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Decline in the take-up of modern languages at degree level

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**Anglo-German Foundation
for the Study of Industrial Society**

DECLINE IN MODERN LANGUAGES AT DEGREE LEVEL

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Researcher biography

As Ball (1990) has noted, the role of the researcher inevitably influences the kinds of data elicited in the qualitative research setting. He argues that readers of qualitative studies should have some idea of the instrument employed in the data gathering. As this study is set within a qualitative research framework, a brief researcher biography is included here for these reasons.

I graduated from the institution referred to in this study as Thames College in 1982 with a degree in German with French. I have been employed as an academic member of staff in the School of Languages, University of Brighton for the past nineteen years where I teach German, TESOL and aspects of Educational Research. I had sole responsibility for the design, conduct and analysis of this study which formed the basis of my Doctorate in Education (EdD) awarded by Thames College in June 2002. I am both personally and professionally concerned at the trend of national decline in the numbers of students wishing to study modern foreign languages beyond the age of 16 in the United Kingdom, and this study was in part triggered by these concerns.

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; 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.

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.

1 Introduction, background and rationale

1.1 Introduction

The last decade has seen a decline in the numbers of students wishing to study modern foreign languages at degree level and, as a result, university language departments are experiencing serious falls in recruitment (Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT) 2000). There has been little investigation into why students are turning away from such study at this level (Coleman 1996) and this inquiry, using predominately qualitative research methods, aimed to provide some initial data on this phenomenon.

There were three main triggers to this study. First, there is concern at the University of Brighton, where I am employed, regarding recruitment on to modern foreign language degree programmes. These recruitment difficulties are not a Brighton-specific problem, as similar difficulties are reported at national level (for example, Utley 2000; Footitt 2001a; CILT 2002).

The second trigger lay in three press reports, all of which were published in *The Guardian* newspaper in February 2000 (Footitt 2000a; Ferney 2000; Marshall 2000). These articles highlighted, among other issues, the concern that universities will be unable to produce sufficient future secondary (and primary) school teachers due to the decline in the number of linguists applying to teach, leading to a potential spiral of language decline across the United Kingdom.

The third trigger was the publication of the final report of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry, published in May 2000. In the context of higher education the inquiry reported that 'languages are in crisis' (Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000: 54) with most university departments operating in deficit; an increasing number are operating under threat of closure or reduction (ibid.: 54) and many others are facing difficulties in recruitment (ibid.: 55). The Inquiry reported that applications to specialist language degrees are declining (ibid.: 55); it highlighted the fact that this changing pattern of language study is uneven and unplanned and that, if sustained, it would further reduce the supply of language graduates and trainee teachers needed to provide an adequate supply of specialists in languages and cultures to meet the demand for the future teachers, translators, interpreters, language engineers and cultural experts needed nationally.

1.2 Background and rationale

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw an increase in the numbers of students taking A-level languages and continuing to university to study for degrees involving the same subject

Table 1
Evolution of admissions to French, German and Spanish single-honours
modern foreign language degree programmes in the UK (home students)

| Year | French | German | Spanish | Total |
|------|--------|--------|---------|-------|
| 1996 | 980 | 322 | 239 | 1,541 |
| 1997 | 932 | 322 | 222 | 1,476 |
| 1998 | 797 | 301 | 218 | 1,316 |
| 1999 | 763 | 299 | 250 | 1,312 |
| 2000 | 738 | 275 | 259 | 1,272 |

Source: UCAS (2002)

area, but since 1992 entries for A-level languages and applications for degree-level foreign language study have steadily declined (Marshall 1998). Table 1 presents the numbers of home students accepted on to the three most commonly studied single-honours modern foreign language degree programmes over a five-year period in the United Kingdom. A steady decline in the numbers studying single-honours French and German between 1996 and 2000 is evident, whilst Spanish has experienced a slight increase in numbers during this period, although from a lower baseline. The Spanish numbers involved are clearly not enough to outweigh the decline in numbers of students studying French and German at this level as reflected by the 'total' column, which illustrates the overall downward trend in student numbers. A similar pattern can also be seen in the numbers of students involved in the study of modern languages as joint honours degrees (UCAS 2002). This pattern of decline in the uptake of modern languages at degree level is in stark contrast to the substantial rise in the overall numbers of students entering degree-level courses at UK institutions over a similar period of time.

The desertion from the study of modern foreign languages at degree level, and particularly from the study of traditional single-honours language degree programmes, can be traced backwards through the education system to a general decline in the numbers of students studying modern foreign languages after GCSE. During the period 1996–2000 the total number of entries for all modern foreign languages at GCE A level fell by approximately 23% (CILT 2001) and the total figures for 2001 show a decline of 8.7% on the year 2000 (CILT 2002).

The general decline in modern foreign language learning after age 16 raises the question 'why?', especially given that language learning in higher education 'has never been more vital to the economy, and language graduates have seldom been more in demand' (Footitt 2000a). Against this background it is surprising that there is a dearth of studies exploring the reasons behind the changing face of modern language studies in the higher education sector (Coleman 1996), with most of the relevant research which has been carried out over the last decade being located in the secondary school sector. Seven studies focusing specifically on the drop-out from modern foreign language study in the secondary school context informed the design of this inquiry to a greater or lesser extent. Four were located in England (Aplin 1991; Marshall 1998, 1999; Fisher 2001), whilst those by McPake *et al.* (1999), Kent (1996) and O'Reilly-Cavani and Birks (1997) explored the decline in the take-up of modern foreign languages in Scotland.

The study presented in this report explores 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 research 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 languages programme leaders in selected universities regarding the decline in student numbers doing A-level languages and continuing to university modern language degree programmes?

1.3 Research methodology

Data for this study were collected in five main stages and comprised a series of interviews, both individual and group, together with a small-scale questionnaire (Table 2).

With regard to the first and third research questions underpinning this study (see Section 1.2) the students' perspectives were initially explored by a series of group interviews. Data from these subsequently informed a small-scale questionnaire which was administered to selected undergraduates at the University of Brighton. Individual

Table 2
Summary of the research methods used in the study

| Method | Participants | Purpose |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Focus group interview (stage 1) | Selected undergraduates | Exploration of the student perspective (research question 3) |
| 2. Focus group interview (stage 2) | Selected sixth-formers (state school) | Exploration of the student perspective (research question 1) |
| 3. Focus group interview (stage 2) | Selected sixth-formers (independent school) | Exploration of the student perspective (research question 1) |
| 4. Small-scale questionnaire (stage 3) | Selected undergraduates | Exploration of the student perspective (research question 3) |
| 5. Individual semi-structured interview (stage 4) | Head of modern foreign languages (independent school) | Exploration of the teacher perspective (research question 2) |
| 6. Individual semi-structured interview (stage 4) | Head of modern foreign languages (state school) | Exploration of the teacher perspective (research question 2) |
| 7. Individual semi-structured interview (stage 5) | Modern foreign language programme leader (pre-1992 university) | Exploration of the higher education lecturer perspective (research question 4) |
| 8. Individual semi-structured interview (stage 5) | Modern foreign language programme leader (post-1992 university) | Exploration of the higher education lecturer perspective (research question 4) |

semi-structured interviews were used to explore the perspectives of the two teachers and two lecturers involved in this study.

