

To: ivanic
From: Dick Hudson <dick@ling.ucl.ac.uk>
Subject: CLIE
Cc:
Bcc:

Thanks for the minutes. Since I shan't be at the meeting next week (for which again I apologise) here are some comments:

3, re Item 7. You might like to add that the ESRC now has an officer who is assigned to linguistics: Chris Godwin <Christopher.Godwin@esrc.ac.uk>. He's going to attend the next LAGB meeting (April 99).

5.7. You might like to add the url for my website: <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/home.htm>

5.8. Please add details of the meeting we've arranged. Katharine Perera was never more than a hope, and she can't in fact make it:

Friday 9th April, 2-4, University of Manchester (part of the LAGB conference):

"Language at school: A place for linguists?"

2.00 Alastair West (QCA): The curriculum

2.40 Chris Brumfit (Southampton): Teacher preparation

3.20-4.00 Discussion.

5.9. You say that Alison and I were going to pursue this, but I thought it was just her; and she has in fact pursued it. So maybe you should delete me.

5.15. The details of engling and teach-ling:

engling: engling@unimelb.edu.au, but subscribing is probably best done via
m.durie@linguistics.unimelb.edu.au.

teach-ling: queries to owner-teach-ling@qcvaxa.acc.qc.edu

6. I met one of the Inquiry team, who told me they were likely to press for Language Awareness in primary schools. How about that? You'd better not minute it, though.

The next point does need correcting, though: The LAGB was going to make a submission. (Not to the email debate - submissions had to be on paper.) We did make a submission, and I've added a copy of it at the end of this message in case you want to add it to the minutes. It would be good to know what BAAL did.

Re the action, I had forgotten that I had said that I would do it, and I didn't do it. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid it's partly because the minutes came so late. It's too late for submissions now, so there's no point in doing anything on the edling list.

7.1 Arts and Humanities Research Board, not Council.

7.2 Alastair West

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LAGB submission to the Nuffield Languages Inquiry

23 December 1998

The Nuffield Languages Inquiry,
PO Box 2671,
London W1A 3SH

Dear Sirs,

I am writing as President of the Linguistics Association of Great Britain (the LAGB), which speaks for those in the UK who teach and research in linguistics, the study of language structure in all its aspects: sound, grammar and meaning; description and theory; acquisition, storage and use; psychology and sociology; synchronic description and diachronic change. We generally call ourselves 'linguists', but it is important to be aware that others often use this term as a synonym of 'language student' or 'polyglot'; this distinction is crucial in the context of the Languages

Inquiry because one of the important questions which the Inquiry will address is whether linguists (in our sense) can contribute to the goal of producing more 'linguists' in the other sense: language students and eventually polyglots. We shall argue below that we can contribute in this way.

We recognise that our expertise is not directly relevant to all the questions to be addressed by the Inquiry. We have less to say, as linguists, about national needs, than the academic discipline of the Sociology of Language. Nor, as linguists, can we contribute on matters of pedagogy, which is the province of Applied Linguistics (represented by our sister organisation, the British Association for Applied Linguistics).

The following statements are uncontroversial matters of fact which we believe the Inquiry should be aware of, and for which linguists can provide research evidence. We urge the Inquiry to review the relevant research as well as listening to public opinion, because the latter is often misinformed and misleading. We feel obliged to say this because public debate is often conducted at an especially low level when the subject is language; the policies of the last decades have created a significant gulf, as far as linguistic matters are concerned, between interested public opinion and professional expertise, which sometimes makes it difficult for the professional linguist's voice to get a proper hearing. There are many important issues on which linguists disagree with popular opinion but speak with one voice (and with the support of strong evidence). As in any active research subject there are also issues where our conclusions have changed over the years or where we are divided, and no doubt even some areas where we still have nothing serious to say, but these weaknesses do not justify the view that professional expertise can safely be ignored.

1. Our largely monoglot population is not inevitable or even normal among the world's nations. There are very many communities in which every adult (bar pathological cases) speaks several languages fluently, which suggests that the ability to speak more than one language is not a skill which varies from person to person - there is no such thing as an 'aptitude for languages' as such which could explain why so many UK citizens are so unsuccessful. The explanation must lie elsewhere - most obviously, perhaps, in pedagogy and/or attitudes.

2. The acquisition of a second language in school is a fundamentally different process from a child's learning of the first language; the obvious differences of age, prior knowledge, quantity of experience and social situation cannot be ignored. There is therefore no reason to suppose that the most successful method for teaching languages at school will necessarily be one that most closely approximates the way in which a child learns its first language.

3. The confident use of a language requires the ability to generalise on the basis of rules; it is not enough to learn a vocabulary of fixed phrases because these apply only in fixed situations and don't help the learner to understand what others say. This means that grammatical rules about word-forms and sentence-patterns must be included in what is taught and learned. Similarly, learners should be taught general rules for relating spelling to pronunciation. The Inquiry should consider whether the present practice of downplaying rules until after GCSE is helpful.

4. The question of rules raises the more general question of metalanguage and general understanding of 'how language works'. In the context of language teaching this is often called Language Awareness, but the content is the same as for linguistics - how languages are structured, how they are used, how they change, and so on. At present languages are generally taught in a theoretical and terminological vacuum, so it is impossible to teach structures and generalisations - hence the 'phrase-book' approach. Some modern-language teachers have successfully taught a framework of general ideas about language alongside the details of the language concerned, and we urge the Inquiry to consider the merits of this approach (as outlined in the paper by David Graddol).

5. However we also urge the Inquiry to consider recent developments in the teaching of English in schools in England and Wales. Both the National Curriculum for English and the more recent National Literacy Project put a great deal of emphasis on explicit knowledge and understanding of 'how language works', so even in primary school pupils should have a much better supply of ideas and terminology for discussing language than has been true until recently. The debate which led up to these changes in English was entirely focussed on the benefits for the development of children's first-language English, but they have obvious implications for the teaching of other languages. This Inquiry comes at a particularly opportune moment, as there does not seem to be any higher body which is able or willing to consider the relations between the teaching of English and of other languages.

6. If the aim of language-teaching at school is to prepare the pupil for learning other languages as needed later in life, then the argument in the last paragraph becomes even stronger. It is likely that at least some adult learners need a framework of ideas about 'how language works' and terminology for describing structures, without which the new language is just a confusing mess of unrelated facts.

7. As with the recent changes in English teaching, it is important to recognise that changes in the approach to language teaching will have serious implications for the preparation of teachers, many of whom have had no opportunity to learn an explicit framework of ideas or terminology. Trainee teachers will need a thorough understanding of the ideas and terminology that they will be expected to teach, and many serving teachers will need help in developing this expertise. It would be helpful for the Inquiry to consider how these matters have been addressed in relation to English - for example by the recent national curriculum for initial teacher-training produced by the Teacher Training Agency.

8. On the question of which languages should be taught at school, we naturally favour as wide a range as possible, in the belief that any second language is better than none. If a competent teacher is available, a language which is widely spoken in the local community could be an even better basis for learning about language than French. However we should stress that the teacher needs to be a trained language teacher with qualified teacher or licensed teacher status, and not merely a willing native speaker.

In conclusion, the main theme of this submission has been that language learners and language teachers need a framework of ideas and terminology for generalising about the structure and use of the language being learned. If the Inquiry would like to pursue any of these points, either in writing or face-to-face, we shall be glad to cooperate.

Yours sincerely,