



## Activity Report

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# An initial assessment of the academic and professional profile of modern foreign languages' teachers in UK higher education

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**Abstract:** The aim of this activity report is to provide an initial appraisal of the current makeup of the professional group of modern foreign language teachers in UK Higher Education. The report is in two parts: a literature review that identifies the main defining qualities of modern foreign languages teachers, and an evaluation of the professional and academic profiles of language teachers in UK higher education, as displayed in the institutional websites of the universities where they work. The analysis of the data collected corroborates the characteristics identified in the literature: the low status of teaching staff, the often unconventional entry paths into the profession, the prevalence of the “native speaker” construct as a desirable feature in candidates who aspire to teach the language, the disparity in qualifications of language teachers, and their low engagement in research activities. Future prospects involve the verification (or amendment, where necessary) of the data collected with accounts from individuals who work as language teachers.

**Keywords:** professional profile; qualifications of university language teachers; research of university language teachers; scholarship of university language teachers; status of university language teachers; university language teachers

## 1 Context

The aim of this activity is to provide an initial picture of the current composition of the body of modern foreign languages (MFL) teachers in UK Higher Education. In British universities, MFL teaching stands out among other subjects in the Humanities for two main reasons: on the one hand, the highest level of qualification required from

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candidates who apply for these posts is often a postgraduate teaching certificate. There is no expectation that these teachers will have a doctoral qualification since they will not be required to actively participate in research. The second distinctive feature of foreign language teaching posts is that they are often filled with “native speakers”: however complex the notion of “native speaker” might be, the term is used by institutions as a synonym of high quality teaching to advertise their language courses.

This paper is structured in two parts: the first consists of a review of the literature on the academic and professional profile of MFL teachers in Higher Education; the second involves an assessment of the online staff profiles of MFL teachers in a number of selected universities, with a view to verifying to what extent the characteristics of this professional group reflect the features described in the literature.

The literature review revealed that the academic and professional profiles of MFL teachers in Higher Education were largely defined by the following factors:

- **Low status of teaching-related work in Higher Education.** Besides the perception of teaching as service work, another –not totally unrelated– aspect that contributes to the low esteem of teaching is its conventional separation from research, in favour of which teaching is dismissed (Acker and Feuerwerker 1996: 403; Knight and Trowler 2000: 77; Willetts 2017: 214–215). MFL departments are not an exception: the professional status of teachers in MFL departments is degraded by its comparison with research staff. In addition, the position of language centres with respect to the core of academic life is even more marginal (AULC-UCML 2019: 12; Howarth 2010; Puntil 2019: 93).
- **Paths into MFL teaching.** A striking feature that appears relatively often in accounts of individuals who explain how they got into teaching is the admission that they started to teach almost by chance. These narratives place little emphasis on earlier training to become a certified language teacher, or on the notion of language teaching as a job that requires a certain level of specialisation, qualifications and professional accreditation (Johnston 1997: 691; Puntil 2019: 108). The accounts of how one can “become” a language teacher just by landing a teaching job and getting on with it dangerously undermine the professional identity and status of language teachers. The perception that *anyone* can teach a language, as long as they can speak it, pervades these stories.
- **The asset of “native language competence”.** The notion of the “native speaker” as the legitimate transmitter of linguistic knowledge is often present in accounts of individuals who become MFL teachers. However, determining who is a “native speaker” and who is not is not as simple as it might seem (Crandall 2000: 43). As Crandall herself states, “the linkage between native-speaking proficiency and professional competence is often misconstrued (when teachers are hired not because of their preparation, but because they

are ‘native speakers’)” (2000: 43). In effect, the assumption that “native speakers” are the best teachers of their languages devalues other teacher attributes, “such as specialized knowledge, interpersonal skills, pedagogical skills, or experience” (Johnston 1997: 700).

