

La Grande Illusion: Why Scottish further education has failed to grasp the potential of modern languages

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Abstract: The most recently available data from the Scottish Qualifications Authority show that modern language provision in the Scottish further education sector is on the verge of a total collapse. Building on previous research by Doughty (2005) and Bourdieu's concept of habitus this article shows how the self-perpetuating belief that 'English is enough' has unintentionally affected data that are used to inform the content of vocational qualifications. The taken-for-granted assumptions underlying the data collection methods are challenged and some alternative conceptualisations are proposed regarding the role of modern languages in vocational education and society.

Keywords: further education, labour market surveys, language statistics, relevance, habitus

Introduction

Just over a decade ago, at the turn of the 21st century, yet another flurry of documents and reports attempted to show that there is a need for native English speakers to have competence in other modern languages. At UK level, the Nuffield Language Inquiry (2000) concluded that greater emphasis should be placed on developing language capability in all education sectors, as well as in business and industry. In Scotland, the government endorsed the recommendations by the Ministerial Action Group on Languages (2000), which advocated a range of measures to improve language learning in schools (Scottish Executive, 2001). At the same time, Lo Bianco (2001) proposed that language skills should form part of a wider language and literacy policy for Scotland. Finally, in a survey of over 300 Scottish companies (Beedham, 2001) over a third of respondents had *knowingly* lost significant business due to a lack of language skills.

Further education (FE) is generally considered as the sector which most closely responds to local employer demand. However, Doughty (2005) identified a number of factors that contributed to a misleading perception regarding the role of languages within FE qualifications. In the first instance, there was no policy with regard to language provision and the funding methodology discouraged programme managers from including language options in their programmes. Concurrently, the data on which managers based their decisions - labour market skills surveys and statistics on language uptake by FE learners - were seriously flawed. As a result, modern language uptake was on a downward path and Doughty concluded that without intervention by government the decline was set to continue. Some might argue that this decline is a 'natural' consequence resulting from the rise of English as a global means of communication, which started with the colonial period of the British Empire in the eighteenth century and continued with the economic rise of the USA in the twentieth. More recently we

can observe an increasing tendency in many countries to offer higher education courses in English in order to attract greater numbers of international students. On the other hand, others have pointed out that even within this increasing homogenisation both social and business relationships still tend to develop more fruitfully when each of the languages involved in the transactions or negotiations is given some courtesy. However, by all accounts the ‘English is enough’ argument is still dominant within Anglophone circles.

Of late, concerns have also been raised about language provision at university level. Former central institutions with a *vocational* focus are particularly badly affected (Doughty, 2009). Thus, Robert Gordon University (Aberdeen), the University of Abertay (Dundee), the University of the West of Scotland and Queen Margaret University (Edinburgh) no longer provide undergraduate degrees in modern languages, and in some instances there is no language provision at all.

Getting into a monolingual habitus

All this points to there being an apparent general acceptance that modern languages have no vocational relevance. By contrast, I want to argue that such a consensus has been maintained within an established knowledge framework that is already based on a monolingual premise. Thus it continues to re-affirm its own taken-for-granted assumptions, even in the face of evidence to the contrary.

According to Bourdieu (1981), individuals within a given society create a system of fairly predictable tendencies to think and act, which he termed *habitus*. By accepting certain phenomena as indisputable facts or ‘truths’, individuals subconsciously structure subsequent thoughts and actions on the basis of these beliefs – regardless of the actual reliability or validity of the initial assumptions. More significantly, future phenomena, even if they contradict the initial impression formed, will be interpreted in such a way as to maintain a belief in the validity of the original judgement. Thus a self-reinforcing dialectical cycle evolves between structure, *habitus* and thought / action.

Using Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* we can formulate a hypothesis that individuals born and raised in Anglophone countries are likely to develop a monolingual disposition, based on the ostensibly ‘self-evident’ truth that English is the dominant, or even the only, language of international communication required in this increasingly globalised world. Within Scottish FE the twin factors of non-policy/inappropriate funding methodology on the one hand, and misleading data from the labour market and curriculum statistics on the other, arguably help to both create and maintain a monolingual habitus (cf. Figure 1). The notion that ‘English is enough’ in turn shapes future thoughts and actions of said individuals, thereby creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Indeed, as Bourdieu points out, the less conscious individuals are of the assumptions on which their actions rest, the more effectively their beliefs can be reinforced even when presented with contradictory data. Some examples are given in the next section.

