

S3 Pupils' Career Aspirations and Views on Language Learning

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Abstract

This article is a shortened version of a report produced for the Scottish Executive Education Department (Doughty & McPake 2005)¹, based on a questionnaire survey of S3² pupils across a sample of Scottish secondary schools, which explored pupils' career aspirations and how these related to their views on language learning. The responses of S3 pupils are significant because as part of proposed educational reforms pupils in this year group will have a greater say in their subject choices. The findings indicate that pupils' career preferences are gendered and strongly influenced by portrayals of particular careers in the media, but that individual schools could also make a difference. The article makes a number of recommendations to help support language teachers and other stakeholders in giving appropriate advice to pupils with regard to the long-term benefits of language learning.

Introduction

The benefits of language learning

A great number of personal, social, political and economic dimensions to the value of language learning have been put forward, such as:

- [E]xposure to another culture through the medium of its language could lead to various changes in understanding, values, beliefs, attitudes, and hence contribute to spiritual development (Smith 2002: 37-38)
- Skills developed in language classes are ... directly transferable to citizenship education, i.e. discussing in pairs, expressing opinion, working with others, taking part in public discourse (Starkey & Osler 2003: 32)
- There is a direct correlation between the value an exporter places on language skills within their business and their annual turnover (British Chambers of Commerce 2004: ii)

Arguably, however, it is the perceived economic value of language learning that will play a decisive part in the considerations of S3 pupils when they are given the opportunity to select from a new range of skills-for-work courses as part of the revisions planned under *A Curriculum for Excellence* (SEED 2004b: 6). The policy also has profound implications for teachers as they develop their teaching, learning and assessment practices (SEED 2004b: 9) to help pupils in their charge to become

successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society and at work (SEED 2004a: 12, original emphasis)

Language teachers may feel confident that their subject

¹ The full article can be accessed at <http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/Research/documents/CareerAspirationsstudy.pdf>

² S3 pupils = pupils in their third year of secondary schooling

help[s] young people to understand diverse cultures and beliefs and support[s] them in developing concern, tolerance, care and respect for themselves and others (ibid: 11, original emphasis)

Many have long argued that pupils leaving school with low or no competence in additional language(s) are unable to take full advantage of their right to mobility within the European Union, when competing with their multilingual counterparts from other member states. But teachers may also be confused by evidence from skills surveys that appear to negate the economic rationale for language learning.

Misleading labour market intelligence and employer practices

'Soft skills' have been the most frequently reported skills gap in recent skills surveys (Futureskills Scotland 2002, 2003, 2004). Soft skills, as defined by Futureskills Scotland, are

particular key or core skills which employers look for to complement the technical skills and experience of their staff. They typically comprise: teamwork; communication skills; problem solving ability; leadership skills; planning; and customer service skills (Futureskills Scotland 2003: 10).

Yet the Futureskills Scotland 2003 survey found that just 1% of employers provided training in 'soft skills' (Futureskills Scotland 2003: 51). Thus, a low level of training in a certain skills area does not necessarily imply that there is no need for, or no use of, such skills. Interestingly, 3% of employers reported training in modern languages (ibid: 51), which suggests that the development of this skill was considered more important than that of other soft skills. Unfortunately, the report does not give details about the number of respondents, their actual position in the company, or the response rate to their survey.

There is also evidence supporting the claim that employers draw on the foreign language skills of their staff without explicitly acknowledging this. For example, the largest percentage of workers recruited from outside of Scotland goes to fill positions in the hospitality sector (ibid: 62). It is reasonable to assume that a proportion of this staff have foreign language skills which will benefit the business in terms of ability to communicate with the many foreign tourists that bars and restaurants are dealing with during the tourist season. Yet the language skills of these employees will not be considered the MAIN reason for employment.

However, studies such as those conducted by the British Chambers of Commerce *do* show clear links between language capability and the benefits for the UK economy. Additionally, the concentration of inward investment in London and the South-East of England (Robinson 2002) can arguably be linked to the availability of people with a wide range of language skills (Connell 2002). This is consistent with the finding by Futureskills Scotland that foreign-owned establishments were more likely to recruit staff from abroad than indigenously owned ones (Futureskills Scotland 2003: 62).

Linking Career Goals and Attainment

In a survey of 1500 pupils ranging from S3-S6, Careers Scotland investigated the link between career goals and educational attainment (Careers Scotland 2005). On the basis of their findings in their sample the authors estimated 30.5% of all S3 pupils did not have clear career goals (ibid: 22). Further, those with clear career goals were more likely to recognize the relevance of the subjects studied for their chosen career, and therefore their attainment levels were improved. Those who did not have such goals were more likely to find school subjects boring and perform less well in examinations (ibid: 37). The findings support the proposals set out in *A Curriculum for Excellence*, to introduce scope for:

greater choice and opportunity, earlier, for young people, to help them realise their individual talents and to help close the opportunity gap by better engaging those who currently switch off from formal education too young (SEED 2004b: 4)

The expectation is that by encouraging pupils to have clearer career goals their motivation for learning and ultimately their attainment in the subject will be improved (ibid: 6). The challenge for language teachers therefore will be to show pupils and their parents how language learning addresses these policy concerns whilst ensuring that the experience of language learning remains an enjoyable activity in its own right.

