

Abstracts of selected recent journal articles

Modern Foreign Languages: Challenges and opportunities in an international context

Barclay, F. (2011)

Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 10(2): 123-125

The crisis in modern foreign languages (MFL) appears to have no end in sight. As I write, my alma mater, Glasgow University in the UK, has just announced plans to cut many of its language programmes. Unless the protests currently being mounted are successful, it will soon no longer be possible to read a degree in German, Italian or Slavonic Studies (including Russian, Polish and Czech) in the west of Scotland. What distinguishes this latest proposal from many which have preceded it is Glasgow's status as a member of the UK's prestigious Russell Group of universities, a collection of 20 institutions in which, according to Jim Coleman's article in this issue, MFL teaching has become increasingly concentrated over recent years. Meanwhile, also in Scotland, the economic crisis is beginning to bite language provision outside the domain of higher education: Scottish councils have just announced that posts for native language assistants – who, through conversation classes, have traditionally offered pupils a glimpse of language learning beyond the constraints of examinations – will be cut by 50% in 2011–12. The move is likely to depress the numbers of students making the transition from studying languages at secondary school to studying languages at undergraduate level.

Modern Languages in the United Kingdom

Coleman, J. A. (2011)

Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 10(2): 127-129

The article supplies an overview of UK modern languages education at school and university level. It attends particularly to trends over recent years, with regard both to numbers and to social elitism, and reflects on perceptions of language learning in the wider culture and the importance of gaining wider recognition of the value of languages education.

Stability, crisis, and other reasons for optimism : University foreign language education in the United States

Levine, G. S. (2011)

Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 10(2): 131-140.

This article presents a brief overview of the state of university language education in the United States. Despite the impact of the world economic crisis on university language education in the United States, the profession has not yet been impacted to the extent many believe it has. Current scholarly debates allow for both a sober assessment of and an optimistic perspective on the field's trajectory in recent years. A brief summary is offered of recent enrollments in university courses in languages other than English, which shows that enrollments have indeed remained stable, though even these stable numbers point toward shortcomings in the place of language education in academia overall. The key points of the 2007 Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee Report, 'Foreign languages and higher education: New structures for a changed world', are then presented, along with some scholarly responses to it. The report, and especially the academic debate it sparked, point toward a period of transformation in university language education; an increased attention to crucial links between theory, curriculum, research, and pedagogical practice; and an encouraging mood of advocacy for language education that transcends the defensive response to program reductions and eliminations.

Modern Languages in Scotland: Social capital out on a limb*Doughty, H. (2011)****Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 10(2): 141-155.***

This article critically examines the state (extent of provision) and status (public esteem) of modern language education in Scotland, which as a constituent part of the United Kingdom has its own independent education system. The notion of social capital, as conceptualized by Putnam and others, is used to show how attempts by language professionals in Scottish universities to create social 'bridges' and 'linkages' with stakeholders in schools have so far not been able to stem an overall downward trend in language study. As a major educational reform is getting underway in Scottish secondary schools, there may be increased opportunities for higher education language staff to build strategic networks but, it is argued, underlying support at the macro level is needed to ensure that such initiatives can be sustained more widely and consistently. Consideration is given to possible future actions.

Lost in transition: Languages transition from post-16 schooling to higher education*Harnisch, H., H. Sargeant, et al. (2011)****Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 10(2): 157-170.***

Ever decreasing numbers of applicants arrive in language departments at UK universities. In the face of this decline, and against the backdrop of higher education languages departments being reduced across the UK, it is important to investigate the supply chain of languages undergraduates in the pre-entry sector. This article reports on a collaborative action research project between Language Networks for Excellence, University of Wolverhampton, and King Edward VI College, Stourbridge. The objective was to investigate how the HE sector can effectively influence and support linguists and post-16 establishments in enhancing progression to studying languages at university and how the post-16 sector can ensure they meet language students' needs in progression to HE. The research presents a number of conclusions and recommendations, not least that, whilst support from HE for 17–18-year-old school students and their institutions is welcome and contributes to students' confidence and skills, there may be merit in targeting students much further down the supply chain, encouraging progression to HE through tailored linguistic and motivational support strategies.

