

Languages in secondary schools

This year's survey, carried out in September and October 2008 by CILT, the National Centre for Languages with support from the Association for Language Learning and the Independent Schools' Modern Language Association, is based on responses to a questionnaire sent to a representative sample of 2,000 secondary schools in England (1,500 maintained schools and 500 independent schools). The survey has been carried out annually since 2002 to track developments in language provision and take-up in secondary schools. Findings are based on a 43% response rate from 855 schools.

Key findings

- The decline in participation in language learning in Key Stage 4 has been halted, although there is little sign yet of any overall increase in numbers.
- However, the picture nationally is one of change and transition in language teaching with much innovation and new practice as schools attempt to revitalise provision.
- There are serious barriers to rebuilding provision for a significant minority of schools – particularly those with high levels of social disadvantage and low educational achievement.
- There are growing regional differences in participation rates in languages with the North East giving particular cause for concern.
- Provision is becoming more diversified. Spanish, Italian and Mandarin continue to rise in popularity, while French and German are still falling though less steeply than before.
- There has been a strong growth in new qualifications. 41% of schools now offer alternatives to GCSE as opposed to 22% in 2006.
- The opportunities for languages within the Phase 1 Diplomas are not being fully exploited.

Further details and commentary

Languages at Key Stage 4

The national data paint a very similar picture to last year in terms of overall participation in language learning. The declines of the last few years have been halted – although not yet reversed – but the picture is one of turbulence rather than stability. There are signs of shifts and upheavals, both positive and negative, as schools adjust to having to 'make the case' for languages to students. Some schools are responding well to the challenge and there is a real sense that provision is being revitalised in the way described by Lord Dearing in the Languages Review. However, others are still seeing decreasing in numbers for German and French, with little prospect of reversing trends. Whether languages are compulsory or optional is not now the main question, but rather how prominently languages sit within a curriculum laden with other options and requirements.

Patterns of participation

Across the maintained sector as a whole, 45% of schools are achieving the minimum recommended benchmark of half of their pupils studying languages in Years 10 and 11 – the same proportion as last year. However, participation varies enormously by type of school and by region. Only 10% of the lowest performing schools provide language learning for more than half of their pupils in Key Stage 4, while 77% of the highest performing schools do so. Numbers engaged in language learning are lowest in the North East, in Maths and Computing

The picture nationally is one of change
and transition in language teaching

While accepting we should be working towards 50%, no one sees this as achievable

Specialist Colleges, and in schools with higher than average proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals. Participation in language learning is more widespread in grammar schools, schools with high educational achievement, Specialist Language Colleges, and in schools in London. Already top of the table last year in terms of the proportion of schools reaching the government recommendation of 50% participation in language learning, London has improved from 57% to 60% of schools reaching this benchmark. The South West, the North West, the West and East Midlands also show an improvement, whereas there is an increased proportion of schools in the South East, the North East and Yorkshire & The Humber failing to engage at least 50% of pupils. Only one in five schools in the North East in our survey now has more than half its Key Stage 4 cohort studying a language.¹

Benchmarks and barriers

Government initiatives to encourage schools to set a benchmark for participation in language learning, and to enforce this through OFSTED and performance indicators, are not yet bearing fruit.² Only 19% of schools where languages are optional have set a benchmark – just 2% more than last year. Respondents highlight the difficulties in setting a realistic benchmark in a crowded curriculum where there is little space for optionality and many other attractive options. Specialist Colleges, where there is increased emphasis on other subject areas, find it particularly difficult to make enough space for languages.

[The benchmark]...has been highlighted to leadership but they cannot see how they can help to increase take-up other than by having a negative knock-on effect on other option subjects.

The benchmark is not considered relevant by the school leadership in a school like ours

As a Catholic Technology college all pupils at Key Stage 4 do RE and Technology, leaving only two option blocks available.

Pupils have three options. The likelihood of them taking languages - even if they enjoy it, is much reduced.

Management are so keen to offer a whole range of popular subjects in order to motivate pupils that the benchmark seems to be an irrelevance. The new Diplomas have further aggravated the situation.

Teachers feel strongly about 'severe grading' – evidence produced by the Association for Language Learning and others that it is harder to achieve a good grade in a language as opposed to another subject.

Although statistically an increasing proportion of GCSE entrants in languages gain an A*-C grade, the figures are skewed by higher proportions of high attaining pupils and teachers say they do not reflect like-for-like effort in comparison with other subjects. Language Colleges in particular, where large numbers of pupils of all abilities sit GCSEs in languages, have seen their overall results suffer as a result. One respondent called for GCSE languages to be given 'double' award status, with options to take the single award in either speaking and listening or reading and writing.

