



Language Trends 2013/14

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

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Executive summary

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About the authors



Kathryn Board OBE

Kathryn Board was Chief Executive of CILT, The National Centre for Languages from 2008 and in that role worked with specialists and a wide range of educational institutions to provide advice on educational policy related to the teaching of languages as well as on initiatives aimed at increasing language learning across the UK. Before joining CILT, she spent 30 years working for the British Council in a number of international and management roles. She also led for CfBT Education Trust on the development of a Languages strategy and the delivery of a number of national projects to support language teaching in English schools. Now partially retired, she continues to work on research projects where she can bring in her expertise. Kathryn speaks Spanish, German and Dutch and is currently working hard on improving her Arabic.



Teresa Tinsley

Teresa Tinsley established and developed the Language Trends series of surveys which have charted the health of languages in various sectors of education since 2002. As well as producing and analysing information on the situation of languages in English secondary schools, the surveys have also covered provision for community languages across the UK, and language learning in Further and Adult Education.

Formerly Director of Communications at CILT, the National Centre for Languages, Teresa founded Alcantara Communications in 2011 and since then has undertaken policy-focused research on languages for the British Academy and the British Council, as well as CfBT Education Trust. Her work for CfBT includes an international review of primary languages, *Lessons from abroad*, as well as the 2011 and 2012 Language Trends reports.

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Executive summary

Introduction

The Language Trends survey 2013/4 is the 12th in a series of annual research exercises charting the health of language teaching and learning in English schools. The findings are based on an online survey completed by teachers in a large sample of secondary schools across the country from both the state and independent sectors. In 2012, and again in 2013 following the announcement that language teaching at Key Stage 2 would become statutory for all pupils in September 2014, a national sample of primary schools has been included in the survey to enable the impact of the new policy on teachers and pupils to be tracked in detail. This report focuses on particular issues of concern arising from the current policy context.

This year's research exercise has been carried out under the joint management of CfBT Education Trust and the British Council.

Key survey findings

Languages in primary schools

As many as 95 per cent of the primary schools that responded to this survey are already teaching a language and 42 per cent say they already meet the requirements of the new National Curriculum which will come into force in September 2014. The overwhelming majority (85 per cent) welcome the forthcoming statutory status for language teaching. However, in many cases the amount of time allocated each week for language learning and the linguistic competency levels of classroom teachers are unlikely to be sufficient to meet the expectations set out in the new programmes of study. Three quarters of respondents believe that the teaching of reading, writing and grammatical understanding, which are requirements of the new curriculum, will be challenging.

A total of 30 per cent of responding primary schools have a member of staff with a degree in the language they are teaching. However, 24 per cent report that GCSE is the highest level of linguistic competence held by any member of their staff.

Confidence levels among classroom teachers at Key Stage 2 are not increasing, with 29 per cent (up from 27 per cent in 2012) of respondents reporting that staff teaching languages in Years 5 and 6 in their school are not confident. Schools are also aware of the need for further training to boost staff competence and confidence and also highlight the need for support and guidance, particularly in developing effective systems of monitoring and assessing learning. This year's survey also shows that 33 per cent of responding schools (the same proportion as in the 2012 survey) do not have systems in place to monitor or assess pupil progress in the foreign language.

In spite of the acknowledged need for training and support, this year's research suggests a low level of engagement with subject-specific continuing professional development (CPD) to enable teachers to improve their subject knowledge to teach languages to Key Stage 2 pupils. Much support that was previously available through local authorities or secondary school partnerships no longer exists.

As many as 50 per cent of schools are concerned about the pressures on the curriculum and about finding sufficient curriculum time to be able to integrate languages properly in order that the expectations of the new National Curriculum can be met.

Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3

Nearly half (46 per cent) of primary schools have no contact at all with language specialists in their local secondary schools. Indeed, there is evidence of a severe lack of cohesion right across the system between primary and secondary schools, with only 11 per cent of state secondary schools reporting that they receive or request data on pupil achievements in Key Stage 2. Less than one third (27 per cent) of state secondary schools can ensure that pupils coming into Year 7 are able to continue with the same language they learned in primary school. In the independent sector the percentage is higher, at 48 per cent. The number of state secondary schools who say they are receiving pupils with experience of language learning in Key Stage 2 has gone down to 72 per cent in 2013 from 84 per cent in 2012. In many cases where there is evidence of prior learning, secondary schools regard it as being of poor or variable quality and insufficient on which to build.

While 18 per cent of state secondary schools report that they have contacts with all their feeder primary schools, the majority say that they are unable to establish effective contacts with the very large number of feeder primary schools. This is due to teachers' workloads, financial constraints and geographical distance. With the statutory teaching of languages at Key Stage 2 due to commence in September 2014, it is a concern that the level of collaboration between schools appears to be declining rather than gathering pace.

