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Language Trends 2020

Language teaching in
primary and secondary
schools in England

Survey report
by Ian Collen



Introduction

The British Council is the United Kingdom's (UK) international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. As well as teaching English all over the world, the British Council advocates for languages in the UK, and produces research on language learning in schools and on the value of languages and intercultural learning to the UK.

Language Trends, which started in 2002, is an annual survey of primary and secondary schools in England, designed to gather information about the situation for language teaching and learning. Its aims are to assess the impact of policy measures in relation to languages and to analyse strengths and weaknesses based both on quantitative evidence and on views expressed by teachers.

This year's survey received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast. All participants gave their voluntary informed consent to take part.

The survey was carried out from early March to mid-April 2020. Schools were invited by email to participate, using the Department for Education's (DfE) official Register of Educational Establishments in England. The data collection phase coincided with the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, which led to all schools in England being closed on 20th March 2020. This has resulted in fewer responses to the survey than in previous years: 608 primary schools (down from 776 in 2019) and 320 secondary schools (a significant drop from 845 in 2019), of which 271 were state-funded and 49 independent. The schools represent all regions of England but there is a low participation rate from state secondary schools in the North East, with just ten responses.

Univariate and some multivariate analysis were performed on the quantitative data to identify overall trends; qualitative comments were analysed by means of thematic analysis¹, using deductive coding. These codes were then quantified in order to identify common themes across the data set.

Response rates	Primary ²	State Secondary	Independent
	10.1%	10.3%	5.7%

In interpreting the data presented, particular caution needs to be exercised: responding schools are more often than not from more affluent areas; 8 out of 10 primary schools and almost 7 out of 10 state secondary schools have a more favourable Free School Meal (FSM) percentage than the England averages of 15.8% and 14.1% respectively.³ The independent school return rate is too small to generalise. As in previous years of Language Trends, the picture emerging from responding schools may be more positive than the national reality. We can, however, still make some comparisons with previous years' data and identify emerging trends.

Policy background and context

Arguably the most significant event shaping policy in recent years has been the decision to leave the European Union (EU). In 2018, 34% of respondents to Language Trends reported that leaving the European Union was having a negative impact on attitudes to language learning and in 2019, 45% of responding state schools indicated that the implications of leaving the EU are a challenge to providing high quality language teaching. This year's report sheds light on the state of language learning in England in the months immediately after leaving the EU. With the backing of the Royal Society, the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Royal Academy of Engineering, the British Academy has urged the government to adopt a National Strategy for Languages, stating that the decision to leave the EU 'makes it even more important for the UK to have the languages needed to forge wider commercial and other links'.⁴

Languages have been a statutory part of the curriculum at Key Stage 2 (KS2, Years 3 – 6, ages 7-11) since 2014. Previous Language Trends reports have highlighted that in practice some schools lack capacity to deliver and provision is inconsistent. There have also been calls for an implementation strategy to realise the political willingness for primary languages.⁵ The National Curriculum must be taught in all local authority maintained schools in England and The National Curriculum Framework stipulates that languages must be taught from ages 7-14⁶. At KS2, the requirement is for a foreign language to be taught and this can include an ancient language such as Ancient Greek or Latin; at Key Stage 3 (KS3, Years 7 – 9, ages 11-14) the requirement is specifically for a modern foreign language. After the age of 14, all pupils in maintained schools have a right to provision in four

'entitlement areas', one of which is the study of a modern foreign language. However, academies and free schools, which make up a majority of the secondary schools in England, are not obligated to teach the National Curriculum, although in practice many follow it, at least in part. They are, nonetheless, required to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and are subject to inspection by Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Independent schools in England are free to set their own curriculum.

Languages form one of the five pillars of the government's English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measure of school performance alongside English, mathematics, the sciences, and the humanities (geography or history). The EBacc had a temporary effect on improving uptake of languages at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 2013; however, in 2017 only 38.2%⁷ of pupils in the state sector were entered for the EBacc, and of those who entered 4 out of the 5 components 80.4% were missing the languages component. The further dip in GCSE languages entries of 2017 and 2018 does not seem to have followed through to 2019, where we can see an increase in candidates for French and Spanish. Nevertheless, boys' entries in modern foreign languages are consistently fewer than those of girls, making languages the only EBacc subject pillar to have a significant gender divide.⁸ It will be interesting to keep an eye on trends over the next few years, especially since Ofqual, the examinations' regulator, will instruct Awarding Bodies from Summer 2020 to adjust the boundary at grades 4 and 7 for GCSE French and German to bring them into line with Spanish.

