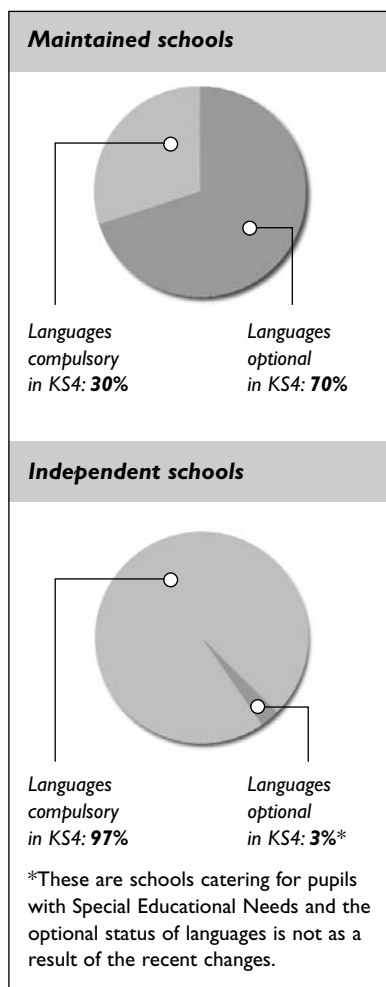


Summary findings

- Fewer than one third of state schools now require students to learn a language up to 16, whereas the vast majority of independent schools regard a foreign language as essential (1).
- The fallout from languages is happening very rapidly: only 30% of schools which are not Specialist Language Colleges require pupils to study a language for more than three years, compared with 57% this time last year. The drop is greater in schools with a high proportion of pupils with free school meals, those with lower GCSE scores, and more marked in the North of England than in the South.
- In those schools where languages have been made optional around 54% of pupils, on average, are studying a language in Year 11, and 41% in Year 10.
- German and French are the languages most adversely affected, whereas the overall impact on Spanish has been negligible. The independent sector is reporting a sharp decline in German but a strong growth in Spanish.
- Schools in both the state sector and the independent sector are experimenting with a much wider range of languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Russian and community languages.
- The perception that languages are not a 'vocational' subject is harming languages and schools may find themselves in a weakened position to deliver the 'entitlement' in future or to respond to the provisions of the 14-19 reforms. The introduction of new options is squeezing languages out except where there is very strong support at Senior Management level.
- There is particular pressure on languages in schools which are (or hoping to become) specialist colleges in other subjects.

Growing gap between state and independent sectors (1)



There is a growing discrepancy between the state and independent sectors, with fears that languages are losing their broad base just at a time when they are a national priority. With many independent schools recruiting pupils from overseas, or catering for pupils whose parents live abroad, they tend to have a much more internationalist ethos, with languages being seen as 'a vital ingredient in a child's education'. There is growing interest too in the International Baccalaureate, in which languages are a core element for sixth-formers.

Respondents from independent schools said their schools felt strongly that languages were part of a 'broad and balanced curriculum'; many also stressed the usefulness of languages in today's world.

'It makes educational sense.'

'It's not about force-feeding, it's a natural part of education.'

In comparison, many schools in the state sector reported that languages are seen as being unimportant and certainly not an essential element.

'Languages have been downgraded.'

'We are in a school where there are many highly motivated children, but they do not perceive a language to be an important option.'

'In our school, languages are not seen as important and students do not then see the importance of choosing a foreign language at KS4 and we, as a department, feel we are fighting a losing battle. Until senior management realises the importance of learning a foreign language and support the teaching of languages, we, as a department do not feel that we can move forward.'

There are shining exceptions however, particularly, but not exclusively, in the Language Colleges where state schools are managing to combat this prevailing ethos and turn languages around in their schools through a combination of broad, positive thinking and creative approaches.

'We have an innovative curriculum with twilight classes, lunch clubs in Portuguese and Chinese, fast-track GCSE in Year 10 and AS in Year 11. We have extensive links with primary schools and we've also introduced Latin.'

'The new Head has chosen to make MFL compulsory again at KS4, including

stated pupils. This is a very positive move, but unusual for my type of school.'

The move towards a more diverse curriculum is damaging languages

Respondents point to a variety of reasons why this is happening. On the one hand, there are simply more subjects from which to choose. Languages may be timetabled against subjects in which pupils may feel they can get a better grade and the pressure of league tables does not work in favour of languages.

'Languages being an option which is placed against a large number of GCSE subjects means that pupils simply drop the language. They opt for ICT, Food Technology, etc.'

There is also concern that pupils may feel they have more of a 'natural' aptitude for subjects like PE, Drama or Art and that they believe that they will find them easier as a result. Where there is a free choice, many more able students are choosing the options which have been offered to benefit less able pupils, and are giving up languages as a result.