Languages in secondary schools

This year's survey shows that 27 per cent of state schools carry out some form of disapplication of pupils from languages in Key Stage 3. This happens where schools take a pupil out of a particular subject, often in order to give additional help in areas such as literacy or numeracy. This means that despite languages being a statutory requirement for all, many lower-ability pupils do not learn a foreign language at all. A small but growing proportion of schools (of just over seven per cent) do not teach a foreign language to all pupils throughout Key Stage 3. These practices are rarely seen in the independent sector.

Pressures of time and funding are adversely affecting teachers' access to CPD, with the most widespread form of CPD being that provided by examination boards. Teachers are increasingly turning to online webinars and social media to access professional development.

There has been rapid growth in the adoption of the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) as an alternative to language GCSEs in the independent sector. This reflects dissatisfaction with the GCSE examination previously noted in both the independent and the state sectors. The use of alternative accreditation in the state sector is declining with the withdrawal of Asset Languages examinations and changes to the range of qualifications which are included in school performance tables.

More than three quarters of state schools say that implementing the new National Curriculum will be challenging, particularly providing continuity of learning from Key Stage 2 and enabling pupils to reach the required standard. The majority of teachers in both the state and independent sectors (83 per cent and 86 per cent respectively) are not confident that the changes being introduced by the government will have a positive impact on the teaching of languages in their school.

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and its impact on Key Stage 4

The EBacc continues to have a positive effect on the take-up of languages in Key Stage 4 and the number of schools with more than 50 per cent of their pupils taking a language has continued to rise. Some 50 per cent of state schools report an increase over the past three years in the numbers of pupils taking at least one language at Key Stage 4, and in 33 per cent of schools this increase is by ten per cent or more. However, in about one in five schools, take-up for languages remains persistently low (below 25 per cent) with no indication of an increase. 31 per cent of schools have used the EBacc as an opportunity to encourage students to take a qualification in their home language.

Although higher levels of take-up of languages are still associated with more advantaged schools and those with higher educational achievement overall, the EBacc has improved the take-up of languages at Key Stage 4 in schools across the socio-economic spectrum. With the exception of schools in the very lowest quintile for educational performance, pupil numbers for languages in Key Stage 4 have increased in schools across the performance range – and especially in schools in the second lowest quintile in terms of educational performance.

The increase in numbers has largely been the result of persuasion and encouragement; where compulsion is used, it is often only for certain groups of pupils. This year the proportion of state schools in which the study of a language is compulsory at Key Stage 4 has reached its lowest ever level at 16 per cent (down from 22 per cent in 2012). The proportion in the independent sector also continues to decline (69 per cent, down from 77 per cent in 2012). Some 30 per cent of state schools do not make provision for all pupils to take a language at Key Stage 4 even though it is an entitlement subject and schools are required to make courses available to all pupils who wish to study them.

There is no evidence yet of any widespread positive impact of the EBacc on take-up for languages post-16.

Languages at post-16

The number of students choosing to study a language at A level in the independent sector is declining at an alarmingly fast rate, with 43 per cent of independent schools reporting declines compared with 35 per cent in 2012 and 30 per cent in 2011. This is in reaction to what is perceived as harsh and unpredictable grading by exam boards and the need of students to be more certain of achieving the highest grades to secure university places. This must be a major concern to universities since the independent sector has traditionally been a reliable source of linguists for study at higher education level. While numbers are more stable in the state sector, there is evidence that where numbers of students wishing to study a language at A level are very low, schools say that they are not able to offer courses because they are not financially viable.

Schools also report that continuation rates from AS to A2 – already lower for languages than for many subjects – are getting worse due to the significant increase in the level of linguistic complexity between GCSE and AS level and the difficulty of predicting grades at A2. Respondents to this survey do not believe that the move to a terminal exam at A2 will improve either predictability or take-up and only five per cent of state schools (six per cent of independent schools) believe that the reforms to A level will improve take-up following GCSE.

This survey shows that few students choose to combine languages with science, technology or maths (STEM) subjects at A level, particularly in the independent sector. Languages are not seen as valuable in the same way as STEM subjects are either for future employment or university entry.

Language choice

Three quarters of primary schools teach French to their pupils while a fifth offer Spanish. The number of primary schools offering other languages is very small.

In secondary schools French, Spanish and German are easily the most widely taught languages. Arabic, Italian, Japanese, Chinese and Russian are offered much less frequently and often only as extra-curricular subjects. The range of languages offered is much richer in the independent sector.

Spanish continues to grow in popularity, with 37 per cent of state secondary schools and 48 per cent of independent schools having seen pupil numbers for Spanish rise in recent years. The recent increase in pupil numbers for GCSE in the state sector means that more state schools are now reporting increases than declines in numbers for French (32 per cent report increases and 22 per cent report declines). German has fared less well, with 17 per cent of state schools reporting increases in numbers and 18 per cent reporting declines. However, in the independent sector one third of schools report declines both for French and German.

While opportunities to learn a second foreign language are quite widespread, this is more often the case in the independent sector than it is in state schools. Approximately 33 per cent of state secondary schools and 90 per cent of independent schools offer all pupils the opportunity to learn more than one foreign language in Key Stage 3. In most cases, the second foreign language is learned concurrently alongside the first.

