

Language Trends 2005

Languages in Key Stage 4

This year's survey, carried out by CILT, the National Centre for Languages, with support from the Association for Language Learning and the Independent Schools, Modern Languages Association, is based on responses to a questionnaire sent to a representative random sample of 2,000 secondary schools in England (1,577 maintained and 423 independent schools). Preliminary findings noted below are based on a 60% response achieved so far from 1,190 schools.

Key findings

- The proportion of maintained schools with languages as a compulsory element in the KS4 curriculum has further declined: from one-third in 2004 to one-quarter this year.
- Decreases in pupil numbers have been most strongly felt in French and German, however, Spanish take-up is increasing. While fewer schools offer Italian and Russian, they frequently report increases in pupil numbers.
- The situation in independent schools remains relatively stable.
- Schools in the lowest quintile of educational achievement are least likely to offer languages as a compulsory subject (7%), while schools in the highest quintile are most likely to do so (63%).
- Schools in the South East (40%) and London (35%) are most likely to maintain compulsory status for languages, while those in the North West (18%) and Yorkshire and The Humber (21%) are least likely to do so.
- Schools with higher than average numbers of pupils with a mother tongue other than English are more likely to retain compulsory languages.
- Very low proportions of pupils are studying more than one language.
- An increasing number of schools report fast-tracking some pupils to GCSE in Year 10 or earlier. However, this is not affecting large numbers of students or, in general, whole classes.
- One in five schools offers some other form of accreditation in addition to GCSE and find benefits in this for pupils. Once again, however, the actual number of pupils affected is low.
- CILT's Languages Work materials have been welcomed as a tool for helping schools make the case for languages to their pupils. There is much more scope for development of this work.

The stark figures paint a somewhat gloomy picture. However, the survey attracted a large amount of qualitative feedback from schools, which echoes the findings of this summer's Ofsted report on languages in Key Stage 4: that languages can flourish where there is commitment and support from senior management. In this document we probe more deeply, revealing the reality behind the data and drawing some conclusions about how languages can best be supported in the changing landscape of 14–19 education.

Effects of changes in provision

Many schools reported positive effects of allowing disaffected pupils to drop languages, such as fewer behaviour problems or smaller groups. In parallel to this, pass rates for those that do take a language have gone up. Some schools have found that it has been easier to set and teach groups of similar ability. In contrast, in schools where numbers are very low, teachers find they do not have enough to form different sets and are struggling to teach mixed-ability classes. Where schools have taken on board the implications of optional status for languages, and focused strongly on measures to support them in Key Stage 3 (extra curriculum time, use of the KS3 Framework, lunchtime clubs, visits, etc) the effect has been positive. Where this is not happening, demotivation has trickled down and there is a despondency about languages throughout the school.

There are mixed reports of the effects on progression to AS and A2. Where there is fast-tracking and early entry to GCSE, pupils may go on to AS in KS4 and some schools report numbers starting to pick up in Year 12. One school reported an increase in numbers doing languages in the sixth form as a result of introducing the International Baccalaureate. Overall there is still great concern about the numbers studying languages post-16 and, in particular, the low numbers progressing from AS to A2.

Factors influencing take-up

The way the option block system is designed and presented is a major factor in many schools which affects take-up of languages. Very often, it is the pull factor of other subjects, rather than rejection of languages per se, which sees them squeezed. Many respondents reinforced the finding that they are perceived as hard by both teachers and pupils – sometimes in contradiction of evidence within the school.

Small school so restricted option blocks so if good students opt for Business they can't do German.

Languages seen as difficult and blocked against 'easier' subjects such as Dance or Drama on the timetable.

Teachers report that while vocational courses, such as GNVQs are being promoted strongly, the vocational value of languages is not self-evident and has to be made explicit. Where this is done, there is evidence that language departments can respond to the new competitive environment.

