



Modern Foreign Languages in secondary schools in Wales

Findings from the Language Trends survey 2014/15

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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 Language Trends reports from 2011 to 2014.

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We would particularly like to acknowledge the time and effort of all the teachers who completed this year's survey and provided the researchers with such rich evidence and comments. The information that respondents have provided is vital in understanding the national picture and in developing the capacity of all of us to improve provision.

Executive summary

This first national survey of foreign language teaching in Welsh schools comes at a time of considerable change for education in Wales. Recent reforms such as the introduction of the Welsh Baccalaureate and 14–19 Learning Pathways now look set to be incorporated within the new, distinctively Welsh, curriculum and assessment framework proposed by Professor Donaldson. As a bilingual nation, Wales has an advantage in the learning of other languages, since research shows that having learned one additional language, students find other languages are easier to acquire.¹ However, data published by the British Academy² show that Wales performs least well of the four UK nations when it comes to learning other languages.

As Wales works to reform its curriculum and assessment arrangements, this report reviews the health of foreign language teaching in Wales and explores the extent to which current arrangements are equipping pupils with the language, intercultural and communication skills to participate fully in a globalised world, given that currently only 22 per cent of pupils take a GCSE in a language other than English or Welsh. This report also seeks to provide evidence of the impact of previous policy initiatives on foreign language teaching in Welsh secondary schools.

Skilled users of other languages who can communicate confidently and who are comfortable in different cultural settings will do much to ensure that Wales achieves its aspirations for the country's competitiveness and prosperity in a complex, globalised 21st century. In a context in which there is increasing emphasis on improving pupils' literacy in Welsh and English, the report explores the relationship between Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)³ and Welsh/English tuition and the extent to which these learning experiences combine – or have the capacity to combine – to help children and young people in Wales become confident speakers and learners of a range of other languages.

Key findings

Modern Foreign Languages are being increasingly marginalised as a result of a number of changes being made by schools in response to challenges they face. These include financial and timetabling pressures as well as new assessment systems and reporting requirements.

The considerable benefits of bilingualism which Wales has at its disposal are not being fully exploited in schools to facilitate the learning of a third or fourth language.

The contribution which foreign language learning can make to enhancing pupils' literacy is not valued and MFL is not seen by many schools as central to achieving the Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) goals.

The low levels of appreciation of the value of languages by parents and pupils in particular is having an adverse effect on pupils seeing MFL as a serious subject for study. Such views are not being countered by the messages from policy makers and influencers.

¹ Cenoz, J. and Valencia, J. (1994) *Additive trilingualism: evidence from the Basque country*. Abu-Rabia, S. and Sanitsky, E. (2010) 'The advantages of bilinguals over monolinguals in learning a third language', *Bilingual research journal*. Vol 33.2, pp.173–199. See also discussion in Cummins, J. (2000) *Language, power and pedagogy: bilingual children in the crossfire*.

² British Academy (2013) *Languages: the state of the nation*.

³ **Note on terminology**

Throughout this report the term 'Modern Foreign Languages' and its abbreviation 'MFL' have been used to denote the subject studied by pupils in Welsh secondary schools. Languages other than Welsh or English are referred to as 'foreign languages' to avoid any confusion with the study of Welsh or English. The generic term 'languages' is used to refer to the system of written or spoken communication used by a particular country or community.

Key Stage 3

Almost one third of schools (29 per cent) disapply pupils or groups of pupils from studying a foreign language at Key Stage 3. This is a result of an increasing emphasis on English and mathematics.

Despite Estyn guidelines in relation to curriculum time for MFL, as many as 43 per cent of schools have reduced the lesson time allocated for MFL over the past three years.

While 50 per cent of schools report that some pupils coming to them from Key Stage 2 have had exposure to a foreign language other than Welsh or English, their knowledge is rarely more than a few words or phrases. Pupils with more than this are most likely to come from England or from abroad.

A range of factors are limiting the extent and effectiveness of continuing professional development for MFL teachers in Wales.

Key Stage 4

In the vast majority of schools (93 per cent) MFL is optional at Key Stage 4 for all pupils.

