

A world away from the

As the number of pupils studying a foreign language falls, **Harriet Swain** reports on the innovative ideas that are reversing this trend

Kicking a football about and discovering the joys of augmentative suffixes might not sound like obvious bedfellows, but making languages relevant to contemporary life is all part of the game at Bradford City Football Club. It has teamed up with a local boys' comprehensive school to improve Spanish learning among both players and pupils with the hope of challenging the linguistic insularity common to many people in the UK.

"Our interest in Spanish dates back to our signing of the Chilean player Billy Topp, and our desire to make him feel at home with us here at the club," says Bradford's director of operations, Dave Baldwin. "Since then, five or six of our squad have voluntarily gone back to the classroom so they can speak to other players and understand more about Spanish culture and, in turn, we have identified young supporters, ball boys and even potential players at one of our local schools. Whether they want a career in sport or in business, the pupils at St Bede's in Bradford now understand that languages are a really important leg up."

Five years since secondary school pupils were allowed to drop languages after the age of 14, the number of young people taking a modern foreign language at GCSE has slumped. The Government currently has no plans to make languages a compulsory subject again, preferring instead to make them available to all primary schoolchildren. But there are new initiatives afoot to encourage secondary school pupils to learn foreign languages.

The Open School for Languages (provisionally called MYLO), a £5.4m online learning project, is one of the main initiatives being unveiled next year to support teenagers learning a key language. Aimed at harnessing the best of new technology and the interest that most young people have in online as well as face-to-face learning, the open school is designed to provide 11 to 16-year-olds with a new range of online

materials relevant to their world, as well as new resources for teachers.

The scheme will begin with French, German, Spanish and Mandarin, but more languages will be added if initial results are positive. The first modules will focus on the basics and preliminary skills for Key Stage 3, while the later modules will be for GCSE students.

Key partners in the project, which is being developed by Lightbox Education, include Cambridge University Language Centre, which is responsible for developing the e-learning content and teacher support materials, and Cilt, the National Centre for Languages.

to find having some level of language skill a competitive advantage. Even though the EU, for example, is crying out for language graduates in Brussels and has a load of interesting vacancies to fill.

"Whether you are sufficiently fluent to have a degree or an A-level in a language, or have simply followed a Key Stage 3 or GCSE language course and enjoyed at least some elements of it, we want to celebrate the fact that people understand a bit more about their world, even if their grammar and pronunciation isn't perfect," she says.

"Studying a language as a teenager not only boosts your ability to use your

Board, "so to assume that our mother tongue is sufficient to get by in most circumstances simply isn't true any more."

If, at a time of increased globalisation, being able to offer at least a smattering of someone else's language puts you ahead of the game in all sorts of different walks of life, then in terms of popularity, languages are at an all-time low.

To Mike Kelly, professor of French at Southampton University and speaker of six different languages, the removal of compulsory education in languages is only one part of the problem. A significant part of the reluctance to learn languages to GCSE level and beyond, he argues, is the entrenched way in which they are often taught in schools. "For the 14 to 16 age group, languages come under the heading of boring and difficult, and can be a particular challenge for boys of that age who feel self-conscious when they are asked to attempt a foreign accent."

"At a time when other subjects such as English, geography and science are tackling the meaning of life and the universe, the simplistic way in which languages are often taught - via topics such as My Hobbies and My Family and the like - make it very difficult for teenagers to use another language to express the things they care passionately about at that age."

But with a new approach to teaching languages at secondary school now on the starting blocks, Kelly hopes that the anti-language culture among many young people will begin to change.

"Language teaching has been far too prescriptive and inflexible in the past and that is, we hope, being addressed by programmes such as the open school," he says.

"By giving teachers more room to come up with topics and methods that reflect what our teenagers are all about today, rather than what they were about several decades ago, we are hoping that far more students will decide that learning a language is relevant and interesting right up to sixth form and beyond."

Languages in numbers

- There are 6,000 languages spoken globally, but only 7 per cent of the population speaks English as a first language.
- Languages are compulsory in the first three years of secondary school, but only 44 per cent of pupils go on to take a language at GCSE. This has declined from 76 per cent in 2000.
- A total of 49 per cent of employers are not satisfied with

university leavers' foreign-language skills, according to research from the Council for Industry and Higher Education.