Both timetabling and promotional solutions require strong support from headteachers and senior management, as pointed out in this summer's Ofsted report on languages in Key Stage 4¹. Where this exists, there is evidence that trends can be bucked and languages can flourish.

Bucking the trends

One of the most striking threads which runs through teachers' comments in the survey is the importance of the attitudes of staff, pupils and parents to the success, or otherwise, of languages in a school:

Many parents do not seem to think that languages are important

(Comprehensive school, Derbyshire, decreasing number of number studying languages)

Most of our parents see language learning as an important part of education

(Independent school, Merton, Surrey)

A large number of respondents cited perceptions about the difficulty of learning foreign languages, or the relevance of learning them, as major contributory factors to the growth or decline in languages at KS4. There were striking differences between maintained schools in middle-class areas, maintained grammar schools and independent schools, on the one hand, and state schools in more disadvantaged, rural or small-town settings on the other.

Parents of our pupils have studied a language. They may have a house abroad. They have their own business and they are aware of the need of a language for trade.

(Independent school)

We are in deprived area where foreign languages and cultures are not valued.

(Comprehensive, Nottingham, where less than 25% of pupils are now learning languages at KS4)

Our school is in a rural location. Farmers who are anti-EU and anti-CAP see no need to learn languages.

(Comprehensive, Lancashire, less than 25%)

The impact of parental attitudes and the prevailing local culture on pupil attitudes is not surprising and many teachers gave both positive and negative examples of how this influences pupil choice in situations where languages are optional.

We offer visits overseas, three exchanges and work experience abroad. We really publicise the usefulness of learning languages. Our pupils have professional parents who value foreign languages.

(Comprehensive, Derbyshire, maintaining take-up of over 50% in KS4)

We are a successful department with good teaching and positive attitudes. Both parents and pupils understand that to do a language is a good idea.

(Grammar school, Wiltshire. Languages are optional but over 75% of pupils continue at KS4)

Compare this with Fiona, a Year 9 student at a comprehensive school in Southend, Essex: *I'm never going to France, so what's the point?* Numbers learning languages at KS4 in this school have declined significantly.

Many respondents mentioned that attitudes towards language learning among staff teaching other subjects, senior management teams or head teachers were also crucial to success. A significant number of respondents reported poor support from senior managers, other colleagues and careers staff.

Languages are perceived as difficult and not useful, despite the hard work and effort of the Languages faculty. Pupils prefer Drama or NVQ Health and Social Care. There is still the 'what do you want to do languages for?' attitude of teachers of other subjects.

(Comprehensive school, Islington)

Languages are not valued in our school and the attitude that 'Everyone speaks English' prevails. Our school has Science College status and languages are not seen as being as important as other subjects.

(Comprehensive, Doncaster, less than 25% continuing at KS4)

In contrast, schools which were managing to buck the trend, even when languages were optional, often reported good support from senior colleagues:

There is strong support from the head and the head of year and pupils are strongly advised that they should choose a language. Only the strongest cases (in writing from parents) are allowed to drop languages.

(Comprehensive, Kirklees, with over 75% studying a language at KS4)

There is guidance at options time by senior management and students appreciate the importance of languages.

(Comprehensive, Sefton, more than 75% at KS4)

A good number of schools are managing to turn around the trend for fewer pupils opting to study languages through robust promotion in the school and in their community.

Careers advice and use of languages in the world of work has helped. We have outside speakers from local educational establishments, for example our local university; speakers on the relevance of languages. All this has had a positive effect.

(Comprehensive, Lancashire, where take up at KS4 is on the increase)

More active promotion of languages prior to options had a very positive effect and numbers for 2005–6 are much higher.

(Comprehensive, Gateshead)

The whole department is working very hard at KS3 to promote languages by doing trips and workshops.

(Comprehensive, Tower Hamlets)

The decision to allow KS4 pupils to drop languages has strangely resulted in more of them taking it! This is also due to having a far better staff of language teachers, who have raised the profile, need and 'cool' factor of languages. More pupils took languages in the sixth form than ever before this year.

