

**The London Centre for Languages and Cultures Colloquium: 'A Future for Languages in Schools?'**  
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**Pembroke College Oxford**

1. Thank you Xaviere, for that introduction. A very good morning to you all. I am delighted to be here today to open this conference. I speak today reflecting the experiences of two different organisations. Firstly, as the new Vice-Chancellor of The Open University where I am enjoying my third month of being in post. And secondly, sharing some of my experience as the former Director of the BBC World Service. Both are global organisations and both rely on their staff having an intercultural understanding.
2. Why am I here today? Why are we all here today? We may have different interests, but we all share a passion for the importance of teaching modern foreign languages. We are all, and rightly so, concerned about the prospect of foreign language teaching being side-lined in the UK education system. Especially when it is becoming apparent that access to language learning is increasingly only available to the privileged.
3. This decline is well documented. The British Council's and CfBT Education Trust's Language Trends Survey tells us there is a worrying decline in the number of students taking languages at GCSE and A-level. You will be hearing from the report's authors, Kathryn Board and Teresa Tinsey, later this morning. And this decline is leading to universities having to close language departments and reducing, even further, the opportunity to study a wide range of foreign languages to degree level at a time when more language graduates are needed by UK businesses.
4. Why is language learning important? I think everyone in this room can think of many reasons why. But I'd like to reflect for a few minutes of why I think it is important and how my views have been shaped by the work I have seen first-hand at the BBC and now at the OU.
5. Today's world is a global world. With advances in technology, news in one part of the world can be reported locally in minutes and spread virally across social media in equally rapid time. We've all seen how the economic issues in one part of the world can have a ripple effect across the rest of globe.

6. Today's UK businesses cannot afford to lose sight of the global economy and both the opportunities and challenges this brings. London, for example, is not only England's capital city but also a leading international business hub, home to the European headquarters of 40 per cent of the 250 largest companies in the world. We know that year-on-year, the British Chamber of Commerce reports that the shortage of language skills in the UK impacts on export performance. And the UK Trade & Investment has estimated that poor language skills and a lack of cultural understanding are holding back the UK's trade performance at an estimated cost of £48 billion a year. So when it comes to the future employability of today's school leavers, language skills are only ever going to be a big advantage that will set them apart.
7. What I learnt at the BBC World Service though was that there is much more value to languages than the mere translation of words. The ability to communicate in another language is just the first step. But what this skill allows you to do is get under the skin of another culture. Learning a language opens up new possibilities for those curious to understand how the world works. It allows you to immerse yourself in a culture so you are able to really understand a different world view. For me, this is the intrinsic value of speaking another language. And this is something that benefits us all in society, as well as the economic benefits this could reap for the UK.
8. It's why we should fight strongly against the still too common assumption we don't need to speak another language, because the rest of the world can speak some English. When you only speak one language, you only ever get a filtered view from the people that can speak some of that language. It's never going to be enough to build meaningful relationships or develop mutual understanding.
9. The changes I introduced in Language Services at the BBC World Service have meant the service is now equipped to broadcast in both English as well as native languages. Bilingual reporting is now well established in BBC News, with World Service Languages having led the way and covering 28 different languages. There are currently around 40 bilingual correspondents working all over the world, some of whom are becoming as familiar to UK audiences as they are to international ones. The BBC has increased its global reach too. There are around 265 million people around the world who access the BBC each week – in addition to the UK audience.

10. The BBC's bilingual reporters from Language Services report in their own language as well as in English. Some of them report in more than two languages. They bring expertise, immediacy and understanding of a story to English outlets both internationally and domestically. In addition to these benefits, it helped us drive savings as multilingual reporting teams can file their own service and in English or another language.
11. A few years ago, only on rare occasions would you see journalists from Language Services taking part in the BBC's English programmes. But today, they have become an indispensable part of the BBC's output. Language Services have been taking the UK to the world and now are bringing the world back to the UK. Because while the BBC's World Service remit is to primarily serve its global audiences, it is also required to add international depth to UK programmes.
12. The BBC's Bilingual reporter scheme was set up in January 2012. The aim of the scheme was to provide comprehensive training for talented language reporters based in key locations around the world, as well as for bilingual language service journalists in London. This has enabled the reporters to deliver in English and their own language service for the whole of the BBC, across all platforms, and particularly from places where the BBC no longer has a presence or is likely to reduce its footprint.
13. The reporters spend an extended period in London training and on attachment to various programmes and departments. This time allows them to familiarise themselves with what a UK audience want and get a better understanding of the output in English. The reporters have come from across Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Argentina as well as London bilingual reporters from the Nepali, Turkish, Persian, Arabic and African Services.
14. Some of the reporters return for a second phase of the training. This involves spending a week with the BBC Six O'clock News and News at Ten to work more closely with the programme. One such reporter is Nomsa Maseko who is based in Johannesburg came in December 2013 as part of the second phase of the Bilingual scheme and provided outstanding and unique coverage on BBC 1 and the Today programme among others when Nelson Mandela died while she was here in London.