Disciplinary disjunctures in the transition from secondary school to higher education study of modern foreign languages : A case study from the UK*Gallagher-Brett, A. and J. Canning (2011)****Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 10(2): 171-188.***

Discussions of student transition from the study of languages in UK high schools to the study of languages at university usually focus on the vertical transition, comparing the differences in curricula and approach to languages taken in each sector. Whilst acknowledging that this aspect of the student transition is important, this article explores the transition in a broader disciplinary context by raising questions about how other subjects students have studied before entering higher education may help or hinder the transition. As well as drawing on relevant literature in the Arts and Humanities field, we also discuss the findings of a case study, which investigated the views of students and teachers in one English university and one English high school.

Reflecting on reflection: Learner perceptions of diaries and blogs in tertiary language study

Absalom, M. and D. De Saint Legur (2011)

Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 10(2): 189-211

The use of reflective tasks, such as journals, as a means to enhance learning is not uncommon in higher education. However, the formative value of reflective tasks is not easily reconciled in tertiary settings where assessment requirements traditionally favour product over process. While learner perception and resolution of this tension have rarely been investigated, research confirms that learners' level of engagement with the task is a salient parameter for learning to take place (Platt and Brooks, 2002). In other words, if the task is to serve its formative purpose, learners' perception of and engagement with the task are paramount. The present case study compares learner perceptions of two types of reflective tasks: an online blog and a traditional pen-and-paper learning journal. Findings suggest that reflective tasks can facilitate regular working habits and offer a space for use of the language, and that regular teacher monitoring strongly affects learners' perceptions of the usefulness of the task.

Score in French: motivating boys with football in Key Stage 3

McCall, I. (2011)

Language Learning Journal 39(1): 5-18.

This article discusses Score in French, an innovative football-related languages project designed by the University of Southampton to motivate boys in French at Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14). The article starts by explaining the rationale for the choice of football as the topic for a project aimed at motivating boys. It considers the main reasons why many boys are less inclined than girls to wish to engage with language study, especially French, and how curriculum materials related to football may influence their attitude towards learning the language. The article then outlines the issues that were considered in designing the extensive resource pack with which teachers were provided to deliver the project in class. It refers to research on which activities students (particularly boys) enjoy or dislike in language learning and justifies why certain types were included whilst others were excluded. Score in French was piloted with approximately 800 boys and girls in Year 8 (age 12) in six schools. The final part of the article assesses the project's impact and whether it achieved its objectives by analysing data from questionnaires completed by the 634 students and 20 teachers involved in the pilot. It highlights in particular differences in the way boys and girls responded to the project.

Gender differences in motivation and L2 accent attainment: an investigation of young Kurdish learners of Turkish

Polat, N. (2011)

Language Learning Journal 39(1): 19-41

Although some earlier studies reported female and child superiority in learning a second language (L2), current research has been inconclusive as to whether, and why, this might be the case. Using a socio-cultural paradigm, this study addresses how motivation, gender and age relate to the attainment of a native-like accent for young Kurdish learners of Turkish. A mixed methodological design was used to collect data from 56 girls and 65 boys at middle and high schools. Results suggested that as the level of integrated orientation increased, accent ratings increased for all participants; introjection, however, was a significant negative predictor of accent native-likeness only for boys. Furthermore, integrated orientation was associated with accent native-likeness for both middle- and high-school students while introjection orientation was a significant negative predictor only for high-school students. Interpreting the qualitative data, the study also presents indicative evidence of the gendered forms of motivation and their relation to native-like accent attainment.

Effect of academic major on students' use of language learning strategies: a diary study in a Chinese context

Rao, Z. and F. Liu (2011)

Language Learning Journal 39(1): 43-55.

