

Executive summary

The last decade has seen declining numbers of students wishing to study modern foreign languages at degree level, and university language departments are experiencing serious falls in recruitment. This inquiry, carried out during the European Year of Languages (2001), used predominantly qualitative research methods to examine this phenomenon.

Research questions

The study explored the reasons why the numbers of students wishing to study modern foreign languages at degree level are on the decline by seeking answers to the following four specific questions.

1. What factors influence the decisions of selected sixth-formers studying a modern foreign language at A level not to study the subject further at degree level?
2. What are the perceptions of the heads of modern languages in the selected sixth forms regarding the decline in student numbers doing A-level languages and continuing to university modern language degree programmes?
3. What are the perceptions of selected first-year undergraduates who could have studied a modern foreign language at degree level (i.e. who had the requisite A-level grades in languages) but had chosen not to?
4. What are the perceptions of modern language programme leaders in selected universities regarding the decline in student numbers doing A-level languages and continuing to university modern language degree programmes?

Data were collected in five stages involving research interviews (both group and individual) and a small-scale questionnaire from the following populations: selected undergraduates from the University of Brighton; selected sixth-formers at both a state sector and a private-sector school in Sussex; two heads of modern languages at the same schools; and two modern language programme leaders in the university sector.

Findings

Two key factors emerge from the students' perspectives. These are:

- a general climate of negativity surrounding perceptions of (degree-level) modern foreign language study;
- a negative A-level experience.

DECLINE IN MODERN LANGUAGES AT DEGREE LEVEL

Four broad themes emerged from the interviews with the staff members in this study as playing a major role in the students' decisions. These were factors relating to:

- poor teaching of modern foreign languages in secondary (and primary) schools;
- a 'climate of negativity' concerning language-learning in society in general;
- vocational concerns on the part of students;
- professional roles and practice.

The perspectives obtained in this inquiry raised issues concerning the teaching and learning of modern foreign languages. These related mainly to teaching methodology in terms of the way modern foreign languages are delivered, particularly in the secondary school context.

The perspectives gained in this study also highlight the need for effective and properly trained teachers to help promote the study of foreign languages, throughout the compulsory educational sectors and beyond, if we are to slow the spiral of foreign language decline in the United Kingdom today.

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Notes to the editor:

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