

British University applications -UCAS- and foreign languages

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In Britain, undergraduate admissions are handled electronically and centrally by an organisation known as UCAS. My son and I recently filled in the forms. The first detail was that the site did not work under the browser Opera, so it was duly reported to Opera. Remember, Opera guarantees to work to the official standards, therefore any site that does not work for Opera does not comply with agreed standards. The fault is almost never with Opera.

Our second choice browser, Firefox, did work, (which means Firefox is tolerant of buggy code) Once into the site however we were amazed how well organised and idiot proof the UCAS site is. The site basically has a long electronic questionnaire which can be completed over several or many attempts, and only when everything is ready you can finish, pay the application fee, and send. The questionnaire includes the usual personal details, schooling history, qualifications taken and to be taken, a reference, and a personal statement.

Now, even though I am British, and even though I am a linguist and have come across comments on the language ability of the British, I was unprepared for a massive shock when going through this form. Please hold the table and be aware that the shock now should be near to causing you to faint or to be filled with disgust. "There is no place whatsoever for languages on the UCAS form."

Of course, you could put it in the GCSE qualifications (the examinations usually taken after five years at secondary school at the age of 16). I am not referring to formal qualifications in languages. I am talking about real ability in languages.

Real ability in other languages, in multilingual countries, is seen as an absolute prerequisite for University entrance - regardless of the subject. For instance, first year students of medicine in Tunisia, as well as achieving the highest marks in maths and sciences are expected to have high grades in English and French. You can be brilliant in Physics or Mathematics, but if your language is not up to standard, you must settle for easier qualifications. My experience is that such students are often B2/C1 in two foreign languages. For comparison with Britain, the AS level (half A level, roughly equivalent to American High School) is B1, and B2 would be considered the level that those doing degrees in language get to after the first year at University. French universities require C1 for university study in France.

I am appalled that there is not even space on the UCAS form for foreign languages. They are not even considered - not once. It was as if foreign languages did not exist. The UCAS form clearly shows the value given to languages in British education.

Of course I should not be surprised by this. As King (2001:25) points out. In Europe at least (though not in UK), there is a common thread of "foreign language capability as a precondition of citizenship.". A working knowledge of at least two foreign languages is viewed as a minimum for anyone who is reasonably educated. King presents evidence to show that the British Foreign Office, when it views the world, gives little importance to foreign languages. (See King L 2001. The European year of languages - taking forward the language debate. *Lang Teach* 34 p21-29).

Languages can of course be mentioned on the UCAS form- in the reference and personal statement - but they should have been included as one of the major questions. And since the Common European Framework of reference was designed from the beginning to be suitable for self assessment, all it would take is a series of tables, one for each language or variety, something like this:

| Language:..... | A1 | A2 | B1 | B2 | C1 | C2 | Is this self assessment? |
|--------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|--------------------------|
| Listening | | | | | | | Yes/No |
| Reading | | | | | | | Yes/No |
| Spoken interaction | | | | | | | Yes/No |
| Spoken production | | | | | | | Yes/No |
| Writing | | | | | | | Yes/No |

The self assessment could be supported by the referee. In the future, language examinations will increasingly be linked to the CEFR, so if someone has any external proof of level, they can add this in the usual way to the qualifications list.

The CEFR was designed by second language teachers, but has proved extendable to the first language. In addition, we know that multilinguals are often stronger in one skill than another. I have argued elsewhere that the framework also applies to diglossia.

www.scientificlanguage.com/provocative/cefr-diglossia-esp.pdf. For Arabic speakers this would mean separate tables for dialect and classical (Low and High forms as linguists like to say). Since dialect Arabic is rarely written, the reading and writing skills would be irrelevant. So, for instance, my wife would need seven tables: Classical German, Swiss German, English, French, Italian, Classical Arabic, Dialect Arabic. In comparison I can only manage a miserable four language varieties.

In addition, since level B1 is the equivalent of an AS level, and B2 is the equivalent of the first year of University, such a table would value languages, and would value those with multilingual backgrounds, and would get away from the terribly artificial GCSE/A level language examinations.

What would happen if the best universities such as Cambridge and Oxford started demanding that all applicants have level B2 in at least one, preferably two foreign languages? For the fact is that in multilingual countries the top degrees require a very high level of other languages in addition to an ability in the subject. Why should Britain be an exception? If Universities demanded high second language skills this would motivate the schools to take them seriously. Universities valuing languages would also have the bonus of favouring the immigrant population - their language skills would at last be given the high value they deserve.

The UCAS form at present does not value languages at all, and as such can be accused of discriminating against immigrants. I am surprised that the commission for racial equality has not already protested about this.

But how can abnormally monolingual British people become multilingual?

1. I have suggested in a parallel article, “learning French in British schools” www.scientificlanguage.com/provocative/french.pdf that first of all **the amount of time devoted to foreign languages go up to 5-10 hours per week**, and that once level B1 is achieved, at least one other subject should be studied through French. Here I present another feasible idea.
2. When I went to France to learn French, having miserably failed my ‘O’ level (GCSE) French, I was told that my accent was terrible, and that I would have been better NOT studying French at school. Instead I should have come to France as a raw beginner and through immersion and good teaching learned French properly, in context. I heard this many times, and I believe the point is valid, for several reasons. Firstly, adults learn faster than children, therefore a lot of the time learning French in school was wasted time. Secondly, I was not taught properly so acquired a bad accent which has taken an enormous amount of work to improve. I noticed that total beginners in French intensive immersion courses end up with a better accent.

Therefore there is a ridiculously easy solution. Cut language learning from the British curriculum entirely. Let students take the GCSE subjects then the A levels a year early, then send students abroad for 12-15 months, studying one or two foreign languages. The money saved through a year less of classes in British schools would go a large way to financing this.

Of course, multilingual immigrants would not need this year abroad, so they could go to University a year earlier. Or they could improve their already high language skills. Either way, such a proposal would finally give multilinguals the value they deserve.

I am proposing that schools do not waste time teaching languages to their students. Instead, they use the time saved to advance the learning of other subjects, so that GCSEs are taken at the age of 15 instead of 16, and A levels are taken at the age of 17 instead of 18. The year thus gained can be spent learning another language using intensive immersion methods, profiting from the faster learning speeds of late teenagers, and the fact that languages are learned faster through intensive blocks of time rather than a few hours a week.

3. To extend the idea further, **why not allow students to go to university at the age of 17 and to take four year sandwich degrees, including a foreign language.** Any student who finishes with less than B2 in another language would be awarded a 'ordinary' degree instead of an 'honours' degree.

Conclusions

The main reasons why so few British people have foreign language proficiency are that proficient people are discriminated against - for example, the immigrants - and, crucially, it is a fact that language proficiency is not valued enough to do something about it.