Language Trends 2005:
Community language[1] learning in England, Wales and Scotland
Key findings from a survey of local authorities, mainstream and complementary schools[2]

Summary findings

- The linguistic map of the UK is changing: the number of languages in use is growing, and diversity is spreading to parts of the country where previously few languages other than English were spoken. This is accompanied by generational shifts among long-established communities.

- Communities make extensive provision for the study of their own languages and there is also support from schools and local authorities. However, it is becoming more difficult for them to sustain this support.

- The benefits of competence and qualifications in a community language are widely underestimated.

- Community languages teachers face similar challenges to foreign language teachers in schools.

- There is immense potential for closer working between mainstream schools and community providers.

Introduction

Community languages: An overlooked asset?

In the UK there are declining numbers of children studying languages post-14 and sitting GCSE or Standard Grade examinations. Considerable concern has been expressed in the press about the long-term future of languages in UK schools and universities and about the implications for business. Yet, the UK has a major linguistic asset not currently sufficiently recognised in language policy and planning: children from multilingual communities across the UK who are growing up with a knowledge of languages, such as Panjabi, Polish, Somali or Yoruba, in addition to English. Some of these children study their languages at school and many more in complementary classes after school or at weekends. The linguistic skills and achievements of this group of children are often ignored in discussions of the UK's competence in languages other than English. There is a need to recognise the particular benefits which competence in community languages represents for the children themselves, for their communities and for wider British society, and to identify ways in which their potential as linguists can best be realised.

Benefits of bilingualism

There is now a substantial body of research testifying to the benefits bilingualism brings to the individual. It has positive effects on both linguistic and educational development. Research has found that the level of development of children's first language is a strong predictor of their second language development, and that promoting languages other than the majority language at school helps develop not only these languages, but also children's abilities in the majority language. Studies of intelligence have shown that bilingual children perform better than their monolingual peers in a range of tests, while comparisons of bilingual and monolingual students' performance in school subjects, such as literacy, numeracy and science, show that bilingual students who have had the opportunity to develop both languages in an academic context (e.g. Scottish children who speak Gaelic and English and who attend Gaelic-medium primary schools) perform at least as well, and often better, than their monolingual counterparts.[3]

Research collated by the Welsh Language Board has shown that children who speak two languages are:

- more versatile and creative in their thinking;

- more intellectually advanced in other fields at four and five years old;

- better at retaining their mental abilities into old age.[4]

> Research from a number of different countries shows that bilingual pupils tend to do better in IQ tests and creative assessments. Also, bilingual pupils do better in Scientific reasoning tests and in Mathematics achievement tasks compared with monolingual pupils.
>
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> University of Wales, Bangor

Many of the benefits which modern languages specialists recognise in students who gain competence in languages, such as French, German or Spanish, apply equally to those who speak community languages, such as Urdu, Chinese or Greek. These include increased awareness of and interest in the wider world, greater confidence in communicating in a range of different contexts, enhanced understanding of cultural differences and a willingness to engage with people and ideas from elsewhere in the world. These are personal qualities of value in themselves, but also are clearly of considerable worth in a business context. A key issue for the UK in the age of globalisation is which languages are likely to be of most benefit for the economy, for trade, and for international relations in the 21st century. Some of the most widely spoken and studied community languages – Urdu, Turkish, Chinese Bengali and Arabic – are likely to be on that list.

Quantitative findings

A substantial proportion of schoolchildren, aged between 5 and 18 speak a wide range of community languages:

- In Scotland, at least 11,000 children speak at least 104 languages.

- In Wales, at least 8,000 children speak at least 98 languages.[5]

- In England, at least 702,000 children speak at least 300 languages.

• London is the most linguistically diverse area, but even outside London, at least 196 languages are spoken.[6]

At least 61 of these languages are taught to children of school age at complementary schools or centres. These are usually run by the communities themselves with classes held after school or at weekends. On average, complementary school students spend one to two hours a week attending language classes.

Mainstream secondary schools provide opportunities for children to learn at least 35 community languages as part of the core curriculum (i.e. during the school day) or as part of the enhanced curriculum (i.e. on school premises, after school hours).

