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**Achtung! Attention! ¡Atención! 注意 ! Внимание!**

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I will be arguing today that modern languages are in severe crisis in Britain.

If the trends of the last ten years continue at French and German GCSE, they will cease to have any candidates sitting the exams in 2019.

We should be a nation leading the way in the teaching of both European and non-European languages, given the importance of Britain and the English language across the world. But instead of being in that pole position, we find ourselves the sick man of Europe when it comes to language teaching.

The first thing we need to do is to restore languages to the position they had twenty or more years go in British schools.

Then I argue we should build on that base to forge ahead to give ourselves a real expertise as a nation: we should become renowned as a nation of language speakers.

I am going to begin with a confession.

I am only a head teacher and not a language expert. Indeed, like most heads, I am not an expert on anything, really.

I only took one O Level in modern languages, in French, and my grade lacked all distinction. I enjoyed learning German and French while at school and bitterly regret that I didn't continue with languages.

I absorbed some Yiddish when young from relatives, and I was delighted to have to learn some Hebrew to marry my wife in a synagogue. Not the easiest of languages!

One reason for my enthusiasm for the International Baccalaureate at my school, Wellington College, is that it makes the learning of a second language compulsory up to the age of 18.

When we sponsored an academy in Wiltshire, Wellington Academy, I deliberately chose modern languages as one of our specialisms.

Wellington is one of several independent schools opening branches abroad, and we are already in Tianjin in China and plan to open our second school in Shanghai in two years' time.

2013 will also be the year when I sit GCSE in Mandarin: I only have 88 weeks to go, and I tick each week off nervously as they go by.

I have enormously enjoyed writing this lecture. One of the great delights has been discovering the warmth of the support of the modern languages community.

A considerable number of people have helped me with writing this, and I would like to thank them all:

Katharine Carruthers, Director of The Schools Network Confucius Institute, Andrew Rylah, Project Manager – Subjects & Curriculum Design Business Unit at The Schools Network, Ben Russell, Head of Media and Public Affairs at The Schools Network, Nick Mair of Dulwich College (and Chairman of Independent Schools' Modern Languages Association), Andy Birkett, Principal of Hele's School in Plymouth, Youping Han from CILT, Anthony McNamara, Headteacher of St Augustine's in Lancashire, David Blow, Headteacher of The Ashcombe School in Dorking and Michael Kelly, Director of the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies at Southampton University.

I would also like to thank my own wonderful heads of French, Spanish and Mandarin at Wellington College, and above all languages teacher, Simon Kirkham, for their help and support with this lecture.

We can make any number of excuses for why the British are so poor at languages, including the prevalence of the English language across the world, which is combined with more than a pinch of arrogance about foreigners having a duty to speak English, the language of not only international business but also much of science, academic life, the arts and the media.

But I do not believe we should make any excuses not the least because, according to Richard Lewis, English speakers have a linguistic advantage shared by no other European country, half the vocabulary of English deriving from Latin tongues and the other 50% Germanic.

'Without lifting a finger', he writes, the English speaker has 'some familiarity with more than 40% of the words in French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Catalan, German, Sweden, Norwegian, Danish, and Dutch.'

'No other European language, apart from Romanian', he tells us, 'has much of a linguistic advantage'.

'Moreover, as English is a member of the Indo-European family of languages, he says, 'English speakers have further access to related tongues including Russian, Persian, Urdu, and Bengali'.

Equally, no other language has been borrowed so heavily by so many different languages and cultures: from France to Finland to Japan, many English words appear in their own languages.

One canard I want to sway at the outset is that the elephant's charge of computers with their ability to translate from one language to another has rendered the teaching of modern languages redundant.

Taking this argument to its logical conclusion, given the increasing sophistication of computers, we might all just as well sit down in armchairs and do no work at all, expecting computers to do everything for us.

Computers will never be able to replicate the subtle nuances and understanding of language, nor the way in which the speaking of a language of another gives one an insight into their minds, cultures and businesses. Computers can help certainly with the learning of languages: we should exploit them to the full, but they will never replace teachers.

My lecture today will have four parts: the reasons language teaching matters, the evidence for saying it is under threat, the reasons why it is under threat and finally, proposals for remedying this position.

