Non-specialist linguists in the United Kingdom in the context of the Englishisation of European Higher Education

Abstract. This paper explores why, in the context of high tuition fees and of the expansion of English as both the language of international trade and more specifically the language of European higher education, students at British universities still wish to acquire language skills alongside a quite different specialist discipline. The paper traces the development of non-specialist language provision in UK universities, including at the Open University, over the past two decades, seeking to identify how many students are opting for non-compulsory language courses, and who they are.

1. Why? A cost-benefit analysis of university study and graduate language skills

English remains the principal mother tongue for the majority of those born in the four nations which comprise the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But devolution of powers, which saw elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh National Assembly in 1999, has created growing disparity across the four nations, not least in the domain of education. For courses beginning in autumn 2012, future students have to negotiate a new landscape of annual tuition fees (see Figure 1).

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<tr>
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</table>

Figure 1: Maximum fees for 2012 entry for UK and other EU applicants
Although loans with long repayment schedules are available, the changes seem to have influenced student choice, with applications down more steeply for England (9.9%) than for Northern Ireland (4%), Wales (1.9%) or Scotland (1.5%).

Students from elsewhere in the European Union seem to have reacted cautiously, with overall applications to UK universities down 11.2% (England down 16.5%, Wales down 14%, Northern Ireland down 8%) but up 6% for Scotland.

For specialist language degrees, applications are down by 11.2% for European and 21.5% for non-European languages – the largest drop of any discipline. However, these figures conceal big differences: applications to French have fallen by 14.0%, German 23.0%, Spanish 13.4%, and Japanese 35%, but Chinese just 1.9%. There is generally a high conversion rate in language from applications to acceptances, so it looks as if the move to much higher tuition fees will cause only a temporary blip in recruitment to languages: this, at least, is what I have recently argued in the specialist press in order to counter alarmist stories which manage somehow to exaggerate Britain’s monolingualism (COLEMAN 2012).

The marketisation of higher education within the UK can be seen as either a dangerous and anti-egalitarian experiment which risks damaging the high global status of British universities and their ability to attract the best international students and contribute to national wealth creation, or alternatively as an inevitable recognition that national prosperity correlates with a workforce predominantly educated to graduate level, that state funding from general taxation cannot be sufficient to finance the expansion in student numbers, and that it is right and proper that higher education should be paid for by those individuals who will benefit from it through a lifelong ‘graduate premium’ of higher salaries.

In support of the latter argument, the most recent OECD Education at a Glance (2011) suggests that on average, worldwide, graduates are more likely to be in employment, especially during economic downturns, than non-graduates, and that their salary will be 50% higher than those with only upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (2011: 138). A UK male in a skilled occupation can anticipate a graduate premium of at least $300,000, and a UK female of $200,000, so higher education looks like a good investment, and not just financially:

"Adults aged 25 to 64 with higher levels of educational attainment are, on average, more satisfied with life, engaged in society and likely to report that they are in good health, even after accounting for differences in gender, age and income" (OECD 2011: 192).

How do foreign languages fit into this overall picture? Although educated adults across the rest of the world, and especially the rest of Europe where the UK conducts most of its business, are moving towards functional bilingualism, UK graduates with foreign language skills continue to be sought after by employers, and make a substantial contribution to the national economy, as successive reports make clear:

- a 2004 survey of Human Resources managers in 2,700 companies for the Michel Thomas organisation;

• the 2007 study by economist James FOREMAN-PECK, *Costing Babel: The Contribution of Language Skills to Exporting and Productivity* (http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/shapingthefuture/101/CardiffBusSch_2007_Costing_Babel_Jan2012.pdf) which sees the UK’s under-investment in language skills as equivalent to a ‘language tax’ of at least £9 billion a year;

• the 2007 DEMOS survey report *As You Like It. Catching up in an age of global English* (http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/asyoulkeitpamphlet);