In addition, in Scotland, children can study through the medium of Gaelic in 61 primary schools.

The most widely taught community languages are Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Turkish and Urdu.

Numbers of students attending complementary schools are highest in the primary and early secondary years (i.e. from ages 5 to 14), but after this, begin to drop. However, provision in mainstream schools targets the mid-secondary years (14–16), in many cases preparing students for GCSE or Standard Grade examinations in community languages. There are clearly opportunities for mainstream and complementary schools to make links and support community language learning across different stages.

Around four-fifths (79%) of mainstream secondary schools which make provision for community languages, and over two-thirds (70%) of complementary schools, enter students for public examinations.

In 2005, around 26,000 students sat GCSEs in community languages, and 12,250 sat A/S and A levels. In Scotland, 657 students sat Standard Grades in Urdu and Gaelic, 232 students sat Higher Gaelic and 30 sat Advanced Higher Gaelic. (Gaelic figures include both 'native speakers' and 'second language speakers'.) In Wales 474 candidates sat GCSEs and 256 sat A/S and A levels in languages other than French, German, Spanish and Welsh.

Examination figures[7]

Language	A: All GCSE entries 2005	% change in all entries from 2001 to 2005	B: % of all 2004 GCSE candidates from English mainstream schools**	C: % change in the number of English school entries from 2001 to 2004	All A level entries 2005 (2001)
Urdu	6,334	-1	88	-12	739 (485)
Chinese	3,091	+40	59	-12	2,062 (1375)
Irish	2,507	-5	0	0	306 (275)
Arabic	2,183	+63	69	-7	429 (275)*
Bengali	1,865	-17	93	-21	83 (58)
Russian	1,736	-1	79	-25	636(469)
Panjabi	1,341	-15	89	-15	203 (226)
Turkish	1,337	+30	75	-1	362 (234)*
Japanese	1,120	+74	67	-3	251 (221)
Gujarati	1,080	-26	100	-10	46 (41)*
Portuguese	1,028	+57	65	-6	175 (111)
Greek	604	+17	90	+14	159 (125)
Hebrew	442	+9	100	+16	40 (16)
Persian	441	+37*	72	+32	170(112)*
Polish	405	+35	76	+33	126 (97)
Dutch	380	+31*	66	+6	119 (37)
Total	**25,894**	**+9**	**80***	**-11**	**5,906**

* comparison is with 2002 – figures not available for previous years

** This column shows entries from 15-year-olds in schools in England in 2004 as a proportion of total entries across all sectors of education in the UK 2004. Note that all entries include a relatively small number of candidates (under 2.5%) from Wales and Northern Ireland. School figures are not yet available for 2005. The figures do not show whether candidates were external or internal, or whether they received tuition.

*** % base excludes Irish, for which almost all candidates were in Northern Ireland.

Two sets of figures are presented here relating to GCSE. In column A, the total number of GCSE entries for each language in 2005, and in column B, the proportion (based on 2004 figures) which come from English mainstream secondary schools. The remaining proportion covers entries from adult and further education, as well as candidates from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. We have compared these figures with data from 2001[8], to show some interesting, if complex, trends:

• Indian sub continent languages are declining across the board. This may represent a generational shift in communities which are now well established in the UK

• Other languages are on the increase, particularly 'world' languages such as Arabic and Chinese, and European languages.

• With the exception of the five languages with the lowest numbers of candidates (Greek, Persian, Hebrew, Polish and Dutch), we have seen a decline in the number of entries from schools in England from 2001 to 2004. This tallies with reports we have received of an increasingly difficult situation for these languages in schools.

• Languages vary enormously in the proportion of entries coming from the English schools sector – only 59% in the case of Chinese, about two-thirds for Portuguese, Japanese and Arabic, but up to circa 90% for Bengali, Panjabi and Urdu.

The pattern of A level entries reflects almost exactly trends at GCSE: Chinese, in particular, shows remarkable growth and we need to investigate further the extent to which this is accounted for by community language provision.

