

Language trends 2019

Introduction and background

Language Trends is an annual survey of primary and secondary schools in England which gathers information about current trends in language teaching and learning. It explores the impact of policy measures in relation to languages and analyses strengths and weaknesses. It draws on quantitative evidence gathered from surveys and from the views of teachers.

This year, the survey was carried out between January and March 2019. It gathered evidence from 776 primary schools and 845 secondary schools (715 state-funded and 130 independent). This year's survey provides an important opportunity for respondents to reflect on the impact of the new GCSE and A level examinations, designed to be more rigorous and promote higher standards of learning, which were taken by students for the first time in summer 2018.

Key findings

Policy developments

- Declining language entries at GCSE and A level have led to mounting concern about the UK's 'language deficit'. A group of organisations including the British Council has engaged with the British Academy's call for a national strategy to enhance engagement with the rest of the world; the Academy has called monolingualism 'the illiteracy of the 21st century'.
- At the primary phase, a White Paper published by specialist researchers set out key priorities to address in order to meet the expectations of recent national curriculum reforms. These include planning for progression, defining expected outcomes, developing pedagogy and local agreements in support of smooth transition to Key Stage 3, and strengthening monitoring and assessment arrangements.

Languages in primary schools and transition

- Almost all primary schools responding to the survey were teaching a language in Key Stage 2 curriculum time, and many had considerable experience of doing so. Seventy-five per cent started teaching a language more than 5 years ago.
- French is taught in 75 per cent of schools, and Spanish in 29 per cent. Spanish has increased markedly since 2012 and French has remained stable. Other languages which are taught in a small number of primary schools are: German: (5%), Chinese: (3%), and Latin (2%).
- Eighty-one per cent of schools report that they allocate a set time per week for language learning, generally between 30 and 60 minutes. However, a third of schools with a set time per week say that pupils often do not receive the time allotted.
- Of schools which are in the highest quintile for free school meals (FSM), 10.6 per cent allocate '30 minutes or less' or 'no time' to languages. This compares to just 3 per cent of schools in the lowest quintile for FSM. Similarly, 11.9 per cent of schools in urban areas offer '30 minutes or less' or 'no time', compared with just 3.9 per cent of schools in rural areas.
- Eighty per cent of schools say they plan for 'substantial progress in one language over the 4 years of Key Stage 2', though many admit that the word 'substantial' is open to interpretation.
- Just 15 per cent of schools formally assess each child on their progress in language learning, although 48 per cent do so informally. Schools with lower levels of Pupil Premium funding and with higher levels of pupil attainment are more likely to assess pupils' progress in languages.
- Twenty-eight per cent of responding schools which had been inspected in the previous 12 months said that language provision was included in the inspection or the report.
- As in 2018, 46 per cent of primary schools employ language specialists; one third rely entirely on specialists whereas in 13 per cent of schools, specialists work with class teachers. Schools with lower levels of FSM, lower levels of Pupil Premium, and higher Key Stage 2 attainment are statistically more likely to make use of specialist language teachers (whether internal or external to the school).
- Participation in CPD for languages is low. Only one in 5 schools where classroom teachers are responsible for language teaching have provided these teachers with language specific CPD in the past year
- Just under 45 per cent of primary schools report having contacts with the language department of at least one of their local secondary schools, and 53 per cent of secondaries say they have contacts with at least one of their feeder primaries.
- Respondents mentioned a number of transition programmes which had been effective. For example, one primary school follows a programme suggested by the local secondary school; it includes everything which the secondary school would like covered before the children transition.

- There has been a clear decline in collaboration. The proportion of secondary schools which liaise with primary schools has dropped from 77 per cent to 53 per cent since 2014, while only 45 per cent of primary schools now have contacts with their local secondary schools, compared to 54 per cent in 2014. Respondents attribute this decline to lack of staff and lack of funding.
- The expected progress in outcomes since languages became compulsory in Key Stage 2 does not appear to have materialised. Only 13 per cent of secondary schools regard their current year 7 cohort as having received a better preparation for language learning in Key Stage 2 than previous cohorts.