Nearly half of responding schools (47 per cent) report declining numbers for MFL in Key Stage 4, and in one in five schools this decline is by 10 per cent or more of pupils. Some schools, however, are working hard to raise the profile of the subject and have managed to increase numbers.

The reasons for the decrease in the study of foreign languages at Key Stage 4 are seen as the perceived difficulty of language examinations in relation to those in other subjects and the number of subjects on offer in relation to the space available in the curriculum to accommodate free choices. Teachers also see the Welsh Baccalaureate as very likely to adversely affect the future take-up of Modern Foreign Languages due to the way in which study options are grouped.

The number of schools offering vocational alternatives to GCSE language accreditation remains small: some 13 per cent of schools offer National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) in business languages and seven per cent offer language modules within the Welsh Baccalaureate as alternatives to GCSE at Key Stage 4.

Post-16

As many as 64 per cent of schools have seen a decrease in the numbers of students opting to take an A level in a foreign language over the past three years. Three quarters of respondents see low take-up of MFL at post-16 as a challenging issue, even more than those who are concerned about take-up for MFL at Key Stage 4.

Competition and prioritisation of other subjects and the low take-up of MFL generally are seen as pressing concerns by a substantial majority of schools. As many as 61 per cent of teachers say that MFL is not enough of a priority for the senior managers in their schools.

Languages taught

French is overwhelmingly the main foreign language taught in Wales; fewer than half of schools offer Spanish and only around one quarter offer German. Nearly half (49 per cent) offer some opportunities to learn a second foreign language, with this being associated with schools working in more privileged circumstances.

Bilingualism and its contribution to literacy

As many as 89 per cent of MFL teachers believe that learning both English and Welsh in primary school benefits pupils when it comes to learning a foreign language in secondary school, and nearly two thirds (60 per cent) think it is of great benefit. However, many teachers believe that the benefit of bilingualism can only be achieved if pupils have had a high quality of Welsh teaching in primary schools – many comment that this has not been the case with the result that pupils struggle with learning foreign languages.

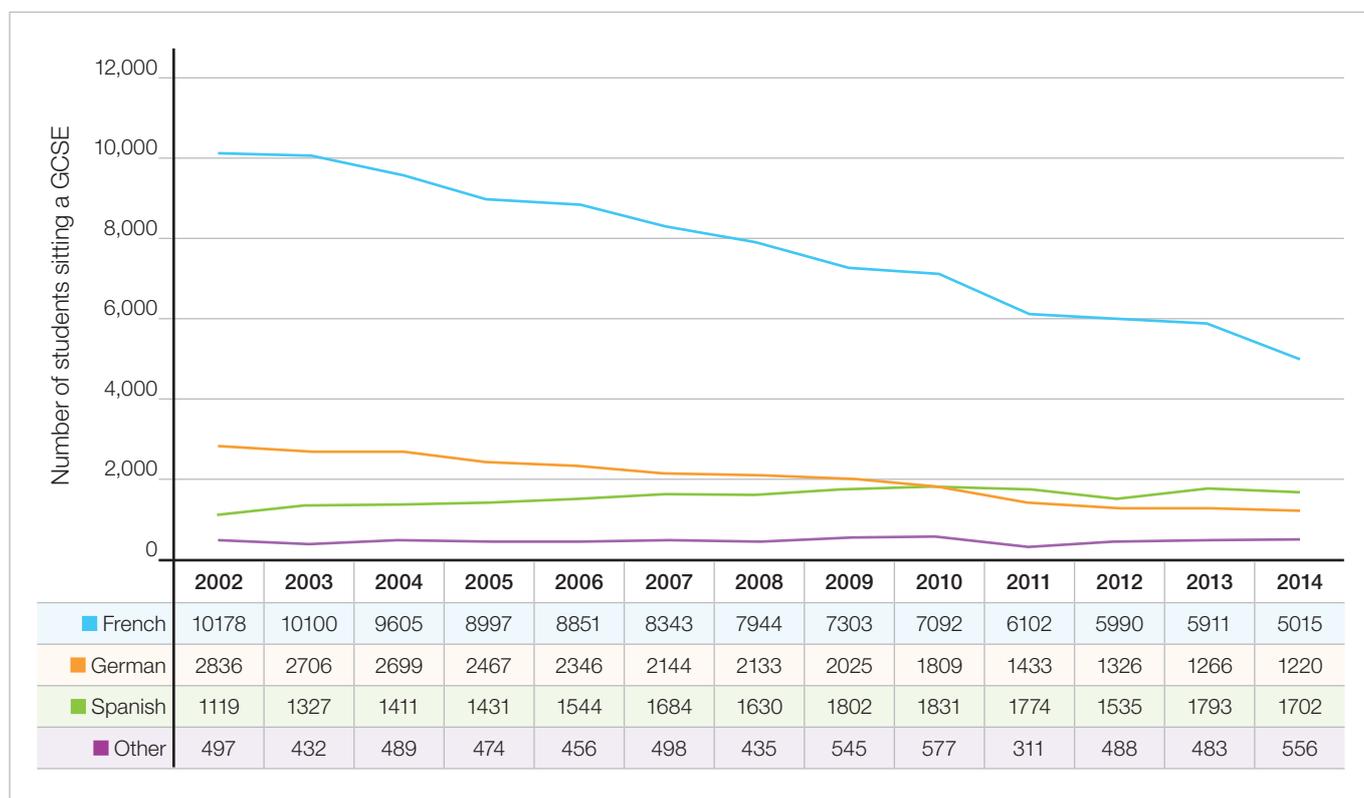
Similarly, the vast majority of teachers (83 per cent) responding to this survey report that MFL is considered to make at least some contribution to literacy in their school; however, it is only considered to make an important contribution in one third of schools (35 per cent). In 16 per cent of schools MFL is not thought to make much contribution and in one school the respondent reports that it is not considered to make any contribution at all. The comments made by teachers participating in this survey suggest that there is considerable confusion in schools about the role Modern Foreign Languages have to play in supporting the development of literacy and the way in which they can contribute to the Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF).