At post-16, the 'decoupled' AS and A levels for first teaching from September 2016 have now seen two suites of awards (2018, 2019). Many schools no longer require pupils to take four subjects in Year 12, as the revised linear A Levels with terminal assessment are seen as a two-year course.

Headline findings

The headline findings for 2020 are:

- Clear evidence that primary languages are embedded in policy, but not in practice;
- In the state sector, primary to secondary transition remains underdeveloped. There are diverging attitudes between primary and secondary teachers in relation to pupil progress at the point of transition. This highlights the need for a robust implementation strategy for primary languages and transition across the 7-14 age range;
- A growing number of pupils are being disappplied from languages at KS3 in both state and independent sectors to receive extra support in literacy. More research needs to be done to understand the cross-curricular role which

languages could play in improving literacy;

- Global English⁹ appears to be a threat to, as opposed to a motivator for, uptake of languages at secondary;
- In the state sector, uptake for languages is much healthier at GCSE in all-boys and all-girls schools, compared to mixed-schools;
- There is a decline in pupil uptake of languages at A level in both independent and state sectors.
- School visits remain healthy in both state and independent sectors.

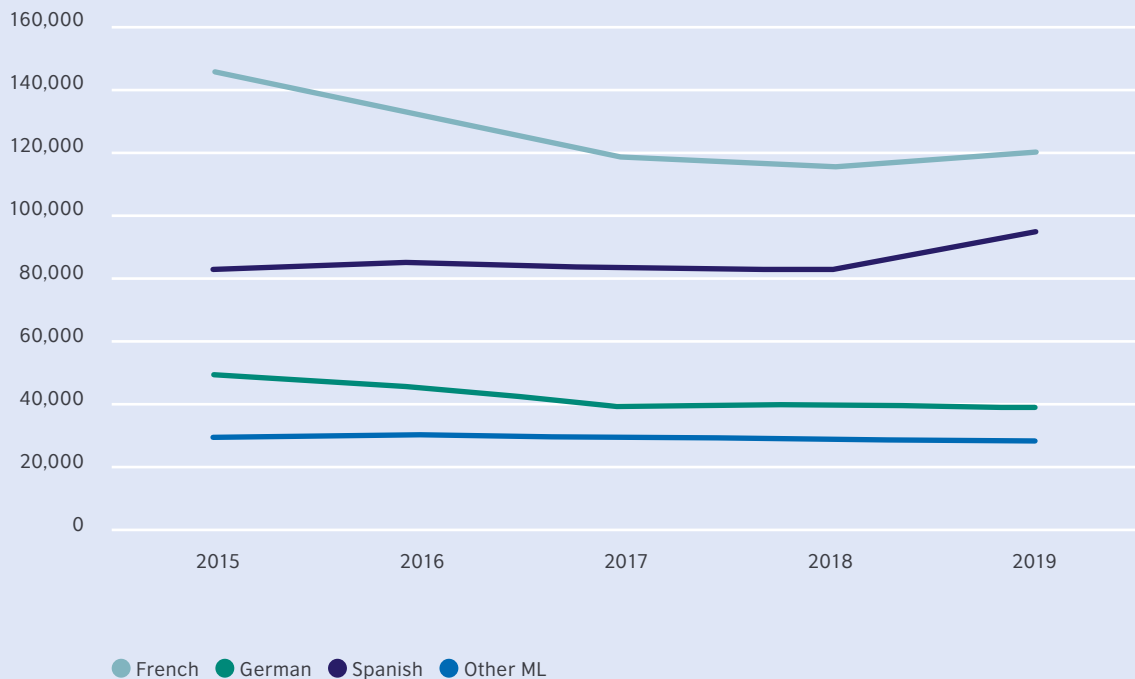
Official exam figures

Official data on GCSE and A-level results from the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) show that whilst entries in GCSE languages have more than halved since 2005, there are signs of a small increase between 2018 and 2019; entries for French increased by almost 4% and Spanish by 7.5%. German suffered a further small decline. French remains the most popular language, but it looks set to be overtaken by Spanish by 2030, or earlier, if current trends continue. Overall, there is still a long way to go to return to the figures of 2005.

With thanks to Teresa Tinsley, Alcantara Communications, for her support and guidance with this year's survey.

1. Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2, pp.77-101.
2. From a sample of 6,000 primary schools
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>
4. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/national-academies-urge-government-develop-national-languages-strategy>
5. Holmes, B. and Myles, F. (2019). White Paper: Primary Languages Policy in England – The Way Forward. RIPL: www.ripl.uk/policy/
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4>
7. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/676596/SFR01_2018.pdf
8. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/boys-language-gcse>
9. 'Global English' is understood to signify that English is spoken in every part of the world, both among speakers within a particular country who share a first language, and across speakers from different countries and first language

GCSE Entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015 - 2019



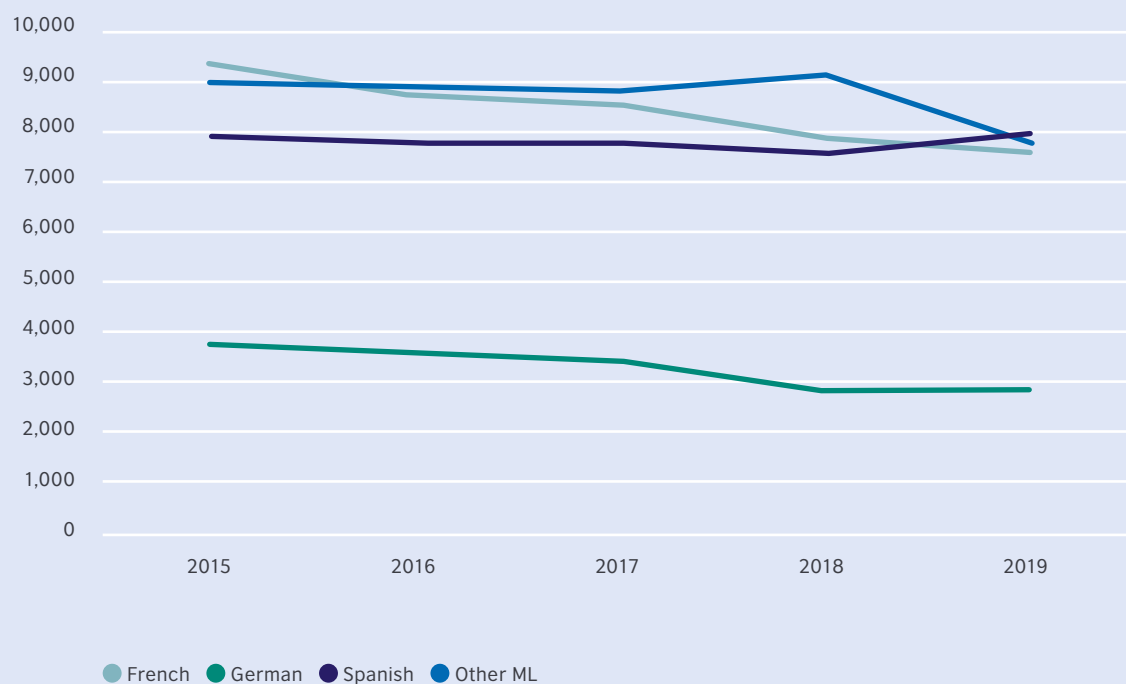
	2005 baseline	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
French	251706	147356	135401	121095	117925	122803
German	101466	51986	47913	41762	42509	41222
Spanish	57731	85217	87581	85184	89577	96811
Other Modern Languages	28182	32090	32704	31668	31437	30997

GCSE Entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England (Source, JCQ).

In 2019, 30,997 pupils took GCSE in heritage / lesser taught languages, excluding Irish and Welsh. In all UK nations, there has been an increase in entries for Polish from 4,357 in 2018 to 5,704 in 2019 as well as increases in Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish and Urdu. Decreases are noted in Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Gujarati, Japanese, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Panjabi and Persian.

At A level, Spanish entries have increased by almost 5% from 2018, overtaking French as the most popular language for the first time since A levels began, just as previous Language Trends reports predicted. Since 2005, French and German have both experienced steep declines, but Spanish has grown almost year on year. Compared to French and German, Spanish also enjoys a higher percentage of GCSE pupils continuing to A level: from the 2017 GCSE cohort, 6.3% of candidates in French and 6.9% of candidates in German converted to full A level in 2019; in Spanish the conversion rate was a healthier 9.3%. In other words, almost one in every ten candidates of GCSE Spanish chooses to continue with the language to A level.