Each of the five main stages in this study involved the collection of data from different populations. With regard to the third research question, students were recruited from the University of Brighton who could theoretically have studied a modern foreign language at degree level given their A-level results, but had chosen not to. Thus, my sample for this first stage of the study comprised first-year undergraduates in the first year of the Diploma in Modern Languages programme at the University of Brighton who had obtained a grade D or above in their A-level language(s) between 1998 and 2000.

One hundred and fifty-five students were registered for the first year of the Diploma programme during the academic year 2000/2001. It emerged, however, that only 23 students matched the predefined criteria. Thirty-three students were members of the public. A further 18 were already doing a degree in a modern foreign language and were studying a second language at diploma level. Nine of the registered students were members of staff. The remaining 72 students registered did not have modern language A levels either because they were foreign students with alternative qualifications or because they had entered the Diploma programme by progressing through the various language levels offered formally within the internal structure of the University of Brighton. This breakdown is interesting in itself as it reflects the changing face of the students taking part in higher education programmes of foreign language study.

Eight students were subsequently identified at random from the German, French and Spanish Diploma classes to take part in the group discussion and the remaining 15 were sent a copy of the questionnaire to complete.

In order to address the first and second research questions two sixth-form schools were located in Sussex, one in the private sector and one in the public sector. For reasons of confidentiality we will refer to the former as Lakeside College and the latter as Valley College. The sixth-formers were recruited by their respective head of modern languages who also agreed to be interviewed. Thus Dr P was interviewed at Lakeside College and Lilian was interviewed at Valley College.

In order to explore the fourth research question two modern language programme leaders, one working in a pre-1992 university (Dr F from Thames College) and one in a post-1992 university (Mr K from Solent University), were recruited to the study.

The students who participated from Lakeside College are referred to as L1, L2, etc., whilst their counterparts from Valley College are called V1, V2, etc. The undergraduate participants from the University of Brighton who took part in the group discussion are likewise numbered P1, P2, etc., whilst those undergraduates from the same institution who completed the questionnaire are referred to as Q1, Q2, etc.

The interview data were transcribed, coded and analysed using the 'constant comparison' method of qualitative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Following each interview, whether group or individual, an initial analysis of the same was returned to the relevant participants for their verification regarding the trustworthiness of the interpretation and for any further comments (Watts and Ebbutt 1987) in an attempt to validate the conclusions drawn. Data from the small-scale questionnaire were analysed by hand using the questions as a guide. Responses to the final question were collated and coded using the 'open coding' approach outlined above.

2 The students' perspectives

2.1 Interpretation of key issues

The key issues to emerge from the students' perspectives are considered in three sections based on the theoretical framework of second language learning motivation proposed by Dörnyei (2001) which underpinned this inquiry.

Language level

It emerged from the student perspectives in this study that very little *integrative motivation* was discernible. A general lack of interest in the target language culture and/or history was apparent and given as a reason for not pursuing modern foreign language study at degree level, as evidenced by P6 who said that she didn't find 'the whole philosophy and great people and French history and French life' very interesting.

The importance of being able to speak at least one other foreign language when abroad emerged as a key issue, with Q9 commenting that she thought the ability to speak another language was as important nowadays as being computer-literate. However, despite this recognition, the notion of 'English being enough' was also expressed, particularly with regard to new technologies such as the internet.

Linked to this was the perception expressed by two of the groups that an A-level modern foreign language qualification was sufficient in terms of the job market as well as being a sound grounding in the target language which could be reactivated at a later date. V3 explained that 'I just think that having an A level in languages is sort of enough' and that it would give him an edge when it came to looking for a job. V10 reinforced this opinion by adding 'it's more than everyone else full stop in general so why go a bit extra'. Thus a modern language degree was deemed unnecessary.

The poor reputation of the English with regard to foreign language abilities was highlighted, whilst the opposite was held true for Europeans. P3 thought, for example, that a UK employer would prefer to employ a German native speaker with a degree in English rather than an English native speaker with a degree in German as the language levels in both German and English of the former would be far higher than those of the latter. This poor reputation appeared to act as a demotivating factor with regard to continued advanced-level modern foreign language learning. It had an impact on: future career paths; A-level modern foreign language performance; confidence levels, particularly with regard to oral ability in the second language. Participants in the first group interview at the University of Brighton believed that their European counterparts had 'the competitive edge' in the search for jobs due to their superior foreign language skills. This view was also supported by 11 of the 12 questionnaire respondents. This discouraged the interviewees from considering modern foreign language degrees as they felt unable to compete with the advanced linguistic skills of their European counterparts.

It appeared that many of the participants, rather than rise to the linguistic challenges which would enable them to 'participate on an equal footing internationally' (Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000: 62), took the view that *not* studying a modern language degree, but instead combining modern language study as an option with a different non-language degree subject, would afford them greater advantages in the employment market upon graduating.

The issue of more student exchanges and increased study time spent abroad was raised at Lakeside College in the context of promoting the continued study of modern foreign languages, together with recognition of the financial constraints involved which could act as a deterrent to many students.

The dimension concerning *instrumental motivation* attracted the majority of the key issues to emerge from this study. This might be expected given the age of the student/pupil participants, all of whom were giving serious consideration to their future career paths.

The perception that a limited range of employment options was available following a modern foreign language degree emerged from all groups interviewed as well as from six of the twelve questionnaire respondents. This acted as a major disincentive to study modern foreign languages at degree level. Of the jobs that participants thought *were* available following such a degree, the following were mentioned, none of which held any appeal: working abroad; translating; foreign service/embassies; teaching. The latter was held in particularly low regard as a possible career route in all three groups and with one questionnaire respondent. Participants in the first two group interviews compared modern foreign language degrees to degrees in art, music, history and philosophy which they saw as being equally limiting in terms of future employment possibilities.

Degrees in other subjects were perceived by all participants interviewed as offering less ambivalent career paths and were therefore chosen in preference as main degree subjects. The first group interviewed at the University of Brighton mentioned that other degree-level subjects, such as business studies, offered a wider range of possible career paths and were consequently perceived as a 'safe option' (P3), particularly if one had little idea about future career directions. This view was supported by two of the questionnaire respondents and raises the issue of the quality of the careers advice received by the participants.

It appeared that the participants' parents and families played a role in helping their children decide on their main degree choices, although this was often pointing out potential problems and difficulties rather than any direct advice about what to study. V10 added that her mother was a German graduate but did not use her German language skills at work. Although this participant had been encouraged by her parents to do a language degree, she was not encouraged by her mother's workplace experience.