Although there are indications that the contribution of Welsh and English to the learning of foreign languages tends to be more highly valued in Welsh-medium and bilingual schools than in English-medium schools, awareness of the corresponding value of foreign languages in relation to general literacy is less pronounced.

Collaboration between teachers of different languages

Fewer than half (46 per cent) of schools provide regular opportunities for teachers of MFL, Welsh and English to share practice with one another. Some 46 per cent do so infrequently and nine per cent do not do so at all. In some English-medium schools, there is evidence of successful collaboration between teachers of Welsh and those teaching Modern Foreign Languages.

Declining GCSE Modern Foreign Language entries for Wales, 2002–2014



Conclusions

Modern Foreign Languages are being increasingly marginalised as a result of a number of changes being made by schools in response to challenges they face. These include financial and timetabling pressures as well as new assessment systems and reporting requirements.

The overall picture for MFL in Welsh schools is one of attrition, with little prospect of improvement or of the decline being stemmed. There is no sense of dynamism or confidence about the direction of the subject and what the future holds.

The reduction in lesson time for MFL at Key Stage 3, the place of MFL as an optional subject within a vast choice of other options and the lack of opportunities in Key Stage 4 for all pupils who wish to study a language, all add to the impression that the subject is marginal within the Welsh education system. Unlike in England and Scotland, there is no policy for pupils to start learning a foreign language before age 11, with the implication that Wales is very likely to fall even further behind in future, with serious implications for the comparability of Welsh and English GCSEs in foreign language subjects.

In Key Stage 3, the only education phase at which the study of MFL in Wales is compulsory, many pupils are receiving only a minimal or fragmented experience of language learning. When pupils choose their GCSE subjects, foreign languages fare badly as they are seen as more difficult than

many other subjects, unpredictable in terms of delivering the top grades needed for continuing to A levels and not as important for future careers as STEM subjects.

The situation at post-16 is of even greater concern. The very low numbers of students opting for MFL mean that, in many cases, courses are becoming financially unviable. Other issues contributing to the decline in numbers at A level are the greater perceived difficulty of A level examinations in MFL compared to those for other subjects and students' need to be more certain of achieving the highest grades at A level in order to take up university places.

