

Languages in secondary schools

This year's survey, carried out this autumn 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 explore language provision in secondary schools and in particular participation in language learning in Key Stage 4. Findings are based on a 43% response rate from 860 schools.

Key findings

- The very rapid decline in pupil numbers in Key Stage 4 appears to be slowing. Figures for Year 11 show a small decline on last year, and are stable for Year 10.
- Schools with low participation rates are reluctant to set targets to increase them. Only 17% of schools with languages optional in Key Stage 4 have acted on the Government's requirement to set a benchmark for participation in languages – the same proportion as last year.
- In the independent sector, languages for all in Key Stage 4 is still the norm. Independent schools also offer a greater choice of languages, though there is a greater diversity of qualifications in the maintained sector.
- French and German have been seriously affected by the decline, but Spanish continues to see increases in pupil numbers. More schools now offer Spanish than German. (Although, in terms of pupil numbers, German still has 40% more GCSE candidates than Spanish.)
- There has been a growth in the use of alternative qualifications to GCSE, in particular Asset Languages. The number of maintained schools using Asset Languages has risen to 14% from 9% last year.
- Nearly one third of schools have reduced lesson time for languages in Key Stage 3 and 6% are compressing Key Stage 3 into two years instead of three.

Further details and commentary

Participation at Key Stage 4

Most schools now have fewer than half their pupils studying a language in Key Stage 4. However, this situation appears to be stabilising; we are not seeing the very dramatic declines in take up which have been a feature of the past few years. With regard to Year 10, there appears to be no further decline in pupil participation. Around one quarter of schools report higher numbers in Year 10 than Year 11 and, although in some cases this may be due to fast tracking, there is also some indication of increased take up.

However, there is still a gulf in practice between schools where languages are well supported (in particular grammar schools, Specialist Language Colleges and independent schools) and others where participation has been allowed to decline to extremely low levels – under 10% in one in ten schools. Eleven schools reported no pupils at all taking languages in Year 10.

Schools with lower achievement rates and higher proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals are overwhelmingly the ones with small numbers taking languages. Although Specialist status works to keep languages strong in Language Colleges, the drive for specialist status means languages fare badly in schools with other specialisms to promote. In view of the importance of languages to UK business, it is of particular concern that 73% of Specialist Business and Enterprise Colleges have fewer than 50% of pupils studying a language at Key Stage 4.

Schools with low participation rates are reluctant to set targets to increase them

... the culture of the community is unambitious and MFL is perceived as 'difficult'

Benchmarks

Since January 2006, schools have been required to set a benchmark for participation in languages in Key Stage 4 of between 50% and 90% of pupils. Responses showed that only very few schools (17%) have done this. This proportion has not increased since last year. Moreover, schools which most 'need' to set a target for improvement – where fewer than 50% of pupils take a language in Key Stage 4 – are the most reluctant to set one – only 13% of these have done so.

Language departments are often keen to set participation targets, but report 'little thirst' for this on the part of school leadership teams who have competing priorities.

'It is easier for a school manager not to set a benchmark, than to face reality: declining uptake at KS4 and a need to support and enable MFL at all levels.'

East Midlands comprehensive, 20–25% participation

'Pressure to achieve specific school targets militates against pupils choosing a subject which is less likely to guarantee a Grade C than other subjects. How and why to persuade a head to risk lower results.'

Specialist Technology College, North East, 7% participation in Year 10

'When brought up with SLT, the response was – no-one else is meeting the target so it doesn't matter if we don't'

Specialist Science College, East Midlands

Of the schools which have set a benchmark, over half of schools have set it at 50%, but the range of benchmarks set runs from 20% to 90%. There is evidence that setting targets for participation is starting to be successful in some schools:

'We are trying very hard to get up to at least 50% by adopting many of the guidelines suggested by QCA.'