The research reported here explored how students' use of language learning strategies (LLS) was affected by their academic major. The data were collected by asking students to keep a four-week diary, and then the findings were examined within the model of learning developed by Biggs. An analysis of diary entries showed that, although there were more similarities than differences in their strategy use, there did exist significant differences between social science students and science students in the use of some learning strategies. These strategic differences in language learning could be interpreted from three perspectives: (1) approaches to learning; (2) career interest; and (3) course structure. Some research implications are also discussed.

The beliefs of two expert EFL learners

Mercer, S. (2011)

Language Learning Journal 39(1): 57-74.

Much of the research into 'expert' language learners has focused largely on their learning strategies or styles. Less attention has been paid to other expert learner characteristics, such as learner beliefs. However, the importance of learners' beliefs in guiding their behaviours and how they interpret their experiences is widely recognised. This article examines the situated belief systems of two expert, tertiary-level EFL learners. Qualitative data were generated with the students in a set of two extended interviews and were analysed employing a grounded theory approach. Based on the findings, the article attempts to indicate some of the complexity and interrelatedness of learners' beliefs, as well as the close connection between a learner's beliefs and their personal language learning history. It concludes by raising questions about understandings of beliefs which categorise them as being fundamentally 'positive' or 'negative'. It suggests that it may be more appropriate for researchers and educators to consider learner beliefs in terms of their appropriacy for a particular individual in their unique sociocultural, educational and personal contexts.

Optimizing visually-assisted listening comprehension

Kashania, A. S., S. Sajjadib, et al. (2011)

Language Learning Journal 39(1): 75-84.

The fact that visual aids such as pictures or graphs can lead to greater comprehension by language learners has been well established. Nonetheless, the order of presenting visuals to listeners is left unattended. This study examined listening comprehension from a strategy of introducing visual information, either prior to or during an audio activity, and also looked at listening comprehension without visuals present. The aim was to find out under what presentation conditions visual annotations would optimize listening comprehension of language learners. A linguistically homogeneous group of EFL learners took a number of listening comprehension tests under three different conditions. In the first condition, the test takers first looked at a number of pictures related to the listening materials and then, putting the pictures aside, listened to the relevant audiocassettes. In the second condition, the test takers looked at the pictures and listened to the audiocassettes simultaneously. In the pictures-free condition, the test takers merely listened to the audiocassettes in their conventional form. The listening texts were counterbalanced in presentation. According to the results, test takers' performance varied significantly across the three conditions, with the pictures-before-listening condition manifesting the best scores while taking the least time, the pictures-during-listening condition the second best scores and the pictures-free-listening condition the lowest scores but taking the longest time. The inclusion of visuals prior to audio materials was the sole condition that significantly optimized comprehension.

Language teachers with corpora in mind: from starting steps to walking tall

Chambers, A., F. Farr, et al. (2011)

Language Learning Journal 39(1): 85-104.

Although the use of corpus data in language learning is a steadily growing research area, direct access to corpora by teachers and learners and the use of the data in the classroom are developing slowly. This paper explores how teachers can integrate corpus approaches in their practice. After situating the topic in relation to current research and practice in ICT and language learning, we examine some easily available resources, suggesting how they can provide examples of naturally occurring discourse for use in the language classroom. Beginning with easily available online corpus resources with built-in concordancers which require no prior technical training, we continue by discussing the challenges which more advanced use of corpora presents. This is illustrated by examples from corpora of business communication and casual conversation. We conclude by emphasising that there is considerable scope for both research and dissemination in relation to corpus applications in language learning.

An investigation of morphological awareness in Japanese learners of English

Hayashi, Y. and V. Murphy (2011)

Language Learning Journal 39(1): 105-120.

