

Opinions

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How far can skills-talk take us?

by Neil Kenny

In this article, Neil Kenny, Lead Fellow for Languages at the British Academy, argues that the broadened notion of skill proposed by a new British Academy project, [The Right Skills](#), provides a framework for articulating more accurately and effectively the full range of skills provided by language degrees.

What's a skill?

Everyone agrees that learning a language involves acquiring skills. But not everyone agrees about where the skills-acquiring stops and something else begins. Does the study of languages at degree level go well beyond 'skills'? The question is not idle. It bears on how the value of language study should be explained to policymakers. Since skills are high on the agenda of the UK government, does it not make sense to highlight the technical skills that language study gives, and of which there is a dire national deficit? But some Higher Education teachers worry that this reduces the value of language study to functional, instrumental, and transactional purposes, such as buying a baguette in a Paris bakery or negotiating a bilateral trade deal. Without denying the importance of the technical skills involved, they worry that exclusive emphasis on them undersells the value of a language degree, not just as a curiosity-led discipline in its own right, but, through its teaching of non-technical as well as technical skills, 'as an ideal preparation for the world of work' and for 'a life of effective global citizenship'. The terms of the debate were outlined for example by Michael Worton (whom I have just quoted) in a [blog](#) marking the publication of the 2016 British Academy report on the language needs of the labour market, [Born Global](#).

Uncertainty surrounding 'skills' is also connected to two fault lines that have long existed within Higher Education language-study. One is between language-degrees and institution-wide language programmes (delivered by Language Centres). The second is between the study of 'language' and of 'content' within degree courses. In the terms of this crude dichotomy, which many rightly reject, training in language competence (mostly or entirely using the medium of the target language) is distinct from the analytic study of culture, literature, film, or language (which very often happens in English, with the objects of study remaining in the target language). Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been pioneered by some but is not widespread in the sector. Although much excellent work has been done to overcome both those fault lines, they have not entirely disappeared.

Our generation is hardly the first to be uncertain about defining skills. From Greek antiquity to the present, the relation between learning how to do something (e.g. *techne*, *ars*, art) and other forms of knowledge (such as innate or theoretical) has long been debated. So the good news is that there is no right answer! But in my view it now makes sense to broaden the definition of 'skill' that is often used in relation to language study. The reason is not just the politic one mentioned above, but the more fundamental one that skills in this broader sense are not only what the future world of work is likely

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to need, and they will not only help foster intercultural sensitivity within the UK (as well as internationally), but they are also what language degrees do actually provide.

A new report: *The Right Skills*

A broadened definition of skill is proposed by a new British Academy publication, [*The Right Skills: Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*](#). Its focus is on ‘high-level skills’, as developed at degree level and above, although some of the skills in question are also taught to an extent at earlier stages of the education system. The report adopts ‘a broad understanding of “skills” which goes beyond “what you can do”, to include attitudes and behaviours’ (p. 18). It is informed by widespread consultation as well as by many sources, including, for languages, the QAA subject benchmark statement of 2015.

The Right Skills proposes two ways – each of them tripartite – of conceptualizing the skills that are imparted by Higher Education. The first tripartite distinction is between

- (i) those skills that are ‘generic graduate attributes’ (p. 21) imparted by degree courses in *any* subject, whether science or else arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS);
- (ii) skills imparted especially by AHSS degrees, whatever the particular discipline;
- (iii) discipline-specific skills such as competence in different languages or high-level numeracy. Moreover, the UK deficit in (iii) leads the report to add its voice to calls for a national strategy for languages (p. 56).

Within this tripartite framework, language degrees impart skills not just under the third heading, but under all three. The framework puts the more technical dimensions of a language-degree on a continuum with other skills, rather than limiting ‘skill’ to the technical dimensions. For me – as a reader of the report, authored by others – that paints a more cognitively accurate picture of the deep connections between the different kinds of learning that go on in a language degree.