### **Reasons why language teaching matters.**

Research by the UK Subject Centre for Languages has identified more than 700 reasons for the study of languages, the strongest of them being the personal benefits and enjoyment gained by the learner.

I will concentrate today on just seven benefits rather than 700.

In a utilitarian age, I will list first the utilitarian arguments for studying languages.

Our business leaders, only too happy to stick the knife into the quality of schooling in general, have been reticent about championing the benefits of language teaching.

Businessman Digby Jones, is an exception. 'Anyone with a foreign language under their belt, whether at GCSE, A Level or as a graduate, will have an immediate advantage in the job market because they can deliver their company an edge in the world market.'

My own chairman at Wellington, Sir Michael Rake, who also chairs British Telecom and Easyjet, has said, "The UK is one of the most open

economies in a globally integrated world. We are blessed and cursed by our ownership of the English language. Whilst this is a great advantage to us as the major language of business communication and increasingly of education; it is a significant disadvantage that we do not adequately understand different cultures and underestimate the issues, others have in business and education where English is not their mother tongue. In my view, it is therefore essential for languages to be taught and understood for a proper understanding and communication internationally'.

Languages are needed at a sophisticated enough level to allow business people to network and to forge personal relationships of trust. Trust is key in business.

I know from my own few words of Mandarin how it has helped in building Wellington College in China: how much better if I knew more.

The use of language is above all important in those crucial first encounters: once the trust has been built, the accountants and lawyers take over, but even there, the ability to speak the language of the other facilitates the speedy, reliable and efficient conduct of business.

It is sheer folly for Britain to aspire to being a major world economic power if it does not start to do a much better job with its language teaching.

Businesses currently find that they have success with teaching languages to their employees in their twenties and thirties because they had solid grounding of seven years of French in school, and often five years Latin, which gave them a latent French vocabulary of about 1,500 words.

This learning also provided the basis for a relatively speedy learning of Spanish and Portuguese. This will not be the case with future generations, who will not have acquired the foundations while at school. We need to act, and we need to act quickly.

A survey reported by CILT's publication 'Why Languages Matter', found that a significant amount of British business was being lost as a result of inadequate language skills.

The survey of 2,000 businesses found over 10% had lost a contract as a result of lack of language skills. At least ten businesses have each lost contracts of over £1m.

According to their findings, the average loss to business over a three year period, is £325,000.

Professor James Foreman-Peck of Cardiff Business School estimates that inadequate language skills amount to the equivalent of a 3-7% tax on British exports. Let us just pause on that a moment: a fraction of that figure could be diverted to boosting language learning and transforming the landscape.

Only a quarter of British businesses, according to CILT, do not need foreign language skills among their employees. It is most in demand among manufacturing, banking, finance and insurance industries.

Second, studying languages help us to understand our own English language better.

This rationale for studying modern languages found a recent supporter in Education Secretary, Michael Gove, who told the Guardian last week: 'Understanding a modern foreign language helps you understand English better', he says.

'The process of becoming fluent in a foreign language reinforces your fluency and your understanding of grammar, syntax, sentence structure and verbal precision. There is no one who is fluent in a foreign language who isn't a masterful user of their own language'.

It is too early to see the damage to English writing and speaking in the decline of modern languages: worryingly, the impact will not be felt for some years.

Or as Goethe put it: 'Who does not know another language, does not know his own'.

A third rationale is the intellectual stretch of modern languages. Language learners are much more likely to be lateral thinkers and problem solvers than those who know only their mother tongue.

60% of the intelligence staff at GCHQ have a languages background: the reason goes far beyond understanding foreign languages, and is explained by the high order analytical thinking that the staff need, and which language learning gave them.

We should not assume that our silo-linguistic mentality will keep us safe in even English-speaking countries. The Spanish language is moving northwards from Mexico across the US.

Some southern states of the USA, as well as regions within many other states such as California, are becoming predominantly Spanish-speaking.

As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it: 'The limits of my language are the limits of my universe'.

Fourth is cultural awareness. It is a moot point whether the culture of another person or country can ever be fully understood if you do not appreciate their language.

Much of the subtleties, the history and the customs of those people will remain alien unless one can read their texts and converse with those people.