Aims and Methods of the Study

The purpose of this research was to explore pupils' career aspirations and how these relate to their views on language learning. By situating pupils' expressed views within the context of the realities of the globalised economy it is possible to infer a number of conclusions and recommendations for policy makers, head teachers, careers guidance staff and language teachers. A total of 2,500 questionnaires were sent out and 47 schools (81% of those agreeing to participate) returned 1466 questionnaires. As we do not know the exact size of each group selected by the school we cannot specify the exact response rate.

The survey consisted of a three-part questionnaire. The first part asked about pupils' profile in terms of gender, age, language learning and academic grouping in English and mathematics. The second part consisted of a series of questions relating to pupils' career aspirations and the sources of guidance and information they had used in order to arrive at these choices. In the third part pupils were asked in greater detail about their views on language learning, their intentions for future language study and their rationales for these views and intentions. A final question asked pupils to reflect on the likely life circumstances in which they would find themselves aged 25, i.e. to project their thinking to a stage when they were likely to have completed any post-school studies and have started working in their chosen career.

Findings

Characteristics of respondents

Like the Careers Scotland study, the respondent group was slightly female dominated (51.8% girls, 48.2% boys). The ability range of the sample corresponded roughly to those projected by SQA examinations. The same held true for the range of languages studied (62.4% French, 16.6% German and 4.7% Spanish). SQA data do not tell us how many pupils are studying more than one language but it is generally assumed that the majority do not. This was borne out in our sample where 85.8% indicated they were studying just one language and 9.4% said they were studying two or more languages. The researchers therefore felt confident in claiming the responses they obtained were broadly representative of Scottish pupils in S3 during the 2004-05 session.

Language provision and views on language learning

French dominates language provision

In line with the national trend, most pupils (around 70%) were studying French, and the majority had started to study their main language in primary school, most frequently in

Primary 6 (around 40%). These responses suggest that the recommendations of *Citizens of a Multilingual World* (Scottish Executive 2000) are being implemented with mixed success. On the one hand, pupils appear to be getting a consistent experience of one language from primary into secondary schooling. However, this consistency has been at the cost of diminished diversification, with languages other than French finding it difficult to sustain uptake.

Short-term concerns in subject choices

The majority did *not* intend to continue studying their main language after S4, with the figure for boys being particularly high (nearly 60%), with only 18.4% intending to continue and 21.7% unsure. For girls the responses were more evenly split: 39.3% did not intend to continue, 31% did and 29.4 were still unsure.

Importantly, a large number of pupils (63.9% of girls, 51% of boys) indicated that they *might* consider studying the language after S4 if they found they got a good grade in S4. This short-term concern outweighed the long-term consideration of finding out that language skills were needed for either their studies or their career (54.4% of girls and 38.3% of boys). For those NOT wishing to continue with language study, the most important reason cited was their lack of enjoyment of language study (again a short-term, and also consistent with findings from the FLUSS report (McPake et al., 1999).

Vocational and social rationales for language study

Similar to FLUSS, only a small percentage of pupils who *wanted* to continue their language study, or start studying one after leaving school, believed they would need a language qualification for their future studies or career. However, when we disaggregated scores by the number of languages studied, rationales become more gendered. Thus, 77.8% of boys studying two languages cited external factors e.g. 'moving abroad'. By contrast, the majority of girls studying two languages most frequently cited 'personal interest'.

Schools and teachers can make a difference

Interestingly, there were also marked differences between schools as to percentages of pupils studying two languages, intending to continue with their language study, starting a new language, or believing that they would be going regularly abroad for holidays. However, these differences were not related to either geographical location or the socio-economic makeup of the school. For example, pupils who believed they would be going regularly on holidays abroad in their adult life were just as likely to come from a rural or inner city school; and that school was just as likely to have a higher or lower than the average 15% registered entitlement to free school meals. This suggests that individual teachers and school managers *can* influence pupil perceptions.

Career aspirations and expectations

Imagining life beyond school

Most respondents were very hopeful that they would be in an enjoyable job with good earning potential. For boys, the most important factor was the potential to earn a lot of money (74.4%), whereas for girls, it was job satisfaction (63.8%) – although this aspect was also highly valued by boys (60%). Whilst few respondents expected to be living or working in the same area as they do now less than a quarter wanted the opportunity to travel as part of their job, and only 5.2% of girls and 3.9% of boys believed they would be using language skills at work.