'The option system does not encourage students to take up languages. More able students are allowed to opt for less academic subjects, particularly the boys, as languages are perceived as difficult in comparison.'

'The main problem ... is that French is set against Media Studies and History – and is blocked by GNVQ IT and BTEC in Performing Arts. German is against Technology subjects.'

Where vocational options are being introduced, these frequently count as a double subject, meaning that students who opt for these have even fewer additional 'slots' to fill on their timetable. At the same time, there are reports of schools reducing the number of subjects pupils take (in order to achieve higher results in those they do take) and there is an additional squeeze on teaching time from subjects like Citizenship and ICT.

Of real concern is the perception that languages are diametrically opposed to 'vocational' options, and are being offered as alternatives to the very subjects with which they would combine best, e.g. Business Studies, Leisure and Tourism.

'Business Studies has been offered instead of languages (not possible to do both!).'

'A move to vocational, double-award ICT, Leisure and Tourism, NVQ, Engineering, etc has been introduced and MFL is not a priority.'

'Languages and other academic subjects appear to be pushed out of favour of GNVQ and Business options which produce greater return (in terms of results) for effort.'

At a time when research into the needs of British business points to a growing need for languages at all levels in the workforce, this is an alarming trend. The increase in international contacts within our economy means that the need for language skills permeates all levels and is not confined to professional or managerial posts. Almost all of today's school children will have some need to communicate internationally.



'What could be more vocational than languages? Yet we cannot be classed alongside subjects like Dance, Travel and Tourism, as the compulsory "vocationals", albeit with a choice. Pupils are not told such "jobs" have poor income returns.'

A remarkable number of replies point to the marginalisation of languages in specialist schools which focus on other curriculum areas. Languages are dropped from the compulsory timetable in order to free up curriculum time to concentrate on these specialisms such as Performing Arts, Sports and Maths and Science, etc.

Some schools do not offer pupils a true entitlement to languages in KS4

The concept of 'entitlement' has been interpreted very loosely in a number of schools. There are numerous cases where only the top sets are guided to do languages, where the teachers not the pupils make the decisions and where 'the lowest ability are not given the option to learn French'.

'Decisions are made on the option blocks without consultation with the MFL Head of Department and how the outcome will affect numbers in KS4.'

In one school, languages were being offered only as an after-school option; in another this was the only option for the lower sets, although the upper sets were 'guided' to do languages. This is a worrying social inclusion issue, particularly when seen in conjunction with the correlations with free school meals and lower attainment.

Exchanges are becoming rarer

The chance to stay with a foreign family to boost language skills is becoming more of a rarity, as schools are fearful of a blame culture which makes the risks too high. Students, too, are less willing nowadays to make the leap of staying with a foreign family and prefer trips where accommodation is arranged with their own classmates. This limits their exposure to the language and culture and cuts off access to what many would see as a key motivating factor. This situation is true for both the independent and state sectors, although a significant number of independent schools are still using the traditional exchange.

'Motivation is reduced because pupils can opt out at the end of KS3 and because visits are no longer viable.'

German and French continue to decline while Spanish remains popular

Percentage of schools reporting increases or decreases		
Increased provision		
	maintained schools	independent schools
French	11%	10%
German	12%	12%
Spanish	44%	50%
Decreased provision		
	maintained schools	independent schools
French	72%	15%
German	70%	34%
Spanish	44%	0%

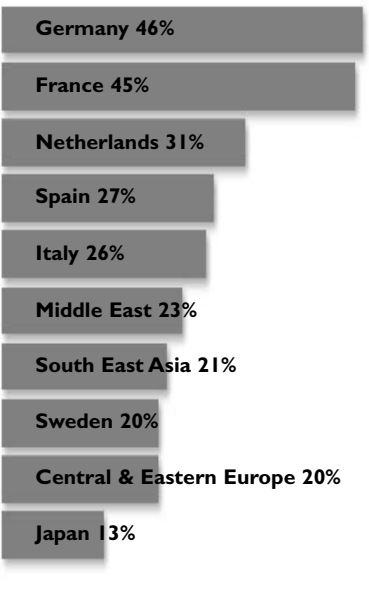
Respondents reported continued concerns over German, which has lost out particularly in the independent sector. Many schools commented on the popularity of Spanish.

'We no longer teach German at KS3 and have introduced Spanish in Year 8 to top sets. Since Spanish is more popular nationally I hope student numbers at GCSE will increase.'

In one LEA, German has been phased out in eight schools (one of which has three specialist teachers of German in the languages team and no German being taught in the school) and Spanish introduced in four (with extra-curricular classes in two others). In another region, one very large comprehensive reported that the knock-on effects of disapplication have meant that there was only one GCSE German group in 2003/4 and that German has now been discontinued.

Yet, as the following table shows, Germany is currently the most important non-English speaking market for British small businesses.

