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## About the British Council

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We work in more than 100 countries and our 8,000 staff – including 2,000 teachers – work with thousands of professionals and policy makers and millions of young people every year by teaching English, sharing the arts and delivering education and society programmes.

We are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter. A core publicly-funded grant provides less than 20 per cent of our turnover, which in 2013/14 was £864 million. The rest of our revenues are earned from services which customers around the world pay for, through education and development contracts and from partnerships with public and private organisations. All our work is in pursuit of our charitable purpose and supports prosperity and security for the UK and globally.

For more information, please visit: [www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)

## About the authors

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### 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 Language Trends reports from 2011 to 2014.

## Acknowledgements

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## Executive summary

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Language Trends 2014/15 is the latest in the series of annual reports on language teaching based on online surveys completed by teachers in representative samples of schools from across the country. Surveys of secondary schools began in 2002 and cover both state and independent sectors. From 2012 onwards state primary schools have also been surveyed. This year's report focuses particularly on the initial impact of compulsory status for languages in Key Stage 2 which was introduced in September 2014, and on continuing concerns about the number and profile of pupils who study a language beyond the compulsory phase in secondary schools. Concern about the drop in the number of pupils taking A levels in language subjects gave rise to two separate inquiries by national bodies in 2014. This report probes further into the issues raised.

The research presented in this report was carried out under the joint management of the British Council and CfBT Education Trust between September and December 2014. For the first time the Language Trends surveys have been complemented by a small number of case studies as illustrations of schools which demonstrate a real commitment to languages and which are finding interesting ways of overcoming challenges.

### Key findings

- The introduction of compulsory language teaching in Key Stage 2 has had an immediate impact on the number of primary schools teaching a language. Almost all schools responding to the survey (99 per cent) now do so and 12 per cent say they have just started in the current (2014/15) academic year.
- Secondary school teachers are concerned about the wide variation in the quality of provision of language teaching at Key Stage 2 and sceptical of many 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.
- 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. The practice of disapplication of pupils in Key Stage 3, and of restricting access to language study in Key Stage 4, is associated with socio-economic disadvantage. In the most economically deprived category of schools, 17 per cent exclude groups of pupils from language study in Key Stage 3 and 44 per cent exclude some pupils from language study at Key Stage 4.
- There are a number of factors threatening the future of language study at A level. These include the impact of performance measures, grading and assessment systems, arrangements for languages lower down the school, increasingly tight budgets for post-16 courses and student perceptions of the relative value of languages in relation to the risk of not obtaining a high grade.
- Schools with high levels of take-up for languages, where pupils with a range of different abilities take the subject to GCSE, are unfairly represented as underperforming in government accountability measures, which are based on achievement, not on participation. This is leading to cuts in language provision.



- French is overwhelmingly the language most frequently taught in primary schools and is offered by well over 90 per cent of secondary schools. However, in secondary schools there is a trend towards fewer pupils studying both French and German, and there are difficulties establishing and sustaining provision for lesser-taught languages. Of the main languages taught, only Spanish is expanding, but more slowly than the rate of decline for French and German. French is declining more rapidly in the independent sector than in state schools.

### Languages in primary schools

The introduction of compulsory language teaching in Key Stage 2 has had an immediate impact both on the number of primary schools teaching a language and on the provision of many of those which already did so. Almost all schools responding to this survey (99 per cent) now teach a language and 12 per cent say they have just started in the current (2014/15) academic year. The evidence shows that many schools have formalised or strengthened provision by teaching a language more regularly or more rigorously. As many as 38 per cent of schools report that they have increased the resources available for languages. The introduction of compulsory language teaching in primary schools enjoys widespread support: some 87 per cent of respondents welcome the measure; and almost all of those that do not welcome the measure support the intention, but are sceptical about the quality of teaching that can be provided.

As many as 40 per cent of responding schools are confident that they already meet the requirements of the new national curriculum in full. Finding sufficient curriculum time for languages, boosting staff confidence to teach languages and increasing the linguistic competence of staff are the greatest challenges that schools face in meeting the requirements of the national curriculum. However, only 17 per cent of responding schools have invested in extra training for teachers and only six per cent have recruited new staff.

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.

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 who 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 or continuing professional development (CPD) events with other primary schools, the proportion of primary 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 from local secondary schools has also dropped, from 34 per cent to 18 per cent.

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.

### **Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3**

Independent schools are more likely than state schools to be able to offer pupils the opportunity to continue learning the language they learned in Key Stage 2 (51 per cent versus 28 per cent).

Secondary teachers are concerned about the wide variations in quality of provision of language teaching at Key Stage 2 and sceptical of many 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.