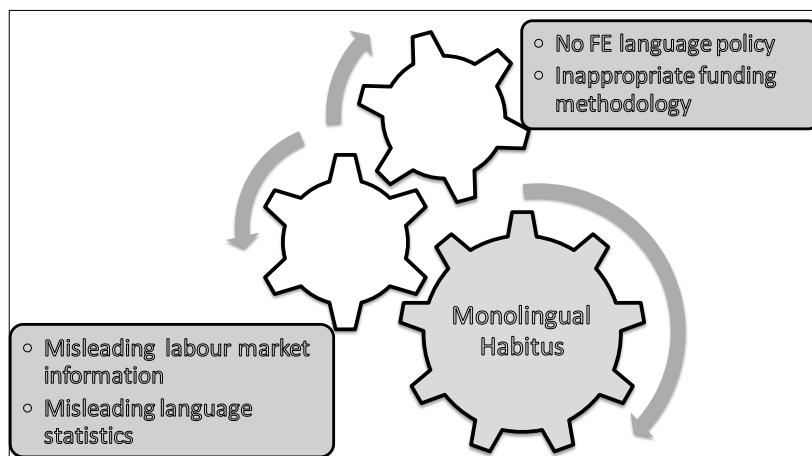


Figure 1: Self-reinforcing factors in the creation and maintenance of a monolingual habitus in Scottish further education

Creating and maintaining the 'English only' illusion

From a monolingual stance we can legitimately locate the aforementioned pro-language texts in the context of 2001, which was designated European Year of Languages. Thus, it would be 'natural' to find many efforts to show the relevance of languages in the run-up to this period. Furthermore, we could point to several publications that appear to provide solid evidence in support of the 'English is enough' argument. For example, in contrast to Beedham's report, a significant percentage of 200 responding export companies in the Edinburgh and Lothian area reported in two consecutive years that they did not consider language skills a barrier to export (Lothian Exports, 2001, 2002). Similarly, three consecutive Scotland-wide employer surveys conducted by Futureskills Scotland (FSS) (*Futureskills Scotland, 2003, 2004, 2007*) found that only 3% of employers offered any language training to their staff. Additionally, the 2004 FSS report concluded that language skills were *not* the deciding recruitment factor for hiring staff from outside the UK.

But what do these statistics *actually* tell us? *Upon closer examination*, the responses in themselves indicate neither a demand/need for language skills, nor a lack thereof, yet it is the latter interpretation that was the accepted conclusion. However, when Doughty (2005) investigated this issue she found that when employers state that language skills are not a barrier to export it is because:

- they have decided not to export at all (but still complete the survey as if they were an exporter)
- they export only to Anglophone countries;
- they export to countries where it is easy to find business partners with English language skills; or
- they already have staff with language skills in place (usually non-native English speakers!)

Employers also indicated that they prefer to hire staff with language skills already 'in place' rather than go to the expense of training them. Finally, they stated that whilst the ability to speak a foreign language was in itself an insufficient criterion for

recruitment, it could play a decisive role when there were a range of candidates with similar profiles applying for a particular job. Doughty's findings were corroborated by a number of investigations conducted separately and independently on behalf of CILT, the National Centre for Languages (*CILT, 2005a, 2005b*).

Clearly, the researchers designing the Lothian Export questionnaire made the assumption that if an employer wanted to export he would consider the language challenge instead of circumventing it. Interestingly, they did not explore the linguistic dimension of the most-frequently identified barrier to export: finding a trustworthy export partner abroad. By repeating the exact same questions the following year they asserted their belief in the appropriateness of the initial premise – and in so doing they have subconsciously revealed a monolingual habitus.

Similarly, the researchers devising the Futureskills Scotland skills survey quite clearly assumed that if an employer found they needed staff with language skills – assuming that the employer would recognise that need in the first place! – they would train existing staff, presumably based on the notion that it would be easy and cost-effective to do so. Again, by repeating the same question in subsequent surveys and obtaining the same response, they have obtained 'consistent' and 'reliable' data that would confirm the implied interpretation that since language training is not happening there is no need or demand for this skill. The conclusion seems 'self-evident' if we start from the premise that English will be the only language that matters, but **it** is not justifiable once we start to reflect on the underlying beliefs.

Doughty (2005) found a prevalence of these same misconceptions when she interviewed a range of students, staff and senior managers at five FE colleges in the central belt area of Scotland. Interestingly, older students who had had some experience of work and travel were more likely to consider that having other language skills would be beneficial. Their responses revealed that it was the sense of elation felt at being able to communicate with speakers of other languages that had modified their monolingual habitus more than having come up against concrete language barriers.

The case of the disappearing language statistics

Because modern languages are not considered a principal vocational subject within FE provision, any language unit that is studied as part of a vocational qualification will effectively 'disappear' from official statistics. For example, a language studied as part of a tourism course is counted as a tourism unit. Only languages studied in 'stand-alone' units - for example in evening classes - are recognised and counted as language study within the system. Younger students make up the minority of learners in terms of numbers but bring in the majority of funding because they tend to be in full-time vocational training courses, are therefore less likely to see the relevance of languages. Older students, who represent the largest learner group and have more experience of work and travel abroad, tend to be keen on languages but usually study them only as part of two- or three-hour evening courses. In other words, these potentially pro-language learners generate very little revenue for colleges by comparison. This,

combined with the lack of language policy and the seemingly negative evidence from the labour market puts language teaching staff in Scottish FE in a weak position from which to argue for the inclusion of more language options in vocational qualifications.