• the 2009 ICM poll for Rosetta Stone (http://www.rosettastone.co.uk/global/press/releases/20090920-public-sector-can-swap-language-translation-for-multilingualism);

• UCML’s extensive 2010 *Labour Market Intelligence* analysis (http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/shapingthefuture/101/17%20-%20Anne%20Marie%20Graham%20emp%20resource%20template_0.pdf), which found demand to be highest for German, French, Spanish, Italian and Dutch;


The consistent message is that using the customer’s or partner’s language, even when they speak English fluently, is essential for building business relationships. The point was already made two decades ago (SWIFT 1991: 44) in an article, which even then could list several supporting empirical studies.

The British Academy has brought together the arguments for greater investment in foreign languages in two reports, *Language Matters* (2009) and *Language Matters More and More* (2011). Annual reports from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) endorse the message. The most recent (CBI 2011) finds that

• only a quarter (27%) of businesses say they have no need for foreign language skills among their employees.

• language skills are particularly important in sectors such as manufacturing and banking, finance and insurance, reflecting the globalisation of organisations

• the greatest demand is for a level of language skills that can help in building relations with overseas contacts

• the major European languages are still those in greatest demand, but there are also widespread requirements for languages to help business in the major emerging economies.

In 2009, Michael WORTON’S review of Modern Languages in UK Higher Education for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in comparing languages with other subjects classified by HEFCE as Strategically Important and Vulnerable (SIV), trumpeted:
Modern Foreign Language graduates go into a wide variety of careers, where their many skills are recognised by employers. This is reflected in the fact that the mean salary of language graduates 3.5 years after graduation is £26,823, the highest mean salary of all of the SIV subjects – ahead of that of graduates of Engineering, Mathematical Sciences, Physics and Astronomy and Chemistry (HEFCE 2009: 21, citing HEFCE 2008: 28).

On the other hand, more recent analyses of graduates at six and forty-two months after graduation, undertaken by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, paint a less glowing picture, suggesting (HESA 2011) that language graduates have lower salaries than the average graduate, are more likely to be unemployed and less likely to be in full-time employment, are less satisfied with their career, and are less convinced that their degree was good value for money or that they were well prepared for a career. It should be stressed, however, that the differences are often marginal, that HESA’s data collection methods are likely to miss the most internationally mobile and successful, and that the data apply to language specialists (i.e. with a degree in Modern Languages) rather than those for whom language is an ancillary skill to a degree in, for example, Law or Economics. Salary levels may also reflect employer ignorance of the value of employees with languages: ‘If firms incorrectly do not see profit opportunities from exploiting language skills, then they will not demand them, and private returns – primarily wages – will be lower’ (FOREMAN-PECK 2007: 23).

One perverse impact of the monolingualist climate in the British Isles (COLEMAN 2009a) has been a reduction of language learning opportunities at schools. In updating for a French audience the state of non-specialist provision in the UK (COLEMAN 2008), I noted that even one foreign language had been dropped in 2004 from the compulsory curriculum at ages 14 to 16. The CBI commented: “The combination of an increasingly global economy and heightened cultural sensitivities is making new demands on many people at work. Weaknesses in foreign language skills are nothing new, but are tending to be exacerbated since the requirement to take a language at GCSE level was ended (76% of employers are not satisfied with young people’s language skills). In addition, well over half of employers (61%) perceive shortfalls in international cultural awareness among school and college leavers” (CBI 2011: 22).

Economic studies concerning graduate language skills have often been ignored by linguists, perhaps because we feel uncomfortable with complex statistical analyses. Three recent publications deserve attention.

KLEIN (2007) explored multilingualism in a small open European economy, namely Luxembourg, and found that, other things being equal, multilingualism enhances both job prospects and earnings, but only for speakers of English and to a small extent of French. KLEIN recommends that the European Union multilingualism policy “MT + 2” should formally become “MT + English + 1” (2007: 278), and expects the market advantage of English-speaking graduates to diminish as supply grows.