While educational policy suggests that schools have a responsibility to ensure the effective transition of pupils from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 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. In parallel to this, a quarter of secondary schools (24 per cent) have no contact with any of their feeder primary schools in relation to languages and say they are not able to manage cross-phase collaboration as a result of externally driven issues which are beyond their ability to resolve. Those secondary schools participating in this year's survey cite large numbers of primary feeders, teacher capacity and time pressures as well as 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 in order to ease pupil transition from Key Stage 2 to 3. Financial constraints and other pressures have led to the cessation of previous joint working between primary and secondary schools and there is evidence of highly valued cross-phase collaboration coming to an end as a result of the withdrawal of funding for specialist language colleges.

By way of contrast, there are many examples of secondary schools organising events and competitions designed to motivate young language learners from Key Stage 2 and support transition to secondary school. A number of schools comment that older pupils from Key Stage 3 upwards are involved in extra-curricular clubs and conversation support for younger pupils.

### **Take-up and participation in languages in secondary schools**

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. However, the independent sector remains much more likely to make languages compulsory for all pupils throughout Key Stages 3 and 4 than is the case in the state sector. 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 are able to study a language if they wish to do so.

The practice of disapplication of pupils in 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 in Key Stage 3 rises to 17 per cent and those excluding pupils from language study in Key Stage 4 rises 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 in Key Stage 3.

After the increases noted in the Language Trends surveys of 2012 and 2013 in schools reporting higher take-up for languages to GCSE (attributed to the impact of the English Baccalaureate), the proportion of schools reporting increased take-up is declining. In 2012, more than half of responding schools said that numbers for languages had recently risen; in the current survey this proportion has dropped to 38 per cent.

A complex range of interrelated factors is threatening the future of language study at A level. These include the impact of performance measures, grading and assessment systems, arrangements for languages lower down the school, and increasingly tight budgets for post-16 courses. It is also affected by student perceptions of the relative value of languages in relation to the risk of not obtaining a high grade.

### **Teaching and learning of languages in secondary schools**

Two thirds of teachers find attracting pupils to study a language post-16 challenging. This emerges as the most widespread challenge for language teachers across the country; more challenging than issues such as 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 influencers. Unsuitable or unreliable forms of accreditation and the prioritisation of English and mathematics, together with the perceived career value of sciences, are creating a difficult climate for languages in schools.

Schools with high levels of take-up for languages where pupils of a range of different abilities take the subject to GCSE, are unfairly represented as 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 since these schools practised a 'Languages for All' policy in line with their chosen specialist college status.

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 Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition 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. There is, however, growing praise for technologically supported CPD, which is easier for many teachers to access, and also for training delivered by specialist organisations and universities.



## Conclusions

Four key conclusions can be drawn from the rich quantitative and qualitative data from teachers participating in this year's survey:

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

The introduction of compulsory language teaching to all pupils at Key Stage 2 has had an immediate and positive impact as primary schools take steps to improve their provision in line with the requirements of the national curriculum. However, transition from Key Stage 2 to 3 remains a challenge, with many schools unable to establish collaboration, often for very practical reasons such as staff capacity, time pressure and budgetary constraints. Secondary teachers, in particular, are concerned whether primary schools will be able to provide language teaching to a standard and level of consistency which will enable them to build on pupils' prior learning when they arrive in Key Stage 3.

### **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**

This affects mainly, but not exclusively, secondary schools and cuts across all key stages. The increasing tendency to excuse, exclude or disapply pupils from languages tuition at various stages creates a growing overall impression that schools are starting to regard languages as expendable for some pupils. The practice of disapplication of pupils in Key Stage 3, and of restricting access to language study in Key Stage 4, is associated with socio-economic disadvantage and is creating a widening gap in opportunities to learn to speak another language.

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

The impact of the English Baccalaureate in boosting take-up for languages in Key Stage 4 is declining and the current way in which schools' performance is measured is having a negative effect on language provision. Language departments which take pride in giving a broad spectrum of learners the opportunity to take a languages GCSE are being put under pressure and school leaders are having to make difficult choices which, in many cases, are leading to cuts in language provision. 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. Neither the examinations themselves nor the way their results are used for school accountability are currently working in the interests of improving language learning in schools.

### **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**

A lack of awareness of the value of languages is commonplace. Influencers such as careers advisers, the media and parents have an important role to play and should help to explain how knowledge of a language can contribute to success with university studies and careers.

The significance of wider societal attitudes should not be underestimated, since they have the power to undermine initiatives and efforts to encourage young people at all stages of their education to study a language.

For young people in England, and the country as a whole to benefit from being able to speak languages other than English, solutions to the major challenges identified in this research need to be sought and applied at a whole-school level as well as openly supported by those who are in a position to influence the decisions of young people choosing study options and career paths.





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