All three groups were dissatisfied with the careers advice they had received from their schools, with P6 describing the school careers officer as 'utterly rubbish' and L4 opining that the careers advice received from school 'wasn't great across the board generally'. Many of the participants in all three groups felt they had been left very much alone to find their future career directions, with minimal encouragement received regarding careers involving modern foreign language degrees. This was clearly illustrated by P6, who said she had only been asked to speak to her school careers officer to establish whether she was going to university or not, whilst three other people in the same

interview said they had been left very much on their own to thumb through the UCAS handbook, with P5 adding 'we were all sort of in the corner going ooo you're quite good at that maybe we should do that course'. P3 said that no one had really spoken to him about the career possibilities following a modern language degree or that such a degree was 'a viable route to go'. Three other participants agreed with this view, whilst six of the twelve questionnaire respondents also commented that they had been largely responsible for their own careers advice. L4 believed that the fact that it was not compulsory to visit the careers room meant that other extra-curricular activities such as sport took precedence over visits there. He thought 'you have to be forced' to use the careers service, and three other participants from this private school agreed very strongly with his view.

Several participants said they did not want to pursue a career in languages and that therefore studying a language at degree level was not an option. V12 said that he didn't think a career which involved working with a foreign language every day would inspire him and that he would 'just end up losing the job or getting sacked or something'. As V1 stated, 'hardly anyone actually thinks I want to do French as a ... way of life ... as a job it's just not what you want to do as a career is it'; there was some agreement with this view particularly in the second group interview at Valley College.

The participants' A-level language teachers had also, according to many of the participants in all three groups, played only a minor role in discussing the students' careers options. P3 described the impression he had received from his school that unless you were a top student in the language A-level class you were not encouraged to apply for a language degree at university. If you were a top student in your A-level language you were encouraged to study languages at a 'good' university to boost your employment prospects, but generally there was little encouragement to do so. This opinion was supported by all of the other participants in this group interview, one of whom said in relation to a modern language degree that 'unless we're brilliant at languages we're not really told about what is in the degree'. There were calls from all three groups interviewed for more help, direction, focus and advice from the school careers services in general.

A further belief, expressed by all groups, was that additional qualifications were necessary on top of a degree in modern foreign languages to enable graduates to compete realistically in the job market.

All three groups raised the issue of modern foreign languages not being perceived as academic subjects in their own right, but rather as an extra qualification. L5 held the view that modern language study was 'more a school subject it's not really a subject you study at university'. She also thought that, given the wider choice of subjects available to study at university, there was less chance a student would pick a subject done at A level to study as a main degree and that the A-level language could be seen as just a step along the route to university rather than as a main subject in itself.

The perception emerged from all groups interviewed that the most effective way to learn a foreign language was to live in the target language country rather than to study the same in a classroom context. V4 thought, for example, that it was more satisfying to learn to speak French in France than in the classroom as 'in a week you are speaking to people with confidence and you're getting ahead' whereas doing a French A level made her think 'I hope I don't actually have to speak to a French person when I go on holiday cos

I'd be embarrassed'. Comments from one of the questionnaire respondents also supported this view.

The appeal of sub-degree-level foreign language study at university with a degree-level qualification in another subject was raised by all groups interviewed. This was perceived as preventing language skills gained to date from being lost as well as being a positive extra qualification to offer potential employers. Ten of the twelve questionnaire respondents supported this view.

The group interviewed at the University of Brighton also found the notion of combined degrees (i.e. joint honours) with languages attractive, although they perceived the range of such courses currently available as limited and unimaginative. Comments from one of the questionnaire respondents supported this view.

It was particularly apparent in the interview in the state-school sector that participants had very little interest in working abroad upon graduating and that they perceived their future careers as being very much Britain-based. As V1 explained:

careers are pretty Britain-based ... it's not like you're looking to go and work abroad ... it's not a career plan to go and work in France or to go and work in Germany it's not on the cards.

He added:

when I think of a job I think of a mainly British-based job or one where I'm working for a British company I don't say that people rule out working abroad but it's not emphasised as something which is a good career opportunity.

V10 added that she saw 'abroad' as a holiday destination rather than as a working base.

Despite this, the advantages of working abroad were recognised by this group, together with the acknowledgement that many foreigners came to Britain to learn English for vocational reasons. The first group interviewed at the University of Brighton also showed little interest in working abroad, and a foreign language degree was consequently deemed unnecessary.

Students from both school sectors thought that an A-level modern language qualification was sufficient for vocational purposes, as it was more than most other people achieved and therefore gave one 'an edge' in the job market. Participants from Valley College saw less emphasis being placed by employers in the UK on modern foreign language ability amongst potential employees and, whilst participants from the University of Brighton recognised the benefits of being able to offer the same to a prospective employer, such as higher salaries, the increased likelihood of being interviewed and possessing a skill for life, the perception remained that jobs in the UK requiring modern foreign language skills were limited and not well advertised.

A final issue in the context of *instrumental motivation* to emerge from both school groups interviewed was that a modern foreign language A level was a tactical choice as it added variety to other A-level courses rather than reflecting any deep interest in the subject.

Learner level

There was little mention of the need for achievement from any of the groups interviewed. However, predictions of low A-level grades in modern foreign languages had deterred several participants from applying to study the same at degree level, whilst several other participants perceived the only goal during the A-level course as being the final grade attained in the examination, which gave the impression of the course being rather purposeless in the preceding two years.

'A major fear of orals' was expressed strongly in the first group interview at the University of Brighton by two participants, and this factor had acted as a strong disincentive to pursue foreign language studies at degree level. P2, for example, described herself as being 'scared to death really really worried' by the oral examinations. Part of the reason for this, she felt, was that at GCSE 'you don't actually learn to speak'. She consequently dealt with subsequent orals by 'learning stuff parrot-fashion'. P6 said she could identify with this coping strategy and that this tactic had caused serious difficulties at A level, where a more independent stance was required.

Linked to this was the worry concerning conversing with native speakers in the target language. Several of the participants in the state-school sector said that they would feel embarrassed or foolish if called upon to speak spontaneously to French people in France, with one person mentioning that she found her A-level language studies disappointing in this respect as she still did not have the confidence to communicate effectively with native speakers. There were calls from this group for greater emphasis to be placed on communicating in the target language during modern language A-level studies, with far greater emphasis being placed on 'chatting away' rather than just 'writing things down and doing listening exercises'.

With regard to perceived second-language competence, all the groups mentioned the difficulty of studying A-level modern languages which undermined their confidence and consequently discouraged them from contemplating a modern language degree. Six of the twelve questionnaire respondents shared this view. Particular difficulties mentioned were: the extra reading, research and writing of extended essays in the target language; the workload generally; the listening component; the grammar content of the A-level syllabus; the lack of structured support and encouragement from A-level language teachers, compared with the help received at GCSE.

A-level modern language study was described as being 'very stressful', with several participants perceiving it as harder than A levels in other subjects. The general perception in this context to emerge from all three groups, and from one of the questionnaire respondents too, was that if individuals were finding A-level modern language study so difficult, a degree in the same subject would be even harder. As P4 said, for example:

if you encourage people to do languages at university then you've got to make them realise that it's not going to be as bad or it's not going to be worse than A level because I really thought it was just going to be far too difficult.