WILLIAMS’ (2011) survey of language use and earnings in Western Europe echoes these conclusions, finding that “the use of a second language in the workplace raises earnings by 3 to 5 per cent in several Western European nations, with even greater returns in some” (2011: 372). WILLIAMS finds that “the language most widely rewarded
across countries is English” (2011: 387), but that “the usage of other languages, including French, Italian and German, is rewarded in some countries” (2011: 387–388). The bad news for British graduates is that “only in the UK is there apparently no income return to using a second language on the job” (2011: 388).

WALKER and ZHU (2010) studied net returns on undergraduate study across discipline groups, based on UK Labour Force surveys. Stressing that their results indicate correlation and not causality, they found that, over a lifetime’s employment, tuition fees of even up to £7,000 a year will become insignificant, that all graduates out-perform non-graduates, and that subject of study is irrelevant for women. In terms of salary, Law, Economics & Management offer the highest returns, followed by “Combined Subjects” and then by Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), with Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities providing the lowest returns, which can even be negative for men with a poor degree classification.

On balance, then, it appears that graduates with language skills are in demand and can look forward to a varied and often well-paid career, and that this may be still more the case for non-specialist linguists, those who have completed a degree in a subject other than Modern Languages but can also offer one or more additional languages.

2. Englishisation, EU policy and the higher education market

The increase in tuition fees for English universities is merely one step in the marketisation of higher education, echoing a similar process at both European and global level. My overview of English-medium teaching in European Higher Education (COLEMAN 2006a) is now merely historical, and I plan an update which will cover both the expansion in numbers – WÄCHTER and MAIWORM (2008) found a tripling of English-taught programmes between 2002 and 2007 – and a review of the intertwined factors which are together driving an acceleration of Englishisation: graduate employability; academic mobility for teachers, researchers and students; the market in international students who now number 3.7 million a year (OECD 2011); global university rankings based on proportions of international students and academic staff and on research status; research rankings which favour English-language publication; the globalisation of scientific disciplines which pushes academics to work together in English (even at applied linguistics conferences such as AILA).

Studies of individual countries continue to appear. Whilst northern Europe leads, even southern European countries such as Italy are introducing English-taught programmes (COSTA and COLEMAN 2012). In the present volume, the task of updating the overall picture is expertly fulfilled by WÄCHTER’s chapter. I therefore simply note that while the Hochschulrektorenkonferenz (HRK) felt so threatened by galloping Englishisation as to issue a 2011 policy statement (in both German, and English, incidentally), its equivalent Universities UK has made no statement whatever on languages. I also note the CercleS 2011 position statement in favour of multilingualism, echoing the HRK in claiming that “the exclusive use of English as a Lingua Franca threatens the
quality of cultural and academic exchange”, and calling for every Higher Education Institution (HEI) to have a language policy (http://www.nut-talen.eu/documenten/CercleS%20Language%20Policy%20Position%20Statement%20Nov%202011.pdf). It should be noted, however, that in the newly competitive market of £9,000 fees, some UK institutions have seen an advantage in promoting their international profile, for example in offering a sharply reduced fee for the compulsory year abroad of a language degree (e.g. Portsmouth), in guaranteeing the possibility of a study experience abroad within every degree (Central Lancashire) or offering free language tuition to students of all disciplines (Aston).

The Bologna Process must also be mentioned. I have repeatedly argued (COLEMAN, 2003, 2005, 2009b) that, far from promoting the European ideal of Mother Tongue + 2 languages, Bologna has favoured Englishisation, and others have agreed (ALEXANDER 2008; GOODMAN 2010; GNUTZMANN 2011; PHILLIPSON 2006; RĀSANEN and FORTANEIT-GÓMEZ 2008; TOSI 2006). As soon as the primarily economic Lisbon agenda overtook the primarily academic desire to create a European Higher Education Area, market competition has ensured that internationalisation and Englishisation go hand in hand. While many European countries, as signatories to the Bologna Process, undertook very fundamental reform of their higher education systems, the UK, whose Anglo-American schema of Bachelor, Master and Doctoral qualifications underpinned Bologna, and whose quality assurance agenda and terminology came to dominate the definition of course content and “learning outcomes”, has barely acknowledged the existence of the process. Its implementation of the Diploma Supplement (DS), for example, continues to be patchy; EURYDICE (2010: 143) lists the UK alongside Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ireland, Russia and the Holy See as guilty of only “partial and gradual introduction” of the DS, which is seen as an administrative burden and not prioritised by many British HEIs.

