1 Transition in languages in trying times – challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

This chapter – as the keynote at the InnoConf in September 2020 – is set out as a call for action. Following a brief introduction focusing on the wider context of the skills and lifelong learning debate in the UK, the term 'transition' is defined and the commonly known (language education) transition points in the English education system revisited. An analysis of the primary to secondary language transition point or border zones of learning (Kelly, Medeiros, & Hazard, 2019) is undertaken by adopting Downes's (2019) concepts of transition. The chapter then further unpicks unexpected transition points, such as the move from in-person to virtual delivery of the language classroom. Building on Downes's (2019) concepts, the author introduces a new concept of policy system mismatch, which is explored and tested on a couple of recent policy interventions impacting language teachers and learners (i.e. GCSE speaking endorsement, changes to the A-level specifications). As a consequence of the analysis of the various transition points, the role of collaboration in overcoming some of the barriers identified is discussed. The final section focuses on the transition from university student to graduate and employee. The reader is invited to engage with a call for action: how could we further enhance our education offer to increase our students and future graduates' employability prospects?

Keywords: lifelong learning, languages, transition, system mismatch, border zones of learning.

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How to cite: Koglbauer, R. (2022). Transition in languages in trying times – challenges and opportunities. In C. Hampton & S. Salin (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education* (pp. 11-21). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.56.1369

1. Introduction: setting the wider context

Lifelong learning[2] and its related agendas (up-skilling, re-skilling, flexible learning, blended/online learning, (degree) apprenticeships, T-levels, etc.) have lately been experiencing a rejuvenation, not just in the United Kingdom but globally. Continuous and rapid technological advancement, the climate emergency, and the related Net Zero targets, the COVID-19 pandemic, and its wide-ranging impact on the longer-term effects upon society, economy, health, and education are some of the drivers of the UK government's lifelong learning and skills policies. While the focus of the public debate lies on technical skills, the European Commission sets out in its (higher) education strategy that "all students need to acquire transversal skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving and key competences, such as numeracy and digital skills" (European Commission, 2021). To achieve this, the European Commission champions a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics) approach, which is also endorsed by the UK Lifelong Education Commission (2021). In fact, at the launch of this commission in March 2021, language skills were highlighted as vitally important in the government's growth and levelling-up agendas. It is with this in mind, that this chapter explores the various stages and forms of transitional language which learners are facing from primary schooling age to the start of their working lives.

2. Transition

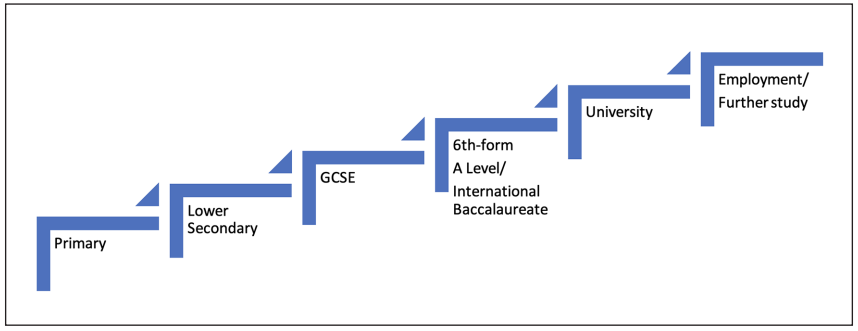
2.1. A brief exploration of the term 'transition' exemplified in primary to secondary transition

Amongst (language) educators, the term transition is commonly understood as points in a (language) learner's journey where they are transitioning to a different level/stage of learning, a new organisation, a more advanced (or in some cases more achievable) programme or exam course: from primary to secondary, from

2. This chapter is based on the author's opening keynote presentation at the online InnoConf in September 2020.

lower secondary to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), from GCSE to A-level or international baccalaureate, and from sixth form to university (see Figure 1). As part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council Open World Research Initiative, 'Language Acts and Worldmaking' (European Commission, 2021), leaders of the transition strand (Kelly et al., 2019) challenged the concept of transition points by referring to them as 'border zones of learning' that frequently hinder the progression of language learners.