Four people in the group interviewed at the University of Brighton felt that their A-level language teachers had 'threatened' them with the fact that the work they were doing for A level was much easier and less intense than that expected at degree level, and that this had put them off wanting to study a modern language degree. P3 said 'they just like put

you off at A level by saying this is nothing compared to what you will be doing for a degree', and P4 added that the teachers do this 'all the time'. The participants felt that the reasons behind these threats lay mainly in the fact that the teachers wanted to make A-level language work appear easier than the students were finding it. As P3 explained:

when you say this is really hard work they go ... if you were doing a degree at university doing languages this is the kind of stuff they'd expect you to do every week and you just think ... I couldn't possibly do this every single week and so for three or four years.

The prospect of a year abroad acted as an added disincentive for one participant, as she felt she would not be able to cope with the demands of studying in a foreign language in a foreign country. This opinion was reinforced by her observations of how the international students at the University of Brighton coped during their year abroad in England. As she explained:

I look at international students now people that have got such little English and I look at the textbooks and I just think wow this is heavy stuff and the people that don't even understand the language and have then got to kind of comprehend it I just think how do you do that.

One further issue to emerge from Lakeside College was the view held by several participants that the length of time the foreign language had been studied compared to the perceived standard attained was demotivating and a disincentive to continue with the subject at degree level. As L2 said:

I've been doing French since I was nine years old now and that's half my life ... and because of that ... I feel as if I should be better than I am which is a little bit demoralising ... and just makes me sort of feel well I'm not as good as I could be ... so I might as well just cash it in really and do something else.

Two participants from Valley College mentioned that they were now bored with the subject they had been studying for so many years. As V4 said with regard to degree-level language study:

I don't feel I could carry on studying French any more I've been doing it ... since ... ten or eleven years old ... and it just gets a bit much ... you reach A level and ... it's still bogged down with all the grammar ... it's still ... learn the grammar and you write a letter and it's the same thing every day since we first started and the thought of going on to do it even more just put me off.

All the participants in the group interviewed at the University of Brighton felt that the compulsory study of modern foreign languages was introduced too late into the school curriculum in England compared to other countries. This resulted, according to the participants, in the content of the A-level language syllabus being too intense and consequently unenjoyable and offputting in terms of studying the same at degree level. As P3 explained, if the study of modern foreign languages were introduced at a younger age into English schools, 'they wouldn't have to cram the entire lot into such a short space of time' which would mean a person could 'have the same standard when you're 13 as when we are 16 if you started just earlier'.

As outlined earlier, all three groups mentioned the general lack of encouragement to study a modern foreign language degree received from school careers services, A-level

modern foreign language teachers, parents or families. However, seven of the twelve questionnaire respondents said they *had* received encouragement, but had still chosen not to study a modern foreign language degree.

Linked to the above was the notion to emerge from all three groups of 'misinformation' surrounding degree-level modern foreign language study. This included the perceptions that the content of modern language degree programmes would: be far harder and more intense than study of the same at A level; lack coherence; be culturally limited; involve in-depth study of literature; be based on a similar, but more in-depth version of the modern foreign language A-level syllabus; be very stressful. The first two perceptions were also mentioned by several questionnaire respondents, together with the additional perception from two people that modern foreign language degrees were restricted in scope in terms of new skills which could be acquired.

These perceptions all acted as powerful disincentives to the participants in the groups interviewed to pursue modern foreign language studies further at degree level and appeared to stem both from the participants' own negative modern foreign language A-level experience and from impressions received from the modern language A-level teachers themselves.

Learning situation level

All three groups said they had found a big jump between GCSE and A-level modern foreign language study. Most participants had found this very stressful and offputting in terms of studying the same at degree level and it had led to a general lack of enjoyment of the A-level course. Most of the participants in the second group interview held at Valley College, for example, thought that doing an A-level language was hard work and very stressful in comparison to GCSE which had been, in the words of V4, 'quite an easy ride'. This participant went on to describe her French A-level course as being 'put on the edge of a cliff' in comparison. Several people thought that this jump undermined people's confidence at A level and consequently put them off contemplating a modern language degree. This view reflected those held by several participants in the other group interviews. As V3 said, 'A level has been quite hard ... so I thought a degree would be just a bit too hard'. V9 echoed this view by saying 'I couldn't do it at university as it's so much harder than A level ... and I can't even do it at A level'.

V7 said that the big jump between GCSE and A level was largely unexpected and that she felt unprepared for it, which added to the stress. V5 supported this view and said that friends who had achieved A or B grades in their GCSE languages would find it difficult to cope with the language A-level class as 'it's a big jump that people aren't expecting at all'. V1 said he had been told 'A levels would be a doss' and had consequently had 'a nasty shock'.

The interview participants mentioned the following as the main problem areas. First, the simple nature of the tasks required at GCSE – many of which could be learned parrot-fashion, particularly with regard to the oral component – made those required at A level appear daunting in comparison. Second, the amount of vocabulary required at A level, compared to GCSE level, had had the same effect. Third, the perception that a sound grammatical knowledge could be avoided at GCSE level added to the difficulty at A level and the perceived jump between the two levels.

Participants in the second group interview in the state-school sector described their general dissatisfaction with the A-level syllabus and, in particular, with the topics they were required to study. The former was deemed to be in need of urgent change in order to foster a more enjoyable language-learning experience and to motivate people to study their A-level languages further at degree level. Topics which were both interesting and practical (such as sport or music and 'more social cultural things') were called for to ameliorate the perceived unappealing nature of modern foreign language A-level study.

The unstimulating approach towards the study of literature at A level was also highlighted. P3, who had studied German literature as part of the A-level syllabus, had found the experience 'unbelievably boring' and 'pretty offputting'. This had undermined interest in the A-level course itself and discouraged participants from contemplating a degree in modern languages. He said he had found the choice of books made by the teachers unstimulating and added that having to learn quotes in the target language was tedious. Having been told by teachers that modern language study at university involved much of the same, he had decided that a degree in modern languages was 'not for me'. P6 agreed with this view. P5, however, had enjoyed her literature studies as they had formed part of a wider project involving a socio-economic study based in the Caribbean. V10, however, described her German A-level literature studies as being 'nothing other than looking at the grammar in the book' and 'just focussing on the boring things'.

A four-year degree in modern foreign languages was also mentioned by several participants at Valley College as a disincentive to continue, although three other people in this group thought that they *could* study a degree for four years but in a subject which they felt 'quite passionate about' (V4) rather than one which had been so unenjoyable at A level.

Four participants from the University of Brighton group mentioned the restrictive nature of the subject choices at A level as these limited degree choices, whilst participants at Lakeside College and three questionnaire respondents said they simply had other main degree preferences. Several participants from the private-school sector said they had felt under a certain pressure to study French after GCSE as it was part of the general ethos of the school to do so, even if individuals had no desire to study it at degree level.

There were few positive comments from any of the groups interviewed concerning the *relevance* of A-level modern foreign languages to their needs. This might be expected as many participants did not perceive any real need to study languages beyond this level, and several people also anticipated low grades in their A-level modern foreign language examinations.

Several participants raised concerns that the vocabulary they were being taught was dated and that the teachers' own language use was rather old-fashioned. This impression had been reinforced by visiting (German) students and language assistants, and the students as a group were evidently disheartened by this. V2 said 'all the French teachers that have ever taught me said they've learnt French however many years ago and when they go to France they can't understand a word they're saying'.

