



The state of language learning in primary and secondary schools in England

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Language teaching in primary schools

4.8 | Key points

- Not surprisingly, the introduction of compulsory language teaching in Key Stage 2 has had an immediate effect by pushing the percentage of primary schools teaching a language to 99 per cent, with some 12 per cent of schools reporting that they started language teaching at the beginning of the 2014/15 academic year. Many schools have formalised or strengthened existing provision in response to the new statutory requirements.
- Many primary schools (40 per cent) are confident that they already meet the requirements of the new national curriculum in full. Where schools are introducing changes to meet the new requirements, the focus is on providing additional resourcing for language teaching, reorganising the way in which languages are taught and making more time available for language teaching.
- Schools in the lowest quintile of educational achievement, and those with the highest proportions of children eligible for free school meals, are the most likely to be in the early stages of developing language teaching and the least likely to have mechanisms in place for monitoring and assessing language learning.
- Schools with high proportions of pupils with English as an Additional Language are less likely to see this fact as a challenge in relation to the teaching of new languages than are those with more monolingual pupil populations.
- Some 49 per cent of primary schools are also introducing pupils in Key Stage 1 to a language even though this is not a statutory requirement
- Finding sufficient curriculum time for languages, boosting staff confidence to teach languages and increasing staff competence are the greatest challenges that schools are facing in meeting the requirements of the national curriculum.
- In the majority of primary schools (57 per cent), language teaching is mainly carried out by the class teacher, although there is evidence of the involvement of a wide range of other people including parents, specialist teachers, governors and language assistants. While 42 per cent of schools have teachers who are either native speakers of the language being taught or have specialist qualifications in the language, as many as 31 per cent do not have any staff with more than a GCSE in a language.
- Although over half of responding schools report that they participate in networking/CPD events with other primary schools, the proportion of schools taking part in training organised by local authorities has declined from 41 per cent in 2013/14 to 31 per cent in 2014/15 and the number of primary schools receiving subject-specific support and training from local secondary schools has also dropped, from 34 per cent to 18 per cent.

Transition from primary to secondary

5.5 | Key points

- Although some schools are developing effective collaboration and joint planning across Key Stages 2 and 3, as many as 44 per cent of primary schools in England still have no contact with the secondary schools to which their pupils move at the end of Year 6.
- Secondary schools cite large numbers of primary feeders, teacher capacity/time and lack of interest on the part of primary schools as the main reasons why they are unable to establish sustainable collaboration with their primary feeders to ease pupil transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3.
- Secondary teachers are concerned about the wide variations in quality of provision of language teaching at Key Stage 2 and sceptical of primary schools' ability to deliver what they regard as a worthwhile level of language knowledge that pupils can apply to their studies in secondary school.
- Independent schools are more likely than state schools to be able to offer pupils the opportunity to continue learning the language they learned at Key Stage 2.
- Many secondary schools organise/host events such as festivals/plays and competitions which motivate young language learners from Key Stage 2, and older pupils in Key Stage 3 are often involved in extra-curricular clubs and conversation support for younger pupils. However, financial constraints and other priorities within schools have led to the cessation of various types of collaboration between primary and secondary schools.
- There is no evidence that levels of collaboration between primary and secondary schools have improved since 2013 and, as shown in the previous chapter, the proportion of primary schools receiving languages-related support from secondary schools has declined from 34 to 18 per cent.
- The need to promote effective transition in languages between Key Stages 2 and 3 is not yet high on the agendas of either primary or secondary schools.

Take-up and participation in secondary schools

6.5 | Key points

- There is a growing trend in both the state and independent sectors, but particularly in state secondary schools, to exclude or excuse pupils from the study of a language for a variety of reasons. In eight per cent of state schools, some groups of pupils do not study a language at Key Stage 3 and in 28 per cent of state schools not all pupils in Key Stage 4 who wish to study a language are able to do so.
- The practice of disapplication of pupils at Key Stage 3, and of restricting access to language study at Key Stage 4, is associated with socio-economic disadvantage. In the most economically-deprived schools, the proportion excluding groups of pupils from language study at Key Stage 3 has risen to 17 per cent and those excluding pupils from language study at Key Stage 4 has risen to 44 per cent.
- It is increasingly common practice, now affecting 29 per cent of state schools, to reduce the number of hours in the timetable available for the study of a language at Key Stage 3.
- The independent sector (86 per cent) is still much more likely to make languages compulsory for all or some pupils throughout Key Stages 3 and 4 than is the state sector (44 per cent).
- The number of English schools reporting an increase in the numbers opting to study a language to GCSE is slowing down compared to the percentages noted in the Language Trends surveys of 2012 and 2013 – growth which was attributed to the impact of the English Baccalaureate.
- An agglomeration of factors is threatening the future of language study at A level. These include student perceptions of the value of languages in relation to their difficulty, the impact of exams and arrangements for languages lower down the school, as well as budgetary constraints.
- Some 16 per cent of schools with post-16 provision do not teach languages at this level.