Figure 1. Common transition points in (language) education



Considering the first transition stage, primary to secondary, Courtney's work emphasises the impact that transition points and in particular their activities or lack thereof, as well as the related curriculum decisions made by teachers and school leaders, can have on learners' motivation towards learning languages (Courtney, 2017). At policy level, the Languages Programmes of Study (DfE, 2013) set out the aim of progression from Key Stage 2 (primary) to Key Stage 3 (secondary). However, with only 42% of responding primary schools in this year's Language Trend Survey reporting having contact with their secondary schools (Collen, 2021), it will not come as a surprise that prior learning of a language is not always taken into account when developing secondary schools' curriculum models.

According to Downes's (2019) four different interpretations of transition, it could be argued that the issue here is not the transition point itself but a

"system mismatch" between the primary and secondary school (p. 1467)**.** While pandemic-related measures may have contributed more recently to the seven-year decline of primary schools having contact with secondary schools ("lack of communication" (Downes, 2019, p. 1470), reduced levels of resources are frequently given as a reason by schools (Collen, 2021). This in turn has reduced primary/secondary transition activities, which results in what Downes (2019) terms a "system mismatch in expectations and conditions" (p. 1469). Not to be ignored when managing these border zones of learning successfully are each learner's *individual* needs, their anxieties and worries (and potentially those of their parents/carers), their differing levels of excitement and motivation, as well as their socio-economic, physical, and psychological well-being. In Downes's (2019) framework, this aligns to the category of "individual change to the foregrounded child through supports in moving from background environment A to B" (p. 1467).

2.2. Border zones of learning, (policy) system mismatch and the learner

If we were to explore each of the border zones of learning in the English education system (illustrated in Figure 1 above) in the same way that we have explored the transition from primary to secondary, some of the parameters may shift, but the complexity of anticipating issues related to Downes's (2019) four interpretations of transition will remain. To support a young person to develop coping strategies in a new environment, planning, designing, delivering, and monitoring learners' progress academically and holistically is, of course, vitally important. While a worthwhile approach, the focus of this section is on those – often external – factors which impact on the challenges organisations, their teams, learners, and their parents/carers are confronted with, and this is not always planned for. For instance, in spring 2020, many of us (learners, parents, educators, school leaders, policy makers, etc. nationally and globally) were faced with an unexpected border zone of learning, the transition from in-person to a predominately virtual delivery of education during the first lockdown. The education sector dealt with an unprecedented logistical, technical, pedagogical, health, and welfare challenge. Many in the education community and beyond

came together to support each other; subject organisations, such as the Association for Language Learning, utilised their networks and expertise to offer support for teachers and opened up their professional development webinars, e.g. the *Technology in Language Teaching* series, beyond their members (Association for Language Learning, 2020-21). Initially, some schools reported positively that some students or groups of students were excited by the new mode of learning. This initial hype soon went when first concerns were raised of learners' progress being negatively affected. Early signs of the growth in inequality led to reactive regional support initiatives and the Department for Education's *Get help with technology* initiative (DfE, 2021). Thanks to these initiatives, lack of access to IT resources has not widened the gap between children from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds and those from poorer backgrounds as severely as commonly feared (see also Andrew et al., 2020). According to a study led by the Institute of Fiscal Studies at University College London, the quality of learning space at home and learning resources provided by schools has had a far more wide-reaching impact on the inequality gap, affecting children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds negatively (Andrew et al., 2020). The deficit in learning that the two lockdowns compounded, the resulting demotivation of groups of learners when returning to in-person delivery will, without doubt, have a lasting impact on education and skills providers, as well as some of their learners, for at least the next decade. Researchers will of course continue to analyse this moving forward.