Increased globalisation, overseas travel, as well as the global market, make this cultural understanding an imperative.

Languages provide the key, of course, not only to understanding others who live in foreign countries, but also our fellow British citizens, large numbers of whom originated abroad and for many of whom English is not their first language.

As Nelson Mandela said: 'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart'.

Or as another great leader, Ghandi, put the cultural point: 'No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive'.

The fifth argument is the sheer pleasure of learning the language of another country. It gives one something for life.

I have never forgotten the words of 'Happy Birthday' in German which we learnt at the age of thirteen, to sing to one of our classmates. So bad was our singing I doubt if the birthday boy himself, whose name was Mike, has ever forgotten the experience either.

The pleasure of being able to travel and conversing in the language, sitting at a table in the street and drinking a coffee while conversing with others, is one of life's delights.

There's more to life than making money and more to Britain than just the economy.

Travelling in a country and being unable to speak the language can be compared to having one eye closed. The world one is seeing is two dimensional, a pale reflection of the three dimensional vivid world one could be celebrating and enjoying.

A famous Czech proverb sums up the pleasure motive for studying language: 'You live a new life for every new language you speak. If you know only one language, you live only once'.

Sixth, we must stop Britain falling behind our competitors, whose teaching of modern languages is way ahead of our own.

Britain is already far too dependent upon foreign nationals to do its foreign language speaking for it.

In many European countries, as Bill Bryson among many others has noted, English is the lingua Franca.

Learning English has powerful career as well as cultural motivations for the young abroad. But it is not only English that is learnt: they are ahead of us in the study of Spanish, Portuguese and non-European languages as well.

EU statistics published last month reveal that Britain lags behind other European countries in our lack of proficient translators.

The 2006 Euro-barometer, as reported by CILT, finds the UK very near the bottom of the table of nationals able to speak one foreign language: 38% in the UK as against a European average of 56%.

Seventh and finally, are reasons specifically for studying beyond the usual trio of French, German and Spanish.

Learning Portuguese opens up Brazil to our young people, as well as five African countries including the fast-developing Angola and Mozambique. Brazil itself is set to overtake the UK economy next year.

Anthony McNamara, head of St Augustine's High School, is a passionate advocate of the teaching of Portuguese: 'I can't begin to describe how enriching and important it is for school students to learn the language.'

Brazil is the country we should watch. Its natural resources and cutting edge green technology alone make this a country we should move far closer to. This will not happen unless we have more speaking Portuguese.

Portuguese is definitely a subject that should be far more taught in British schools.

So too should Arabic.

Increasing tensions with the Arab world in the 1990s which culminated in 9/11 provides just one reason why we should be having many more of our young people learning Arabic. So too does the economic importance of the Gulf and Arab states.

Celebrating the rich and deep Arab culture provides a further motive for the study of the language.

Studying non-European languages is difficult where there is a different linguistic structure and cognates. But learn them we must.

Mandarin is arguably more difficult than Arabic to learn, as I can testify from my own GCSE learning. But forge ahead we must.

China becoming the predominant economic, then political, then cultural power in the world is inevitable. Whether or not we want this to happen is irrelevant.

One of the SSAT/Schools Network's greatest achievements over the last ten years has been the encouragement it has given to schools to learn Mandarin and to embrace China with partnerships and visits.

Mandarin learning is one of many areas where the state sector is ahead of the independent, though the latter is catching up, with Brighton College in Sussex a shining example, where Mandarin learning is compulsory from the age of three.

Headteacher, Richard Cairns, said, 'We believe that the earlier they begin to learn the more natural and better'.

Russian and Japanese are further languages that British schools should be embracing, but are failing to do so in any numbers.

The learning of Urdu is a moot point. The cultural reasons for learning it are many, though there are of course many other languages used in India.

But the business reason is less compelling because use of English is so widespread amongst the Indian business community.

### **The decline of modern languages: the evidence.**

I now turn to the evidence for the decline of languages in Britain.

It is starkest at GCSE. The last ten years have seen a steady decline in numbers taking GCSE, according to the research of David Blow and others.

The decline has been particularly sharp since June 2005, with a further significant drop from 2010 to 2011, as many present today will know.