15. The bilingual reporters have contributed widely to the BBC's global and domestic output.

Some of the highlights have been:

- BBC Arabic's Murad Shishani and producer Vladimir Hernandez were on the Greek island of Leros in May reporting on the migrants' rescue operation. Murad was the first international journalist to be allowed on board a Greek search and rescue mission in the Mediterranean and was able to film a rescue operation. His report was a lead story on BBC World News and also ran on Radio 4's Today. In this piece Murad at one stage acts as interpreter for the coastguard, shouting out in Arabic to a group of migrants in an overcrowded boat.
- In March, the Iraqi army's major offensive to recapture Tikrit from Islamic State fighters was a big story. BBC Persian's Nafiseh Kohnavard spoke to some of the Shia militia groups taking part in the operation who confirmed that Iran had provided training, support and weaponry for the offensive. She filed for BBC Persian and WS English and wrote a piece for [bbc.com/news](http://bbc.com/news). BBC Arabic's Ahmed Maher in Baghdad reported for English and Arabic and BBC Monitoring's Mina Al-Lami spoke to The Fifth Floor about the significance of the city and how it has changed since it was occupied.
- Other examples include: Ahmed Maher and his road trip across Egypt with Newsgathering producer Jonathan Twigg after the fall of President Morsi; Julia Carneiro's reporting on the Santa Maria nightclub fire in Brazil, and Oleg Boldyrev holding pieces of the meteorite he had just picked up from the snow.

16. And it's not just about visibility, but more importantly about inside knowledge, context and feel for the story – and that's how BBC audiences understand better what's behind the riots in Brazil or Ukraine crisis and Turkey protests, the rape of women in India or the world of social media in China.

17. According to editors' feedback, bilinguals are of very high quality and have changed audience's perception and accents are not an issue if well-presented. Bilingualism allows them to fully understand the issues in a country, at a deeper level than an ex-pat could ever do only talking to people who spoke English or in limited conversation in the native language. But bilingualism allows these reporters to understand the wider world viewpoint –

they have to pick up the common points of reference that people in other countries will be able to relate to as well as the UK perspective.

18. Bilingual reporters also give great flexibility for breaking news. The wealth of languages now in the BBC newsroom and in Language Services means the BBC can break stories more quickly and accurately. The BBC Newsroom no longer has to wait for other people to translate.
19. All in all – having bilingual reporters has enabled the BBC to produce better quality reporting that's more insightful and is building intercultural understanding across global audiences. It has saved time and money, at a time when the BBC had to make budgets cuts and it's allowed the BBC to break news more quickly and reach more people.
20. The BBC has now introduced a work experience scheme for young people aged 18 and over. If you're not familiar with it then it's called Future Voices and is aimed at finding the bilingual talent of the future. It's open to those who are fully bilingual in English and one of the other 28 languages used by the BBC World Service. Successful applicants get to spend a month learning about news reporting at the BBC.
21. In addition to bilingual reporters, other colleagues from the BBC's Language Services are making an invaluable contribution to the rest of the BBC using their language skills. For example, a World Service programme called BBC Trending which reports social media trends around the world, relies heavily on BBC Monitoring and Language Services to spot the trends in different languages and work closely with the Trending team to report them. One recent example was a collaboration BBC Azeri and #BBCtrending about a fake British tourist who "loves" Azerbaijan which brought the site 800,000 views and was one of the most-read stories during that week.
22. Language skills are so valuable that I hope we can come up new solutions to stop what I can see is a vicious circle of us not having enough linguists, not enough language teachers and not enough students in the UK getting the opportunity to learn a second language.
23. I think that The Open University could be part of the solution of tackling this issue. Many of you will know that The Open University is a unique university. We are open to anyone regardless of their prior achievement, and our online model opens up access to anyone in

the world that wants to benefit from a UK education. We have over 10,000 international students studying with us and partnerships with 26 institutions worldwide. Our international development programmes have helped over train over 200,000 teachers in sub-saharan Africa and have so far supported 25 million Bangladeshis speaking English in the last 9 years.