Specialist Science College in Yorkshire & The Humber with participation rates of 27% in Year 11, 37% in Year 10

Factors influencing take up

Three quarters of schools confirm previous years' findings that it is the way languages are offered within option blocks which is an obstacle to greater take up. There is already pressure on the number of choices available yet schools want the offer to be as free as possible to meet the desire for a more 'personalised' curriculum. As the 14–19 curriculum diversifies, pupils have difficult choices to make, and languages lose out as result:

'With the advent of the new diploma options and the fact that our dual

status means setting targets for those taking these subjects, languages have been marginalised in the option pools.'

Sports and Science College, South West, 30% take-up in Year 10

'We have lots of vocational courses that are taking priority.'

Comprehensive, North East, 4% take-up in Year 10

School policies are crucial, and can have a positive as well as a negative effect:

'We feel that staff have a somewhat negative attitude towards MFL and form tutors and guidance staff do not promote it at options time. Our efforts tend to be negated by others. We do not feel that SMT understand the importance of languages and don't promote them enough.'

Maths and Computing College, East of England 50% in Year 11, 40% take-up in Year 10

'It is only with an extremely supportive school leadership group, favourable option blocking and strong, mixed ability KS3 teaching that we have been able to achieve our take up rates.'

Specialist Arts College, London, participation 50% in Year 11, 60% in Year 10.

Student and parental attitudes were often seen as a barrier, particularly in rural or deprived areas:

'... the culture of the community is unambitious and MFL is perceived as "difficult".'

Science College, East Midlands, 20% participation

'Many pupils do not see languages as important – recent government policy changes have reinforced this.'

Specialist Science College, North West

Staff have a somewhat negative attitude towards MFL and form tutors and guidance staff do not promote it at options time

Languages here are seen as a fun subject which is intellectually rigorous and has a clear use for a number of future careers

In contrast, attitudes to languages in the independent sector remain extremely positive:

'Our modern languages department is thriving ... Languages here are seen as a fun subject which is intellectually rigorous and has a clear use for a number of future careers.'

Boys' Independent School, South East, 100% take-up in Year 10

In order to counteract negative attitudes, two thirds of schools have undertaken promotional or motivational activities and reported positive results:

'Careers input helped this year's uptake. Had a morning of food and film.'

Technology College, North East, 45–50% take-up

'Through strong promotion, particularly using the CILT Languages Work DVDs, we were happy with the cohort choosing a language, both in terms of ability and size.'

Science College, Yorkshire & The Humber, 75% take-up

Some schools are clearly working extremely hard to encourage take up both in and outside the classroom:

'... we have: promoted languages a lot (posters, outside plays, speakers etc.); introduced a new course related to business; offered more travel opportunities to pupils; networked with schools abroad (a French exchange and a German exchange); used more ICT in lessons and more drama as well. In the future we aim to develop and add more (French play acted by pupils, animation movies in a foreign language, podcasts, more travel opportunities, pupils to teach in primary etc).'

Specialist Arts College, West Midlands 25% take-up in Year 11, 30% in Year 10

However, the perception that languages are hard can mean that the effect of such activities is sometimes limited:

'It was very disheartening to see that despite our huge efforts the take

up of MFL at KS4 has declined greatly..An options system which puts MFL in competition with Art, Drama, Media Studies, PE etc. which are perceived by the students as easier and more exciting will always make life very hard for us.'

Maths and Computing College, East of England, 20% participation in Year 10

'GCSEs in MFL are still perceived as difficult and we as teachers believe 'we are swimming against the tide''.

Science College, Yorkshire & The Humber, 75% take-up

Alternative accreditation

There has been a growth in the use of alternative accreditation to GCSE, in particular Asset Languages. The number of maintained schools using Asset Languages has risen to 14% from 9% last year, although many are in the early stages of using it and say it is too early to evaluate its impact. Schools using Asset Languages qualifications at the end of Key Stage 3 with pupils who are giving up languages say it is useful motivation in the final months of study after pupils have made their option choices. As in previous years, there were also positive comments regarding the use of NVQ language units:

'NVQ firmly embedded in our curriculum and increasingly popular with staff, students, parents.'

