

When will we get some fluent policy on modern languages?

Michael Gove's call for children to learn more languages is part of a confused narrative that dates back to Labour.



Michael Gove has said he would like children to start learning more languages from the age of five. Photograph: Mark Makela/Zuma Press/Corbis

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Comment

There are a whole host of reasons why it's important to learn a foreign language, as Michael Gove, the education secretary, explained in an interview at the weekend when he [called for children to start learning additional languages from the age of five](#).

Gove said: "Learning a foreign language, and the culture that goes with it, is one of the most useful things we can do to broaden the empathy and imaginative sympathy and cultural outlook of children." He added: "It is literally the case that learning languages makes you smarter. The neural networks in the brain strengthen as a result of language learning."

So does Gove deserve three cheers, or at least *un bon point*, for this attempt to halt the [calamitous fall](#) in the number of pupils sitting a language GCSE from 444,700 in the summer of 1998 to 273,000 in 2010?

Andy Burnham, Labour's shadow education secretary, seems not to be entirely convinced. He said: "I welcome his belated endorsement of Labour party policy. Languages would already be taught in our primary schools, had Michael Gove not scrapped Labour's curriculum plans last year. This is yet more of the duplicity we have come to expect from the secretary of state."

Gove seems to have forgotten the policy that all primary school children in England should start learning a modern foreign language from the age of seven was announced back in 2007, when the then education secretary, Alan Johnson, said he wanted "to put languages at the heart of learning".

But Gove's announcement is certainly a lot more positive about the benefits of fluency in another language than former Labour education secretary [Estelle Morris](#) ever was. It was Morris who decided in 2002 that we should stop forcing all our 14- to 16-year-olds to study a modern foreign language. Incredibly, she admitted that this decision to scrap compulsory modern languages in England's secondary schools [was a consequence of truancy crackdowns](#). Morris's policy of dropping compulsory foreign language learning beyond the age of 14 was implemented in 2004.

As a result of these changes, language departments in many secondary schools began to shrink as take-up declined and fewer teachers were needed. Since 2004, the number of candidates for GCSE French has fallen by about 30%.

And Gove has continued with contradictory thinking about language learning. In hindsight, he may well be thankful for the student protests that swept the country a year ago: they drowned out a Department for Education decision to [suspend the British Council's foreign language assistant scheme](#) for English and Welsh students. More than 2,500 students were faced with the prospect of having their year abroad cancelled.

The suspension was greeted with fury and despair by academics involved in language teaching. The year abroad is a compulsory element of the vast majority of language degrees, and more than 2,500 British students worked as language assistants in Europe, Latin America and China last year. France, with 1,130 assistants, and Spain with 638, are the most popular destinations for language assistants.

The language assistants programme was started in 1905 to enable participants to widen their teaching experience and develop linguistic fluency and confidence while assisting with the teaching of their own language abroad. When the programme started, education was seen to be the key to improving the economic prosperity of the country and, in particular, there was dissatisfaction with modern language teaching in both countries. *Plus ça change.*

Former language assistants who were furious about the suspension of the language assistant scheme included author JK Rowling and impressionist Rory Bremner, who said: "How can you fully understand and appreciate another language and culture without spending proper time there, living and working?"

Fortunately, Gove eventually saw sense and the language assistant programme, which cost just £750,000 in 2010, was finally reinstated, but with a £50,000 cut in its budget. This meant that there has been no marketing of this year's scheme.

Do foreign languages matter any more? Surely everyone speaks English these days? Well, yes they do matter, and here's a practical reason why. Only 6% of the world's population speak English as a first language, and 75% of the world's population don't speak any English at all. British influence at the heart of the European Union's decision-making process is almost certainly affected by the fact that British officials are not well represented in EU institutions. Of the 32,140 staff at the European commission, just 1,463 (4.6%) are British. Britain represents 12% of the EU population but British applicants made up just 1.44% of the applicant pool for the 2010 recruitment cycle