24. Modern foreign languages are an important part of our curriculum offer and our research. We offer courses in Chinese, French, German, Italian and Spanish and these have proved a popular part of our offer with 5,000 students last year studying a modern foreign language. Any decline in learning languages naturally affects us too but I am pleased that the OU provides a route for adults to learn foreign languages. These students may have missed out on earlier opportunities to do so – or have come to realise later in life, the value of speaking a foreign language and the advantage it may bring to their career. Or just as importantly, they may be studying for the sheer love, excitement and challenge of learning a new language and new cultures. Our teaching of intercultural competence is an integrated part of our languages curriculum so our students not only learn how to speak another language but they develop a global understanding too.
25. We want everyone who wants to learn a foreign language to have the opportunity to do so, regardless of their income and prior experience. Like all OU courses, our degree level entry modules in languages do not have traditional university entry requirements.
26. Where I think the OU can play role for the whole of the languages sector is our distinctive ability to teach languages at scale through innovative use of technology. For example, our use of synchronous audio conferencing has pioneered how distance language learners' develop their spoken interaction. In addition to our 5,000 language students, we have used our content to extend this learning, informally, to millions more. The free language course materials on our platform OpenLearn – had over 2.4 million views from around 310,000 unique visitors last year. Our language content on iTunesU is our most popular content on that channel with 15 million downloads since the channel started in 2008.
27. Now through FutureLearn, a company wholly owned by the OU and set-up as the UK's first platform for MOOCs – that's short for massive open online courses – we are expanding our reach to thousands of people who want to learn a non-native language. Our partnership with the British Council to deliver a MOOC on learning English has broken records and is the biggest single MOOC ever, with over 400,000 learners from over 150 countries. The British Council have told us that this innovative use of technology is the key to increasing the take-

up in language learning. The social learning features such as the ability for learners to record themselves speaking the language they are learning, quizzes, videos and online communities to practise are creating an immersive learning experience. Another FutureLearn MOOC, Introduction to Dutch, is also proving to be very popular. In 2012, the OU set up and ran a MOOC on Open Translation as we believe that language is one of the big unacknowledged barriers to adopting Open Educational Resources. Our MOOC enabled participants to work with others from different countries and cultures, and introduced learners to open translation tools, developing useful employability skills in a global context.

28. This social approach to learning a language is a powerful way of breaking down borders through technology – and enables learners to experience some of the immersion they would if they were learning the language living in the actual country. I think there are learnings here for the school sector both in the delivery of classroom teaching, and language learning for teachers at scale. The OU is actively involved in outreach work and is a partner in the Routes into Languages consortia, showcasing online classrooms and advising on how we can use learning technologies to help tackle language skills shortages. The OU is committed to using our expertise to help increase the uptake of languages across the UK.
29. One thing I have learnt from the experience of working in global organisations is the crucial value of partnerships and collaboration. Working together in this way breeds innovation, and enables us to achieve better outcomes than if we had worked in isolation.
30. The London Centre for Languages and Culture is an example of this. We wanted to be a partner in this centre because we know how important it is to study languages at school and university. I am pleased that the OU has been able to use its expertise in open access and high-quality content to train teachers.
31. Our key contributions to this centre have been the delivery of successful CPD seminars by central and regional academics and the creation of a dedicated website for teachers which provides open access free learning material and resources for languages, gathered by our language specialists such as Xaviere who leads on the OU's partnership in the Centre. The Centre provides support to 9 languages overall – the languages taught at the OU plus Arabic, Persian, Japanese and Portuguese.
32. Our website also includes language-specific teacher forums which facilitate online learning and the exchange of ideas between teachers within their schools as well as beyond. We've

also been pleased to provide the Centre with a wide range of language-focused seminars and workshops, contributing to research into the way languages can contribute positively to widening participation in higher education, making university an option for everyone, which is of course, exactly why the OU exists.

33. We are now hoping to extend the activities of the Centre to Manchester in the next academic year, which the OU will be able to support through its regional centre in Manchester and our regional network of academic staff and associate lecturers.
34. This is just one example of a successful collaboration and this type of partnership is something I want to see us do even more of. But just like foreign language teaching, the OU is also facing a challenging time. Over the last five years, the numbers of part-time undergraduate students in England has fallen by 41% - nearly 200,000 students. I think this is a tragedy because we see first-hand every day how much part-time study means to our hard-working students. Many students have no option but to study part-time – be it through working full-time, caring responsibilities or disabilities.
35. My job as the OU's Vice-Chancellor is to protect the OU's mission – so we can continue widening access to learning, such as foreign languages, to as many people as possible. With so many areas of education under threat, it's essential we continue to talk, collaborate and partner. This is how we can ensure that every member of society gets a high quality education throughout their schooling and that this continues with opportunities for lifelong learning.
36. I am sorry that I cannot stay for the whole event today, and I know there will be many good discussions about how we can increase the take-up of languages. While I cannot profess to be a linguist or an expert in languages, I hope that the experiences I have shared have the set the scene for the immense value language learning brings to our schools, colleges, universities, businesses and the whole of UK society. I look forward to the OU continuing its work with this Centre and to exploring whether our learning at scale platform can help more teachers and learners benefit.
37. Thank you. I am now very happy to take any questions...