- The CBI reports that more than a third of employers are specifically recruiting people for their language skills, yet many are forced to look overseas to meet this growing need.

Source: Cilt, the National Centre for Languages

Kathryn Board is the chief executive at Cilt, the National Centre for Languages, which is working to motivate young people through initiatives such as the annual Language and Film Talent Awards (Laftas). She says the removal of foreign languages as a compulsory element of education for children older than 14 puts British youngsters at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to carving out international careers. But her message is more about using language-learning to boost employability, literacy and reading skills than attempting to push school-leavers into specialised languages-based careers.

"What we are saying to pupils and their parents is you don't need to be fixed on a career as a translator or interpreter

own language properly, but also gives you a marked advantage if you need to learn German, or even Mandarin, much later on in life," she adds.

While our sometimes smug attitude to foreign languages rests on the belief that the rest of the world speaks English, this is no longer the case, according to Cilt.

In 2000, 51 per cent of internet use was in English, but this figure has now dropped in favour of Chinese and Arabic. While English remains a key language of business for the present, it is quite possible that Mandarin will overtake it.

"Less than 7 per cent of the world speaks English as a first language and 75 per cent of the world's population don't speak any English at all," says

'Our in-house material has the most resonance'

Last year, St Bede's - an inner-city Catholic comprehensive boys' school in Bradford - formed a business languages partnership with its local football squad, Bradford City. The partnership has directly led to Spanish language becoming the school's top GCSE "options" subject.

"Many of our boys are keen on taking business as a GCSE course and hearing football boss Dave Baldwin talk about the benefits of learning a second language in terms of a long-term business or sporting

career has been a real eye-opener for many of them," says the school's head of languages and humanities, Carol Wade. Having taught in boys' and girls' schools, Wade (right) believes while girls often learn for the pleasure of it, boys want to know why they are studying a particular subject and need to be reassured it will have relevance in later life, for them to develop an interest.

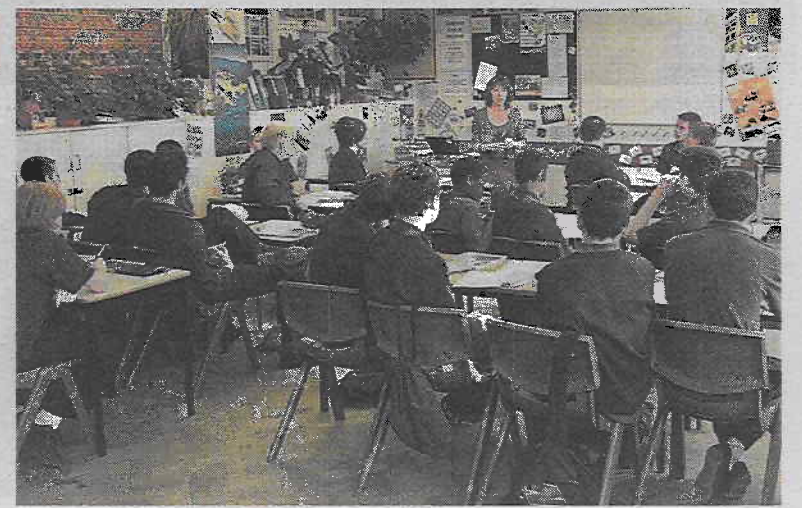
"We still teach the grammar that the boys need, the verbs and nouns and so on, and we still use a certain

amount of textbook-based learning. But we find that the material that we have specifically developed in-house to reflect the football link often has the most resonance with our pupils," she says.