(Comprehensive, Colchester)

Perhaps this remark sums up the importance of attempting to change attitudes:

What are the main factors which affect take-up in languages? Pupils enjoying lessons at Key Stage 3. Parents believing languages are important. The fact that some university courses ask for a good grade in a GCSE language. The Senior Management Team recommending that a language is taken.

¹ Implementing modern foreign languages entitlement in Key Stage 4, Ofsted, June 2005 (HMI 2481)

The one attitude most often mentioned as a cause for the decline in pupils studying languages is the perception among the students that languages are difficult and that many other subjects are easier or, at least, that it is easier to achieve higher grades in other subjects.

Languages are perceived by pupils as hard, as there is much to commit to memory. Practice in memorising material is a much less prevalent skill in other subjects.

MFL is perceived as an elite and difficult subject.

Pupils think languages are too difficult and too much work.

Lots of pupils enjoy languages, but when it comes to options even the bright ones say it's hard.

Many respondents felt that against this background, the increasing emphasis on vocational subjects, the competition with other subjects in a crowded curriculum and more 'exciting' new options, closer to pupils' own areas of interest (PE, Drama, Media Studies), all work against languages at options time.

Diversifying the offer

The experiences of schools offering non-GCSE language courses to motivate learners and meet their needs offer useful perspectives on ways forward. Although, as yet, only a relatively small proportion of schools offer these and for relatively few learners, their experiences are generally very positive.

The offer of Entry level and Level 1 qualifications is often seen as crucial in making languages available for all pupils and keeping up numbers: *Excellent for less able pupils – main reason for 80% take-up.*

But Entry level and Level 1 certification are also being used in a wide range of other circumstances: as a second foreign language for gifted and talented linguists; to provide a qualification and a sense of purpose for those who do not continue with a language beyond Key Stage 3; and to introduce new languages, both at KS4 and in the sixth form, sometimes in combination with vocational courses such as Travel and Tourism. Schools report provision for Italian, Russian, Japanese, Mandarin and Arabic in this format, as well as Spanish, French and German.

Among these qualifications, the Certificate of Business Language Competence is a popular choice, confirming successful experience in the Black Country Networks for Excellence 14–19 Pathfinder which found that the course content offered a more relevant and motivating experience for students:

In five years this is the highest uptake we have had for Spanish. The less able are encouraged by it.

So far the pupils in this class have been far more highly motivated than they were in Year 9.

Better for pupils who do not see the relevance of learning languages.

Feedback from schools which have used NVQ language units is very positive in terms of student experiences:

Pupils enjoy it more than GCSE.

More relevant course content.

Very motivating and accessible.

Excellent as a motivational qualification – group were all CID borderline and all achieved Level 2.

Schools which have been involved in piloting new qualifications – Applied French GCSE, AVCE Language and Business, and Asset Languages qualifications – have welcomed these and many more are hoping to use them in future. The Asset Languages qualifications in particular are praised for their flexibility. Many schools are at the early stages of experimenting with alternative provision and feel they need

to build it up over a number of years before they can see a full picture of the benefits. Others are considering the possibilities, but need support and advice. Their main concerns are about the administrative burden, costs, the availability of teaching resources, and the status accorded to such qualifications. They speak of the need to find a 'niche' for these qualifications within the timetable.

Conclusions

There is a need for schools to adopt strong measures to prevent languages becoming marginalised in the reformed 14–19 curriculum. Languages can and should be at the heart of these reforms. These measures will need to include:

- Redoubled efforts to convince pupils of the value and relevance of languages to their future lives. Training and development in this area for careers teachers.
- Developing the offer of languages courses to include both a wider range of languages and different types of courses suited to different learners. These will include fast-tracking for those capable of being stretched in their language learning; opportunities to study more than one language, including community languages; and languages courses within vocational frameworks.
- Support for schools and recognition of the resources required to achieve this.
- Development of partnership working – with other schools, with colleges and HEIs and with businesses – to develop and share good practice and demonstrate the relevance of language learning.
- Commitment on the part of senior management and governing bodies to ensuring language learning remains a key part of students' educational experience.
- Strong advocacy for languages to win greater acknowledgement of the added value of a language qualification for all students.