Teaching and learning in secondary schools

7.6 | Key points

- Two thirds of teachers see the difficulty of attracting pupils to study a language post-16 as challenging. This emerges as the most widespread challenge perceived by teachers across the country, more than many other issues including take-up for GCSE.
- Languages are seen as more difficult than other subjects, less reliable in terms of delivering the top grades and not important in the eyes of many of those who influence young people in their choice of subjects.
- Unsuitable or unreliable forms of accreditation and the priorities of English and mathematics, together with the perceived careers value of sciences, are creating a difficult climate for languages in schools.
- Schools with high take-up for languages where pupils of a range of abilities take the subject to GCSE, appear to be underperforming in government accountability measures which are based on achievement not participation. This is leading to cuts in language provision. Language provision in former specialist language colleges is particularly vulnerable to this effect.
- Opportunities for lower-ability pupils to study languages have been curtailed as a result of the decline of alternative accreditation such as NVQs, Asset Languages etc., following the government's decision for these and other similar qualifications not to count towards schools' performance tables. Lower-ability pupils may be discouraged from taking a language to GCSE in order to maintain a school's rating in performance tables.
- Many teachers are finding it difficult to access CPD due to heavy workloads and schools' budgetary constraints. Examination board led training receives mixed responses from teachers while technologically supported CPD and training delivered by specialist organisations and universities is praised.

Trends in relation to specific languages taught in English schools

8.5 | Key points

- Chinese and Spanish are the only languages which show an increase in the number of pupils studying them or schools offering them.
- Chinese is more usually offered as an extra-curricular subject and for only a short amount of time each week.
- German continues to decline in both the state and independent sectors.
- An increasing number of schools report that they are offering Latin in addition to a modern language.
- Opportunities to learn more than one language are in decline in the state sector. It is far more common for the independent sector to offer pupils the opportunity to study two languages than it is in the state sector. More than 90 per cent of independent schools offer all pupils the opportunity to learn more than one language at Key Stage 3, whereas only 35 per cent of state schools do so.
- In the independent sector there are significant declines in the numbers of pupils learning French and German.
- Whereas some lesser-taught languages are being taught in an increasing number of schools as extra-curricular subjects, or offered as examination subjects to pupils who already speak them, there has been little progress in embedding them as mainstream curriculum options.

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Conclusions

For the first time since 2004, the academic year 2014/15 sees the compulsory teaching of languages across two consecutive key stages in English schools. Against this background, this year's Language Trends survey has been able to gather rich quantitative and qualitative evidence of the impact that the introduction of languages at Key Stage 2 has had, as well as exploring further some of the major issues which have emerged in Language Trends surveys from previous years. These include transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, the take-up of languages at Key Stage 4 and the state of languages at Key Stage 5. The research has sought both facts and views from teachers in both primary and secondary phases and both the state and independent school sectors.

It is clear that issues occurring at one particular key stage are rarely isolated and frequently have a knock-on effect on another key stage or across the whole school system. The overarching conclusions to this year's Languages Trends research centre around four major themes. Each of these is of considerable significance and merits serious consideration by stakeholders in education, policy, business and the media. We hope that the presentation of the key findings in this way will facilitate productive discussion and debate which will, in turn, benefit both young people in education across the country as well as those professionals whose working lives are dedicated to developing the knowledge and skills of children and young people.

1. Statutory status for languages at Key Stage 2 has had an immediate positive effect on language provision in primary schools.

Following the introduction of compulsory language teaching for all pupils at Key Stage 2 at the beginning of the 2014/15 academic year, as many as 99 per cent of primary schools now report that they are teaching a language. This is a further increase on the 95 and 97 per cent recorded by the Language Trends research in 2013 and 2012 respectively and shows the immediate effect that legislation can have on schools.

Many schools acknowledge that their provision of language teaching at Key Stage 2 has been 'informal' and 'patchy' to date and qualitative evidence provided by respondents to this year's survey shows that schools are working hard to increase resources and improve systems to ensure that the language teaching offer to pupils improves in line with the requirements of the new national curriculum. However, many differences remain in key aspects such as the amount of curriculum time dedicated each week to the learning of a language, the level of linguistic competence of class teachers, who are still the majority source of language teaching for Key Stage 2 pupils, and the degree to which primary teachers are able to achieve a consistency of provision and achievement in pupil learning to meet the needs of Key Stage 3 teachers receiving pupils into Year 7. Primary teachers report that their biggest challenges are finding sufficient curriculum time for languages and boosting staff confidence and linguistic proficiency to teach reading, writing and grammatical understanding. Many would welcome guidance and support with these challenges but this year's survey provides little evidence of languages-specific CPD for primary teachers.