The decline is very similar for French and for German. Numbers taking the former fell from 315,000 in 2002 to 141,000 this year, and numbers taking the latter from 122,000 to 58,000 in the same timeframe.

The decline is particularly marked in lower-attaining pupils at GCSE.

In 2002, 165,000 gained A\* to C, and 150,000 D to U. But in 2011, the numbers gaining D to U had fallen to 26% of the 2002 number, compared to 62% of the A\* to C number.

These numbers are for French, though they match numbers in German.

As is well-known, the decline is less steep in Spanish. The increase in Spanish GCSE-takers from 54,000 in 2002 to 61,000 in 2011, has been far eclipsed by the decline in numbers taking French and German.

The figures are revealed in all their horror on the ALL and ISMLA websites.

Numbers at A Level, in contrast, have remained 'remarkably steady', in the words of Michael Kelly, Professor of French at Southampton.

Some 35,000 young people a year are taking modern languages A Levels (down from 49,000 in 1995). The absence of a decline in the last five years is encouraging, though there has been a decline in the percentages of numbers taking modern languages as against other subjects.

Those taking it are also disproportionately in the independent sector.

At university, the number of undergraduates studying language degrees has equally remained steady, with a slight increase in the last two years to about 29,000.

But again, this figure indicates a significant decline in the percentage of undergraduates studying modern languages, as the overall number of students in higher education has increased greatly in the last ten years.

The social exclusiveness amongst the modern languages elite is noticeable also at universities, with students with language degrees increasingly concentrated in the prestigious universities.

Numbers studying to be language teachers at postgraduate level fell for a number of years, so there has been a mild recovery of late of 10%, taking the numbers to 1,900.

Yet again, however, the apparently better news is deceptive, as less than half trainee language teachers were British-educated, and many of those who were not will go abroad to teach.

Let us also note that 1,900 is a pathetically small number. We have well over 30,000 schools in Britain. If all those 1,900 went into British schools, it would give them one new languages teacher every 15 years.

### **The decline of modern languages: the reasons.**

The comparative lack of trained language teachers is one of the reasons for the poor state of modern languages teaching in Britain, to which we now turn in this third section of this lecture.

Andrew Rylah is clear about this point: 'The problem now is that the numbers of language teachers coming through are dwindling and there will be a knock-on'.

The biggest factor for the decline in modern languages teaching in Britain is government policy.

If we are to get anywhere with this discussion, government needs to hold its hand up and admit it has been the chief culprit.

The biggest single problem here was the decision by Blair's government in 2002 to remove languages as a compulsory subject.

All the tables reveal the dramatic decline in numbers taking GCSE at that point.

To this extent, the decision to include languages in the EBacc, and Michael Gove's statement last week that he would like to see languages teaching for all from the age of five, are encouraging.

It is up to Michael Gove now to back his statement with resources.

Not all Michael Gove's ministers, however, appear to show his understanding of the importance of language teaching, and as yet there is no collective will to put languages on a level playing field with other 'hard' subjects.

Of course government is closing the stable door after half the horses have bolted, but it is important to be positive, as we find that the government at last is listening, though I suspect the utilitarian reasons weigh more heavily with them than the other six.

Third, exam boards, supported by OfQual, persist in offering grades which are too harsh.

According to one senior member of the ML fraternity, 'OfQual are not listening'.

Anecdotal evidence is legion, and will be familiar to everyone in the audience this afternoon.

'We definitely have to discourage pupils from doing AS Level languages. If they have an A at GCSE then they may get a C or possibly above at AS. But if they have only a B at GCSE, they can work hard all year and learn a great deal, but generally get a U at AS level. It's just not fair to encourage pupils to take languages', said one senior Spanish teacher at an independent school.

Paul Howard, author of the Michel Thomas French and Spanish courses, says 'The important thing is to be honest with the students: anything less than a grade A at GCSE and, no matter how hard the student and their teachers work, it is unlikely statistically that they will access the top grades at AS or A2'.

According to JCQ statistics, severe grading is a problem in particular in French A Level. The subject has more highly-able pupils sitting the subject, and 38.6% of entries in 2009 achieved a grade A, compared to 26.7% for all subjects.

But the ability of the candidates suggest that the 38.6% of A grades is too low – in contrast Maths had 45% in 2009.