There are no strong indications that lesser taught languages are gaining ground in the school system. The importance of many of these languages was highlighted in the British Council's *Languages for the future* report published in November 2013.¹ However, the study of Chinese is increasing slowly from a small base, with three per cent of primary schools, six per cent of state secondary schools and ten per cent of independent schools offering pupils the opportunity to learn Chinese as a curriculum subject. However, in common with other lesser taught languages, the sustainability of Chinese is not assured.

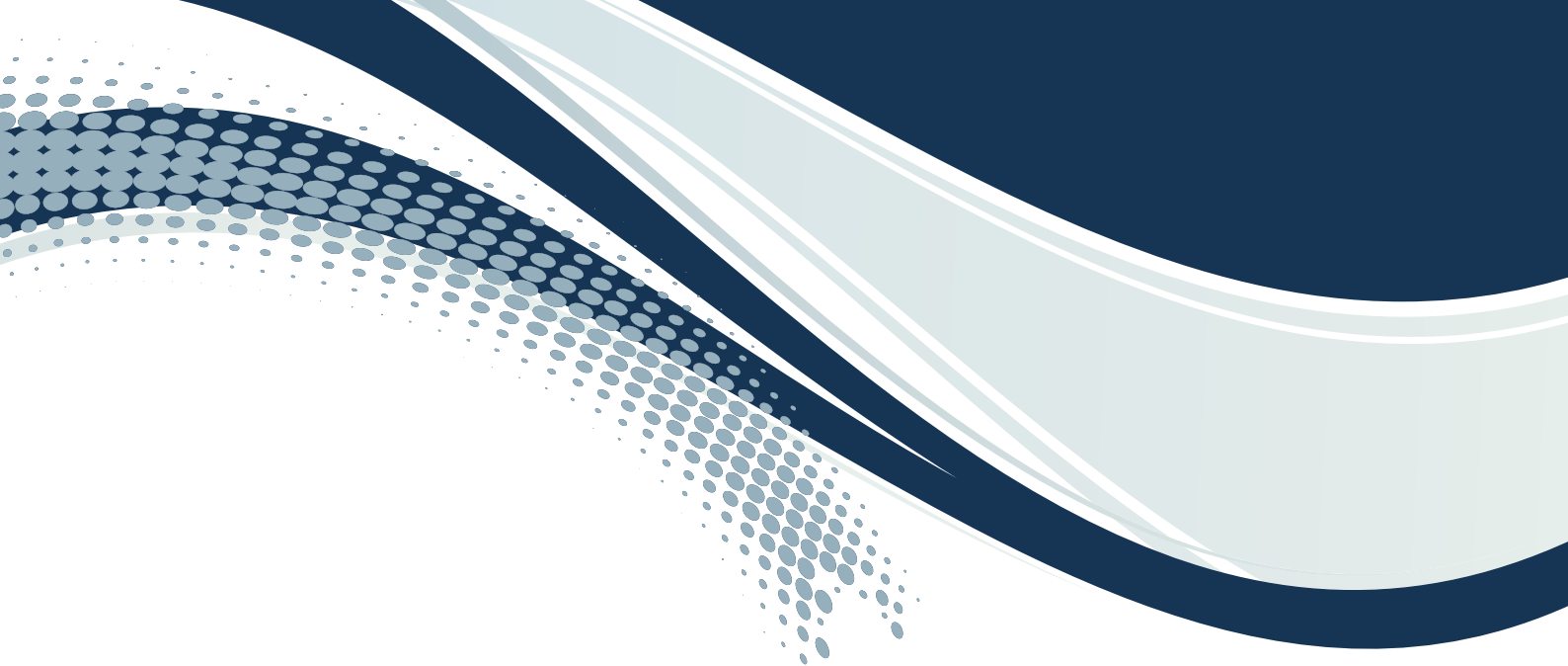
¹ British Council (2013)

Conclusions

The evidence of the positive impact of the EBacc on the take-up of languages at Key Stage 4 is very encouraging, as is the finding that so many primary schools welcome the imminent introduction of statutory language teaching to all pupils at Key Stage 2. However, it is important not to misinterpret these developments as signs that the teaching and learning of languages in English primary and secondary schools has a clean bill of health. The hundreds of schools who responded to the 2013/14 survey have provided detailed evidence of a number of significant issues, principally:

- the need for further training of primary school teachers
- the lack of cohesion at the transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3
- the growing exclusion of certain groups of pupils from language study at Key Stages 3 and 4
- the deep crisis of language study post-16.

All these issues need tackling with vigour if the language education received by children in England is to equal or surpass the quality of that provided in the highest-performing education systems. There is also still a great deal to be done to convince school leaders, parents and pupils themselves of the value of languages and that speaking only English in today's world is as big a disadvantage as speaking no English. This Trends survey 2013/14 shows we are still a long way from achieving the quality and consistency in language education necessary to prepare children adequately for life and work in a globalised society.



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