Against the backdrop of these challenges, as many as 44 per cent of primary schools report that they have no contact with local secondary schools on issues relating to transition from Key Stage 2 to 3. This is broadly similar to the percentage noted in the 2013/14 Languages Trends report when the survey focused in some detail on what was happening in secondary and primary schools to support effective Key Stage 2–3 transition and revealed the high degree of insularity in both

education phases. The introduction of compulsory languages at Key Stage 2 in September 2014 has, as yet, produced no evidence of increased collaboration around transition – rather the reverse – and it is probably still too early to expect major changes, particularly given the impediments cited by secondary schools. From the schools' perspective, the issue of transition is not yet high on the agenda, yet if the new national curriculum is to deliver the raised standards of linguistic competence envisaged in the new GCSE and A levels, the development of the quality and consistency of language teaching in Key Stage 2 needs to go hand in hand with efforts in secondary schools to capture the benefits and build on them, rather than assuming that all pupils will begin from a standing start in Year 7.

For their part, secondary schools acknowledge the desirability of collaboration but cite a number of impediments to the development of sustained collaboration with primary schools which are beyond their control. These include i) the large numbers of feeder primary schools which are often geographically dispersed; ii) lack of interest from primary schools who are unresponsive to approaches; and iii) budgetary constraints/capacity issues. Qualitative evidence from this year's survey indicates that secondary schools are now less able to provide support to primary colleagues than was the case in the past. A particular case in point is the impact of the cessation of the highly valued cross-phase collaboration which has resulted from the withdrawal of funding for specialist languages colleges which, from 1995 onwards, had been charged with promoting languages within their local communities.

While there are some good examples in the qualitative data from this year's survey of effective cross-phase working and imaginative opportunities to bring pupils from both key stages together, much remains to be done to facilitate teachers in both education phases in developing collaboration to a level at which pupils will begin to see real lasting benefits. Primary schools would clearly benefit from secondary teachers' subject expertise and secondary teachers would benefit from a better understanding of how language learning fits with primary pedagogy and the primary curriculum.

2. There is a growing tendency for schools to exclude some pupils from language learning at Key Stages 3 and 4, with access to language learning often being linked to social advantage.

The increasing tendency to excuse, exclude or disapply pupils from languages tuition at various stages suggests that schools are starting to regard languages as expendable for some pupils. This is perhaps one of the most serious findings from the 2014/15 survey. In 2014/15 some pupils or groups of pupils at Key Stage 3 do not study a language in some eight per cent of schools in the state sector and the qualitative evidence provided by respondents to this year's survey shows that exclusion can affect as much as 30 per cent of the cohort. At Key Stage 4, some 28 per cent of state schools do not make the study of a language available to all pupils. In some cases the fact that a pupil was taken out of language classes at Key Stage 3 then prevents them from taking up a language at Key Stage 4, and in other cases selection of certain pathways automatically excludes the study of a language. There is also evidence of schools actively dissuading those pupils from studying a language who they deem unlikely to achieve a good pass at GCSE.

The practice of disapplication of pupils at Key Stage 3, and of restricting access to language study at Key Stage 4, is associated with socio-economic disadvantage and creating a widening gap in opportunities to learn to speak another language. In schools located in the most socio-economically deprived areas of the country, the proportion excluding groups of pupils from language study at Key Stage 3 rises to 17 per cent and those excluding pupils from language study at Key Stage 4 rises

to 44 per cent. In contrast, in the independent sector, languages are compulsory for all in the vast majority of schools throughout Key Stages 3 and 4, and there are far more opportunities for fee-paying pupils to learn a second modern or ancient language.

Whether schools practise the exclusion of individual pupils or groups of pupils at Key Stage 3, the reduction of time in the curriculum for languages or the reduction of Key Stage 3 to just two academic years, this has repercussions into Key Stage 4 and beyond. Pupils deprived early in their secondary education of the chance to progress with their language learning, or to raise their levels of attainment and their confidence as language learners are unlikely to be able to catch up later. They are also denied an opportunity to reinforce their literacy through learning another language as well as to develop their view of the world at a key point in their intellectual development. They are also excluded from the full range of subject choices at Key Stage 4 and for GCSE and beyond.