Developments promoted by EU policy include academic mobility. Preparation for Erasmus exchanges has also motivated non-specialist language provision in the UK as elsewhere. But although UK Erasmus participation, after a period of decline, has risen in recent years (Figure 2, p. 15), partly thanks to the inclusion of work placements (the UK has a higher proportion of Erasmus participants on work placements than any other participating country), the proportion of non-specialist linguists is markedly lower than elsewhere thanks to low motivation and inadequate language skills. Overall, specialist language students consistently comprise 15% of all Erasmus students; in the UK alone, specialist language students consistently comprise over 40% of all participants, and the figure rose to nearly half (48.28% in 2008/09) once work placements and assistantships were included.
The development of provision for non-specialist language students

The awareness of demand for language skills from specialists in other disciplines emerged in the 1960s and 1970s with the expansion of higher education (Coleman 1996a), and met with varied responses (Coleman 1994a). The short-lived Government-funded Language-Export Centres sought to link universities and businesses at a time when neither was really ready. The institutional autonomy which UK universities have always enjoyed allowed individual universities to set up Joint or Combined Honours courses, for example in German and Business or French and Law, and these continue to recruit today. But initial responses tended to be of a service nature, with powerful disciplines such as Economics or Engineering demanding Language for Special Purposes (LSP) courses tailored specifically to their needs.

It was in the then Polytechnics (which became 'new universities' in 1992) that more systematic initiatives began in the late 1980s, under the banner of Languages For All or Institution-Wide Language Programmes (IWLPs). Ad hoc service provision was proving too fragmented and costly (Fay and Ferney 2000; Ferney 2000), and IWLPs drew on the flexibility provided by modularised curricula (which had been introduced on a predominantly US model along with semesters) to establish centralised provision of several foreign languages at multiple levels, with a standard progression replacing the LSP model. A communicative approach was adopted, alongside enhanced levels of tutor training and quality assurance (Ferney 2005). A series of annual IWLP conferences, with published proceedings, took place for a decade from 1991.

The level of take-up in the earliest days is impossible to establish, since the Universities Statistical Record (HESA published its first statistics in 1995) concerned itself only with 'old' universities and old-style degree classifications. But by 1992, the year in which specialist language student numbers peaked, the first comprehensive survey of non-specialist language learners (Thomas 1993) showed that the latter actually outnumbered the specialists, although only 47% of UK students were entitled to elective language study (Thomas 1993: 21), and only 23% in 'old' universities. While numbers tended to be unstable (Coleman 1994b, 2004), especially as devolved budgets led students' 'home' department to reclaim resources lost to the IWLP, the non-specialists continued to outnumber the specialists (Translang 1997, Marshall 2001). Although the IWLP movement had disappeared by 2002 (Sheppard 2003, Coleman 2004: 152), along with much of the specialist modern language provision in the new

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Figure 2: Year-on-year percentage changes in number of Erasmus participants
universities, and partly because of resource constraints fuelled by falling numbers of
specialists in surviving departments, non-specialist student numbers by then were ro-

HESA records separately language specialists on a named degree and "other under-
graduates", i.e. students taking accredited language modules. Although such modules
may represent up to 40% of an individual’s timetable, accredited language modules
normally make up between 10% and 20% of the student’s total study time.