Languages at secondary

- In spite of a small decrease, French remains the most commonly taught language. There is a more marked shrinkage for German with 40 per cent of state schools offering the language in Key Stage 3 (down from 48% in 2015). There has been a sharp decrease in the number of independent schools offering German at Key Stage 4 (66% compared to 79% in 2017).
- The majority of state and independent schools (86% and 83% respectively) enable pupils who are learning other languages or speaking other languages in their home to take public exams in these subjects.
- Thirty-three per cent of state secondary schools have groups of Year 9 pupils, who, because of a reduced 2-year Key Stage 3, no longer study languages. However, there has been no increase in this practice which is discouraged in the new Ofsted inspection framework. The practice does not exist in the independent sector.
- Schools where some groups do not study a language in Year 9 are significantly more likely to have a higher proportion of students eligible for FSM, a higher allocation of Pupil Premium funding and lower Attainment 8 results. They are also more likely to be Sponsor Led Academies and have a lower proportion of students identified as having EAL. They are slightly more likely to be in the North.
- In general, 2-3 hours a week are allocated for languages in Key Stage 3. However, in schools with higher numbers of FSM eligible pupils, higher levels of Pupil Premium funding and lower Attainment 8 results, the time allocated tends to be lower. However, these schools often allocate additional time for languages in Key Stage 4 so that pupils can catch up. The issue is that the reduced curriculum time in Key Stage 3 may discourage some pupils for opting for languages at GCSE in the first place, since they do not feel that they have made sufficient progress.

Take-up at Key Stage 4

- As in previous years, the survey has shown considerable variation between state schools in terms of the proportions of pupils taking a language in Key Stage 4. More than a quarter report take-up of 75 per cent or more, but 21 per cent report take-up of less than a quarter of the cohort.
- Schools with less than 25 per cent of the cohort taking a language are statistically more likely to have high levels of FSM, high levels of Pupil Premium, low Attainment 8 scores, and are more likely to be Sponsor Led Academies and Foundation schools. They are also more likely to be in rural or coastal areas. By contrast, 75 per cent of schools in London have a take-up of 75 per cent or more.
- Changes in take-up over the last three years have disproportionately favoured high prior attainment

pupils and disfavoured lower prior attainment pupils, in both independent and state schools. Ninety-five per cent of state schools say that more high prior attainment pupils are now taking a language than in recent years, and 84 per cent of state schools (70% of independent schools) say that low prior attainment pupils are less likely to be doing so.

Staffing

- Fifteen per cent of state schools and 10 per cent of independent schools report increases in staffing; 24 per cent of state schools and 20 per cent of independent schools report decreases.
- Thirty-four per cent of state schools and 24 per cent of independent schools report difficulties recruiting languages staff. The East of England is the region with the most severe recruitment challenge; 47 per cent of schools in this area reported difficulties with recruitment.
- Sixty-seven per cent of state schools and 79 per cent of independent schools have one or more staff who are EU27 citizens. Some schools reported having very high proportions – ‘5 out of 6’, ‘11 out of 13’, ‘all 6 of us’, etc.

Post-16

- Thirty-nine per cent of responding state schools and 42 per cent of responding independent schools report having fewer pupils taking a language than in previous years. A number of reasons for the decrease were cited, including: the perceived difficulty of the subject; a preference for science subjects; and an unwillingness on the part of senior leadership to run classes with small numbers.
- The move to 3 A levels, is seen as a key factor leading to declines in Post-16. Take-up of AS levels is now low, with 30 per cent of independent schools and 27 per cent of state schools offering them.

Response to new GCSEs and A levels

- There is no specific question in the survey about exams and assessment. However, in a question about challenges schools face in providing high quality language learning, the ‘nature and content of external exams’ emerged as the most widespread concern in both sectors – cited by 71 per cent of state school respondents and 64 per cent of independent schools.
- ‘The way external exams are marked and graded’ was cited as the second highest concern by independent schools (62%) and also by 59 per cent of state school respondents.
- Many respondents highlighted the difficulty of achieving a high grade in languages compared to other subjects. One respondent commented that ‘many able linguists feel their chances of reaching the top grades are far greater elsewhere in the curriculum’.

International activity

- Almost all types of international activity are more prevalent in the independent sector. Gaps are particularly large with pupil exchanges (25% of state schools vs 48% of independent schools) and hosting language assistants (23% vs 44%).
- A large minority of schools in both sectors (45% of state schools, 41% of independent schools) say that the implications of Brexit are a major challenge. There are, for example, concerns about declining attitudes to language and increased recruitment difficulties.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/language-trends-2019>