(Turning Our) Back to the Future? Cross-sector Perspectives on Language Learning

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Abstract: This paper reports on the analysis of a subset of the data related to a wider project about perspectives on language learning as part of the launch event of the Scottish Government's 1+2 language policy in November 2012. Transcriptions of interviews with learners from primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors were compared and contrasted using an iterative coding process. The findings suggest that the lack of challenge in the language curriculum, previously identified by McPake *et al* in 1999, continues to act as a demotivating factor, compounded by poor transition arrangements between education sectors. A subsequently conducted literature review revealed commonalities with our own findings. Some recommendations for stakeholders in languages education are put forward for consideration.

Introduction and Background

In the autumn of 2012, Scottish Government asked SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages, to collect views about language learning from students of all ages across Scotland, in line with Recommendation 34 of the Report by the Working Group on Languages (Scottish Government, 2012). Opinions gathered would be edited into a short film, to be shown at the national official launch event of the Scottish Government's 1+2 language policy in November 2012. The policy had been announced in the Scottish National Party's election manifesto:

We will introduce a norm for language learning in schools based on the European Union 1 + 2 model - that is we will create the conditions in which every child will learn two languages in addition to their own mother tongue. This will be rolled out over two Parliaments, and will create a new model for language acquisition in Scotland. (Scottish Government manifesto commitment, 2011)

The whole film project involved 143 language learners from one nursery school, five primary schools, five secondary schools and one higher education institution. The interview footage was edited into a 3-minute video clip for the national conference, as per Scottish Government instruction. In addition, three sector-specific clips were produced, which are now hosted on the YouTube channel of the SCILT website .

During the editing process, we noticed that a number of comments echoed findings from previous research (McPake, 1999; SCILT 2011a; SCILT 2011b) and we therefore decided to undertake a closer analysis of the data. Significantly, an important curriculum change had taken place in Scottish education over the timeframe under

consideration, 2001 - 2012. As can be seen in Figure 1, we assume that the university students (Y1-Y5) had predominantly experienced the '5-14' curriculum. The 'Curriculum for Excellence' (CfE) was introduced in 2004 so the S4 students in our study likely experienced both 5-14 and CfE during their primary education. The P6 and P7 language learners only had experience of CfE which has a stronger focus on formative assessment and on working across traditional subject boundaries. We therefore wondered whether the responses from this latter group in particular might reflect a different experience of teaching and learning.

The preliminary findings were shared in the form of a research poster at a cross-sector event during the Engage with Strathclyde week in April 2014. Following further analysis, the more detailed findings were presented at the Annual Conference of the Scottish Association of Language Teaching (SALT) in November 2014.
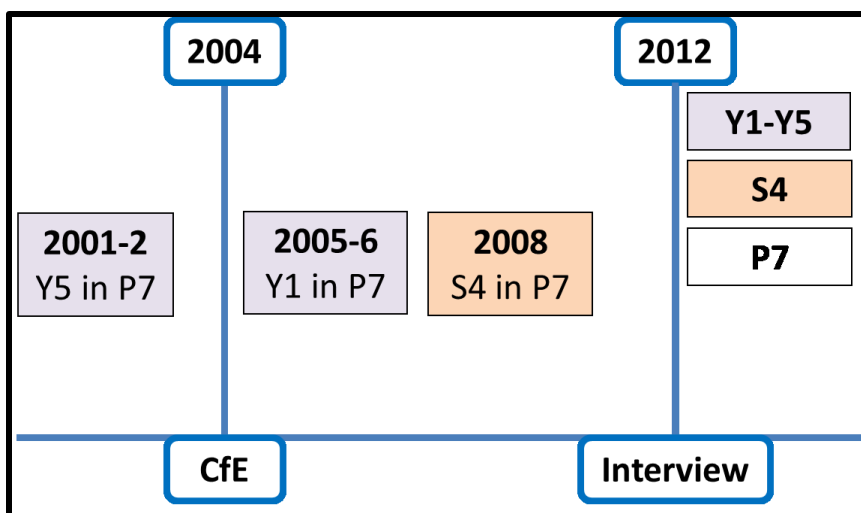

Figure 1: Timeline indicating curriculum experience of participants

Methodology

Given the relatively limited timeframe, it was decided to contact local authorities across central Scotland and students at University X, located close to SCILT. Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs) with responsibility for language provision in schools were contacted by email. QIOs from five local authorities consented to participate and provided the names of relevant schools.   An information and consent form was issued by the schools to the parents/guardians of all participants (143 in total) and interview times agreed. Through the Language Ambassadors programme running at University X, seven students for whom a language formed part of their degree volunteered to be interviewed for the film project.