Career goals and attainment

Careers Scotland had concluded that having clear career goals was linked to higher attainment (Careers Scotland 2005: 34). By contrast, in our study 'Credit' boys and girls were more likely to indicate that they had *not* made up their mind about a career than either the General or Foundation groups. However, our principal concern is that the subject choices pupils make in relation to future career aspirations take into account the nature of the ways in which globalisation is likely to affect working lives, no matter which vocational path is chosen.

Gendered career aspirations

Girls and boys had different career preferences. For example whilst overall a career in a skilled trade was most popular amongst boys, Credit boys were more likely to chose a career in the IT industries. Girls' favourite career option was teaching/lecturing both for the group as a whole and for Credit girls. However, when we disaggregated the data by the number of languages studied, the vocational profile of both boys and girls changed. For example, boys studying two languages most frequently cited the top girls' choice 'teacher/lecturer' as their preferred career choice. Amongst the girls' responses, the option of careers in IT or the legal profession become more prevalent. However, because we are not comparing equal group sizes, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from this set of findings.

Gendered views on the relevance of qualifications

Around a third (33.1%) of girls indicated that the highest qualification required would be a university degree, as opposed to 23.5% of boys. Conversely, 18.7% of boys believed that 'good Standard grades' would be sufficient to be successful in their chosen career, whilst only 7% of girls did so. We therefore agree with Careers Scotland's recommendation that "there would appear to be scope for improving amongst teachers and pupils alike an understanding of the link between subject curriculum and the world beyond school." (Careers Scotland: 35). The importance of this advice becomes clearer in the light of the findings that follow because they give more detailed information about how pupils in S3 arrive at their professed career aspirations. This aspect was not investigated by Careers Scotland.

Media influences on career aspirations

Just over 40% of respondents in both genders indicated that they did not know anyone who did the job they were aspiring to. The jobs of people in the immediate family of the respondents did not appear to provide inspirational choices for career options, all attracting less than 10% of responses. Yet the majority (around 63% of boys, 70% of girls) were turning to their parents for advice – even though parents' own jobs evidently did not relate to pupils' aspirations. By contrast, nearly half of the respondents indicated that they had seen their chosen career either in TV or on film. It thus appears that the way that jobs are portrayed in the media has a noticeable effect on young people's career aspirations. This is important since the jobs portrayed in the media tend to be glamorised and are not necessarily representative of reality.

Less than half of respondents (33.6% of boys, 41.9% of girls) had discussed their aspirations with careers advisers although most intended to do so in the future. Given the above findings it would clearly be beneficial if careers advisers were involved at an earlier stage, provided they are well-informed about the conclusions that can and cannot be drawn from skills surveys and other labour market intelligence concerning the need for language skills.

Perceived irrelevance of language skills for world of work

Government statistics (Labour Market Trends, 2002) indicate that changes in the occupational structure from manual to non-manual labour mean that the demand for skills related to manual dexterity and strength is falling – yet boys in our sample still appear to hold on to these traditional values. As indicated earlier, lack of communication skills consistently feature in labour market surveys. It is therefore worrying to note that only 30% of boys rated communication skills as important. From the responses given to earlier questions, it was not surprising that the majority of pupils did not recognize the vocational relevance of language learning, with fewer than 7% believing that language skills would play an important role in their later jobs after school.

Conclusions and Recommendations

At the point of making their subject choices in S3 pupils are pre-occupied with short-term concerns and their career aspirations are heavily influenced by the way jobs are portrayed in the media. At the same time, pupils rely on their parents, who themselves may not be very knowledgeable about these jobs, as an important source of information for career advice.

Thus, subjects chosen at the end of S2 on the basis of unsubstantiated or erroneous assumptions are likely to limit pupils' ability to develop their full potential during their remaining compulsory secondary schooling, as envisaged by ACfE (SEED 2004a: 14). Further, careers advisers may unwittingly give inappropriate advice if they interpret findings from labour market surveys as necessarily meaning that language skills are not used nor in demand. This is an important consideration because the findings also show that, irrespective of geographical or socio-economic factors, individual schools can influence pupils' views on language learning and the role they might play in their future lives.

In the light of the curricular changes envisaged it is therefore important that language teachers develop strategies that maximise the potential benefits arising through language learning and make more explicit the contribution language study makes to a wide range of skills valued by S3 pupils themselves and by potential employers. Careers advisers should meet with learners before S3 subject choices are made. Careers advisers and head teachers also need to understand that the way in which skill surveys are conducted, and the way in which findings are interpreted obscures the degree to which language (and intercultural) skills are actually used or needed.

This in turn means that the Scottish Executive Education Department must provide more detailed information about the relevance of language and intercultural skills in the globalised economy to head teachers, careers advisers and language teachers so that they are able to provide appropriate guidance to young people at a still very impressionable age.

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