

The future of the teaching and learning of Slavonic and East European languages in the UK

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Historical note

The teaching and learning of Slavonic and East European languages in Britain has a long and diverse tradition. To appreciate the perspectives and potential in the future it is useful to recall this tradition, largely because I believe there can be no future without a past, and, on a more political note, because these days it is necessary to emphasize that knowledge and expertise which have been built up over a long period of time will be irretrievably lost if they are made subject to short-term and short-lived institutional activism. There is good scholarly work available on the history of Slavonic and East European studies in Great Britain, such as the articles by Gerald Stone and Robert Auty quoted in the bibliography. Suffice it here to mention an example which is at the very beginning of studying, learning and teaching Slavonic languages in Britain. This is Heinrich Wilhelm Ludolf's *Grammatica Russica*, the earliest printed grammar of vernacular Russian published in Oxford in 1696. Apart from a description of the different parts of speech and, where applicable, of their inflection, it includes a large section of ready-made phrases in vernacular Russian and their translation into Latin. This suggests a two-fold aim which Ludolf pursued with his grammar: on the one hand, a systematic description of the language, and on the other, a practical manual enabling the student and the scholar to study the language as well as helping the traveller, the diplomat and the tradesman to get by when in Russia. This dual purpose was also emphasized by Edward Bernard, the delegate at Oxford University Press, who initiated the purchase of the Press's first set of Cyrillic types in order to print Ludolf's grammar. We know, thanks to Gerald Stone's electronically published manuscript *Slavonic Studies at Oxford: A Brief History*, that Bernard commended Ludolf's Russian grammar as a 'useful booke to our Russian merchants' as well as 'an inlet into that language which is the mother of most of the dialects of Europe'. Even if the latter is of course not quite the case, Bernard clearly made out practice as well as learning and scholarship as suitable uses of Ludolf's grammar. This dual purpose of studying and teaching Slavonic and other East European languages was not only relevant at the end of the 17th century.

The purpose of learning Slavonic and East European languages

It remains central today and, to my mind, will essentially inform the future of our discipline too. Knowledge of Slavonic and East European languages is of course a specific skill and of immediate practical use, in scholarship, in trade, in journalism, in business, in politics, in diplomacy and in many other domains. At the same time, it is much more than this. Linguistic competence is undoubtedly the first and foremost path towards genuine cultural awareness. The significance of this in a globalized and highly mobile world does to my mind not need any further justification. I would, therefore, like to stress yet another, further aspect.

There is a deeply personal facet to learning languages and, thereby, developing awareness of cultural difference. It represents a fundamental and unparalleled emotional and intellectual experience to be in a place where they speak another language and refer to partly different sets of everyday knowledge, informed by local customs, history, popular culture, politics and so forth. To put it differently and somewhat more technically, learning a different language implies the experience of being ‘the other’. Let me briefly illustrate: We learn a new language, say Hungarian, and subsequently take the newly acquired skills to Budapest, or to Szeged, or to Debrecen. There we come to sit in a boardroom or at a dinner table where the conversation is being held in that language. Adapting to a situation of this kind is not simply a question of linguistic competence. It poses challenges to tune in, as it were, culturally, to understand *how* things are being said, to negotiate the fact that one’s linguistic competence will be typically somewhat restricted, to pick up on local realia which one does not know, including simple things such as names of public figures. Being thrust into unknown waters like this is a challenge that is difficult, but at the same time exciting and enriching. I believe that all of us here know this experience. We would all have our own stories to tell. Eventually, however, I assume that we would be able to converge on the conclusion that learning a foreign language does not only imply acquiring new grammatical structures and vocabulary. It implies cultural knowledge and interpersonal skills which no other branch of learning can impart in quite the same way. All these observations are mere truisms at a language workshop where we are all, by definition, very much involved in teaching and learning Slavonic and East European languages. However, I find it useful to pause from time to time: in order to reflect on my own experience with learning and using languages other than my native tongue, and in order to formulate clearly what makes this a worthwhile occupation. After all, these musings may easily spark the more cynical comment that my stressing the importance of foreign language training does not come as a big surprise given that I make a living out of it. I think it is reassuring to have something robust to reply to this.