- **Qualifications of MFL teachers.** One feature that stands out in studies about qualifications of MFL teachers is the variety of certifications or training routes that recruiters consider acceptable to perform the job, although some of these professional training courses were “as short as four weeks in duration” (Borg 2010: 24). As an example, the PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) only takes nine months to complete. The PGCE programme grants qualified teacher status in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is required in order to be able to work at state schools, but it is also widely accepted as a qualification to teach languages at university level (Block and Gray 2016: 486): in fact, as shown below, this certificate is the second most common highest qualification of MFL teachers in UK universities.
- **Research engagement of MFL teachers.** Research engagement is recommended to MFL teachers. Nevertheless, its benefits are limited and unclear. As a consequence, only a minority of language teachers engage in research (Borg 2010). The low engagement of MFL teachers in research needs to be addressed alongside the issue of qualifications discussed above: it is unlikely that teachers without a research background, and who, in some cases, have not even been trained as linguists, will take the initiative to start research projects of an academic standard.

## 2 Data collection

The data collected for this report are available in the public domain. In view of the restrictions on travel and the shift in work-related priorities brought about by the proliferation of COVID-19 outbreaks during 2020, the data collection was limited to the information available on universities' websites about their language teaching staff.

The sources of the data were the institutional websites of the 24 universities that make up the Russell Group. Established in 1994, the Russell Group is a self-selected association of universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland which tend to be the most research-intensive and, at the same time, the most demanding in terms of the qualifications required from students who aspire to enter. Data collection was limited to these institutions, primarily, because a criterion was needed to limit the scope of this section of the report. Given that these universities pride themselves on the excellence of their research, it was pertinent to

examine the status of language teaching staff within their institutional structures, particularly in view of the teaching versus research dichotomy described in the literature.

742 profiles of language teachers, in both language centres and MFL departments, were examined. Of these, 479 profiles belonged to teachers who worked in language centres. The separation between MFL department and language centre staff was not always neat, as, in many cases, language teaching staff worked for both programmes. In addition, there were some institutions where all foreign language teaching was carried out within MFL departments.

This data collection method has, obviously, some limitations:

- Staff details might not be up to date, or might be incomplete;
- In 7 of the 24 universities included in the activity, professional profiles for language centre staff were not available on the institutional website;
- In 3 of these universities, information about Language Centre teachers was limited to displaying the name of the module convenor in the relevant module descriptions;
- In one university, the language centre was exclusively dedicated to the teaching of English, while staff in the MFL department taught indistinctively cultural and language modules.

While this lack of information limits the scope of the study, it is telling in its own way since it supports the statements made in the literature about the low status of language teachers, and especially language centre teachers, in research-intensive universities. In one case, language centre staff did not even appear on the University's academic staff search engine.

### 3 Results

As stated above, the distinction between groups of staff who worked in MFL Departments and in Language Centres was not always straightforward. For this reason, the data provided regard, on the one hand, the whole group of language teaching staff, and on the other, language centres only.

In the absence of more detailed accounts from individual teachers, the clear predominance of a degree in a language other than the one being taught (Figure 1) can only be provisionally explained on the assumption that many of these teachers, having completed a degree in English studies, came to the UK and ended up settling in the territory. Their background in language study, together with the “native speaker” status they must have enjoyed in the eyes of recruiters, might have favoured their appointment as teachers of their own language, despite the

fact that their training might have little or nothing to do with their mother tongue – let alone with its teaching. Figure 2 supports the statement that the overwhelming majority of MFL teachers in UK universities identify as “native speakers”:

With regard to the proportion of MFL teachers who are not qualified linguists (represented in the first column of Figure 1), it is worth noting the small difference between this percentage and that of MFL instructors who are specialists in the language they teach. Both figures (the high proportion of teachers trained in a discipline totally unconnected with languages, as well as the low proportion of staff with language-specific qualifications) illustrate the outlook depicted in the literature: any graduate, in any discipline, can be considered for a language-teaching job, as long as they are perceived as “native speakers”.