Given the large number of participants and the large amount of film footage, it was essential for us to apply criteria to help refine the focus of our analysis. Since the norm in Scottish primary schools up until the introduction of the 1+2 language policy was for languages to be taught from P6 and P7 we decided to analyse only interview footage with learners from these year groups from that sector. In the case of the secondary

language learners, we decided to concentrate on the S4 learners as they had recently moved into the Senior Phase. The selection criteria were not applied to the university participants as there were only a small number of volunteers.

The interviews were semi-structured, covering the same aspects, but phrased as appropriate to the age of the participants:

- Languages other than English spoken at home and/or learnt at school/university
- Pleasurable and challenging aspects of language learning/being multilingual
- Linkages made between any plans for the future and the role of languages within these
- 'Eureka' moments linked to language learning
- Messages for the politicians and educators at the Languages Conference

The interviews were both video and audio-recorded and then transcribed. We analysed the transcripts in an iterative manner, starting with some likely coding categories, such as learner motivation; impact of family background or language role models; communication; employment; and emotions.   However, as expected, the coding process revealed further categories, such as relevance and repetitiveness.

Overall we assumed that since the data was originally collected with the acknowledged intention that views would be showcased at a national conference, participants would hold, or profess to hold, largely positive attitudes towards language learning. At the same time, we cannot be sure that participants in our study were selected in line with the above assumptions. For example, we do not know whether QIOs sent a request to all schools in the authority to volunteer or if specific schools were identified and then invited or nominated to participate.

Findings

Language Learner Perspectives - University

Interviews were held with seven students from a range of stages: one female student from Year 1 (Deirdre), two female students and one male student from Year 2 (Clare, Carol and Chris), one female student from Year 4 (Betty) and two male students from Year 5 (Alex and Andy) (NB: all Year 3 students with language options were unavailable for interview as they were on their year abroad stay). There was a fairly even gender distribution amongst the participants, which does not in fact represent the gender split for any of the European languages at SQA Higher Grade in general, as it very much female-dominated: In 2012, male uptake was 23% for Spanish, 25% for French, 27% for German, and 29% for Italian. It is also important to note that apart from the two Year 2 female participants, all other students were learning a language in conjunction with a vocational subject, (most notably law), suggesting that students' motivation for language learning had a strong instrumental focus. An overview of the HE participants is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: University Interview Participants Overview

Name	Gender	Year	Main Degree	Language(s)
Alex	M	5	Mechanical Engineering	Italian
Andy	M	5	Law	Spanish
Betty	F	4	Journalism & Creative Writing	French
Clare	F	2	Languages	French & Spanish
Carol	F	2	Languages	French & Spanish
Chris	M	2	Law	Spanish
Deirdre	F	1	Law	French

Year 2-5 students would not have experienced any of the CfE reforms, which were introduced in 2004 as they would already have finished primary school at that time. Deirdre, the only Year 1 student participant, might have experienced the beginnings of the reform

Motivation for language learning – 'Eureka' moments

All university participants in the study were Student Language Ambassadors, i.e. they had volunteered to go out to schools to give promotional talks on the benefits of language learning, or to participate in language promotional events. We therefore assumed that their language learning motivation would be very high, and this was indeed reflected in their responses with regard to their present language learning experiences. However, the interviews revealed that this had not always been the case.

For Alex (Year 5), the 'Eureka' moment did not occur until his first year at university, following a chance encounter with an Italian student at a party. This led to a decision to spend a year in Italy on an Erasmus grant where he "fell basically in love with Italian." By contrast, his memories from school were much less favourable:

> *In P6 you felt like you were learning set phrases, and when you were in Standard Grade you were learning how to pass an exam. You weren't learning how to construct or be creative. (Alex)*

For Andy (Year 5), the Eureka moment had come a bit earlier, during a Global Classroom initiative in his senior year. It opened his eyes to different possibilities, and like the other participants in our study, he was supportive of an early start to language learning and wanted to ensure that future young people would still have the opportunity to continue with language study:

> *If we don't keep these doors open for travel and for work opportunities abroad then we're going to be kept apart from the rest of the world. (Andy)*

Similarly to Alex, Betty (Year 4) could not "remember in High School ever seeing anything to do with what the end result could do for me." Her Eureka moment only came during her first year studying journalism at a further education college. During a

visit to a television news studio, she witnessed a journalist interpreting during a live broadcast and thought: "It looked brilliant and I want to do that!"