The current state

So if learning and teaching foreign languages is fundamental in practical terms and in terms of cultural awareness and competence, how does the current state in the UK fare?

We are all too familiar with stories about the decline of modern languages in British education. For example, the decision in 2004 to end the requirement that teenagers take a language at GCSE has had and still has detrimental effects. Second-language acquisition is a highly varied process and has so far eluded any straightforward generalizations. Still, the empirical research on “age learning differences” summarized in Johnson’s and Johnson’s *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* suggests that continued exposure to foreign languages from an early age enhances foreign language acquisition also later in life. In other words, and as one would have guessed intuitively, starting early is crucial; and once you have missed a crucial juncture in getting into the habit of learning foreign languages it will be more difficult to pick up the skill later on in life. It is, therefore, no surprise that, in the wake of 2004, the number of language students at A-levels fell to a new low this year. To be sure, the decline concerns the languages typically taught in schools, French, Spanish and German, while the so-called ‘Other modern languages’ show a rise in takers this year. I have not been

able to establish the precise ratio for A-level subjects in our area, that is for Russian and Polish, which come under those 'Other modern languages'. However, even if there may be a welcome momentary rise in pupils sitting these languages, the long-term trend for Russian in secondary schools, especially state ones, has been downwards. (For GCSE entries, on the other hand, John Evans, a workshop participant, kindly drew my attention to "National trends in GCSE entries 1995 to 2011", available at the web-site of The National Centre for Languages, last accessed on 3 January 2011 at <www.cilt.org.uk/home/research_and_statistics/statistics/secondary_education/gcse_national_exam_entries.aspx>. They show a steep rise in entries for GCSE Polish and more or less steady numbers for GCSE Russian.)

The squeeze on teaching and learning Slavonic and East Slavonic languages has made itself felt in tertiary education too. In 2002, Stephen Hutchings offered a concise analysis of the development of Russian studies in UK universities in a short statement published on the web-site of the Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies. His pertinent points are still valid today and can easily be expanded to Russian and East European studies more generally. A surge in interest after the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by a slump in undergraduate numbers later in the 1990s. This was accompanied by painful mergers and closures of departments, a process which, unfortunately, has still not come to a halt as the latest struggle to safeguard Russian, Czech and Polish at Glasgow University shows. Since the new millennium we have been experiencing three types of institutional consolidation at a reduced level with fundamental consequences for the teaching and learning of Slavonic and East European languages too.

- 1.) Firstly, courses in the social sciences may shed their named Russian or East European studies component and subsume them under more general headings, such as European politics or international relations. Hutchings, for example, refers to the London School of Economics where, in 2001, they closed their named undergraduate degree programme in Russian Studies, but retained post-Soviet expertise of international repute for other courses, such as International Relations. Typically, this kind of change involves that language classes either become optional, or are not on offer any longer altogether.
- 2.) Secondly, various institutions retain area studies courses with Russia and Eastern Europe as a named part of the degree. Such courses in Russian and East European Studies may or may not include a language requirement. If they do, it often takes the form of a qualifying, rather than an integral component of the course, and teaching is typically outsourced to a language centre or independently employed tutors who can provide language teaching specially geared towards social scientists.
- 3.) This leaves us with a third institutional context where Russian and East European languages typically form an integral part of the academic curriculum. These are traditional language and literature courses and their successors incorporating cultural studies, such as film studies, gender studies, and cultural history. They have come under particular pressure, partly because they are often perceived as lacking

immediate vocational relevance, and partly because they imply intense and, thus, costly language tuition.

These trends pose fundamental challenges for the teaching and learning of Slavonic and East European languages in UK higher education. They partly cause linguistic skills to slip off the academic agenda altogether. Alternatively, language may become optional, or an additional qualification tagged on to the core curriculum. Courses where language continues to form a core component tend to acquire a reputation of being somewhat luxurious, a liberal art, as it were, for those who do not need to bother too much about the practicalities of life. This summary, I have to admit, is deliberately phrased in somewhat polemic terms. It must not conceal the fact that the various branches of Russian and East European studies cannot be exempt from the problems and questions which colleagues in other disciplines and in other branches of the educational system face as well: limited financial resources, the need to reflect hard on the efficient and proper distribution of these resources, and competition with a wealth of other educational offers. The future of the teaching and learning of Slavonic and East European languages undoubtedly faces a number of difficult challenges. However, this does to my mind not simply mean ‘doom and gloom ahead’ as there are also various very encouraging signs on the horizon.