The considerable benefits of bilingualism which Wales has at its disposal are not being fully exploited in schools to facilitate the learning of a third or fourth language.

Despite evidence that bilingualism facilitates the learning of further languages, the benefits are not being realised in Wales, which has the lowest level of take-up for Modern Foreign Languages at Key Stage 4 of all four UK countries.

This may be linked to the way that Welsh is taught, particularly in English-medium primary schools, which teachers say does not appear to be aimed at the development of wider language learning skills. The evidence indicates that English, Welsh and MFL are regarded in most schools as quite separate subjects without the potential for collaboration or common approaches to teaching. This leads to the perception that, despite official guidelines, MFL has nothing to do with literacy in English or Welsh, a perception which has a negative impact on pupils' ability to transfer learning from one language into another.

The proposed introduction of a new curriculum which calls for improvements in the teaching of Welsh and which places English, Welsh and MFL within the same area of study, provides an opportunity to remedy this.

The contribution which foreign language learning can make to enhancing pupils' literacy is not valued and MFL is not seen by many schools as central to achieving the Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) goals.

The report highlights that there is a greater general awareness of the benefits that learning both Welsh and English brings to the study of a foreign language, than there is of the notion that this can also work in the opposite direction. This may reflect the fact that the link between foreign languages and literacy is not made explicit in the LNF documentation, although there is certainly plenty in the LNF documentation to encourage schools to involve MFL along with other curriculum subjects in their work to develop pupils' literacy. Much of the activities which pupils undertake in MFL classrooms support wider literacy, including sound/spelling links, reading strategies, comparative grammar work and extended writing activities.

The evidence from this survey suggests that many schools are confused about the role that MFL can play in the development of literacy. Greater awareness of how foreign languages can contribute would not only support greater whole-school collaboration towards improved levels of literacy and ensure improved results against LNF goals for Welsh schoolchildren, but would also give greater recognition to the valuable role of foreign language learning in children's education.

The low levels of appreciation of the value of languages by parents and pupils in particular is having an adverse effect on pupils seeing MFL as a serious subject for study. Such views are not being countered by the messages from policy makers and influencers.

In spite of the many sources of evidence highlighting the contribution that foreign language skills can make to a nation's economic growth and the wellbeing of its citizens, there is very little in the way of Welsh Government policy or the practice of the majority of key stakeholders and influencers in Wales to demonstrate a commitment to languages beyond Welsh and English or to foster an appreciation of the value of languages amongst young people, their parents and potential employers. In terms of attitudes, Wales is very similar to other parts of the UK where a lack of understanding of the value of foreign languages is commonplace. However, in recent years both Scotland and England have introduced policies which are designed to improve the position of foreign language learning in the curriculum.

Professor Donaldson's recently published review of the curriculum and assessment systems in Wales states very clearly that well developed skills in Welsh and English will support the subsequent learning of third and fourth languages and help Wales to exploit its full potential as a confident and competitive nation. However, in the absence of a robust policy on foreign language education to counter the very low levels of take-up for foreign languages and the rapid rate at which take-up is declining, especially at the post-16 level, this potential is unlikely to be realised.

Teachers' responses to our survey suggest that the majority of young people and parents in Wales are neither aware nor appreciative of the benefits which skills in languages and intercultural understanding can bring in terms of advantages for study, personal development and employment. The languages community as a whole is not being successful in exploiting the findings of research to make a strong case for foreign language learning in terms which both key stakeholders and influencers can understand.

To stem the dramatic decline of foreign languages in schools across Wales and to address the widely held perception that foreign languages are unimportant and of little use, will require concerted action at the highest level, both in order to address the systemic/structural challenges being faced by schools and to begin to tackle entrenched and unhelpful social attitudes. The new curriculum proposed by Professor Donaldson has the potential to bring all language subjects closer together and enable children in Wales to become confident users of three or more languages. However, without clear direction and guidance for schools and the active involvement of MFL experts, it also risks MFL becoming further marginalised as a subject of study.



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