The situation of Urdu is unclear: numbers are fairly stable at GCSE, however, they have increased for AS and A level.

Progression rates to A Level are very good in most cases: A level Arabic entries for 2005 are 22% of GCSE entries in 2003[9]; for Turkish the proportion is 30%; 14% for Panjabi and 11% for Urdu. These may be compared with a 4% progression rate for French, for example. Chinese shows a spectacular retention rate of students from GCSE to A level: 76%. Japanese is 31%.

Qualitative findings

Rationale for teaching community languages

Mainstream and complementary providers all agree that it is important for students to learn to understand, speak, read and write their community languages well. Mainstream providers place great emphasis on gaining qualifications, while complementary school directors give high priority to gaining access to the history, culture and/or religion associated with the language. Teachers in complementary schools rate highly students' enjoyment of language learning and opportunities to meet others from a similar language background, seeing both of these as important factors in students' choosing to study a community language.

Reasons for choosing to study a community language
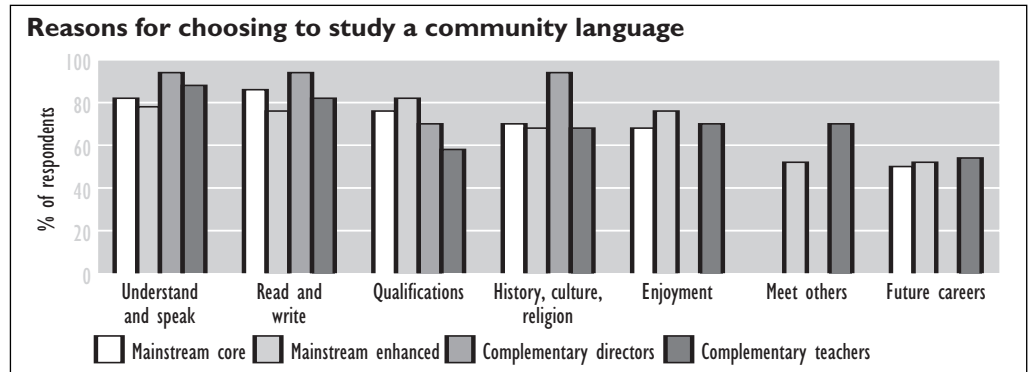
However, providers across the board are less likely to see community languages as being of value for students' future careers. This indicates that there is scope to draw providers' attention to the demand for community languages in careers ranging from interpreting, translating and teaching to business, international relations and the media.

The changing linguistic map of Britain

Over several decades, the main community languages spoken in Britain have been those of the Indian sub continent: Panjabi, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati and Hindi. But, there is evidence of increasing diversification, and also of demographic change, affecting both areas where bilingual communities are well established and those where until recently there were very few bilingual pupils at school. For example, in Wakefield, a local authority where Panjabi and Urdu speakers made up 99% of the bilingual school population five years ago, there are now many more languages in use. The Scottish Borders traditionally had few students who spoke community languages, but recently Portuguese – and Russian – speaking families have moved to the area to work in the fishing industry. Similarly, in Wrexham, a local authority with very few community language speakers five years ago, there are now at least 25 languages spoken in schools, including Portuguese, Polish, Tagalog and Shona.

Several mainstream and complementary school respondents drew our attention to the fact that the context for community language learning is changing. For example, many Asian children currently at school are the second or third generation from their community to be born in the UK. They may have less exposure to a community language at home or in the neighbourhood, and fewer ties to the country from which their grandparents or great-grandparents emigrated. Their experience of using community languages may be limited to specific situations, and teaching approaches need to take into account of the fact that some may not be fluent speakers. At the same time, many children of refugees and asylum seekers, and of economic migrants from different parts of the European Union are new arrivals in schools across Britain, increasingly in areas where previously there was little experience of bilingualism. They may have already achieved high levels of competence in their community languages but be unable to demonstrate this because of lack of appropriate provision.