A level Entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015 - 2019



	2005 baseline	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
French	12716	9332	8753	8539	7874	7607
German	5481	3791	3617	3422	2859	2864
Spanish	5601	7941	7774	7813	7591	7932
Other Modern Languages	6249	9039	8884	8862	9091	7762

A level Entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England (Source JCQ)

Survey Findings: Languages in Primary Schools

Whilst the number of responding schools is lower than in previous years, we have enough responses to make some comparisons and identify trends. 74% of the 608 responding schools this year report they have taught a language as part of curriculum time for more than five years. This figure is up from 51% in 2015, suggesting the subject is better embedded in schools' policies.

However, almost 40% of schools state that, in practice, pupils do not always receive language teaching according to the time allocated each week throughout the year. In analysing qualitative comments from respondents, the most common theme is 'time constraints'. A typical response is as follows:

"Timetable restrictions, school trips and things like the Year 6 SATS and pressure on data can mean that it is not always consistent."

Languages taught

French, on the curriculum in 75% of schools, remains the most taught language at KS2. Spanish, which has been growing year on year in primary since Language Trends 2012, is now offered in 25% of primary schools. German is taught in 4.5% of schools, whilst Chinese, Italian and Latin are available in less than 3% of schools in our sample.

88% of respondents report that their school actively plans for substantial progress in one language over the course of KS2 – an increase of almost 10% on the 2019 figure. In planning for learning, schools rely heavily on the KS2 Framework for Languages, the DfE Programme of Study and half of the respondents reported dependence on commercial schemes of work, a figure which is similar to that reported in 2015.

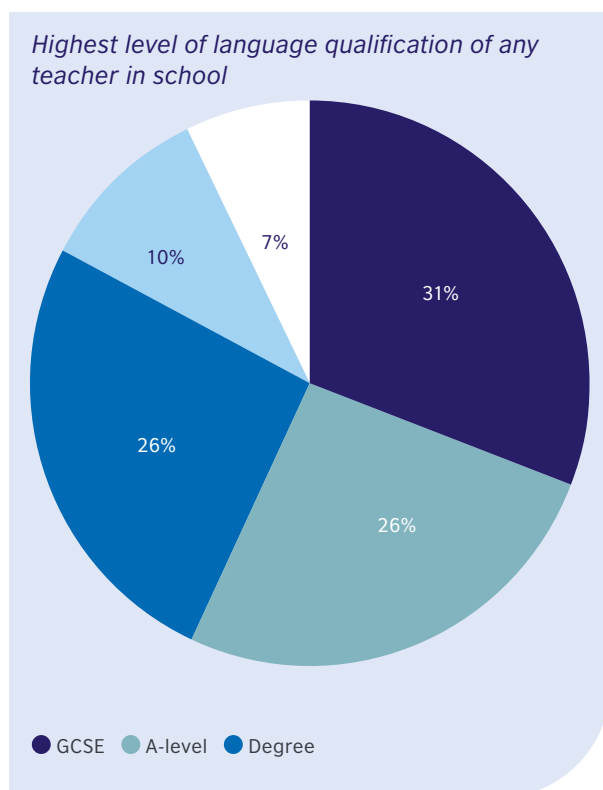
Time for teaching at primary

50% of teachers reported that where languages are taught at KS2, the time allocation was less than 45 minutes per week. 30% of teachers reported that languages at KS2 were taught for between 45 minutes and 1 hour per week.

Nine out of ten respondents indicate that their school has a set time for teaching languages each week, though as mentioned above this does not always play out in practice. The remaining 10% of teachers report having a set time per year for language learning, ranging from 12 hours to 30 hours. A number of schools within this latter group report having a half-day per half-term devoted to language learning, rather than teaching on a weekly basis. Only 13% of respondents report that they formally assess pupils' progress in language learning.

Language teachers' qualifications and cpd

Staff qualifications in languages are broadly similar to the findings of Language Trends 2015, but it is notable that the percentage of staff with no qualifications in the language they are teaching has decreased from 11% in 2015 to 6% in 2020.



Almost 70% of schools deliver primary languages in-house, either with class teachers or by a specialist who is also a member of the school's staff. The specialist is often an HLTA¹⁰ who has good language skills:

"Pupils are taught by an HLTA who is a member of the school's staff and who has a MFL degree, but not QTS"¹¹

"It depends on the confidence of the teacher. Some pass this subject to an HLTA who teaches during the class teacher's Planning, Preparation and Assessment time. But others who may have more confidence will teach the lesson themselves. (The latter is very rare)."