Support for languages

The following comments, collected from across a range of institutions, demonstrate the broad base of support for maintaining and developing language learning for our young people:

Although overall confidence is starting to return to languages in higher education, there is a strong concern that less privileged students are increasingly missing out on language opportunities.

Professor Mike Kelly, Director, Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies

The fact is, more and more businesses are looking for employees with language skills, and these career opportunities have to be highlighted for young people. As the complicated process we now call 'globalisation' accelerates, the ability to communicate internationally becomes a pre-requisite for success on so many different levels. That hoary old adage, 'Everyone speaks English', thereby absolving us of the need to learn other languages, will consign the UK to the slow lane of global culture, politics and business.

Miles Templeman, Director General, Institute of Directors

BCC research shows that there is a strong connection between the value an exporter places on language skills within their business and their annual turnover. The greater value placed on language skills, the greater the annual turnover. All those in a position to influence provision must take note of the findings of the CILT survey and recognise the value of languages to business and the economy.

David Frost, Director General, British Chambers of Commerce

We welcome this valuable piece of research. It provides a clear evidence base that helps identify areas of vulnerability in languages.

Dr Liz Beaty, Director (Learning and Teaching), HEFCE
Learning a language can open up a world of opportunity for young people. For example, European funding is available for exchanges to European universities under the Socrates-Erasmus programme, training placements funded by the Leonardo programme or voluntary work placements in Europe through the European Voluntary Service. Additionally, European and other worldwide languages can give young people much more flexibility in where they work and who they work for in future years. UK employers have a shortage of people with language skills and these skills are vital for continued development of the UK economy.

Phil Williams, Careers Europe

Foreign language learning is extremely important for Britain's economic success and for ensuring our students have the skills to compete in a global marketplace. While the statistics presented here and in SHA's recent survey paint a worrying picture, there is already much good work happening in schools to increase the interest in studying languages. The new languages ladder, for instance, is a much more flexible qualification and should help students who struggled with languages at GCSE level to find them relevant and rewarding.
 Dr John Dunford, General Secretary, Secondary Heads Association

The decline in the learning of languages is a serious concern. The study of languages gives an understanding of other cultures, and anyone with an insular outlook is not properly educated. If we think that we can ignore other languages because we wrongly believe the rest of the world is happy to talk in English we shall become an international laughing stock.
 Stephen Adamson, Vice Chair, National Association of School Governors

CBI figures reveal that over 74% of employers are dissatisfied with school leavers' language skills. The CILT survey highlights worrying regional differences and that languages are less likely to be offered in schools with low academic achievement. We need to encourage more of our young people to study languages so they are equipped with skills that help them make their way in the competitive, globalised economy of the 21st century.

Susan Anderson, Director Human Resources Policy, CBI

Further information

The full statistical report can be downloaded from the CILT website at www.cilt.org.uk/key/trends2005/ks4.htm

Making the case for languages at Key Stage 4 will be published by CILT, the National Centre for Languages in December 2005. This new book written by Teresa Tinsley (CILT) and Linda Parker (Association for Language Learning) provides a toolkit of practical suggestions, persuasive arguments and advice on the best ways to reach a range of audiences when making the case for languages post-14.

www.cilt.org.uk/publications/npf5.htm

Thank you to all schools who responded to this survey.



Languages Work

This website and associated materials help teach pupils about the importance of languages and their relevance to the world of work. The Languages Work project is funded by the Department for Education and Skills.

www.languageswork.org.uk

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