Amongst the Year 2 students, both Clare and Chris had had a positive experience at school. Unusually for a boy, Chris had studied both French and Spanish to Advanced Higher level, and had benefitted from contact with a Modern Language Assistant. He then used his Spanish to good effect when his uncle got married in Spain and he was asked to help with interpretation. For Clare, having had the chance to go abroad during her school year gave her greater confidence in speaking. By contrast, Carole reported that like most people in her French class she felt frustrated by the lack of that contact. She experienced her Eureka moment when she saw her uncle conversing with waiters in a restaurant in several different languages.

> *I remember once in a restaurant he was talking to us obviously in English and then he spoke to the waiters and waitresses and he was having a good laugh with them in French and then with this Italian family and I just sat there and I was so envious and I thought 'Oh, I want to do that one day (Carole)*

Deirdre (Year 1) had not enjoyed her language learning experience at school but during an extended immersion stay with a family abroad that her parents had organised she recognised the relevance of having language skills:

> *Learning another language is all about learning how to respect other people (Deirdre)*

Summary of Language Learner Perspectives from University

There were a number of points on which all HE participants agreed: They all felt that an early start would help to normalise language learning and improve cultural awareness. However, they would also have liked schools to provide more challenging and meaningful language learning experiences. They had found their stays abroad both demanding and liberating with their self-confidence increased.

Language Learner Perspectives – Secondary School

All twenty-two secondary school participants were at the time studying at least one language in S4. Due to the self-selection process outlined earlier the students were spread somewhat unevenly across three secondary high schools, code-named Yellow, Orange and Grey. The group from Orange High School was female dominant and many of the participants were speaking a language other than English at home due to their parental background. The group from Grey High School were male dominant, and had studied German since Primary 6. The boy from Yellow High School was interviewed as part of a larger group from different stages. An overview can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Overview of Secondary School Participants

School	Boys	Girls	Characteristics	Language(s)
Orange HS	3	7	Non-Anglophone heritage	French, Urdu
Grey HS	9	2	Predominantly Anglophone heritage. No multilingual role models	German
Yellow HS	1	0	Anglophone heritage. Father a multilingual role model	French

Experience of CfE

In relation to the HE participants, the language learners from S4 were between three-seven years younger. We are making the assumption that all of them would have experienced some aspect of the new curriculum, although we did not inquire about this during the interviews.

Motivation for language learning – 'Relevance'

The responses from each group reflected both students' home background and the range of language options available at their school. For example, in Orange High School, all participants had a non-Anglophone background at home; they also had the opportunity to study two languages, although this did not necessarily include their home language.   In Grey High School, the majority of participants were only studying one language and did not have occasion to speak another language at home. The only S4 boy from Yellow High School, had some distant Polish heritage, and he had a positive parental role model since his father spoke several different languages, which he needed for work.

Across all three schools, there seemed to a consensus that a greater choice of languages should be available to study, even at Orange High School, where a wider than normal range of languages was on offer. Most also expressed the belief that language learning should start earlier than P6 or P7. Like the HE participants, the secondary school students reiterated the desire to avoid repetition between primary and secondary sectors and create a more challenging context in the latter.

> It's good starting to learn [a modern language] earlier so you're not playing when you get to high school (Boy9, Grey HS).

> Teaching us how to say hello and greetings, it's not really hard to do so [...] You could have all this done [in primary school] and doing the harder stuff once you get into high school (Girl1, Grey HS)

> We've been learning (French) since P5 and now I'm in S4 and I know so little (Girl2, Orange HS)

Overall, the boys seemed have a more instrumentally oriented motivation for language learning than the girls did but there was not always a clear vision about how languages would actually fit into a particular career path. However, there was a clear desire to use the language for REAL purposes, and with immediate relevance to them:

> I want to go travelling and you could do more stuff if you can speak different languages (Girl2, Orange HS)

> We're teenagers and talking to other teenagers we'll be using up to date and slang [so] we don't need to learn the polite way of saying things (Boy3, Grey HS)

> I think they should start having exchanges and get more involved in the full culture (Boy9, Grey HS)

Summary of Language Learner Perspectives from Secondary School

Like the participants from the HE group, who it has to be remembered were between two and seven years older, the respondents from the S4 groups were supportive of an earlier start to language learning, but also still in agreement that language learning could be made more interesting by making it less repetitive. There was also a call to use the language for real communicative purposes, that seemed relevant to each individual pupil, and this included their preferred choice of language.