Dual specialism Maths/Computing and Language College, South East, with languages compulsory in KS4

Curriculum innovation

With a more diversified languages offer highlighted as the way forward in Lord Dearing' Languages Review earlier this year, there are some heartening examples of curriculum development:

An 11–16 school in Yorkshire & The Humber describes how business links involving other curriculum areas have transformed the profile of languages:

'Initially subjects which complement MFL (Business studies/Travel and tourism) were taking our customers rather than working with us, due to option blocks. This has now been changed and the Business/MFL link is strengthened. We are no longer the department needing help but can be seen as helping other departments as I lead the Business Language Champions project ... The value of MFL in making a significant

Students not studying a language are missing positive impact on other subject areas

The social and educational profile of schools with very low participation rates remains an acute cause of concern

contribution to overall literacy is now clear. Students not studying a language are missing positive impact on other subject areas’.

In the South East, a boys’ Humanities College with 100% take-up explains how the introduction of new languages can instil greater enthusiasm for those traditionally taught:

‘We have a leadership group which is keen to promote languages. We are proud of the fact that our numbers for French in Years 12 and 13 have increased. This academic year we have 29 boys taking AS French and fifteen doing A2 French. Studying a language is compulsory in KS4. We have introduced a fast track Spanish course in Year 10 and the first cohort will take the GCSE examination in 2008. There is a growing interest in studying Mandarin in the school. For the past two years a group of boys (Years 10/11) has participated in The British Council’s immersion courses Kunming and Nanhai. This year we have introduced

a Year 7 Calligraphy Club (with some Mandarin input), and a Year 8 Mandarin Club. We have a group of Year 12 boys studying Mandarin after school with a view to taking the Asset Languages tests and another group of Year 11 students will start to study Mandarin after school from January onwards’.

Conclusions

Languages in Key Stage 4 may have reached a nadir, but numbers appear to be stabilising and the indications from this survey are that there are unlikely to be any further significant falls in numbers. There are already signs that some schools are beginning to turn the tide of decline and measures in place from this September should strengthen their efforts. These measures include a far-reaching programme of promotional activities in the regions involving the higher education sector,¹ and the inclusion of languages in performance tables from this summer².

The social and educational profile of schools with very low participation rates remains an acute cause of concern. There is already a divide between the linguistic ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ and this will get wider unless school leaders in establishments with only a handful of GCSE candidates take action. Languages departments need support in driving forward changes to give languages a coherent place within their 14–19 offer. The drive for curriculum innovation will therefore need to go hand in hand with a campaign to promote the value of language study to senior managers within schools.

¹ The Routes into Languages programme is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (£4.5 million) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (£3.5 million). It includes funding for nine regional consortia over three years to improve the take-up of languages post-14 and through to university. The programme was developed by three organisations working in partnership: the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML), the HE Academy Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS), and CILT, the National Centre for Languages. www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk

² Following Lord Dearing’s Languages Review, the benchmark requirement has been strengthened through the introduction in 2008 of two performance indicators, one measuring good grades at GCSE and one measuring participation and attainment. The DCSF has published a guide for school leaders on Languages in Key Stage 4, which may be downloaded or ordered from www.teachernet.gov/publications, using the following reference: DCSF-00669-2007

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/2007/secondary.htm.

Links

Business Language Champions

www.cilt.org.uk/employment/employers/blc.htm

European Day of Languages

www.cilt.org.uk/edl

Languages 14–19

www.cilt.org.uk/14-19

Languages Work

www.languageswork.org.uk

Specialist Language Colleges

www.cilt.org.uk/specialistcolleges

CILT, the National Centre for Languages

111 Westminster Bridge Road

London SE1 7HR

Tel: 020 7379 5101

Fax: 020 7379 5082

www.cilt.org.uk

Association for Language Learning

Association for Language Learning

University of Leicester

University Road

Leicester LE1 7RH

Tel: 0116 229 7453

Fax: 0116 229 7454

www.all-languages.org.uk

Independent Schools’ Modern Languages Association

Duncan Byrne (Chairman ISMLA)

Haberdashers’ Aske’s Boys’ School

Butterfly Lane

Elstree WD6 3AF

Tel: 020 8266 1787

Email: dbyrne@supanet.com

www.ismla.co.uk