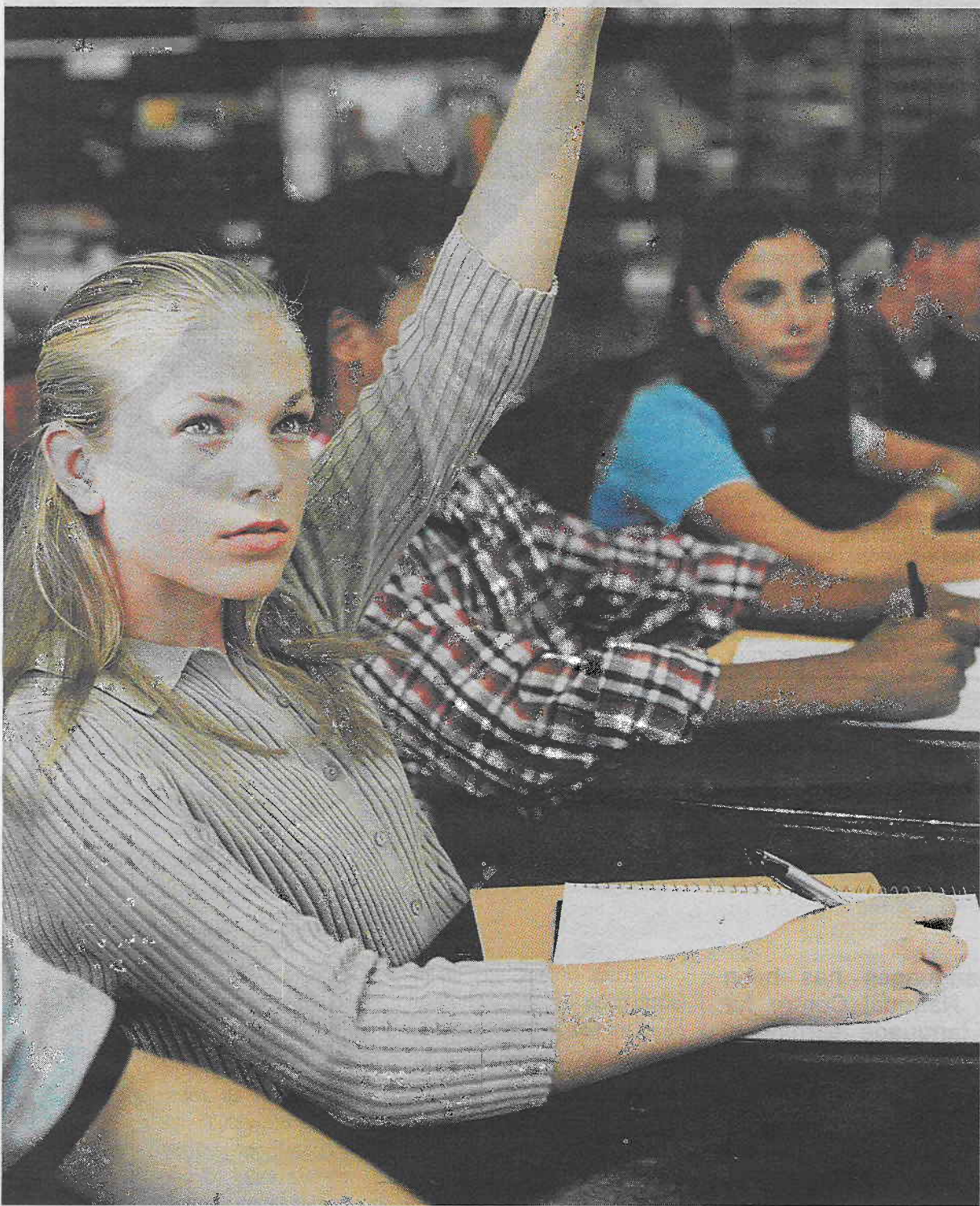
"Our experience is that teaching real-life examples of the language as they apply to business or sport - even down to learning Spanish numbers via the backs of football shirts - is not only more effective when it comes to exam time, but also manages to engage pupils' interest in class.

"At a time when many language departments are finding that they have no GCSE classes at all, we now have three language GCSE groups this year - the first time since languages became optional - as well as some 26 A-level Spanish students."

The school and club are also partners in Cilt's Business Language Champions programme, a government-backed scheme which helps companies and schools to work together to motivate young language learners.



classroom



Hands up: it is hoped that a new approach to teaching languages will be backed by young people
STOCKBYTE

'Relating lessons to life is the only way to make it real'

More than 40 different languages are represented by pupils at Dormers Wells high school in Southall, London. Four years ago, the school began offering students the chance to study for the British Airways Language Flag award, which involves between 15 and 20 minutes of role play, reading, listening and conversation in either French or Spanish.

The award, which is taken as part of the school's applied French with business GCSE course, has prompted a

growing number of former students to opt for careers, involving a foreign language, both with BA and with other employers.