The position is more acute when it comes to A\*s. Only 19% of A grades awarded in 2011 for French achieved an A\*, and only 22% of Spanish and German A grades were awarded an A\*.

This contrasts with 40% in Mathematics and 32% in Physics. A\* grades matter to students at university entrance and they need to be rewarded accordingly.

At GCSE, harsh marking resulted in only 10.1% of grades at French receiving an A\* grade, 8.9% at German, and 14.8% at Spanish.

ASCL, ALL, and ISMLA, all argue that the grading in modern languages GCSEs should be brought into line with those awarded to Maths, which is shown to have a comparable degree of difficulty.

This problem with severe grading is not new. The Dearing Review in November 2006 recognised it, as have countless reports since. Action needs to be taken.

With so much hanging on schools achieving five As to Cs, and with Ofsted breathing down their necks as well as government, it is unsurprising that heads as well as pupils are giving languages a wide berth for subjects that are easier to succeed at.

The problem is especially bad amongst less-able boys. We should be very concerned about making language learning more attractive to young males.

Capricious and poor marking, and unpredictable grades, are further reasons for the decline of language learning. According to Nick Mair: 'The main issues are unsatisfactory marking of oral tests, the calibre of marking of written work, schools' unwillingness to complain, and state schools' inability to afford re-marks'.

The broader political climate also explains why languages are under the cosh. In the heyday of the creation of the European single market there was widespread enthusiasm for languages, reflected in England and Wales, though not in Scotland, by a modern foreign language becoming a foundation subject in the Education Reform Act of 1988.

Now the euphoria of the EU is over, and the likelihood of Britain joining the single currency dead for many years to come, almost imperceptively, the continent has moved more than 22 miles away.

The state of the national economy has not helped. The perception of a foreign language being irrelevant to job prospects and to the lives of many in hard-pressed schools, in areas experiencing economic difficulty, is easy to understand.

Some dull teaching of modern languages has also helped the perception of it being a 'boring' subject to too many in secondary schools. It is indeed harder to enthuse a class in a rigorous subject like Mathematics than it can be in Drama or even History.

Non-European subjects are suffering in particular. Mandarin, so vital a subject as we have seen, is not receiving the support from government that it might.

Ministers have given the language fraternity the impression, rightly or wrongly, that they are not particularly interested in Mandarin teaching.

### **Eight solutions to make modern languages flourish in Britain.**

Finally, we come to the solutions, and I have eight to offer.

Let's make no mistake: urgent action is needed or language learning in schools will begin to fade out all together. If the current rates at GCSE continue, French and German will be dead in 2019.

So what are we going to do about it? My eight suggestions complement those of the fertile suggestions from The Schools Network.

First, we must begin in the family. We all know that it is much easier to learn languages from the earliest of ages.

Evening classes should be set up for parents who should be strongly encouraged to go once a week to learn, or brush up a range of foreign languages. They should then start filtering this through to their children.

Second, language learning should be compulsory from year one in primary schools so real foundations are laid. Rose was in favour of it, as Gove now is. Let's stop talking and act.

Three, grade boundaries should be revised so that it is easy to gain Cs, Bs, As and A\*s in languages as in subjects of comparable difficulty.

Four, Mandarin requires particular attention. While Edexcel and AQA have made their GCSEs more accessible, it is still too difficult – and I want the change to come before 2013 when I sit my GCSE.

Five, teaching of modern languages, criticised recently by Ofsted, needs to become more vibrant, and the subject needs to have more space for enterprise space and active learning.

The best modern language teachers are an inspiration and they need to do more to show others how wonderfully exciting the learning of languages can be.

Six, all should continue with a second language throughout the sixth form, as insisted on by the International Baccalaureate.

Seven, as Michael Kelly has argued, every undergraduate should study a second language.

Eighth and finally, and the most radical idea of all: governments need to start saying that schools are no longer exam factories, with one purpose and one measure alone – five A to C grades – but they are places of delight which are concerned with – radical word coming up – education. Shock horror.

They should be about scholarship and about learning, and they should be stimulating, fun and enriching.

If governments started preaching this mantra, then the learning of languages would snowball. What is more, I think their blessed five As to Cs would increase.

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