Language Learner Perspectives – Primary School

A total of forty-five P6 and P7 pupils took part in ten group interviews from five primary schools, code-named Blue, Red, Green, Purple and Gaelic. Again, due to the self-selection process, distribution was somewhat uneven across the five schools. Profiles of the primary participants are detailed in Table 3. All were learning French but participants in both Red and Gaelic PS were also learning an additional language (Spanish and Gaelic respectively). The majority of the pupils were from Anglophone backgrounds. There were a small number of multilingual role models in both Red and Green PS, either from non-Anglophone heritage or from family members living and/or working overseas, but none in Blue PS.

Table 3: Primary Interview Participants Overview

School	Boys	Girls	Characteristics	Language(s)
Blue	6	13	Anglophone heritage. No multilingual role models.	French
Red	6	6	Predominantly (but not exclusively) Anglophone heritage. Three multilingual role models	French & Spanish
Green	3	3	Anglophone heritage. No multilingual role models.	French
Purple	2	2	Anglophone heritage. One multilingual role model.	French
Gaelic	3	1	Gaelic Medium Education Unit – multilingual education	Gaelic & French

Experience of CfE

In relation to the S4 participants, the primary language learners were four to five years younger. In relation to the HE students, they were between seven and twelve years younger and had experienced Curriculum for Excellence throughout their primary education.

Motivation for Language Learning– 'Making Connections'

For this group of participants there was a greater tendency to focus on the emotional aspects of language learning than in the previous groups, and there were notable differences between the responses from participants in the Red and Gaelic primary schools on the one hand, and participants from the Blue, Green and Purple primary schools on the other. For example, learners from both Red and Gaelic schools relished the challenges inherent in learning other languages.

'[If learning a language is tricky] it makes you want to keep going.' (Boy 2, Gaelic PS)

'I would like to learn Arabic because I think that's quite challenging' (Boy 1, Red PS)

However, in the other schools participants expressed feelings of anxiety and boredom which clearly inhibited them in their language learning.

'I get kinda scared in case I say something wrong.' (Boy 1, Purple PS)

'It puts me off a little bit […] I try to listen and it's hard to learn.' (Girl 2, Blue PS)

These negative attitudes appeared to be engendered or reinforced by a repetitive language learning experiences.

'Sometimes you learn something and you go right back after the summer holidays and … you don't want to learn it again.' (Girl 5, Blue PS)

'In Primary you learn something then you go onto [something] different … I think the first thing you [learn] you keep going on and you redo it every primary, you learn it again and again and again.' (Boy 2, Purple PS)

Again, the views from the Red group differed in that respect:

'It's fun learning different languages by playing games instead of just doing it in a text book and on a sheet of paper' (Boy 5, Red PS)

'[Our French lessons] are interactive … it's not just the same thing every single time, we're always doing something different.' (Boy 3, Red PS)

Like their university and secondary school counterparts, primary participants were very much motivated by real encounters with speakers of other languages. However, the rationales expressed in the Red group were more generic and integrative in nature, making explicit connections between language, culture and people whereas the personal relevance was more marked in the Blue and Green groups

I'd like to learn Italian because I quite like Italy. (Boy 6, Red PS)

[Learning languages] is a really good experience because it lets you socialise with other people that speak different languages. (Boy 3, Red PS)

I would like to do Spanish because in my family we sometimes go to Spain and the first year we went we couldn't speak to anybody and it felt quite embarrassing. (Girl 3, Green PS)