First and foremost, I think there is by now a clear consensus among British policy makers and the wider public that the learning and teaching of foreign languages is of vital importance for the UK and, thus, needs proper support and development. I remember the story of a friend who works in his country’s embassy in an Eastern European capital. More precisely, he is responsible for collaboration in the areas of education, science and research. In that particular capital there has been a long-running annual meeting of representatives from a range of embassies in order to discuss possible multilateral forms of co-operation among the various countries represented, and with the host country. In the past, these meetings had already produced some successful forms of co-operation. At each of the annual meetings some new faces turned up as diplomatic staff stays only for a certain amount of time in the host country. So at one particular meeting a new UK representative was present. Everyone was chatting away in various languages: some had learned the language of the host country very well and conversed in that language, others used English or French or German or Russian as their preferred second language. Over the course of the meeting it emerged that the UK representative did not once switch from English to any other language. Crucially, this friend of mine said that it was generally noticed and informally remarked upon such that it became an inhibiting factor in properly including the UK colleague.

I hasten to add at this point that this is nothing but a small anecdote. I am sure there are plenty of diplomats from all over the world whose command of foreign languages is limited, while many UK diplomats have excellent foreign language skills, not least as the Foreign Office used to run a fine language school – until 2007. It is of course also true that English *is* the world’s lingua franca, and native English speakers are often given little chance to practice their foreign language skills. I remember an English acquaintance among a group of German speakers. At the first pause or ‘erm’ in his otherwise good German, he would be shouted over

in rather poorer English by his German speaking interlocutors. Let us, however, at this point leave the world of anecdote.

In 2004, the British Chamber of Commerce commissioned a survey on the impact of foreign languages on British business sponsored by the Learning and Skills Council. While English is explicitly and, of course, correctly recognized as the international business language, the survey also found that British exporters express strong support for the – then – Government’s strive to introduce modern languages at primary school level. There is a utilitarian reason to encourage people to learn foreign languages, even if in purely practical terms they may be able to get by in English. Language plays an important role in what the political scientist Joseph Nye called ‘soft power’. This is someone’s ability to employ values and culture in situations where people negotiate and try to maximize gain. I must add that the term comes with rather heavy ideological baggage and has subsequently come under strong criticism. In this context, I am referring to it in order to illustrate the fact that people who otherwise think in numbers and gains clearly recognize the importance of cultural and interpersonal skills. Put differently, two people from different countries will achieve more together if they display the willingness to understand each other, and this, by definition, implies language.

Thus, there are not only scholarly and educational arguments to be made for learning and teaching Slavonic and East European languages. There are also purely utilitarian arguments. These are mere truisms, but the important point is that utilitarian arguments in particular have brought about the change in attitude towards supporting foreign language teaching among policy makers, managers and administrators in various branches of the educational system. CEELBAS, the project that has made possible this meeting and many other initiatives over the past 5 years, is a prime example. Its stated aim goes as follows: “The main objective of the Centre has been to realise the UK's strategic commitment to the study of Central and Eastern Europe and Russia by developing multi-disciplinary, language-based research capacity around key themes to generate a sustainable flow of highly trained expertise.” There are now good prospects for a Phase II of CEELBAS. And there are many other signs which suggest that language learning and linguistic expertise remain at the forefront of UK educational policy making. Take, as a further example, special Government funding which the British Academy has received to run a four year programme to support languages and quantitative skills (L&QS). This is in reflection of the Academy’s longstanding concerns about deficits in these areas in UK education and research. These are very encouraging signs and prospects for the future. They are paired with a still exceptionally lively and diverse landscape of teaching and learning Slavonic and East European languages in the UK. It is true, there have been closures and mergers of departments in academia and elsewhere which were detrimental from an educational and scholarly point of view, and which thrust colleagues into considerable difficulties. At the same time, however, our languages are still taught in a range of institutions, with diverse purpose and methods applied: Polish and Russian are available as GCSE- and A-level subjects. Existing and newly emerging community groups organize tuition for young ‘heritage’ speakers, such as, for example, in the form of so-called ‘Saturday Schools’. Slavonic and East European languages are taught at colleges of adult and further education. A number of universities continue to support