Schools with lower levels of FSM, lower levels of Pupil Premium, and higher KS2 attainment are statistically more likely to make use of specialist language teachers.

However, whether teaching is by class teachers, specialist speakers including some HLTAs or specialist languages teachers, over 70% of teachers have not accessed language-specific Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in the last year. Where the highest language qualification of school staff is a GCSE, the figure for those who have not availed of subject specific CPD increases to 86%. Those respondents who have taken part in subject-specific CPD report the following:

"Sharing of resources with language specialist and observing a specialist teach lessons."

"Training with a history museum in London in using Latin in the primary classroom."

"Language upskilling – teachers' CPD trip to France for a week linking with a school."

"Language upskilling in the form of Erasmus+ training in Spain for six teachers."

"Language upskilling day at a local sixth form college."

"INSET day of local learning alliance provided language specific CPD - led by Head of Languages from a local secondary school: covered Ofsted framework, planning and assessment, classroom resources"

28% of teachers report that a lack of language specific CPD is one of the three main challenges for their school in meeting the National Curriculum requirements for modern/ancient languages.

Ofsted inspection

Almost a third (27.65%) of respondents reported that their school had been inspected by Ofsted in the last 12 months. Of the 167 primary schools which were inspected by Ofsted, just 7.7% reported that languages were a focus of the inspection ('deep dive')¹² and/or were mentioned in the public report. This figure is much lower than 2019 when 28% of inspected schools reported that languages were a focus of the inspection and/or were mentioned in the public report. This can be explained in part by the changing nature of inspections. As an agent of change in scrutinising the intent, implementation and impact of the curriculum, Ofsted inspections can play a pivotal role in the embedding of primary languages policy into practice.

International engagement

Over the past three years, the number of primary schools availing of opportunities for international engagement has steadily decreased. 61% of primary schools reported having no opportunities for international engagement for pupils or teachers, which is an increase of 15% on the 2018 figure. The number of primary schools hosting a Language Assistant has halved in the same period.

10. Higher Level Teaching Assistant

11. Qualified Teacher Status

12. Ofsted (2019) 'Inspecting the curriculum: Revising inspection methodology to support the education inspection framework'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-the-curriculum>

	2018	2019	2020
The school has one or more partner schools abroad	35%	27%	19%
Involvement in international projects	22%	16%	10%
Host a language assistant	5%	5%	2.5%
Pupil exchanges	5%	2%	1.5%
School trips abroad	12%	8%	8%
Teacher exchanges	6%	7%	4.5%
Teacher CPD abroad	9%	7%	5%
eTwinning	-	11%	6%
None	46%	50.5%	61%

In qualitative comments, the most frequent emerging themes for not engaging in international activity were 'finances' and 'time'. One teacher summed up her experience as:

"I did do a Primary Teacher project in 2012, spending time in a French Primary school. It was a fabulous experience and our children exchanged letters for some years before the contact left and it fizzled out. The reality is that all these links take up a huge amount of time, personal energy and some personal cost. As a teacher with a busy job and subject leadership responsibility for languages in a school with little money, I don't have the time, energy or resources in an average week to countenance more twinning links or hosting visits alongside the day to day demands of teaching."

In addition to financial and time constraints, current circumstances are already having an impact on international engagement. It will be interesting to follow the impact of a worldwide pandemic on the international dimension of language learning in the years to come:

"We participated in Comenius a few years ago. We have also hosted visits from teachers and pupils from Spain, Italy, Sweden, La Réunion. This year we organised our first trip abroad for children - unfortunately this is unlikely to happen due to COVID-19."

Attitudes of senior school leaders

Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 0 – 10 how well their school senior leadership team rate languages on the primary curriculum. Although it must be borne in mind that many respondents may themselves have been senior school staff (the invitation to complete the survey was addressed to the Headteacher with a request to forward to the Languages Coordinator), the results show an improvement on the 2019 attitudinal figures. The average score increased from 6.5 in 2019 to 7 in 2020, and more than half (54%) report that their senior management rates languages highly (scoring 8 points or above, up from 36% in 2019). Just 14% of respondents indicated that attitudes of senior leaders were negative by giving a mark of 5 or below. This is an improvement on the 35% of respondents who indicated this negative attitude in 2019.