Participants in the University of Brighton group commented that they felt the university application process was inappropriately timed with the school sixth-form year, with one person adding that she felt the university admissions process was uncoordinated with the sixth-form syllabus. Most of the participants in this group felt that they did not have

enough time during the final year of their A-level course to make important decisions about future study and career pathways. This feeling was exacerbated for two people by the fact that they were not sure what they wanted to do in the future and felt pressured into sending off their UCAS forms without having any very clear ideas about their futures. As P2 explained:

I think you don't have enough time to decide especially with UCAS you have one year and you're not really into your A levels yet ... and then you have to decide everything within three months fill in the forms send it all off it's all during the time when you're meant to be really getting down to your A levels ... it's all jumbled up and you just don't know what you really want to do.

P4 said she 'found it all so stressful I didn't apply I just took a year out' in order to avoid having to make 'life-changing decisions' about the future. Two other students thought it would be a good idea to complete their UCAS forms at a different time of the academic year. P1 compared the situation in England to that in Italy, where the results of school-leaving exams are available before the university application process begins.

The uncertainty surrounding final A-level grades at the time of university application had acted as a disincentive to several of the participants interviewed, whilst, in terms of *satisfaction*, a general lack of enjoyment of A-level modern foreign language study emerged as a major disincentive to pursue study of the same at degree level. As V5 said:

a lot of the decisions made like whether people choose to do a language degree is based on their experience before and I think that our sort of ... experience influences that decision that we don't want to go on and carry on doing something that we're not enjoying or haven't enjoyed as much as we might enjoy something else.

Three of the questionnaire respondents also perceived degree-level modern foreign language study to have limitations in terms of study satisfaction. However, two of the participants in the third group interviewed said they *had* enjoyed their A-level modern foreign language studies, and this view was shared by six of the twelve questionnaire respondents.

2.2 Conclusions

This section has presented the reasons why the student participants did not choose to study a modern foreign language degree even though, given their A-level choices and/or results, they could potentially have done so. Dörnyei (2001: 155) remarks that 'demotivation is a complex issue', and it is evident from the interpretation presented above that this is indeed the case, with no single factor contributing to the lack of enthusiasm for pursuing modern foreign language studies at degree level.

Two key factors, however, do emerge from the students' perspectives. A general *climate of negativity* surrounding perceptions of (degree-level) modern foreign language study and a *negative A-level experience* combine to act as disincentives to the students to study foreign languages at degree level.

3 The teachers' and lecturers' perspectives: interpretation of key issues

All four teachers/lecturers interviewed felt that many pupils found the A-level modern foreign language syllabus difficult, with high demands being placed on the candidates. This view was endorsed by the majority of the student participants. This, the staff believed, was a key factor in discouraging pupils from pursuing modern foreign language study at degree level. Three of the four academics interviewed felt that there was a general perception that it was harder for a good GCSE pupil to get a high grade at a foreign language A level than in other subjects, and that this was an added disincentive. This perception also emerged from the third group interview.

Dr F from Thames College raised the issue of the positive effects of early foreign language learning, an issue also raised by all participants from the University of Brighton, whilst Mr K, his counterpart at Solent University identified the lack of a compulsory need for students to study a foreign language post-GCSE as a key issue. Whilst Lilian from Valley College in the state-school sector supported these views, she also highlighted the problems arising from some pupils having learnt a foreign language previously and others in the same class having not.

Dr P from Lakeside College saw the modern foreign language GCSE syllabus causing many of the problems at A level. He believed that the GCSE syllabus was considered boring by pupils due to the topic-based approach to the teaching materials, which seemed to comprise 'an endless repetition of bus tickets and train times and so on', and thought the introduction of a narrative element to the GCSE course might add interest.

Mr K also perceived the syllabus in schools for modern foreign languages, and in particular German, as unattractive, whilst Lilian commented on the possibility of students being able to 'rote-learn' for the GCSE examinations but not at A level, which contributed to the wide gap between GCSE and A-level modern foreign language study. The latter perspective mirrored comments from students in the first two groups interviewed. Dr P hoped that the wide gap between the two levels would be addressed by the introduction of AS levels as part of the Curriculum 2000 educational reforms. Concerns about this gap were expressed by all group interview participants, with students in the second group mentioning their dissatisfaction with the unappealing nature of the topics studied at A level.

These concerns also reflect the view of Reynolds (2001: 8) among others (for example, Lee *et al.* 1998; Grenfell 2000; Bernard and von Ploetz 2001), that:

the current [modern foreign language] curriculum and communicative teaching methods have disappointed many expectations, and there is a real need to develop teaching methods and materials that will stimulate and challenge the real communicative and cognitive interests and creativity of the young, especially teenage learners.

All four academics interviewed had adopted a 'wait-and-see' approach to the impact of the new AS levels, with Dr P seeing the 'problems concerning post-16 take-up of modern language studies only being addressed if the level of the new AS examination were right'. Lilian felt they were really only accessible to 'bright, middle-class achievers' as the examinations remained difficult and had not fully addressed the gap between GCSE and post-GCSE modern foreign language study. She expressed disappointment at the timing of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry, which she saw as a missed opportunity as it did not coincide with the major curriculum change after age 16. She also regretted that the modern foreign language AS levels were not 'more fun', partly due to syllabus demands and time constraints, and thought they did not appeal to the interests of the targeted age group. She wondered whether there would be an element of 'tactical choice' at play, with pupils looking for more subjects to study after GCSE rather than intending to go on to the full A2 with their language studies. The post-16 decline in the take-up of modern foreign language study would consequently be postponed by only one year. Indeed, despite cautious notes of optimism that the introduction of the AS levels might encourage pupils to study a modern foreign language to A2 and beyond (for example, Fisher 2001; Marshall 2001), early figures indicate that this may not be the case (CILT 2002).

Lilian thought there was a pressing need for the general culture in Britain towards modern foreign language learning to change in order to reverse the declining take-up of modern foreign language study at degree level, a factor mentioned by all four teachers/lecturers interviewed as a key issue surrounding the debate.

This perceived 'climate of negativity' was deemed by all four academics to be dictated largely by the negative portrayal of 'Europe', 'foreigners' and 'all things foreign' in all aspects of the British media and particularly in the popular press. This negative portrayal was, according to Dr F, Lilian and Mr K, exacerbated by the general political climate in Britain today (2002) but, as the former commented, without a public which felt their views were expressed, this attitude could not be so successfully promoted. Dr F also wondered to what extent parents were negatively influenced by it with regard to their children's degree choices. This is a realistic consideration, given that 'parents are more involved with their children's university choices than ever before' (Plomin 2001).

Dr P felt that this general 'climate of negativity' created attitudes in young English people which were detrimental to them, and he regretted the lack of positive language-learning/speaking role models in society in general. Lilian also commented that people in Britain do not hear foreign languages being used around them, which led to an 'island mentality' on the part of the British population, possibly reflected in the Britain-based career aspirations of many of the student participants from Valley College. Lilian felt this 'whole culture of negativity towards language learning starts right way back at primary school in the education system' and that only 'bold legislation' could bring about the cultural changes which were, in her view, necessary.