language tuition in Russian and other Slavonic and East European languages, or they make specific efforts to increase provision, such as the recent introduction of Ukrainian at Cambridge. I am not naïve. As the latest developments in Glasgow show, there is continued pressure on our subject area, because teaching Slavonic and East European languages at a professional level will cost money, and because, with the exception of Russian, our languages often receive the label ‘small’ or ‘regional’. Still, I believe there is everything to play for in the future.

Tasks for the future

Let me, therefore, in this last part of my talk mention the areas which I believe will require our particular attention in the future in order to maintain and develop the teaching and learning of Slavonic and East European languages in the UK. To my mind, there are three of them:

The first one is premised on my conviction that linguistic competence is absolutely central for anyone who wishes to study subjects pertaining to East and East Central Europe. I am rather uncompromising on this point. Linguistic competence is not an option, or an add-on, once all the rest has been covered, such as the region’s politics, economics, culture and history. Language is the starting point. This implies that, from my point of view, curricula with a sole or partial focus on East and East Central Europe should have a language component, and that this language component should be an integral part of the syllabus, not only a threshold qualification. I know this is an ideal and will not always match up with reality due to limited resources, due to the need of widening access towards university courses, and due to the fact that good social scientists or historians are not necessarily good linguists, as much as good linguists are not necessarily good social scientists or historians. However, I believe it will be crucial for us in the future continuously to stress the need to treat linguistic competence on an equal pair with other subjects, not only in traditional language and literature courses, but also in area studies and the social sciences. After all, how can I ever gain any serious understanding of, say, minority policies in the Baltic states without having some knowledge of Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian, as well as some competence in Russian, Polish or Belorussian. And even more fundamentally, I believe we will need to advocate the view that language teaching is not just service teaching toward other subjects. Understanding linguistic structure, and how it works in texts in particular, provides essential methodological tools. This is in evidence, for example, from historical research practice which has seen a fundamental shift from understanding sources not as quasi-reports of past events, but as texts which relate those events in one way or another. Thus, the future of the teaching and learning of Slavonic and East European languages will depend on our ability to communicate and to defend the significance of linguistic training.

The second area which, I believe, will need our particular attention in the future has to do with academic competition, which, if construed as a constructive rather than punitive process, can be very exciting. What I have in mind here is the fact that we need to compete for students and for resources. Let me refer to a blunt example: At Open Days for prospective undergraduate students I am sometimes asked the question why someone should study Polish,

or why someone should acquire reading competence in Ukrainian, if they could spend that time on learning Chinese or Arabic. A simple answer is that specialized language skills can well be the key towards particular opportunities in further study and in employment. However, I do not think that that this is sufficient an answer. We need to accrue and constantly up-date good arguments why it is worthwhile learning Slavonic and East European languages. For Russian, we can of course always point towards the mighty number of people who speak it as their first or as a second language in the post-Soviet context. Perhaps with the exception of some years in the 1990s, UK policy makers and the public clearly acknowledge Russia's significance on the world stage. However, I believe there are many more and better reasons to study Russian than because of the fact that the country has a nuclear bomb and vast natural resources. For example, contemporary Russian cinema is probably among the most exciting to see for anyone interested in film. These very days, for example, the "Academia Rossica" is holding its fifth Russian Film Festival. There are specific and good arguments for learning other Slavonic and East European languages too. Contemporary Polish theatre, for example, currently attracts significant attention well beyond Polish borders, and also features prominently in the three-day conference on Polish literature to be held here at SSEES later in the week. For anyone interested in contemporary theatre in general is very likely to come across some of the prolific and highly regarded Polish playwrights and directors of our days. A social scientist, on the other hand, interested in, say, educational policy will, as far as I am aware, be able to observe a host of innovative experiments in Slovenia since independence. To take a further example, a student of Russian history will find illuminating the rediscovery since 1991 of a distinct Ukrainian perspective on Eastern European history. For one final illustration we do not even need to leave the UK. Slavonic and East European languages have become new community languages in this country. Polish comes to mind most readily, but others are significant too, for example, as far as I am aware, Lithuanian, Slovak and also Russian. The list could of course go on and on. Presented as such, that is as a list of examples illustrating the significance of East European languages, it does not sound like much more than a purely promotional exercise. This is not just what I have in mind. Raising interest in teaching and learning Slavonic and East European languages in the UK will depend on our ability to identify processes and developments in our respective countries which are unique and of genuine interest from a broader comparative point of view.