What then, according to this report, are the generic skills imparted especially by AHSS degrees, and that I mentioned above under (ii)? They are conceptualized in turn by another tripartite schema, – as three clusters of skills.

The first cluster can be described as communication and collaboration: it includes clarity, coherence, persuasiveness, use of evidence, adjustment of register to audience, listening, being sensitive to different viewpoints and cultures, and so on.

The second cluster can be described as research and analysis: it includes formulating research questions, thinking critically, locating and retrieving information, organizing and manipulating it, analysing it through different methods, recognizing its imperfections, and formulating nuanced conclusions.

Finally, the third cluster, which departs even more markedly from narrow understandings of skill, can be described as attitudes and behaviours: it includes learning to work independently and with self-discipline, solving problems creatively and proactively, being receptive to new ideas and approaches, and being open to further learning and development.

Certainly, it could be argued that versions of some of these AHSS-wide skills might be imparted by science degrees too. On the other hand, all of them will resonate with anyone who has taught or taken a degree in languages – for example not only the skills acquired through study of culture, literature, or film but also those acquired through training in listening (e.g. audiovisual comprehension) and in

manipulation of register. It is indeed difficult to think of other disciplines that impart some of these skills, such as those last two, as searchingly as language degrees.

The report shows that, although it is difficult to predict all the skills that will be needed in the future, those three clusters of AHSS skills are likely to loom large. Qualities such as social perceptiveness and coordinating, flexibility, adaptability, nuanced judgement, or synthesis and articulation of complex ideas are likely to be crucial as interactions become ever more global and as culturally sensitive thinking is needed to make good decisions about the design and use of digital technology. The strong message that already comes from employers is that they value a can-do, culturally open mindset in graduates. Language degrees provide that even if one disregards the linguistic competence that employers also value greatly for more specific purposes. So, although *The Right Skills* does not go into such detail, it provides a framework for understanding what employers have long said, for example that the ‘year abroad’ (the third year in 4-year language degrees) is attractive to them both because of the linguistic competence gained and because of the flexibility, adaptability, openness, and resilience that it imbues.

Ways forward?

So *The Right Skills* offers a fresh way to articulate the value of language degrees to policymakers. It provides one way of weaving languages into the woefully languages-free, or ‘[linguistically indifferent](#)’, picture of skills priorities that was recently published in the Industrial Strategy White Paper.

The Right Skills also provides a framework that could usefully be internalized *within* the world of Higher Education. The framework can show how language degrees both overlap with, and are distinct from, others in AHSS. Its expansive notion of skills offers a way of further overcoming the fault lines between the more technical and the more critical work done within a language degree, as also between language degrees themselves and institution-wide language programmes.

Further Reading

British Academy. 2013. *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security* <<https://www.britac.ac.uk/publications/lost-words-need-languages-uk-diplomacy-and-security>>

British Academy. 2016. *Born Global: A British Academy Project on Languages and Employability* <<https://www.britac.ac.uk/born-global>>

British Academy. 2017. *The Right Skills: Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, <<https://www.britac.ac.uk/publications/right-skills-celebrating-skills-arts-humanities-and-social-sciences-ahss>>

Cambridge Public Policy SRI. 2015. *The Value of Languages: Ideas for a UK Strategy for Languages* <<https://www.publicpolicy.cam.ac.uk/research-impact/value-of-languages>>

Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. 2017. *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain Fit for the Future* (White Paper, Cm 9528) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/the-uk-industrial-strategy>>

Kelly, Michael (ed.). 2018. *Languages After Brexit: How the UK Speaks to the World*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), including chapter 22 (Michael Kelly, ‘Conclusion: Towards a Strategy for the UK’)

Nesta. 2017. *The Future of Skills: Employment in 2030* (London: Pearson and Nesta) <<https://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/future-skills-employment-2030>>

QAA. 2015. *Subject Benchmark Statement: Languages, Cultures and Societies*
<<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2982#.WjJf4VKcZBw>>

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