

Dialogues

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Language analysis in Schools: Education and Research (LASER)

by [Richard Hudson](#) and [Graeme Trousdale](#)

In this article, Richard Hudson, position, and Graeme Trousdale, position, introduce the collection ...

In March 2019, the [British Academy](#) hosted a launch event for Language Analysis in Schools: Education and Research (LASER), at which a number of speakers presented their reflections on the importance of skills in language analysis for a range of subject areas currently taught in schools. This Dialogues collection of *Languages, Society and Policy* (LSP) contains brief position papers from some of the presenters, which summarise the views expressed at the launch. A striking feature of these contributions is the range of disciplines they cover, from STEM subjects such as mathematics and statistics to core humanities subjects like English and foreign language learning. This focus on cross-disciplinarity is at the heart of LASER's objective: to raise the profile of language analysis in its own right, to demonstrate its importance in a range of school subjects, and to carry out research projects that inform educational policy and practice. In this article, we provide a brief summary of some of LASER's main aims and some of the premises behind the formation of our network.

First, it's important to be clear about what we mean by language analysis. We see language analysis (LA) as the analysis of patterns in language, including both patterns in the system (e.g. how many tenses does English have?) and patterns in texts (e.g. what tenses are used in this passage?). It is

- an activity, not just passive knowledge.
- relevant to any kind of language material, including the student's own non-standard vernacular as well as foreign languages.
- separate from evaluation.
- conscious and slow, in contrast with everyday rapid and unconscious use of language.
- based on linguistics, but accessible at many different levels of sophistication.
- potentially supported by technical tools such as tables and diagrams.

Taking this as our definition of language analysis, it is clear that the current education system in the United Kingdom provides few opportunities for teaching LA. In schools, students are given little credit for skills in LA in the public examination system (though in England and Wales, LA has a slightly greater presence than it did a few decades ago, thanks to phonics, SPaG – spelling, punctuation and grammar – tests, and A-level English Language). By contrast, LA is prominent in the

school education system of other countries. In universities, LA has a limited existence in many departments of English or foreign languages, though it flourishes under the title of ‘linguistics’.

Second, we can recognise the educational benefits of LA across a range of subject areas, as follows:

- **English:** LA allows children to discover for themselves that the English language (in all its varieties) is both orderly and interesting, and provides a vital framework of ideas and terms for understanding how language in general works. LA can also facilitate the exploration of the style of different authors and can help in evaluating literary works.
- **Foreign languages:** FL teaching should build on the insights brought to English, enriching them and showing the diversity and interest of other languages (in contrast with the dominant, purely instrumental, approaches).
- **Mathematics:** LA is highly relevant to mathematics in moving from everyday language to more abstract and specialised meanings and expressions, and also in developing pattern-spotting skills.
- **Statistics:** LA is crucial for the skilful and careful use of language needed in statistical thinking across the curriculum.
- **Science:** as in mathematics, LA helps in moving from everyday to technical language as well as in developing scientific skills such as identifying variables.
- **History and geography:** LA can explore both historical and geographical variation, as well as differences between everyday and technical terminology and ideas.

At present, then, the UK education system includes very little LA, but it could and in an ideal world it would. The key difference between that world and the real world is in its **integration**:

- across **the life span**: from primary school to university, LA builds cumulatively, and we want new teachers to be able to teach it confidently and enthusiastically.
- across **subjects**: work on English is the foundation for work on foreign languages and in other subjects.
- across **pedagogies**: from a five-minute warm-up to an entire lesson, from part of an English or foreign language lesson to a separately timetabled slot. But in every case, students would be active.
- across **teaching and assessment**: public exams such as GCSE and A-level would have a greater focus on LA components, which would give more credit for skill and knowledge in LA.

We have seen in recent developments that children educated in the UK clearly have aptitude in LA, and LASER seeks to encourage ways to foster and develop this. We recognise the following as key strengths:

- The **UK Linguistics Olympiad** (UKLO). UKLO is popular with pupils and teachers, and produces world champions.
- **Linguistics**. This is a buoyant research subject in our universities.
- **A-level English Language**. This attracts nearly 40,000 candidates every year, so hundreds of teachers have some knowledge of linguistics, including LA.
- **Infrastructure**. There are established committees and associations both in HE and for school teachers; these bodies are generally supportive of these ideas and enable recruitment of volunteers.
- **Enthusiasm**. Many English and foreign language teachers are enthusiastic about introducing linguistics into school teaching, as are a large number of academics in HE linguistics departments (and in English and foreign language departments where linguistics is taught).
- **Government**. Government education departments in England support primary phonics and grammar.
- **Classroom cooperation**. Pupils are good at working together, as required in much of LA.

In the long term we are looking at a profound cultural change, but short-term goals include:

- An optional LA paper as part of GCSE English Language.
- An A-level exam in Linguistics (possibly called Language Analysis).
- A textbook series for English including LA activities, and similar for foreign languages.
- A conference that brings together representatives from English and foreign language teaching at both school and university level.
- A national database of teaching materials for LA, with comments on how well they work.

We believe that LASER can achieve these aims if it builds support from across the educational spectrum. The articles in this issue of LSP provide clear evidence of why LA matters and why LASER's aims are relevant in the current educational climate. We welcome the support of others who share our objectives.

Abbreviations

The following list of abbreviations used in these papers is intended to help readers who are less familiar with the UK's education system.

- A-level = Advanced level: a qualification consisting typically of three or four subjects taken in the last two years of secondary education (i.e. in Years 12 and 13).
- GCSE = General Certificate of Secondary Education: a qualification typically covering most subjects taken at the end of Year 11.
- KS1–5 = Key Stages 1–5: age-based stages of education in which KS1 ends in Year 2, KS2 in Year 6, KS3 in Year 9, KS4 in Year 11 and KS5 in Year 13.
- MFL = Modern Foreign Languages.
- Ofqual = The Office for Qualifications: a government agency responsible for overseeing school examinations and qualifications.

Resources

LASER manifesto (from which parts of this introduction were taken):

<http://clie.org.uk/laser/#manifesto>

More information about LASER: <http://clie.org.uk/laser/>

About the authors

Richard ('Dick') Hudson is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at University College London and Fellow of the British Academy, with a research record in theoretical linguistics but also a lifelong enthusiasm for bringing linguistics into the school curriculum.

Graeme Trousdale is Senior Lecturer in the department of Linguistics and English Language at the University of Edinburgh. His research interests are in cognitive and historical linguistics. He is a member of the LAGB's Education Committee and is keen to develop ways of engaging with teachers to encourage more opportunities for young people to learn about linguistics.