Finally, I am coming to the third area which I believe will require our particular attention in the future in order to maintain and develop the teaching and learning of Slavonic and East European languages in the UK. This concerns the quality of the teaching of these languages, appropriate to the given context and purpose. I remember my own first Russian course book in school which was a dull succession of stale and unnatural sounding lessons. The experience repeated itself when I started learning Polish at university with a text book from the 1970s. Here, a certain pan Kowalski engaged in all sorts of exemplary and artificial sounding activities which nobody ever did in my world. For example, he routinely got up at 5 in the morning and started exercising in front of an open window, surely mainly because "gimnastykować się" is an example of sorts for the conjugation of verbs in "-ować". Luckily, we have now come a long way with respect to teaching methods and materials, especially

over the past 20 years. Kagan's and Rifkin's volume on *The Learning and Teaching of Slavic Languages and Cultures* records some of these advances up until the late 1990s. I am sure similar developments can be observed with respect to the teaching of Baltic and Finno-Ugric languages. Milestones in language learning have been described with a greater degree of precision. An example is the introduction in 2004 of the certification of learning Polish as a foreign language according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, as described in more detail in an article of 2005 by Władysław Miodunka. After many years in the UK I have come to understand and appreciate the British call for caution against one-size-fit-all standards and norms. The aims of learning and teaching Slavonic and East European languages must surely differ from context to context. At the same time, it is certainly useful to reflect carefully on methods and outcomes as appropriate for the given context. In fact, in the UK we are particularly well placed to conduct this reflection and to develop innovative curricula, materials and assessment methods for Slavonic and East European languages. After all, this is the country where fundamental changes in second-language acquisition started and have continued to unfold since the 1970s. It is the teaching of English as a foreign language which has sparked an unprecedented diversification and development of didactic methods, as is in evidence from a survey such as Johnson's and Johnson's *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics. A Handbook for Language Teaching*. Some of the ideas developed for teaching English as a foreign language may still be waiting to be discovered for the teaching of our languages.

One specific of our language group is the fact that they are very closely related as far as the Slavonic languages are concerned. To some extent, this extends to the Baltic languages and even to the Finno-Ugric languages, where, for example, Hungarian has a considerable number of Slavonic loanwords. This creates exceptional potential for synergies. In other words, if a learner is familiar with one Slavonic or East European language, they will typically acquire another one very fast, especially as far as passive linguistic competence is concerned. This is a tremendous argument in favour of learning them as they offer the immediate potential of easily acquiring related languages and, thus, becoming a proper area specialist. It also offers great potential for the development of language teaching materials. For example, someone learning Ukrainian will often have some Russian already, such that all the basic grammatical categories and parts of the core vocabulary will be reasonably familiar. I know that many among us here are actively engaged in developing language teaching materials. I also know that developing such materials is challenging, time consuming and requires a good deal of specialist expertise. However, it is certainly worthwhile the effort because it is the quality of our teaching which will be a decisive factor for the future of the learning and teaching of Slavonic and East European languages. If I think of an initiative such as the new CEELBAS language repository, I am convinced that this future is bright despite recent difficulties and set-backs. I am looking forward to the presentations of language projects and work in progress in the afternoon. We shall then also have the opportunity to discuss possible future initiatives for the next phase of CEELBAS.

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