In Figure 3, which includes data about postgraduate qualifications of MFL teachers, the prevalence of staff trained at doctoral level in the joint account of MFL departments and language centres is justified by the fact that some of these

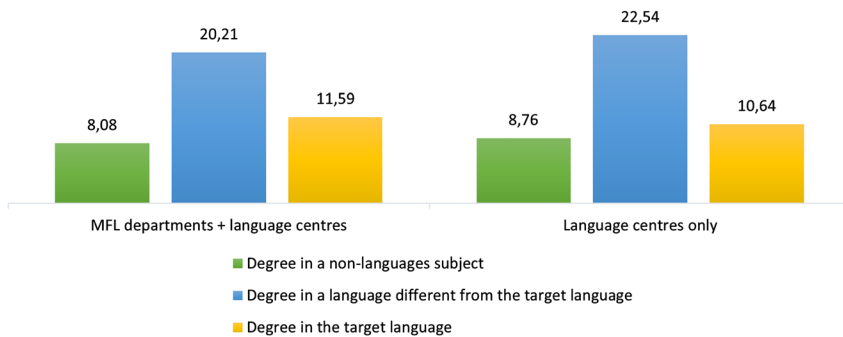


Figure 1: Undergraduate qualifications of MFL teachers (in %).

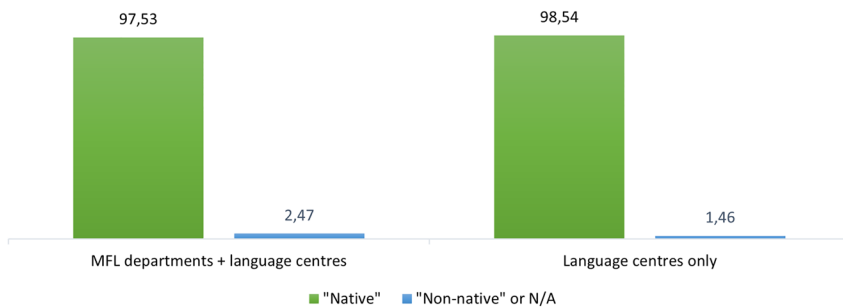
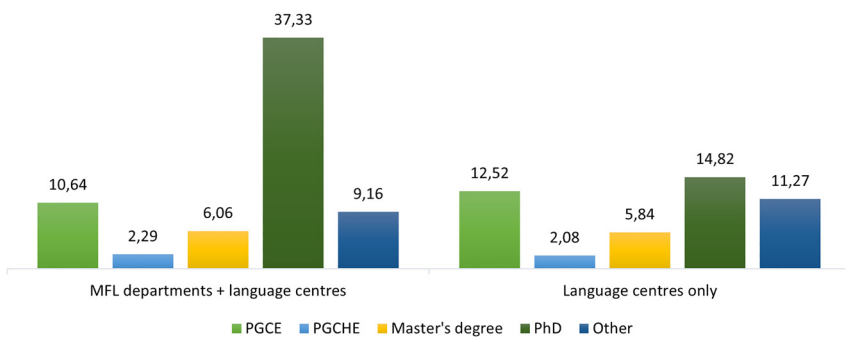


Figure 2: “Native” versus “non-native” MFL teachers (in %).

individuals teach cultural subjects alongside language modules. A PhD qualification is an essential requirement for most of the positions where the candidate will teach cultural modules. The proportion of teachers trained at the highest level in MFL departments reflects this fact.

It is worth noting that, in the specific graph for language centres, qualifications at doctoral level also feature at the top, even though staff who work in these academic units do not usually participate in the tuition of cultural modules. Furthermore, a PhD is rarely an essential requirement for candidates to Language Centre teaching posts (of 54 job adverts for language teachers published on the website jobs.ac.uk between 28 May and 16 October 2020, only one specified the possession of a PhD as an essential requirement). One possible explanation lies in the saturation of the academic job market in the disciplinary field of the Humanities. Candidates at doctoral level in search of a research-active position that is increasingly difficult to secure might end up teaching languages –perhaps in resignation, perhaps waiting for a better opportunity. The expansion of institution-wide language programmes in UK universities in recent years (AULC-UCML 2019: 2) might have offered these professionals the chance to earn a living while performing a job which they might see as second best, but which gives them the financial security they would lack in a succession of fixed-term postdoctoral contracts.