Vocational Relevance

Surprisingly perhaps, the respondents from the primary schools had more to say about the relevance of languages in the world of work, except for the children attending the Gaelic school. Perhaps this was because languages seemed part of their identity, a natural ingredient of who they are and what they do. Across the other four schools the most common view about the usefulness of learning another language was that: 'It'll give you lots of opportunities for jobs.' (Boy 3, Blue PS)
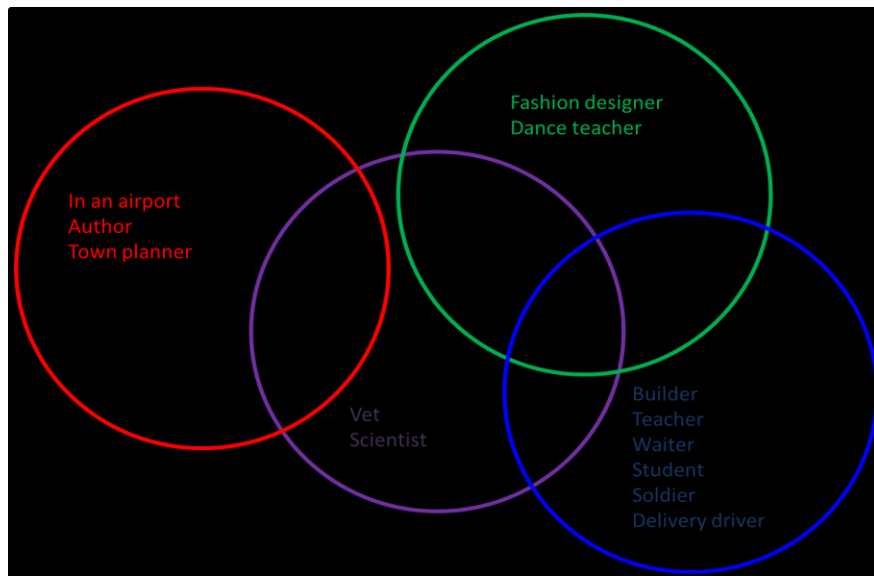
Figure 2: Venn diagram of suggested jobs that would involve language skills

A wide range of jobs were suggested, especially from Blue primary school but again there was a slight but notable difference in perspective between participants from Red Primary school and the others. For example, in Blue PS and Green PS, the children assumed that languages would only become useful IF you had decided, or were obliged by your company, to live abroad.

> *If you go for a job and you can't find one in Scotland then you might move to another country. (Girl 4, Blue PS)*

> *You can use languages whenever you go to different countries [...but] I've never been abroad. (Boy 1, Purple PS)*

By contrast, children from Red PS spoke about the role of languages in jobs they would do locally in Scotland, e.g. working as a doctor or in an airport.

> *My Mum, she works in a company and it uses different languages [...] and they've got people from all around the world, so I could do that when I'm older. (Boy 2, Red PS)*

> *If you're like a doctor and foreign people come in, you'll understand them and be able to talk to them.(Girl 5, Red PS)*

> *Learning languages would help if you want to work in an airport because loads of foreign people would come and you could speak to them and give directions and things like that. (Girl 3, Red PS)*

Summary of Language Learner Perspectives from Primary School

Despite the difference in age and curriculum experience primary school participants still expressed many similar views as those from the secondary and university sectors. Any belief in the potential benefits of language learning, or which language(s) to learn seemed frequently linked to the relevance it had to pupils' own lives. Significantly, quite a number of primary pupils already identified repetition and an absence of progression in their learning experiences and expressed some frustration at the lack of creative

application in the language class, suggesting that attitudes to language learning are formed very early on. It was therefore encouraging to note that in the Red Primary School it had been possible to create positive attitudes towards languages in an Anglophone context.

Evidence from the Literature

The importance of transition – primary to secondary

Since the initial aim of the initiative was not motivated by research design principles no literature review had been conducted prior to the interviews being held. The questions had been formulated based on the request from Scottish Government for the launch of the 1+2 language policy. During our subsequent literature review we discovered that coincidentally a team of researchers at the University of Reading (Courtney 2014; Graham et al, 2014) had been conducting a Nuffield funded research project into the transition phase of language teaching from primary to secondary school. Their findings were published in 2014 and highlight that negligence of the transition phase had been identified in several previous studies. For example, forty years ago Burstall (1974) identified poor liaison or transition as a principal contributing factor to the failure of the last major primary languages initiative in England and twenty-four years later Blondin et al (1998) came to the same conclusion. The authors also cite Galton et al (2000) who makes the point that poor transition as a factor across other disciplines, with similar effects, e.g. lack of continuity in pedagogy and curriculum coupled with repetition of content leading to a 'hiatus' in learner progress and decreasing learner motivation. However, with regard to languages, Courtney (2014) believes the problems may be compounded due to different teaching models employed, different languages taught, varying levels of time allocated to language teaching, varying levels of teacher proficiency, as well as the increasingly diverse nature of the pupil population. The need for better transition arrangements had also been highlighted by primary school respondents in the SCILT National Survey (2011a:9).