Dr F and Mr K both mentioned the perception that, due to the apparent strength of English as a world language, it was unnecessary for British people to learn a foreign language, a view held by several of the student participants. This, Dr F and Mr K believed, reinforced the 'climate of negativity' surrounding foreign language learning in Britain.

Dr F felt that foreign language proficiency not only enabled one to communicate with foreign language speakers, but also provided cultural insights which could not always be translated into English. Thus he thought that foreign language learning to advanced level

should be included in the whole political debate surrounding multicultural societies, a view seemingly endorsed by Footitt (2001b), who argues that

citizenship today must also comprise linguistic literacy, an informed awareness that we live in a multilingual world, and that languages express different perceptions of how we might relate to each other internationally in the future.

Mr K detected an 'anti-German' attitude on the part of British elites in politics which he regretted; he said that he saw this negative cultural problem, which he perceived as playing an emotional role in society, underlying the structural problems in schools.

Evidence to support this notion of a 'climate of negativity' surrounding modern foreign language study is perceptible at most levels in society. Headlines such as 'Once again, we are becoming the language dunces of Europe' (editorial in *The Independent*, 22 August 2002) may even lead to a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Reynolds 2001: 1) thereby promoting the negative climate further.

It is also hard to find positive role models in the wider society who speak other languages and who might positively influence the perceptions of young people. Notable exceptions are the footballer Gary Lineker, the tennis player Tim Henman and the athlete Diane Modahl, who were all used to promote the recent European Year of Languages campaign in 2001.

Regarding media attitudes, Bussmann (2001) notes the 'years of relentless press abuse' which has contributed to the declining numbers of students of German as a foreign language in Britain and the impact this has on the foreign language skills of the workforce, with one in five English exporters having 'nobody who can speak a foreign language'.

A further effect of this 'climate of negativity' concerns the declining interest of British students in spending part of their study time abroad (Corbett and Footitt 2001). As John Reilly, director of the UK Socrates-Erasmus Council, is quoted as saying

students, their families and universities in other European countries recognise that if they want to develop their career prospects they need one or two European languages at a good level and experience in other countries. This climate does not exist in Britain.

Times Higher Education Supplement, 3 August

Whilst some positive messages of support for modern foreign language study can be heard from various political leaders in Britain (Thomson 1998), it could be argued that greater efforts are needed on the part of those in power if the general 'climate of negativity' surrounding modern foreign language learning in Britain is to be reversed.

Regarding the perceived vocational concerns on the part of students, Dr P said that many of his pupils did go on to university to study modern foreign languages, but in conjunction with subjects such as 'law' or 'business' rather than as single- or joint-honours degree programmes. The reason behind these choices lay, according to Dr P in the increased vocational awareness on the part of pupils, a view supported by Dr F, together with the perception that the sorts of linguist now required in the job market were those who could function in a foreign language rather than being specialist linguists. Thus Dr P saw wider economic needs dictating the foreign language courses on offer as well as their

content. He thought that many students saw foreign language study as 'an add-on rather than a course of study in its own right'. These views mirror those held by many of the student participants and reflect the growing popularity of the institution-wide language programmes offered by many universities (Coleman 1996; Pilkington 1997; CILT 2002).

Lilian mentioned that her students saw the career paths of 'teaching' or 'translating' as the only viable options following modern foreign language degrees, neither of which held any appeal. This perception of the limited range of careers, and the general lack of appeal of entering the teaching profession in particular, coincides with the views of many of the students interviewed and was highlighted in the Nuffield Language Inquiry (2000: 69) as a cause for concern. As Marshall (2000) points out however, 'language graduates have lower rates of unemployment than graduates in the great majority of other subjects'.

Whilst many argue that 'English-only speakers are at a real disadvantage in the recruitment market' (Bernard and von Ploetz 2001), it has also been suggested that many language graduates feel that their foreign language skills are underused (Wallace 1993). The argument has also been mooted that foreign language skills can be bought in by business communities as and when necessary, rather than employing foreign language graduates directly (Vandevelde 2001). However, as Wallace (1993: 3) argues, 'successful business contact with foreign countries must rest on a real understanding of other cultures, and not just on the belief that basic language and translating skills are all that is necessary'.

Both Lilian and Dr P discussed the careers advice available to their pupils which, contrary to the views of their pupils interviewed, they thought was 'adequate' (Dr P) and 'very thorough' (Lilian), provided the students knew what they wanted to do in the first place. Lilian, however, thought it would take more than good careers advice to shift the negative cultural attitudes in society in general regarding foreign language learning.

Dr F also thought there was a general lack of awareness on the part of students regarding the advantages of knowing foreign languages in the modern marketplace. He believed this message needed to be spread at the A-level stage, if not before. However, Mr K thought that although some students *were* ill informed regarding these advantages, others were not and yet had still chosen not to study degree-level modern foreign languages. Thus, in his view, the employability factor was not the only concern for students when choosing what to study at university, but added to this was consideration on the part of both potential students and their parents of the costs (and debts) involved, as well as the 'fun factor' of the subject studied. He perceived that there are 'study fashions', a view supported by, for example, O'Leary (2000), and that currently the trend did not support modern foreign language degrees. Contrary to Dr F's opinion, Mr K also thought that the whole employability argument reached students too early at the age of 15–16.

The final key factor to emerge from the interviews with the teachers and lecturers concerned their own professional roles and practice. All four people interviewed raised concerns about the quality of foreign language instruction delivered in secondary schools, with Lilian saying she had rarely seen the subject well taught in that sector and Mr K remarking on the apparent dearth of good foreign language teachers in some schools.

Dr P thought that many teachers did not select teaching material carefully enough and did not fully explore the nature of post-GCSE foreign language study before teaching the same. Dr F thought some secondary school teachers were ill-prepared and over-reliant on

coursebooks, which reflected their lack of confidence in their subject, and he felt that ways had to be found 'to attract more capable teachers into the profession'. He also thought that teaching conditions in secondary schools were not always good and that there was a great need for more preparation time on the part of modern foreign language teachers. He said he would like to see a closer co-operation within the modern foreign language teaching world, with greater dialogues between those responsible for various aspects of modern language teaching and learning. This view echoes Footitt (2000b) who opines that 'language departments in higher education could work more closely with language teachers ... in secondary schools, in language colleges and in further education, to "bridge the gap" which so clearly exists'.

It also coincides with the concept of a 'partnership for learning' proposed by the Council of Europe (2001) which would, according to Jones (2001),

bring together all stakeholders, teachers, learners, testers, producers of materials ... into a coherent framework that would ensure a seamless pathway of learning from primary through to higher and further education.