The perception that languages is a 'hard' subject also impacts on pupils:

Pupils perceive the subject to be a) difficult and b) not glamorous like Diplomas.

Innovation and experimentation

This year's survey captures a sense of change and movement in language teaching practice in secondary schools. There is widespread experimentation with new courses, new timetabling arrangements and new forms of accreditation – and evidence that these are starting to lift the gloom of previous years. 32% of maintained schools (and 10% of independent schools) have introduced new courses and report improvements in attitudes and take up amongst pupils.

Languages is the most popular option choice in school. Good materials/resources lots of games (vocabulary) and use of ICT- podcasting and blogging.

Languages are completely optional here, but the uptake has increased due to the introduction of the VIPS applied French NVQ. GCSE uptake this year has also increased due to the change of personnel and improved schemes of learning.

The school has recently invested in interactive whiteboards for every languages class and there was marked increase in take-up of a second language at Key Stage 4 this year.

Pupils perceptions of languages in Key Stage 3 is improving with primary languages, they now come to school questioning less and with a more positive attitude to the existence of other languages and cultures.

We have 'invented' a course called European Languages and Cultures in which we offer beginners Greek and Italian accredited by Asset Languages at Breakthrough. This is offered in a special option block to cross-phase groups. This year 26 students have opted for this subject.

30% of schools (12% in the independent sector) say they have introduced new teaching approaches and the number of schools offering some other type of accreditation besides GCSE has shot up to 41% from 22% in 2006 and 29% last year. Of these qualifications, Asset Languages is by far the most commonly used, with 18% of maintained schools now offering this in Key Stage 3, compared with 11% last year. Other qualifications include Entry Level certificates, NVQ language units, the Certificate of Business Language Competence and the new Foundation Certificate of Secondary Education. Schools are using these qualifications in diverse ways – to introduce new or second languages, as certification at the end of Key Stage 3, and as additional certification for 'fast tracked' pupils. They generally report positively in relation to the impact on motivation and popularity amongst pupils, but point also to some drawbacks such as costs and manageability:

Using a variety of accreditation meets the needs of the individual pupil

but is very stressful for the teacher.

Teachers haven't got enough time to offer extra qualifications, as well as compulsory KS3 and KS4 options. With so many it is getting too confusing and time consuming.

One in eight respondents had visited CILT's 14-19 Reshaping languages microsite and commented particularly on its value for providing information and case studies on alternative accreditation and provision.

Key Stage 3

The vast majority of schools have seen changes to language provision at Key Stage 3, and a mixed picture is emerging with languages some schools thriving from opportunities for cross-curricular work, immersion experiences or CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). For others however the changes have meant cuts (18% of schools have discontinued provision in one or more languages, often German) and reduction in lesson time for languages (33%). 10% of schools have shortened Key Stage 3 to two years – and this has produced some negative impacts for languages:

We are all frustrated that by providing early entry accreditation in Year 9 the option system renders it almost impossible for pupils to continue to a higher level.

Shortening of Key Stage 3 to two years means that our Year 8 pupils have to make informed decisions about their future career by making options in Year 8 - when they are 12 years of age! Only 15 out of a cohort of 200 opted for MFL last year.

Schools report favourably (if at all) on the introduction of the new secondary curriculum, though this is clearly only just starting to have an impact.

New curriculum initiatives have had an impact at Key Stage 3, with one lesson of MFL in Year 7 now delivered through a cross-curricular approach.

Languages taught

The popularity of Spanish continues to grow, and it is set to overtake German as the second most commonly taught language after French – indeed, in the independent sector it has already done so. Three years ago, only half of maintained schools offered Spanish: 75% do so today. Provision for Italian has also increased from 7% of schools in 2005 to 18% now, and Mandarin from 2% to 14% in the same period. Other languages such as Urdu, Russian and Arabic also appear to be generating interest following changed QCA guidelines on which languages schools may offer.

The introduction of Spanish has proved very popular, this is the third year of teaching it. We anticipate a minimum take-up of 80% to study Spanish at GCSE.

We start with all pupils studying French and then picking up another language in Year 9 - Spanish, Latin, German, Urdu is the choice.

There is a small but growing interest in offering languages spoken in local communities (Polish, Turkish, Bengali and others) and increasing recognition in both maintained and independent sectors that these languages are of global significance and should not be overlooked.