The importance of transition – secondary to tertiary

Turning to the interface between secondary and tertiary education, again around the time of our interviews, Absalom (2012) had been conducting research into the factors facilitating or hindering continuation of language study in the Australian education system. Absalom's literature review cites findings by Hajdu (2005), Curnow & Kohler (2007) and Ren (2009) from which he extracted a series of factors related to the decision-making process, cutting across the different student groups:

- the benefits of language learning for future career options

- the importance of travel as a motivating factor for language learning

- the centrality of human relationship (either familial or between students and teachers) for successful engagement with language learning

- the integration of culture into the language program as a key element of motivation to continue language learning
- the possibility of using the language outside the classroom context as a stimulus to continue with language study.

As was the case with our own research participants, continuation with language learning was associated with a 'personal relevance' to the learner (Taylor and Marsden, 2014) and the comments from participants in Red PS suggest there may be ways for teachers to help pupils discover this personal relevance.

Implications for teacher education

In our study, implications for teacher education derive from the experiences and perceptions of the learners. There was a consensus among the young language learners about their interest in using their language skills for authentic communication, and in learning about other cultures.   Many of the S4 and university participants felt that they had not experienced enough of either during their secondary education.

Almost mirroring our own participant timeline two studies published seven years apart (Kelly et al, 2004; Hennebry, 2011) indicate that teaching about target culture and wider citizenship as part of modern languages lessons in secondary schools in the UK remains rare. Correspondingly, the model of intercultural understanding taught in most UK primary schools is 'static' according to Woodgate-Jones & Grenfell (2012). In their 'dynamic' conceptualisation of intercultural understanding, culture is 'much more variable and constantly shifting' (ibid: 342), chiming with Liddicoat et al.'s (2003) explanation that:

> *Cultural knowledge is not therefore a case of knowing information about the culture, it is about knowing how to engage with the culture. (Liddicoat et al., 2003: 8 cited in Woodgate-Jones & Grenfell, 2012: 342)*

Hennebry (2014) also recommends the European Profile for Language Teacher Education: A frame of reference by Kelly & Grenfell (2004) to language teacher educators (EPLTE). A voluntary framework commissioned by the European Commission, EPLTE identifies twenty seven aspects of professional development for early phase languages teachers, under the headings of Knowledge and Understanding; Strategies and Skills; and Values. Practical suggestions for developing each aspect are outlined in the document. Given that teacher education is now widely accepted as being a career-long endeavour, it would be worthwhile for languages teachers to consider the competences being presented, regardless of their length of service.

Certainly, in our view, language teacher education which encourages 'the development of critical and creative agency' (Evans & Esch, 2013: 140) amongst individual teachers and professional communities would go a long way to addressing the issues that emerged in our study. We also agree with Hennebry (2014) that teacher education has a vital role in developing teachers' subject knowledge and professional practice around the interrelated concepts of culture, citizenship and language learning.

Implications for government

Less than a decade ago the Australian Government commissioned a review of teacher education for language teachers (Kleinhenz et al, 2007), which identified a number of challenges that mirror our own findings as well as those expressed by teachers and senior managers in SCILT's national survey of modern language provision (SCILT 2011a; 2011b), such as:

- The low value placed on languages and cultures within the communities

- Variations in supply and demand for modern language teachers

- Lack of sufficient time, within the 'crowded curriculum' of teacher education courses, for the study of languages pedagogy

- Insufficient language-specific teaching methodology

The report made a number of recommendations to be actioned by government and its associated bodies, some of which could arguably be applied to the current Scottish context, e.g.:

1. Take note of, and provide as models to all universities which train languages teachers, the innovative strategies used by some education faculties to forge strong links and partnerships with schools to establish collaborative approaches to languages teacher education, and suggest mechanisms for sharing these strategies (Recommendation 11)

2. Facilitate discussions which help Education faculties integrate studies of language and culture with professional studies of teaching, to reduce or eliminate the 'languages gap' that occurs when languages are studied at a significantly earlier period than studies of pedagogy, through the promotion of cooperative ventures to provide language-specific languages teaching methodology units. (Recommendation 12)

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

The views expressed by the participants in the interviews on language learning across all three education sectors point to a lack of challenge in the language curriculum over a prolonged period of time. In light of the Scottish Government's commitment to change public attitudes to language learning and the implementation of the 1+2 language policy by 2020 the need to address this issue has acquired new urgency. Good transition arrangements between sectors are in our view crucial elements in that process as they should lead to a better understanding by stakeholders of learner needs and motivation. There should also be closer links with the community, as this might help identify positive role models and create that local and immediate relevancy. We are aware that some collaboration between schools and universities already exists (cf. Doughty, 2008) and with additional support from government these diverse initiatives could be brought together to make the desired sea change in attitude happen.

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