The *coup de grâce*: new qualification design rules

By all accounts, the most devastating blow to language provision has come with the advent from 2002 onwards of new design rules for Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Diplomas (HNDs), the most common qualifications delivered in Scottish FE. Because these awards are considered to be the equivalent of first and second year university level, it was stipulated that at HNC level no unit could be delivered below level 6 and level 7 of the newly devised Scottish Credit Qualification Framework respectively i.e. roughly equivalent to Higher and Advanced Higher level in the school sector.

Statistics from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) (cf. Table 1) show the devastating effect that these new qualification design rules have had on the numbers of learners studying a language, which were already weakened due to the aforementioned perceptions of non-demand. After the academic session 2001-02 (the year the new design rules were applied) uptake in all the main four European languages declined markedly, in some cases reducing provision by nearly 90%. Even Spanish, which at school level and in many higher education statistics is cited as a language ‘bucking the trend’, appears on a downward spiral. Language study now makes up less than one percent of all FE provision.

Table 1: Language Uptake in Scottish FE colleges 1999-00 and 2005-2009

NC unit entries	2001-02	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	% change from 01-02
Spanish	2964	2383	2197	2180	1684	1882	-37%
French	1255	850	765	794	635	774	-38%
Italian	696	438	381	305	249	255	-63%
German	533	316	244	205	224	218	-59%
Other	n/a	0	0	0	14	4	n/a
Total NC	5448	3987	3587	3484	2806	3133	-42%
HN unit entries							
Spanish	1091	688	502	350	416	379	-65%
French	793	286	186	147	96	121	-85%
German	372	116	79	67	51	51	-86%
Italian	260	106	72	62	27	29	-89%
Other	11	25	46	38	45	6	n/a
Total HN	2527	1221	885	664	635	586	-77%

NB: Whilst HN entries roughly represent numbers of learners, NC entries are likely to equate to roughly 50% of learners and possibly less, due to multiple enrolments for individual units of qualifications such as Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

Can we break the monolingual habitus?

In contrast to the findings by Futureskills Scotland, recent surveys conducted by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2008, 2009, 2010) have identified a general

dissatisfaction of employers with the current level of language skills of school leavers and graduates alike. Repeatedly, the respondents call for '*a conversational ability*' in a foreign language rather than *fluency*. Staff in customer-facing positions are key people in that respect and these staff tend to hold FE rather than HE qualifications. However, although the CBI commands authority as an organisation, it represents only a certain proportion of UK businesses. In particular, the majority of small to medium size enterprises are not members and yet it is most likely they who will have difficulty in accepting the pro-language argument if they have been able to 'get by' with English.

Additionally, within Scotland the few businesses who have gone on record to state that the language skills of their employees have enabled them to increase profit margins have either hired language graduates (Taylor, 2005: 5) or native speakers of the language as part of the 'Fresh Talent' Initiative (Doughty, 2009: 17-18). For example, hiring a Chinese engineering graduate helped one particular company establish a joint venture in China. In another case, a company initially looking for a German speaker hired a Belgian national because he could offer French as well and thus expand their export potential. This kind of evidence may be able to support calls for maintaining language provision in HE but not necessarily in FE. Clearly though, it is only once employers have experienced the effect of language skills on the profitability of their business that they become openly more pro-language. The fallback position of 'one can get by in English' continues to dominate. Graddol's apparently paradoxical argument, that "*the more English becomes used as a world language, the more the British will need skills in other languages*" (Graddol, 1998) is a difficult one for employers and curriculum decision-makers to grasp.

According to Bourdieu it is difficult to counteract habitus, since it is formed over a long period of time. However, we know that public opinion - and by extension individual habitus within that - can be modified. Thus as a society we could take up Lo Bianco's recommendation and consider the linguistic dimension within cultural, social, technical, scientific and political issues. We certainly need to reflect more deeply about the hidden assumptions underlying seemingly 'objective' skills surveys and formulate questions that take into account the role and the ways by which languages manifest themselves in business transactions and business relations. Rather than considering the cost of languages we might think about the ways in which they enrich us, both literally and figuratively. As individuals, rather than disparaging the additional language skills we have acquired at school we should rejoice in the knowledge that even a little language, used appropriately, will go a long way.

Elsewhere I have argued that cross-sector partnerships have a role to play in achieving attitudinal change but they require central support in order to become durable (Doughty, 2011). In this edition, Lestienne (2011) ably exemplifies how experiencing the vocational relevance of languages can make a positive difference to language uptake in the senior school. However, unless urgent action is taken it may be too late to assure any kind of sustainable language provision in Scottish FE colleges.

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