There is concern among providers that the context for community languages provision is becoming more difficult. Figures for exam entries certainly show a decline in some languages and particularly in mainstream schools. This mirrors the national decline in take-up of modern languages. It seems likely that community languages provision is similarly affected by schools' decisions to make languages optional post-14, and by wider societal views that competence in languages other than English is not a high educational priority. There is a need to draw secondary school students' attention to the benefits of studying and gaining qualifications in community languages.

Challenges – and some solutions

Ambivalence in mainstream attitudes towards community languages

Attitudes expressed by some mainstream school staff and some local authority representatives indicate that community language learning is not always seen as valuable or as a high priority and some found it difficult to provide any positive reasons for making provision. Some feel that students are spending time and gaining credit for something that they are 'naturally' good at and that this is a waste of resources (although it is never suggested that English-speaking students do not need to study the language formally at school because they are already 'naturally' competent in the language). It is important to recognise that it takes many years of study for monolingual English-speaking students to acquire high levels of literacy in English, and the same is true for those who speak community languages. Students may gain varying levels of oral fluency at home or in their communities, but learning to read and write the

language requires a different sort of attention, particularly when it involves a different script.

A key rationale for failing to provide support for community languages put forward by several authorities is that they have to prioritise provision of English as an additional language. Such provision is of great importance but English and community languages are not mutually exclusive areas of provision; nor are the students always the same people, as many of the children interested in studying community languages are already fully fluent in English.

A focus on potential qualification gains may be one way of promoting community languages to those who remain unsure of the value of making provision. Exam data shows that attainment levels are very high. In 2004 80% of GCSE entrants gained A*–C grades and over 50% received and A or A*. This, of course, reflects the advantage students have of contact with the language outside the classroom; however, it also suggests that many more students, capable of obtaining B or C grades, are not being entered for the exam.

Students have much to gain by achieving an additional qualification, and schools and authorities will benefit from this in their performance tables.

High levels of diversity, low student numbers

A key dilemma for both mainstream and complementary providers is the fact that the range of languages in use in British schools appears to be increasing, but the numbers of students who speak any one language may be small. Moreover, concentrations of students shift from year to year. Several schools had the experience of recruiting teachers and organising provision, only to find that numbers of students in that language fell in subsequent years, while the numbers for other languages, not available, rose.

This dilemma is widely recognised among those involved in provision for community languages and both the QCA and NALDIC have advocated greater collaboration and mutual support as ways forward.[10]

Training and professional development for community languages teachers

Community languages teachers have a wide range of qualifications, from the UK and overseas, and differing experiences of language teaching. One of their key requirements is for greater opportunities for professional development. In some areas, their concerns are similar to those of

modern languages colleagues: they are looking for opportunities to develop their use of ICT in the classroom, interested in finding ways of making language learning more engaging and enjoyable and, like all teachers, they are concerned to become more effective in areas such as classroom management, understanding and responding to different student learning strategies and improving the quality of their teaching. Other issues are more specific to community language teaching. Given the diversity of students' experiences of the language they study – which may be their 'mother tongue', their 'second language', a language they use for specific purposes, or a language which is part of their cultural heritage, but not one which they actually use at all – they have a particular concern for mixed-ability teaching and differentiation, to enable them to work in classes with similar abilities but mixed ages, or conversely, similar ages but a wide range of abilities and experiences.

Professional development is expensive and may be difficult for complementary schools, in particular, to access. One approach may be to support the development of partnerships, between community languages and modern languages teachers in the same school or authority, between mainstream and complementary schools who have students in common, or between teachers of the same languages in different areas. Informal discussions and opportunities to network may enable teachers to share ideas and approaches and also help to identify a wider range of professional development options.

Questions

The survey indicates a need for further debate within education and, more specifically, within languages education and with the communities themselves about the place and the value of community language learning:

1. Are there significant differences between modern languages and community languages in terms of rationales, goals, values and student experiences?

2. What would be the benefits of bringing provision for these groups of languages closer together?

3. What gains might we expect to see from enhanced provision and take-up of opportunities for community language learning?

4. What steps should be taken and which actors should be involved in helping to achieve this?

If you would like to contribute to this debate, please e-mail us at commlangs@cilt.org.uk or use the contact details opposite.