Beyond qualifications at the highest level, other remarkable features in Figure 3 are the very low proportions of teachers who have received postgraduate training to teach in the specific context of higher education (PGCHE, or Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education), and the relatively high percentage of staff who hold a PGCE teaching qualification (see Section 1). This is the second most common type of certificate after PhDs and, in the case of language centres, more than doubles the proportion of staff who hold a master's degree in language



**Figure 3:** Postgraduate qualifications of MFL teachers (in %).

teaching. In fact, the PGCE is the highest level qualification attained by 8.35% of teaching staff in Language Centres. These figures support the argument that, if MFL teachers do not engage in research at university level, it is simply due to their lack of background and training in this area of academic work.

As a counterpoint, the presence of MFL teacher profiles with a research background can be seen as positive, in as much as it shows that these staff have the potential to develop research of an academic standard.

## 4 Future prospects

At this initial stage, this report offers only an approximation of the makeup of the professional body of MFL teachers in UK universities. Further data collection involving the accounts of practitioners by means of questionnaires and interviews will be carried out once the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 emergency response are eased. In the meantime, this initial report allows for some reflections that can be taken into consideration in future stages of the project.

Despite the discouraging landscape of the research activity of MFL teachers depicted in the literature, it would be unfair to conclude that the key to the professional recognition of this group of staff lies only in them doing research at an academic level. In fact, as the data show, a considerable proportion of MFL teachers are as qualified to do research as their research-active counterparts, and some of them do engage in complex intellectual enquiry. However, the hierarchical nature of the academic workplace sidelines the research endeavours of MFL teachers and excludes them from the official faculty research circuits. In order for language teachers' research to be acknowledged, the distinction between research and teaching-only staff has to be abandoned so that the research activity of language teachers is legitimised and explicitly supported by departments. To engage with research in a meaningful way that has a positive impact on academia and beyond, language teachers should be entitled to the same kind of privileges which, right now, are exclusive to research-active staff: protected time to do research, paid research leave periods and institutional support in research grant applications.

It will be argued that not all language teachers want to do research, and this is an undeniable fact. The question then arises: what really distinguishes university teaching from teaching at other educational stages (i.e. secondary schools)? It is hard to defend the right to the full academic status of MFL teachers when some choose to stand aside and not develop key areas of their academic profile. Their claims to the status of full members of the academic community will only be considered if they are supported by evidence of them matching up to the skills and

profiles of their research-active colleagues This again can only be realised with institutional recognition and support.

Nevertheless, the future of modern languages as a discipline does not only depend on the research being carried out in academic departments, but also on students being able to access language tuition that is intellectually stimulating and that requires them to engage in critical thinking. This is what distinguishes Higher Education from previous stages of learning, and this is what students come to universities for. The grim prospects for the future of modern languages as a discipline in UK Higher Education (Westminster Education Forum 2017) call for a concerted effort on behalf of MFL departments and language centres to highlight the value of their teaching in shaping the minds of global citizens who can use their freedom of thought and expression from a fully informed point of view.

In the wake of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, universities have been quick to join the “decolonising the curriculum” trend, declaring their best intentions to become more inclusive and diverse workplaces. However, the truth remains that these institutions are often shunning large groups of –mostly female– ethnically and culturally diverse staff who being, in theory, part of the academic community, are confined to its periphery. Beyond the well-meaning rhetorics, the elimination of barriers between “classes” in university departments and the integration of MFL teachers as fully-fledged members of the community would be authentic steps towards the diversification and decolonisation of academia. In order for this to happen, MFL teachers need to be given the chance to find and develop their academic voices.

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