Lilian regretted the lack of positive role models from modern foreign language teachers themselves, whom she described as being 'oddballs'. She deplored the poor reputation of teachers in the United Kingdom in general, compared to the regard in which the profession was held abroad, and saw an urgent need to attract more 'normal' people into the modern language teaching profession. Dr P also expressed concerns both at the dearth of applications (particularly from men) to enter the modern language teaching profession, mirroring views expressed by Footitt (2000a), The Nuffield Languages Inquiry (2000) and O'Leary (2000) for example, as well as at the potential lack of specialist translators in the years to come if the decline in the study of modern foreign languages at degree level is not reversed. The latter comment reflects the concern expressed by the British Academy (2001: 2) that the numbers of graduates applying to do PhDs in European languages are inadequate to 'replenish the academic profession, meet the needs of the economy and sustain the intellectual health of the nation'.

Dr F queried the effectiveness of teacher education programmes in England based on his own involvement with teacher education, saying that the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme was too short and not subject-specific enough. This, he believed, led to professional insecurity and lack of awareness on the part of language teachers of the difficulties faced by the pupils, which added to the frustrations and negative experiences reported. Views which appear to endorse these concerns were held by many of the students interviewed.

Both Dr F and Mr K thought there had been some mismanagement in the way German as a foreign language had been 'sold'. They believed that people should recognise that learning a foreign language *is* difficult and not just all about communication. A new balance was needed, they argued, between promoting the easy, communicative, joyful aspects of foreign language learning and the necessarily more academic aspects.

Mr K expressed concern that universities, which are 'simply desperate' to meet student recruitment targets, will be tempted to offer places on modern foreign language degree-level programmes to students who have only obtained an AS-level modern foreign language qualification, leading to teaching problems in universities. He also thought that, because German was perceived as a difficult subject in which to achieve good A-level

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grades, it received little support from heads of schools who were concerned about their school's ranking in national league tables. Dr P raised the further issues of the lack of time available to staff to do more to promote the continued study of modern foreign languages and the difficulty individual teachers had in keeping up with the very wide range of courses involving modern languages now on offer at universities.

4 Discussion and conclusions

4.1 Introduction

Bearing in mind the limitations of this study (see Section 4.3), any conclusions drawn can be but tentative. It is clear, however, that the factors contributing to the participants' decisions not to study a modern foreign language at degree level are complex, with no single factor emerging as a main 'demotivator'. The views of the student participants can be encompassed by two broad themes: a negative A-level experience and a general climate of negativity surrounding the continued study of modern foreign languages. These two categories both contributed in a major way to students' decisions not to study a modern foreign language at degree level.

Four broad themes emerged from the interviews with the staff members in this study as playing a major role in students' decisions. These were factors relating to: the teaching of modern foreign languages in secondary (and primary) schools; a general climate of negativity pervading the wider society; vocational concerns on the part of students; professional roles and practice.

In order to promote modern foreign language study at degree level, several key issues emerged from the perspectives obtained in this study which could well be addressed by the parties concerned in terms of institutional/co-operational policy decisions. These are considered in turn below under the following headings: issues for schools; issues for universities; issues for the wider society. There follows a consideration of the methodological issues to emerge from this study in terms of the way modern foreign languages are delivered particularly in the secondary school sector, with the recent government green paper (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2002) serving as a backdrop to this discussion.

4.1.1 Issues for schools

- Schools could first raise pupils' awareness of the number of degrees on offer which involve continued modern foreign language study and the usefulness in terms of future careers of spending time abroad on study programmes such as Erasmus and gaining a degree in modern foreign languages.
- They could ensure that pupils enter university with a sound grammatical knowledge and the ability to work independently to enable them to pursue their languages studies further in the university setting.
- The school sector could promote a climate in which inspirational teaching and sympathetic attitudes on the part of foreign language teachers are prevalent.
- Efforts are needed to improve teaching conditions in the school sector generally and to further promote school exchanges with other countries.

4.1.2 Issues for universities

- Universities could ensure the continuity of the language learning experience received by students whilst at school and adopt a softer approach to make the subject more appealing.
- They could expand the range of courses involving the study of foreign languages, in terms of both combined degrees and sub-degree-level courses, which may involve taking a fresh approach to such study.
- All course publicity involving modern language study should detail the course content and promote the message that such degrees lead to a wide variety of career options. This information could be disseminated by the universities themselves as well as by professional bodies such as the CILT and the Association for Language Learning. Care with the timing of such dissemination is needed.
- There is a need for openness on the part of universities, to share with the general public what they are doing and to demonstrate the benefits of modern foreign language study at advanced level.
- The modern language teaching world could co-operate more closely to promote a greater dialogue between different aspects of modern language study. Such a spirit could be fostered by conferences and publications.

4.1.3 Issues for the wider society

- The media in the widest sense could play a key role by: showing a greater international interest when reporting events, and doing so with greater respect for other cultures; promoting people with high public profiles who speak other languages, for example footballers and pop stars, to provide positive role models particularly for young people; promoting advertisements or foreign films in the original language with subtitles.
- A more concerted effort could be considered at national level on the part of university and school pressure groups, employers and government representatives to really promote the study of foreign languages both at school and at university and to address the underlying cultural problems which contribute to the general climate of negativity apparent in the wider society in Britain today. Events such as those connected to the European Year of Languages are a good starting point.

4.2 Discussion

Many of the issues presented above involve policy decisions at the highest level if the spiral of decline in the take-up of modern foreign languages at degree level is to be halted or even reversed.

The perspectives obtained in this inquiry have also raised additional issues concerning the teaching and learning of modern foreign languages which concern national policy and which could usefully inform wider debates in the field.

First, there are methodological issues in terms of the way modern foreign languages are delivered, particularly in the secondary school context. Many students interviewed in this study had negative feelings towards their modern foreign language learning experience both at GCSE and at A level, due in part to the nature of these syllabuses. Serious concerns

were also expressed regarding the methodological approaches underpinning the GCSE, AS-level and A-level syllabuses by all of the academic staff interviewed who highlighted the apparent lack of coherence in modern foreign language teaching throughout secondary school education and beyond into the higher education sector.

These methodological concerns reflect the public debates in the English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching world in the mid-1980s (for example, Swan 1985; Widdowson 1985) surrounding the nature and relevance of the 'communicative approach' (Widdowson 1978) to (English) foreign language teaching. As Swan (1985: 3) argues, 'a basic communicative doctrine is that earlier approaches to language teaching did not deal properly with meaning', producing students of EFL who were structurally competent in that they could produce grammatically correct sentences and yet were unable to perform a simple communicative task. The 'communicative approach', with its emphasis on the language of interaction, was hugely influential in the EFL teaching world throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, until the pendulum swung back to reconsider the role of grammatical instruction whilst incorporating the more positive aspects of communicative methodology. In the current world of EFL teaching, the methodological approach underpinning the most successful language courses and examinations could perhaps best be described as 'a balanced approach'. This could be defined as a methodological approach which seeks to promote an in-depth treatment of grammar and language awareness together with an emphasis on the development of communicative competence, as evidenced by the hugely popular *New Headway English Course* (Soars and Soars 1998).