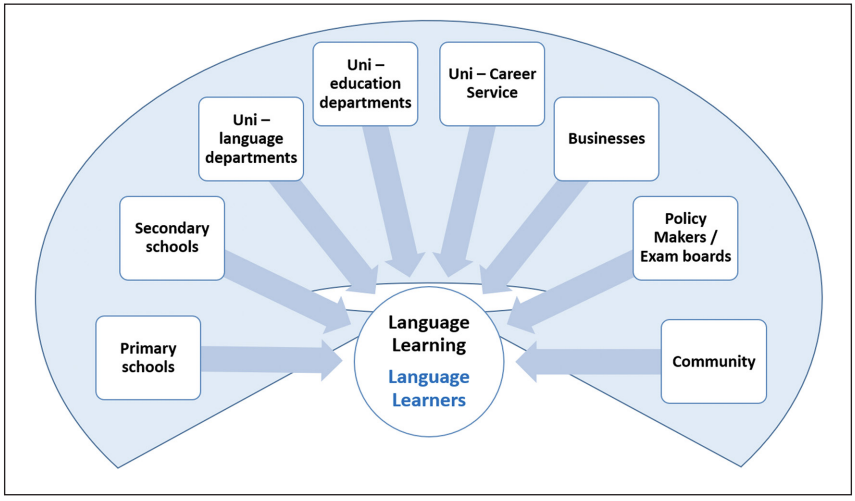
The pandemic – while immensely impactful – will hopefully be a once-in-a-life-time border zone of learning experience. However, a learner's progression can be influenced – halted or accelerated – by a change of form, teaching or friendship group, a new teacher or tutor, the experience of a school trip abroad or the year abroad for a university/college language student. While some of these are system-driven and may relate to an expectation or condition mismatch of the new or even existing environment, they all have the individual learner and the impact of these border zones of learning at their heart. There is however another phenomenon in education which is worth highlighting, mentioning, and scrutinising. Remaining with Downes's (2019) system mismatch concepts, I argue that there is a potential fifth category, namely the system mismatch

between the education provider and the policy makers, in short, a policy system mismatch. Decisions such as moving from a two-year Key Stage 3 to return to a three-year Key Stage 3 does not only impact on a school's curriculum structure and resources, but it also creates additional border zones of learning, where learners, who are midway through their learning journey, are potentially disrupted and must now follow a different path. Another example could be the one-year change to the GCSE language speaking examination, where speaking was removed from GCSE languages (French, German, Spanish) specifications and added as a separate teacher-assessed 'endorsement' resulting in a pass, merit, or distinction three tier system. Teachers and schools had not planned for these options; a pedagogical culture shift with regards to speaking was required. While some embraced this and the greater flexibility, as well as the potentially reduced administrative burden of not having to hold formal invigilated speaking (mock and real terminal) examinations, others were concerned that this would devalue speaking as a skill within the classroom, especially at the examination stage. While unavoidable, this policy system mismatch has led to further system mismatches, for instance when post-GCSE language learners enrol onto an A-level course, where the syllabus and/or teachers may have different expectations in speaking than the GCSE endorsement experience provided for. The option to choose not to study a film at A-level, put in place with the curriculum changes of 2018, is another recently-created policy system mismatch: as an A-level language learner, the student was confronted with an unexpected border zone of learning in terms of specification; as a university student enrolled on a language degree or combined honours degree with languages, the usual transition from A-level to university study might be further impacted by a system mismatch of expectations, for instance where the first year curriculum was built on the understanding that A-level language students have experience in studying a literature topic *and* a film.

A basic principle seems to be emerging: (language) educators, regardless of which phase of language teaching and learning they are involved in, must have an understanding of the wider (language) education system. This was also part of the InnoConf 2020 conference organisers' rationale, as the knowledge of current practice, priorities, challenges, and opportunities

will help language educators to adjust their education offer, their syllabi, expectations, or pedagogical approaches to facilitate a more positive 'border zone experience' for each and every learner. A keynote, a conference seminar, or an article are each starting points of gaining this knowledge and increasing understanding and awareness. Cross-phase policy engagement contributes to further enhancing one's understanding. However, true collaboration between education providers and wider stakeholders, as exemplified in Figure 2 below, will increase the positive experiences of those border zone experiences and limit the system mismatches.