This year I have been able to organise an extra-curricular class for Urdu GCSE.

Measures to increase take up

Since drop-out from languages became a matter of national concern, and particularly since the 2007 Dearing Review, a number of initiatives have been put in place to support schools in motivating pupils and increasing take up. This year's survey asked schools to what extent they had been involved in measures to increase take up, and how effective they had been:

- 13% of maintained schools have been involved in the HEFCE/DCSF-funded Routes into Languages programme which mainly operates regionally through consortia of universities working with schools.
- 33% of schools have used Languages Work materials to highlight the value of languages for careers.
- 45% have organised their own promotional activities such as careers talks, as recommended on the basis of previous Language Trends surveys.

All these activities are already judged to have shown impact both in terms of attitudes and, albeit to a lesser extent, on actual take-up.

Diplomas

28% of maintained schools surveyed are involved in delivering the Phase I Diplomas; a small minority of these involve some language teaching. It is to be hoped that these pioneers will be successful and lead the way for others to follow.

Languages have not been welcome on the vocational courses in our school...but according to a survey of parents and students, languages are becoming more popular.

However, there is evidence that the introduction of Diplomas is putting a squeeze on both curriculum organisation and option choices.

When diplomas are introduced and students are offered a wider variety of choice at Key Stage 4 I fear that we will have a fall in our uptake.

The latest initiative on Diplomas has left me with all three lessons of Year 10 French on one day.

MFL is becoming more popular in KS4 due to good teaching, market forces, parental and teacher persuasion

Students are too young when they choose their options to see the relevance of a language in the workplace

There is clearly more work to be done to support the integration of language courses into the Diplomas so teachers to see them as an opportunity rather than a threat. The development of the new Diploma in Languages should be helpful in this respect.

Language trends in independent schools

As in previous years, the issues for independent schools are different from those in the maintained sector. Participation in languages remains healthy and there is generally an expectation from both parents and senior management that language learning will continue up to 16 at least.

All boys take French to GCSE, 90% take Spanish to GCSE, 20% take German to GCSE, 5% take all three. 30-35 take French to A Level each year. 20-25 take Spanish to A Level each year.

This means that schools are under less pressure to respond to new initiatives and to change teaching methods. However innovation is

evident in other forms. Whilst qualifications like Asset Languages are less widely taken up in the independent sector, alternative qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate and the I-GCSE are provoking interest and involvement.

Whilst independent schools offer a wider range of languages than the maintained sector, trends are very similar. Spanish has now overtaken German at all Key Stages including post-16 and Italian has grown strongly with nearly one third of independent schools now offering it. Independent schools are nearly three times as likely to offer Chinese, Japanese or Russian than state schools, although the number of schools offering Mandarin seems to have declined slightly this year – perhaps an early warning about the sustainability of this language without better national support structures.

The one prospective change for us in the near future is likely to be the removal of French as a compulsory core language to GCSE. A language will remain compulsory - but it won't have to be French.

First cohort to take Spanish at GCSE in 2008, and 50% continued to AS. First triple linguist at GCSE through in 2008. Profile of languages raised within school, giving us competitive edge.

Participation in external CPD is lower in many independent schools than in the state sector.

We are very grateful to all teachers who completed this year's survey, and shared their experiences and views.

Notes

1. A more comprehensive survey of schools in the North East Region by Paul Harrison, Headteacher of Teesdale School for Comenius North East found this proportion to be slightly better – around 25%. However this alternative survey confirms that the number of students studying languages in Key Stage 4 (and on into Key Stage 5) continues to fall in the North East.

2. Since September 2006 schools have been asked to decide on a benchmark or minimum proportion of pupils following a language course in Key Stage 4, and to report on the benchmark in the Self Evaluation Form and in information provided to parents. The Benchmark should be between 50% and 90% of all pupils. From September 2008, schools have been asked to report on two performance indicators in languages measuring achievement at Level 2, and participation and attainment at Level 1.

The three organisations responsible for this survey are very grateful to all respondents for the wealth of information they have provided.

Further information

The full statistical report can be downloaded from the CILT website at www.cilt.org.uk/key/language/trends/2008/secondary.htm.

Links

Reshaping Languages 14–19

www.cilt.org.uk/14to19

Languages Work

www.languageswork.org.uk

Specialist Language Colleges

www.cilt.org.uk/specialistcolleges

Routes into Languages

www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk

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