Developing morphological awareness (MA) is an essential component of vocabulary growth, given that it can contribute to enhanced depth of vocabulary knowledge and provides a pathway to deeper associations with more members of a word family. Despite the considerable body of vocabulary research, specific relationships between different aspects of MA are not yet well understood. This is particularly the case for learners of a second language, such as Japanese ESL (English as a second language) learners (JESLLs). This paper reports on a study which focused on aspects of MA, using a word segmentation task and an affix elicitation task. The JESLLs were more adept at morphological segmentation than a comparison group of native speakers of English (NSs), a finding which highlights the influence of instruction in developing MA. Performance on the morphological tasks was analysed using Bauer and Nation's list of different levels of English affixes, to examine potential effects of morphological variables (frequency of affixes, productivity and semantic transparency). Semantic transparency was influential in the participants' performance on the word segmentation task. These variables, however, did not account for performance on the affix elicitation task. When vocabulary size (VS) was taken into account, productive MA was positively related to both receptive and productive VS for the JESLLs. Among the NSs, it was, in contrast, receptive MA that correlated with both types of VS. These findings are discussed in terms of the nature of depth of L2 vocabulary knowledge (relative to that of L1), in relation to MA.

Language Matters More and More – A Position Paper by the British Academy (2011)

Introduction

1. The British Academy, the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, is increasingly concerned about the state of foreign language learning in the UK at all levels from primary school to university research. In 2010, 57% of pupils were taking no language at GCSE. While the total number of A-level candidates for all subjects has risen by 24% since 1996, the number of candidates for languages in the same period has fallen by 25%. The declining numbers of school pupils studying languages have inevitably reduced the numbers studying languages at university. As a consequence, there have been a number of closures of university language departments, with language degree provision now mainly located in pre-1992 universities, and in the Russell Group universities in particular. It had been hoped that future take-up of language studies at GCSE and beyond would gradually improve, as more primary schools responded to the recommendation to make languages a statutory requirement in the primary curriculum from September 2011. While there is evidence of growing provision of languages at primary school level, there are concerns that much of the momentum that has been established will be lost. Provision may well decline in response to the government's decision in June 2010 to withdraw languages as a statutory requirement in the new primary curriculum.

2. This statement comes at a time of dramatic change in the funding for higher education teaching. From 2012 onwards, funding will be largely driven by student preferences. As the Browne report said: "Their choices will shape the landscape of higher education." While universities will be able under the new system to expand programmes in response to student demand, they may also find it necessary to close or reduce programmes where numbers are low. Given that language degrees are already vulnerable, the British Academy is concerned about the consequences of reduced student demand for language learning. Demand will remain low in the short-term because it will take time to arrest the decline in language learning at school. Demand may also be depressed by student concerns that the length of language programmes, which are typically four-year courses, will increase their level of debt and the amount of their graduate contributions.
3. In this context, the British Academy is concerned that the individual decisions taken by vice-chancellors as they respond to the new funding system and refocus institutional priorities may unintentionally lead to the large-scale closure of language departments, or to a situation where language learning becomes even more concentrated in certain universities or parts of the country. This will not only have a harmful impact on the vulnerable condition of university language learning, but will also have wider detrimental impacts on UK social, cultural and economic well-being.
4. The British Academy has repeatedly drawn attention to these concerns about the future outlook for language-based courses, and also the importance of language as a 'core competence' for UK citizens. The Academy's Position Paper of 2009, *Language Matters*, pointed to the way in which the lack of language skills at secondary, tertiary and research levels would affect the UK's ability to compete effectively in a global market, and would also make UK citizens less able to compete for a range of job opportunities both at home and overseas. We therefore endorse the recommendations of last year's 'Worton report', which examined the health and condition of university modern languages programmes, with findings similar to ours.
5. The Browne report's recognition of the need to fund 'strategically important language courses' has helped to draw attention to the importance of language learning. So, too, have the Education White Paper and the recent call from Baroness Coussins, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Modern Languages, for a national languages recovery programme. The timing of the Browne Review of university funding and the review of the national curriculum would (as Baroness Coussins noted) make a recovery programme for languages particularly timely.
6. Although the language skills deficit is evident at all levels from primary right through to postgraduate research, and needs to be tackled at all these levels, this short statement focuses on the need for action by higher education institutions. The British Academy believes that universities are well placed to contribute to this national recovery programme. In our view, university vice-chancellors are in a position to take action to encourage language learning both at school and at university, and should strive to ensure that universities fulfil their obligations not only in the long term interests of their students but also with an eye to the nation's needs.

To read the full position statement go to: <http://www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/460>