Britain's non-English speaking markets (% of businesses)*



There is a greater variety of languages being taught in our schools than ever before

The independent sector reports a growth in the teaching of Japanese, Chinese and Arabic, while in state schools, too, these languages are starting to take their place alongside the traditional offer of French, German and Spanish. Community languages, especially in those areas where schools respond to local need, are being given a higher profile as schools recognise their contribution to students' achievements.

'Urdu is increasing in popularity and this year is part of the MFL Department rather than EMAG.'

Community languages are coming into the mainstream curriculum. In one school, for example, students can take a GCSE in Urdu, Bengali or other languages in Year 9 and move on to French or German GCSE in Years 10 and 11.

For the first time in the three years of this survey, the reintroduction of Russian is being reported. One Specialist Language College in the East of England has 44 of its 140 Year 10 pupils opting to take Russian as their main language for GCSE, and 100 out of 180 in Year 8 learning Russian as a second foreign language. There is interest in a wide range of languages,

which are seen as having appeal and challenge for pupils, but this clearly has workforce and training implications, especially at a time when (as was reported last year) many university language departments have seen a reduction in the number of students specialising in languages and when a number of departments have been closed or their activities and the range of languages they offer curtailed.

One Language College in East London, teaches four European and three community languages with all pupils having the opportunity to study at least two languages at some point during KS3 and KS4.

Schools are experimenting with new types of courses and new modes of delivery

A substantial number of schools (15% of the sample) report 'fast-tracking' groups of pupils, allowing them to take a GCSE in Year 9 or 10. There is evidence that they are using the Key Stage 3 Framework as a basis for this. Students can then study a second foreign language or take the same language to higher levels. Several schools offer Foundation level GCSE in Year 9, others offer the Certificate of Business Language starting in Year 9, or a second foreign language. One school is introducing accelerated progress through Key Stage 3 in two years.

'Fast-tracking at our school has been very successful and has had an impact on numbers continuing to A level.'

There are some examples of clever timetabling where students take a 'double' languages option and some good feedback from schools trialling vocational languages courses such as EdExcel Applied French, NVQ language units with GCSE Leisure and Tourism or Business Studies.

'The vocational course in French has given a new impetus and reality to learning a language. Boys can see new relevance.'

'We have begun a GCSE double award, where pupils study French and German GCSEs as one single option. This class is very popular – full in both Year 10 and Year 11.'

'Alternative certification opportunities may appeal to a wider audience of motivated

but less able students who wish to enhance their record of achievement folder.'

Even greater divide in provision post 16

At sixth-form level, there is an even greater divide opening up between the 'best' and the 'worst' provision. In the independent sector, there is strong parental pressure to maintain language provision, and in one independent college in London 50% of pupils aged 16 and over are studying a language. Respondents from the state sector on the other hand report a knock-on effect from falling numbers lower down the school with fewer numbers doing AS and A2 languages. In one case, numbers had dropped in French from 17 to 2 at A2, and from 20 to 7 at AS. Schools attribute this to the high-grade culture at A level, with many students dropping out after AS and opting for those subjects where they feel most certain to get the highest grade. Sadly, it is often the most-able students who drop languages at this point.

Looking forward

It is clear that the landscape for languages is changing. Enormous challenges have been raised by the introduction of more choice at KS4: in the 1990s languages teachers took their subject through the difficult transition from being optional to being a compulsory subject for everyone. It is understandable that they now see this going into reverse as a retrograde step. Only a minority in this year's survey see optional languages as being more successful, with pupils taking languages because they want to, an improvement in classroom discipline and the hope of improved numbers going through to A level.

'One of my current A2 students said that she would have opted out at KS4 but is now wanting to study French at University.'

But many teachers and schools are beginning to respond to the new landscape and those in the avant garde now, may well be in the best position to respond to reforms in the 14–19 curriculum which will come into place over the next decade.

Notes on the survey

I The questionnaire was sent to a sample of 1,500 maintained schools in England, selected from the NFER database. This analysis is based on returns from 807 schools, a response rate of 54%. This very high response rate is indicative of the level of concern felt about this issue among language teachers. The Independent Schools Modern Language Association (ISMLA) sent the same questionnaire to its members, producing 59 replies which were analysed separately.

Further information

The full statistical report, which also gives regional breakdowns, can be downloaded from the CILT website at www.cilt.org.uk/key/trends2004.htm

For more information on languages and the 14–19 reforms go to www.cilt.org.uk/14-19

Information for Heads and Governors: ALL and CILT have produced an information leaflet, available soon at www.cilt.org.uk/14-19/heads.htm and www.all-languages.org.uk

Languages Work



This website and associated materials help teach pupils about the importance of languages and their relevance to the world of work. Go to www.languageswork.org.uk

* From *Language and culture in British business: international communication, needs and strategies* by Stephen Hagen, to be published by CILT early in 2005.

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