Final comments from primary

25% of respondents provided comments on good practice which has helped them to overcome issues in language learning in their school. In these comments, it is clear that many teachers and pupils enjoy language learning. Whilst this year's Language Trends adds to the body of research evidence that more needs to be done to support primary languages, we must not lose sight of the fact that there is much to celebrate:

"We are committed to the principle that learning a Modern Foreign Language is appropriate for all children, whatever their ability or special needs. Our main objective in the teaching of MFL is to encourage all children to develop a positive attitude towards language learning."

"Our children really enjoy French. It has been really interesting to see some children who struggle in other areas of the curriculum really thrive in language learning."

Other good practice included an occasional French Café for parents, curriculum mapping from Year 1 to Year 6 and onto KS3, use of online fora such as the Association for Language Learning (ALL) website to share ideas, cross-phase planning, bespoke primary language learning communities of practices with particular Local Authorities and Academy chains, and a focus on the teaching of language in manageable chunks.

Transition from Key Stage 2 (KS2) to Key Stage 3 (KS3)

Questions about transition from KS2 to KS3 date back to the 2014 Language Trends Report. The trend over the years has been for primary schools to have less contact with secondary schools with regard to languages and the 2020 data reveal yet another deterioration:

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
46%	44%	49%	50%	53%	55%	56%

Percentage of primary schools with no contact with secondary schools

In the state secondary survey 46% of respondents in 2020 report no contact with primary schools with regard to languages (down from 52% in 2019 and 77% in 2014); in addition, 74% report that they receive no data on pupil prior attainment. Furthermore, almost 70% of respondents state that in KS3 some pupils start a new language to the language studied at primary level. Despite much academic research into KS2-3 transition, it is clear that this remains an area of major concern, not least because of the government's ambition for a high-quality languages curriculum from ages 7 to 14.

Where schools do cooperate, the most popular form of collaboration is 'exchanging information informally' (53% of respondents). There is very little evidence of collaborative planning or sharing of next practice. Where schools are involved in collaboration, the following comments by primary teachers are indicative of activities:

"The secondary school brings a group of year 9 pupils in each June to do a carousel of activities in both Spanish and French to our year 5 and 6 pupils. This gives our pupils the chance to have a go at French, as some have to select a language before going to high school and haven't had a chance to try out French."

"Year 6 students sometimes attend a language lesson as part of a transition programme. If the secondary school have exchange students, they sometimes visit our secondary school."

"We have invited secondary school colleagues to see how our lessons are run in school but at present

they haven't taken us up on the offer."

"We used to have someone from the local secondary school come in and teach KS2 classes every other week. Due to lack of funding this no longer continues."

Secondary teachers are all too aware of the need to collaborate with primary colleagues but their comments suggest that a lack of any coherent and properly funded framework for KS2 to KS3 transition in languages is holding back progress. Just 3.5% of secondary teachers say that all pupils in Year 7 continue with the same language learned at primary school. More often than not, language learning at KS3 starts from scratch:

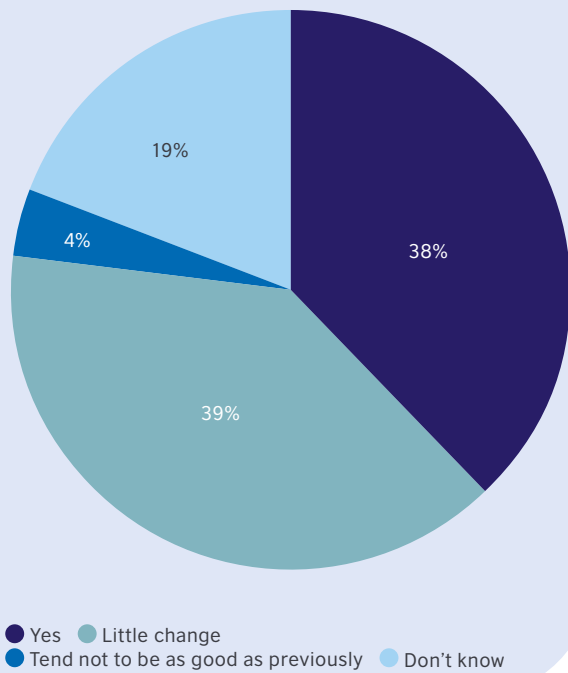
"Very little information is available. We have over 50 feeder schools but some information about which language is studied and for how long is collected by liaising teachers (non linguists) who visit the schools for a transition programme."

"No info available. We teach French as if from scratch, since at least some students have not done French before. We do set extension work for those students who are not challenged by the work due to good primary school teaching. By about week 3 or 4 of the first half-term, all students are on the same level, and any disadvantage because of lack of primary language has been made up."