In 2007/08, a total of 58,900 undergraduate and postgraduate students from non-lan-

Even today, while HESA theoretically captures all accredited modules, every esti-

The Association of University Language Centres (AULC, formerly Directors of
University Language Centres, and one of the founders of the European Confederation
of University Language Centres, Cercles, in 1991) conducted a survey over several
years. In 2003, 44 members reported growing numbers, two were stable and only one
was falling. For four years from 2003, actual numbers at UK universities were divided
into accredited (contributing to the degree profile, but counting for less than 50%) and
non-accredited (or extra-mural); despite some inconsistencies such as the (non-) in-
clusion of Open University students, the data give a good overall picture (Figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Non-accredited</th>
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</table>

Figure 3: Numbers from the AULC surveys of non-specialist language students
As recently as 2009, the Worton report asserted that "several universities are closing down or reducing their provision of language teaching for non-specialists" (HEFCE 2009: 6), and the University of the West of England notoriously closed its University Language Programme in 2011. Yet the most recent snapshot survey of 19 Language centres by Manchester’s John MORLEY (personal communication, February 2012) shows 15 reporting expansion of provision and numbers, 3 steady state and only 1 declining. In 4 cases, the increase was over 20%. Internationalisation can thus mean more than just recruiting international students paying high fees. Institutional backing for non-specialist language provision appears buoyant; one respondent notes "increasing levels of central University support for this area of (IWLP type) activity as it ticks the employability and internationalisation boxes", although there are concerns that students already paying high fees may be less willing to incur additional expense for optional language modules. UCML (the University Council of Modern Languages, the overarching body which represents virtually all university departments and professional associations in modern languages, linguistics and area studies in the UK) and AULC plan a major national survey in 2012.

4. Non-specialist provision and profiles

British attitudes to language learning are very much linked to socio-economic status. At school, in public examinations, and at university, it is often the more privileged who recognise the social capital bestowed by foreign language competence.

Whereas specialist Modern Language degrees, with mutual selection at entry (students choose the university, the university chooses its students) and generally high entry requirements, can typically count on over 90% of entrants continuing through to graduation in the minimum time, non-specialists, who have often opted in to courses providing zero or only supernumerary credits, and who have registered for a one-semester or at most one-year module, have little to lose by dropping out again as their specialist workload grows and the language assignments become more demanding. The usual pattern is therefore pyramidal, with far more classes at lower levels and by no means all starters completing each module (REIMANN 2004). Demand across languages is unpredictable. Yet fixed costs, for specialised facilities, staff development, quality assurance and administration of teaching and assessment can be high. One consequence is that staffing has to be flexible, meaning that short-term and temporary contracts are common, even though tutors are typically highly qualified specialist language teachers.

There is no single administrative model, although centralised language provision for specialists in other disciplines, mostly delivered by the Language Centre, remains the most common. Many Language Centres benefit from central university funding, or at least central funding of premises and staff salaries. Traditionally there have been "tensions" (HEFCE 2009: 29) between "content" specialists in literary, cultural and area studies, on open-ended full-time contracts including research leave, who have more or less willingly and more or less competently taught the target language to specialist stu-


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students, and Language Centres, whose staff of qualified language teachers faced much less favourable contracts of employment. But today the Language Centre teaching brief may also extend to the language element of specialist Modern Language degrees, and in the face of so many external pressures, nearly all university linguists now eschew the old sectarianism, as the AULC Chair opted to do more formally (http://www.aulc.org/documents/academic.doc). Innovative solutions have been adopted at Birmingham, where the Director of the Language Centre is also Head of the School of Languages, and at Bristol where a Director of Foreign Language Teaching is to be appointed within the School of Modern Languages to oversee both specialist and non-specialist teaching.

Comparing specialists and non-specialists in 1996 (Coleman 1996b), I found that science specialists were on average less proficient than linguists, more likely to be male, and more likely to be instrumentally rather than integratively motivated. Career orientations remain a more common reason for following a language course than lifestyle choices.