In line with views put forward by Reynolds (2001) among others (see Section 3 above), it would appear that the world of modern foreign language teaching in the widest sense could well address similar methodological debates to those which have informed the teaching of EFL over the past two decades. This might ameliorate the shortfalls inherent in the modern foreign language syllabuses currently on offer in many secondary schools, and address the needs of 'a generation of linguistically challenged students' (Bassnett 2002) who have emerged from communicative approaches to foreign language learning at school with a need for remedial grammar coaching at university (ibid.). By addressing at the level of national policy the methodological shortfalls underpinning the current modern foreign language curricula throughout the compulsory education sector and beyond, the lack of coherence at all levels of modern foreign language teaching and learning, as highlighted by the participants' perspectives in this study, might begin to be addressed.

It is perhaps pertinent at this stage to consider the reasons why foreign language learning is so important in Britain today. Despite opinions to the contrary, for example those put forward by Williams (2000), the views of those in support of this notion in recent press debates can perhaps best be summarised by the Council of Europe (2001: 2):

it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination.

Indeed, it is not just through competence in European modern languages but in foreign languages in general that intercultural awareness and understanding can be enhanced.

Recent government proposals (DfES 2002) do little to support the above message. Despite opposition at senior political levels in the European context (Garner 2002), it is deemed 'too constraining' (DfES 2002: paragraph 3.16) for pupils to be obliged to study modern foreign languages at Key Stage 4. Consequently it is proposed that, with effect from September 2004, the statutory study of modern foreign languages be applied only until the age of 14. This appears to be a backward step in contrast to many other European countries, for example Germany, where study of modern foreign languages is a requirement of the curriculum until the final examinations are taken (Bussmann 2001). Indeed, in Germany, the learning of a *third* foreign language after the age of 11 is shortly to become compulsory in secondary schools, with at least one other non-language subject being taught through the medium of a foreign language. With the ambassadors to the UK of France, Germany, Italy and Spain calling for foreign language teaching to be mandatory in primary schools and to continue to university degree level in order to promote business interests in the UK and to facilitate student exchanges within the European community (Garner 2002), the recent government proposal outlined above does little to promote continued modern foreign language study in Britain at a time when positive messages on learning languages could not be needed more.

The same green paper (DfES 2002) also proposes to offer all primary school children the 'entitlement' to study foreign languages by 2012, although this will not be a compulsory part of the National Curriculum. Currently only 'around 25% of state primary schools in England offer a foreign language' (Footitt 2000b), whereas elsewhere in Europe learning modern foreign languages starts at age six and will become mandatory from age seven in France and Germany from September 2002. The government proposal concerning primary schools outlined above is thus a positive step towards starting to bring the situation in Britain in the primary school sector in line with the rest of Europe and promoting an early start to foreign language learning, although the delayed implementation of this proposed policy is of great concern given the proposed changes to the secondary school curriculum outlined above with effect from September 2004. It remains to be seen whether the government white paper, due out after the submission of this report, will retain these proposals which have received a great deal of criticism from the world of language teaching and learning.

The green paper proposals (DfES 2002) also raise several concerns at the level of national policy, many of which have echoes in the findings to emerge from this study. First, in order to introduce the primary school 'entitlement' to modern foreign language study into Britain's 21,000 primary schools, it has been estimated that 'an extra 20,000 teachers' will be needed (Garner 2002). Given the declining numbers of PGCE students wishing to teach modern foreign languages in schools and the general lack of appeal of the teaching profession as a career, as evidenced by many of the participants in this study, it would appear that finding such a large number of teachers will be increasingly difficult as fewer A-level students enter university to study modern language degrees in the first place, thereby reinforcing the 'vicious circle' (Bassnett 2002) of supply and demand.

Second, the proposals raise the question of the quality of those teachers recruited to deliver modern foreign languages in the primary school sector. As evidenced from many perspectives in this study, the quality of teachers is crucial in motivating students to continue with their modern languages beyond the level currently studied. If, as the former education secretary, Estelle Morris, is reported to have said (Miles 2002), teachers already working in the primary sector with 'rudimentary foreign languages – perhaps picked up on holiday' are asked to teach primary pupils 'the basics', a hugely motivating

experience can hardly be anticipated. This will only contribute to the spiral of decline in modern foreign language study when such study ceases to be part of the compulsory school curriculum.

It would appear therefore that there is an urgent need, which can only be addressed by national policy, for properly trained language teachers to deliver a coherent modern foreign language syllabus starting in the primary school sector and continuing throughout the education system. This would hopefully, in turn, have a positive impact on the take-up of modern foreign language study in higher (and further) education. Currently the prevailing perception in many university language departments is that there is no long-term perspective regarding university modern foreign language study and that individual language programme planners face the demands of the 'student customers' and individual institutions (in the widest sense) with no coherent language strategy extending from schools into higher education. Indeed, even the European dimension of higher education has been described recently as 'a mess' (Corbett 2001) with a fragmented policy framework having neither a shared agenda nor a national strategy.

Despite the many individual initiatives on the part of a wide variety of institutions across all levels of the education system which have sparked some imaginative and effective ways to promote the study of modern foreign languages and enhance students' experience of them, it would appear that without an integrated and coherent national language teaching and learning policy, which is urgently needed at all levels of the education sector, these efforts and initiatives are but wasted.

4.3 Limitations of the study

Any conclusions drawn from this study are limited by the nature of the sample and by the fact that the data were collected over a six-month period between January and June 2001. The sample itself was relatively small and it is not possible to claim that the perspectives to emerge are representative of anyone else but the participants to whom they belong. The inquiry therefore seeks to explore individual perceptions and to offer an interpretation of these rather than to produce 'generalisable' data which could be subjected to statistical analysis.

It could also be argued that the pupils interviewed from the two schools in Sussex might have more positive perspectives regarding their modern foreign language studies than pupils interviewed in another county, for example Wiltshire, given the proximity of Sussex to the northern French coastline, thereby facilitating school excursions and students exchanges.

A further consideration is that modern language programme leaders in higher education, with language specialisms other than German, may have different perspectives.

As robust an analysis as possible of the data collected has been attempted. Inevitably, however, in an essentially qualitative study of this nature, the researcher's own perspectives have coloured the kinds of data elicited from the participants and the interpretation thereof (Ball 1990). The researcher's biography is therefore included at the outset.

4.4 Avenues for further research

In terms of useful avenues for further research, the following areas could be explored. First, a longitudinal study could follow the cases of selected sixth-formers who chose to study a modern foreign language at AS level. This would enable key periods in the students' lives, when crucial decisions regarding continued modern foreign language study are made, to be pinpointed, and for feelings concerning how motivated or demotivated individuals feel at the time of these decisions to be explored.

Second, if it emerges in September 2002 that pupils are continuing with their modern foreign language studies after GCSE, but not continuing to A2 level, a future study could usefully address this issue using similar research methods to those employed here but with an extended questionnaire to incorporate a wider range of responses.

Third, universities could also consider the need for research into whether students find modern languages more attractive when combined with other non-language degrees and exactly what those degree options could be.

Fourth, the perspectives of higher education modern language programme leaders whose specialism is not German could be sought in order to broaden the range of perspectives obtained in the university context.

Fifth, further related research could explore how greater methodological continuity between the modern foreign language syllabuses from primary level right through the school system and beyond could best be defined and implemented in order to provide a more coherent language learning experience for students.

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