Financial pressures on schools are further reducing opportunities to study a language. The very small numbers of pupils opting to study languages at A level presents an additional challenge as a result of the pressure on schools to only run those A level courses which attract sufficient numbers (usually groups of at least eight to ten students) to make the course financially viable. This year's Language Trends report shows that teachers regard the take-up of languages post-16 as one of the most challenging issues they face and that A level language courses are under significant threat because of low numbers.

The issue of exclusion and uneven provision is closely connected to another key theme emerging from this year's Language Trends survey, namely the adverse effect of school performance measures and assessment systems.

3. External assessment systems and school performance measures are having a negative impact on the teaching of languages in secondary schools.

With the increased pressure on schools to improve their performance and levels of achievement, as well as the intense scrutiny of pupil performance in English and mathematics, it is perhaps inevitable that school leaders seek to adopt measures which will not only help ensure the best performance outcomes from pupils entering public examinations but also demonstrate via performance tables that the school's standard of teaching and learning is high. However, this year's Language Trends survey shows how the drive for high pupil achievement data and the prioritisation of other subjects is having an adverse effect on the learning of languages in English schools.

It is the pressure to make more time available for those subjects which are prioritised in accountability measures such as mathematics and English which is behind the reduction in the number of hours in the timetable available for the study of a language at Key Stage 3. Language teachers in secondary schools see competition from other subjects as one of the major issues affecting their subject and this is closely linked to the way that languages are assessed and graded in relation to other subjects and the knock-on effects on pupil attainment and school performance.

This year's Language Trends research provides evidence via the survey and the case studies that schools with high levels of take-up for languages, where pupils of a range of abilities take the subject to GCSE, are unfairly represented as underperforming in government accountability measures since these are based on achievement rather than participation. As a result, school leaders are having to make difficult choices which, in many cases, are leading to cuts in language provision in order to improve schools' performance against national accountability measures. Language provision in

former specialist language colleges is particularly vulnerable to this effect. Decisions about whether languages should be compulsory for all or some pupils in Key Stage 4, or whether language study is even 'appropriate' for certain groups of pupils, are being taken not on educational grounds or with regard to the interests and potential of the pupils concerned, but on the need of schools to do well against accountability measures and in national performance tables. However, as one teacher points out, the value pupils derive from learning a language is not dependent on their academic ability. Language departments are being put under pressure by the use of data that the vast majority believe is flawed (see the Ipsos/MORI finding that only 18 per cent of language teachers believe that GCSE is a fair measure of linguistic competence) and does not compare like with like. Average grades are skewed not only by schools' increasing propensity to enter only high-achieving pupils for languages GCSEs, but by candidates who are 'native' or 'background' speakers. This system is working to the detriment of pupils' education and undermines the work of teachers dedicated to giving a broad spectrum of learners an opportunity to develop their language skills and an understanding of the world beyond the 'Anglosphere'.

The decline of alternative accreditation such as NVQs, Asset Languages and others, following the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government's decision for these and other similar qualifications not to count towards schools' performance, has made it much more difficult for language departments to offer language courses suitable for lower-ability pupils.

It is not, however, only lower-ability pupils whose opportunities and choices are restricted by unsuitable forms of accreditation or lack of access to sufficient curriculum time. Respondents to this year's Language Trends survey also provide plenty of evidence that higher- and middle-ability students are being deterred from taking languages, both at GCSE as well as A level, because of the fact that languages are regarded as more difficult subjects and because of the uncertainty of getting the top grades needed for study at the next level. Language teaching in the independent sector is suffering particularly from this effect.

4. Wider societal attitudes are adversely affecting an understanding of the value of languages and discouraging pupils from seeing languages as a serious subject for study.

There is one further issue which is contributing to the difficult climate for languages in schools which plays a significant role in deterring students who are capable of becoming good linguists from studying a language. That is the widely held belief that languages are not important in comparison with mathematics and science subjects. The view that other subjects are more useful in careers, that everyone speaks English and that it is easier to achieve examination success in other school subjects is commonplace. In this year's Language Trends survey as many as two thirds of teachers from across both the independent and state sectors report finding it challenging to attract pupils to study a language post-16. A lack of awareness of the value of languages for study, work and leisure and a view that languages are both difficult and of lesser importance is attributed to school leaders, parents, employers, school-based pastoral staff and careers advisers, politicians and the media. Teachers report that isolationist positions reported in the media in relation to cooperation in Europe and beyond are affecting the attitudes of some groups of students as regards language learning. Clearer messages about the importance of languages by those with the power to influence the thinking of young people and to guide them towards making decisions which will maximise their future study and career opportunities would do much to protect and nurture the valuable place of languages alongside the many other subjects which are important for study.



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