"We assume no prior learning - none of the local primaries teaches Spanish which is what KS3 learn."

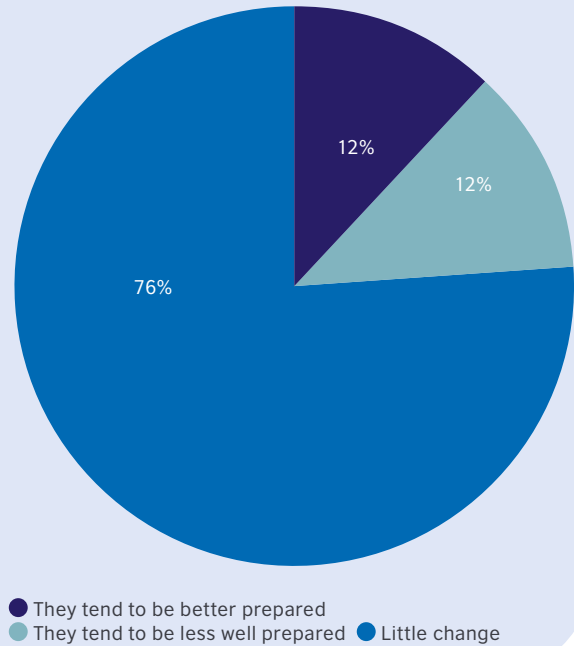
Perceptions of year on year improvements in language learning

Are outcomes at the end of Year 6 improving for successive cohorts? (Primary school respondents)



38% of primary teachers believe that outcomes at the end of Year 6 are improving for successive cohorts of pupils (37% in 2019). On the other hand, just 12% of secondary teachers (13% in 2019) regard their current year 7 pupils as having had a better preparation at primary school for language learning at KS3.

How does the preparation of current Year 7 pupils compare to previous cohorts? (Secondary school respondents)



These data provide evidence of diverging attitudes between primary and secondary teachers in relation to progress in languages at the point of transition.

Languages in Secondary Schools

French remains the most taught language at all Key Stages in both state and independent schools, with the exception of Spanish which is the most taught language post-16. The data in the table below show the percentages of responding schools offering each of the following most widely taught languages at KS3:

	State Secondary	Independent
French	95%	92%
German	60%	69%
Spanish	79%	85%

The shrinkage in German noted in Language Trends 2019, where the subject fell to 40% at KS3, is not replicated in this year's survey. This may be explained by the smaller response rate and the profile of responding schools. As in 2019, Spanish appears to be stable across all Key Stages in both sectors.

Time for languages

In the current survey, 67% of state schools offer up to three hours of languages at KS3. Schools with fewer teaching hours for languages at KS3 are more likely to have higher proportions of pupils eligible for FSM and lower overall educational attainment. Schools in the lowest quintile for FSM eligibility are over twice as likely as those in the highest quintile to offer more than three hours of languages per week at KS3. Nine schools reported offering less than 60 minutes per week at KS3. At KS4, practically all schools offer at least two hours of language learning, with almost 40% of schools offering at least three hours per week.

80% of independent schools offer less than three hours of languages at KS3 and the remaining 20% offer more than 3 hours of languages. At KS4 nearly all independent schools offer up to 3 hours of language teaching.

Languages at key stage 3 (KS3)

Pupils in the independent sector (83% of independent schools in this survey) are more likely to have a choice as to which language they study at KS3. By comparison, only 30% of schools in the state sector offer pupils a choice.

Despite the requirement of the 7-14 Curriculum for language learning at KS3 to be for three years (i.e. until age 14), 31% of state school respondents report that KS3 in their school is over two years. This is up from 28% in 2017. Ofsted have not rejected a two-year approach to KS3 outright;¹³ the overriding factor should be that pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum across the 11 – 16 age range. In the spirit of the 7-14 Curriculum, a child's access to language learning should not cease at the end of Year 8, but our data reveal that this continues to be the case for many pupils. A number of schools clarified in comments that they are offering various models which fall in between the binary two-year or three-year KS3:

"We teach a 2-year KS3 but still allow pupils to make their GCSE choices in Year 9 with all other subjects. students study 2 languages up to year 9."

"KS3 is two years. 75% of students study two languages in Year 7 & 8 and get the choice of which one to continue into Year 9. However, some students continue with both into year 9 and can then choose to continue with both or just one at GCSE."