"The GCSE we offer here is hamster-free," says the advanced skills teacher and head of language development, Grace Dawson. "That means, by the time our students are 16, we may be asking them about a whole range of things, but not about how many pets that they have at home nor what their hamster is called.

"This school is in a highly deprived area of the country, and with many of our children being casual admissions from Somalia, for example, we have found that relating languages to business, and to life as it is lived by most of us today, is the only way to make the lessons real.

"If your family has been forced to flee from their own country and has no experience whatsoever of living in Europe, then the old standby questions about your car breaking down on the French

motorway, or the delights of staying in beautiful gîtes with swimming pools, are hardly going to be relevant to you.

"Whether they are Polish, Pakistani or English, my students really enjoy their visits to BA's headquarters at Waterside, London, and tell me that it brings the modern workplace to life for them.

"It's great to see the sense of pride and achievement which students feel when they receive their badge and certificate."

Comment

Kathryn Board

Chief executive,
Cilt, National Centre for Languages



'GRADUATES WITHOUT A SECOND LANGUAGE ARE DISADVANTAGED WHEN LOOKING FOR JOBS'

MICHAEL PALIN said in a recent newspaper interview that what he regretted most was not being able to speak another language properly. This sentiment is echoed widely in the adult population, according to a YouGov poll that showed most Britons' biggest regret from their school days was not taking a language to a higher level.

Although this year's figures show a bottoming out of the decline in the numbers of teenagers opting to take a foreign language, only 44 per cent are going on to gain a GCSE qualification. This is unreasonably low for a country that wants to make its voice heard internationally. One in 20 students takes French as one of their A-level choices, and only 3 per cent of university students take a foreign language as a single or combined degree subject. Surely, as the global economy emerges from the financial crisis with a much less Anglophone orientation, individuals and business will have a greater need of languages to keep them competitive.

But aren't British teenagers recognising the global dominance of English, and the lack of value they feel they get from learning a language in relation to the effort it involves? Are they right to feel it's an investment that's not worth making, given the other choices available? Rightly or not, teachers, heads and pupils seem to agree languages are "hard" in relation to other subjects, that the investment needed to achieve a higher grade is greater than for other subjects.

An economist at Cardiff Business School, Professor James Foreman-Peck, who has studied the role of language in determining patterns of world trade, has shown the UK is underperforming in its trade with non English-speaking countries. Not sharing a language is a barrier to trade for countries the world over, but for the UK the effect is nearly double the world average. Foreman-Peck calculated by improving our language skills we could add £21m a year to GDP, and concluded we are under-investing in them. He highlighted a number of reasons that explain why we have an inflated perception of the importance of English and why we tend to wait to see if others will learn our language first, before investing in learning theirs. There are three important points to consider in Foreman-Peck's work on the economics of language learning.

First, the investment that must be made now by teenagers in learning a language is too high and too remote from the benefit they will get in years to come. We must make their experience of language learning enjoyable, relevant, creative and satisfying - all

the things Lord Dearing and Lid King called for in their 2007 Languages Review final report in terms of "meanings that matter". The development of new courses, such as the diploma in languages and international communications, tools such as the Open School for Languages, and training for teachers to develop opportunities within the new secondary curriculum to make languages exciting and motivating for pupils, are coming to fruition, and should start to show an impact over the next few years.

Second, teenagers lack good information on which to base their decisions. This barrier is being overcome by the Languages Work website, which carries career information and resources, and by raising awareness of the value of languages other than English not just for employability but for social and cultural enrichment, travel, global links and relationships. Schools that organise

"We must ensure we do not come to regret under-investment in language learning"

careers talks, work with Business Language Champions or take part in the Routes into Languages activities with local universities, report a better uptake of languages. It is important these initiatives continue, and for the good practice to spread to more schools.

Finally, it is important to re-align the labour market is international. Companies can recruit from the EU and beyond, and there is an almost unlimited supply of talented multilingual EU graduates eager to work in the UK. British graduates without a second language are disadvantaged when it comes to looking for jobs with international companies and will find it harder to gain promotion within them.

The next few years will be difficult for public spending, but if our young people are to be able to compete on a par with their peers from other countries, languages must be given a high priority in our education and training. Other countries promote language learning - and not just English - as a key means of national and personal advancement. We too must ensure underinvestment in language learning is not something we come to regret.

www.languageswork.org.uk
www.cilt.org.uk