Figure 2. Working collaboratively for success in language learning



However, this can only be achieved if all parties, including collaborators, policy makers, and school leaders accept that developing meaningful and successful partnerships requires resources, most importantly time, and ideally funding for some national initiatives. We would not start with a blank sheet: next to successful localised solutions, the highly praised *Routes into Languages Ambassador* scheme (Routes into Languages, 2021), through which university students gained an insight into language teaching and learning in schools, helped schools to promote languages through various projects and activity

days, and gave pupils access to university students' perspectives on languages, on studying at a British university, and on the students' year abroad/work experience. Utilising learners in making these border zone experiences more manageable is also one of many benefits of the *Foreign Language Leaders Award* (Sports Leaders, 2019). Students in those language departments in secondary schools that have adopted this scheme, plan, design, and deliver activity days for younger children, most commonly to those in feeder primary schools. It is worth noting here that such initiatives address some of the issues caused by the various system mismatches and lack of communication discussed earlier in this chapter. At the same time, students involved as language ambassadors or language leaders gain a wide range of transferable skills as well as build their own confident levels, which will stand them in good stead in their personal and professional lives.

3. Language learners' transition to graduate employees and lifelong learners

Another key border zone of learning is the transition from being a university student to becoming an employee (or in some cases an entrepreneur). It is commonly agreed that language graduates should have a positive outlook when it comes to employment, as studying languages is perceived as academically challenging, requires high levels of competence in communication and intercultural understanding, and a variety of life and transferable skills will have been developed through the year abroad. Those studying on a combined honours degree may also have acquired high levels of specific business, finance, and/or technical knowledge linked to their non-language subject choice(s). The most recent CBI (2021, p. 16) skills survey endorses this, with employers rating their skills priorities for the coming years (in percentages) as follows: industry, practical, technical knowledge (specific to a business/sector) 60%; leadership and management 58%; advanced digital skills 44%; critical thinking and problem solving skills 36%; communication/customer skills 32%; teamwork 20%; planning and organisational skills 19%; basic digital skills 12%; and basic literacy/numeracy skills 6%. These will not come as a surprise.

4. A call for action

A 'traditional' language course, whether focused on linguistics, culture, literature/literary criticism, or translation will touch upon many of the required skills. For some this may be enough. However, whether one agrees with it or not, graduate employment is one of the accountability measures of 21st century university education. Therefore, the following question emerges for university language departments: how can we further enhance our educational offer to increase our students' and future graduates' employability prospects? This question is even more pressing as 'a job for life' is a phenomenon from the past. Current and future graduates will have to embrace the fact that their journey as a learner is not coming to an end with their graduation, when in fact this is the contrary and is the transition to the exciting next step of their learning journey, as a professional and lifelong learner. If we accept that this question is legitimate, then the following may be worth considering: in many language departments, curricula reviews are taking place with decolonisation in mind: would this be also an opportunity to review to what extent the curriculum offer considers or reflects the global megatrends of climate change, technological advancement, accelerating urbanisation, global shifts in economic power, demography and social change (PWC, 2021), or the United Nations Global Goals for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2020)? Is there also a wider institutional or sector-wide call for collaborations between universities that could lead to new innovative cross-disciplinary offers involving future employers on a consistent basis rather than just in small- scale pilot projects (which are nevertheless key for testing new approaches)? To what extent could we challenge ourselves pedagogically by ensuring every graduate has had the opportunity to develop a wider range of transferable skills as part of their university undergraduate education, including experiences in the workplace and/or as a volunteer?

Many of these questions are partially explored and addressed by the various stakeholders – our real challenge is to join efforts to ensure that the transition from graduate to employment does not continue to be a system mismatch but a positive transition towards a professional learning experience.

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Research-publishing.net

Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education
Edited by Cathy Hampton and Sandra Salin

Publication date: 2022/05/30

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover layout by © 2022 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-98-6 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2022.