The 2005/06 AULC survey (http://www.llas.ac.uk/resourcedownloads/2406/byrnepps) of sample institutions found that non-specialist language students were 61% female, 30% postgraduate, and only 70% British. No less than 14% were students from other EU countries (who pay fees at UK levels unless they are on Erasmus exchanges, in which case they pay no fees) and 16% non-EU international students (who pay far higher fees than UK or EU students). HESA data tells the same story of a growing share of non-UK students on non-specialist language modules, rising from 7% (other EU) and 9% (non-EU) of takers in 2002/03 to 10% and 13% respectively in 2007/08. It seems that students who do not have English as a mother tongue not only appreciate the career importance of mastering English, but also the value of adding additional languages to their portfolio, while too many UK-born English native speakers, as I have often lamented (e.g. Coleman 2009a), fail to grasp the importance of learning even one foreign language, especially within less advantaged socio-economic groups. UK-based students thus made up a decreasing proportion of non-specialist students on accredited language modules, falling from 83.6% in 2002/3 to 77.1% in 2007/8.

The prominence of EU students among Language Centre clients has even received national press coverage (Times Higher Education 26 January 2012), when Reading’s Vice-Chancellor testified to a House of Lords enquiry that overseas students who were often already proficient linguists were far keener to take extra language modules in UK universities than their British peers: ‘The greatest take-up of foreign language courses is from foreign-students taking up a four [sic] or fifth language’. (http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=418824).

HESA data for 2002–2008 show that most students took just one language module, although one in five took two and one in ten opted for three or more. Over the six years, women consistently made up three-fifths, and full-time students around two-thirds of the cohort. Their home discipline, if not an unspecified ‘Combined’ degree programme, was likely to be Business, Linguistics, a Social Science or a Humanity. Target languages were not always specified, but whereas in 2002/3 French outperformed Spanish, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Chinese, by 2007/8 Spanish had
Non-specialist linguists in the United Kingdom

Overtaken French, Italian had overtaken German, and both Chinese and Russian had overtaken Japanese. Forty percent of non-specialist language students were on the first year of their degree course, and a further 28% on the second year, although all years of study were represented. The language element typically counted for between 10% and 20% of their total credits. European languages remain most popular, with French, Spanish, German, and Italian leading the list.

At the end of the academic year, in each of 2010 and 2011, an online survey of non-specialist language students was carried out on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) by LLAS (the Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies based at the University of Southampton) through two networks: UCML and AULC. The link to the online survey was sent to individual learners. The respondents were self-selected, their numbers represented only about 2% of the whole population, and the sample was opportunistic rather than structured: it therefore cannot be considered truly representative. Nonetheless, the numbers of respondents, and the fact that they were attending a range of tertiary institutions, does lend some validity to the data.

For the surveys, a ‘non-specialist’ was defined as a student who was not taking a full- or part-time undergraduate or postgraduate degree in which a language is either named (e.g. BA French, BSc Mathematics with Spanish) or implied (e.g. BA European Studies, BA Applied Languages). These non-specialist learners thus include:

- undergraduate or postgraduate students taking language courses as part of their degree, but not in a quantity sufficient for the language to be named in or implied in the student’s programme title. The amount of language study necessary to be part of a named degree is likely to vary by institution;
- undergraduate or postgraduate students taking university accredited language courses in addition to (and not counting towards) their programme of study;
- learners who are undertaking a university accredited language course, but are not registered for any undergraduate or postgraduate study;
- a learner undertaking a language course provided by an HEI, but accredited by another organisation or not accredited at all.

1255 students responded to the 2010 survey (http://www.ucml.ac.uk/news/104), representing more than twenty institutions, and 1191 to that in 2011 (of whom 174 were studying more than one language). In order of popularity, Spanish was ahead of French, German and Italian, with Japanese and Chinese very close to each other and ahead of Arabic. One in five 2011 respondents, and one in three in 2010, were aged over 35. While nearly all 18–21-year-olds were full-time undergraduates, older students were more likely to be taking just the language module (overall about one in three students was not following any other courses), and more likely to be regular visitors to a country where the language was spoken. Women made up 63.8% of respondents. More than a quarter were not native speakers of English. A majority of students of French, and, to a lesser extent, those of German and Spanish, had learned the language before, mainly at school, and often unsuccessfully. Those seeking a new language were likely to opt for Spanish.
The adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in order to benchmark proficiency levels is probably less advanced in the UK than elsewhere in Europe, but it was nonetheless surprising that nearly half were unable to articulate in any way their current or target level — although less surprising once the wide range of locally consistent but nationally incoherent course labels is taken into account. Most students intended to continue their study at a higher level, but there were concerns about availability, and in fact, as all those involved with University Language Centres know well, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and the number actually continuing is far lower. Although fewer than one in ten believed that language skills were essential for their job, three-quarters recognised their generic importance for employability. Virtually all respondents (over 96%) claimed to be enjoying the course, but, as is typical of all opt-in surveys, many of the open comments were either very enthusiastic or very critical towards the teacher.

Students’ main subject was likely to be Business, a Social Science or a Physical Science rather than a Humanity. While most students were earning credits for their language modules, and a few students were even more focused on getting credits than on attending the classes, for a substantial minority what counted was the pleasure and achievement of language learning, with assessment and certification an irrelevance or even a distraction.

5. The Open University

The Open University is the UK’s largest university, with over 250,000 students. Because of the perceived difficulty of learning a language at a distance in the days before easy real-time many-to-many communication online or by telephone, a programme of languages was initiated only in 1991, with the first module offered in 1995. By 2010, The Open University (OU) was recruiting 10,000 students a year to its language modules in French, Spanish, German (all available from beginners to degree level) and to beginner and intermediate modules in Italian, Chinese and Welsh. The particular approach to teaching languages at a distance, and its evolution to match rapidly developing technologies, has been described at different stages (e.g. BAUMANN 1999 [in press], COLEMAN 2006b, COLEMAN [et al.] 2010, COLEMAN and VIALLETON 2011), and an intensive research programme instituted since 2001 has led to over 300 publications related to multimedia and distance language learning. With its “open to all” policy recruiting a wide range of students from the completely unqualified to highly qualified academics (COLEMAN and FURNBOROUGH 2010), the OU now represents 7.5% of language students on first degrees, and 10.3% of those on other undergraduate courses — in other words one in ten of all non-specialist language learners in UK higher education. Since openness to places and to student preferences means that attendance at face-to-face and online tutorials is voluntary, the learning materials must be of the highest quality. It is said that every British University uses some pirated OU materials in its language courses, and international demand is extraordinarily high. During its three
years on iTunesU (http://open.edu/itunes/), the OU has become the world’s most popular source of online university learning materials, with over 40 million worldwide downloads. Languages consistently feature in the top ten, with Beginners French usually leading; but, interestingly, with Chinese more popular than Spanish in global terms. The OU app Chinese Characters First Steps for iPhone and iPod Touch (http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/chinese-characters-first-steps/id441549197?mt=8) also reflects the constant innovation, which is changing the landscape for non-specialist language learners.

6. Conclusion

As LANVERS (2012) has shown, awareness of the role of English as an international Lingua Franca need not dissuade UK-based native speakers from taking an interest in acquiring foreign languages. While recruitment to specialist Modern Language degrees has shown a consistent year-on-year increase since 2004, albeit to a shrinking number of surviving departments, numbers of non-specialist language students also remain buoyant overall, in spite of administrative and financial changes. I am confident that under the new fee regime, with students ever more aware of university education as an investment, the demonstrated employability advantages of acquiring language skills will attract growing numbers of specialists in other disciplines to add one or more foreign languages to their Curriculum Vitae – especially as increasingly internationalised campuses provide the glowing example of non-UK students taking full advantage of the courses on offer.

Literature


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