"I prefer not to split language learning into key stages. It's a continuum which starts in primary school, as far as I'm concerned, but pupils choose their GCSE language in Y9, so we have a three year KS3 I guess!"

4.4% of state schools and 24% of independent schools offer Chinese as a full curriculum subject at KS3. Latin is taught at KS3 in 2.7% of state schools and 49% of independent schools. However, these figures need to be understood in the context of the low response rate for independent schools.

13. <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2020/01/09/making-curriculum-decisions-in-the-best-interests-of-children/>

Disapplication at key stage 3

Previous Language Trends reports have highlighted that the two-year KS3 means that language learning is effectively terminated for some groups of pupils at the end of Year 8. Schools where some groups do not study a language in Year 9 are significantly more likely to have a higher proportion of students eligible for FSM, a higher allocation of Pupil Premium funding, lower Attainment 8 results, be Sponsor Led Academies and have a higher proportion of students identified as having English as an Additional Language. They are also slightly more likely to be in the North of England. In 2019, 54% of schools in the highest FSM quintile stated that 'some groups do not study a language' as opposed to only 21% of schools in the lowest FSM quintile. 57.1% of Sponsor Led Academies stated that 'some groups do not study a language', in contrast to 32.6% of Community schools and 30.9% of Academy converters.

This year's Language Trends shows that the number of pupils who do not take a language in Year 7 and Year 8 has continued to increase:

	All pupils study languages	A small number of individual pupils do not study languages	A small number of individual pupils do not study languages	No pupils study languages	School has no pupils in this year group
Year 7 2019	66.1%	28.5%	28.5%	0%	1.7%
Year 8 2019	60.5%	33.9%	33.9%	0%	1.4%
Year 7 2020	67.5%	28%	28%	0%	0%
Year 8 2020	60%	35%	35%	0%	0%

In this year's survey, the inequity in language learning across the social divide (which was the principal finding of the 2018 survey) is confirmed. Those schools which have a two-year KS3 are statistically more likely to have a higher FSM indicator and be an 11-16 school.

In qualitative comments, teachers revealed that the most common reason for disapplication was for pupils to spend more time on literacy. Independent schools are not immune from this phenomenon either; in 11 of the 49 responding independent schools a small number of individual pupils do not study languages in year 8. Similar to the state sector, teachers in the independent sector reported that additional needs or English as an Additional Language (EAL) were the main reason for disapplication at KS3:

"A very small number of pupils do not study foreign languages as they have EAL- they do English then instead. A handful are also withdrawn for Learning Support purposes, specifically literacy."

Uptake at key stage 4 (KS4)

Teachers were asked to give the percentage of current Year 10 pupils studying a language for GCSE to the nearest 10%. In the state sector this ranged from 0% to 100%, with an average of 51%.

In 2018, 31% of teachers had stated that they expected numbers taking languages to grow over the period 2018-2021 in line with government policy. Whilst the overall entry figure for languages in England in 2018 evidenced by JCQ data demonstrated a slight increase on previous years, the data collected for this year's survey shows that figures for Year 10 have decreased overall and many schools are a long way off achieving the government's Ebacc ambition of 90% of pupils taking a GCSE language by 2025:

Proportions of pupils studying at least one language subject in Year 10	% of state schools 2018 (651 respondents)	% of state schools 2020 (271 respondents)
75% or more	29%	22.5%
Half or more of the cohort, but less than 75%	21%	24%
Less than half of the cohort but more than 25%	27%	34%
25% or fewer but more than 10%	16%	16%
10% or fewer	6%	2.5%
None	1%	1%

In the independent sector, proportions of pupils studying a language in Year 10 ranged from 20% to 100%, with the average much healthier than the state sector at 82%. There are indications that languages are struggling in a very small number of independent schools.

The trend for high and middle-attaining pupils to be more likely to do a language for GCSE has increased significantly in both sectors. This may be the result of the new ‘harder’ GCSE specifications bedding in.

Groups more likely to be taking a language for GCSE	State Schools		Independent Schools	
	2018	2020	2018	2020
High prior attainment pupils	66%	92%	59%	83%
Middle prior attainment pupils	44%	66%	35%	52%

In 2018, 57% of state secondary teachers said that pupils with Special Educational Needs were less likely to be doing a GCSE language than previously, by 2020 this figure has increased by five percentage points to 62%. In qualitative comments many teachers expressed the desire for a vocational qualification in a language, equivalent to GCSE, which contributes to school league tables.

Boys’ learning at key stage 4

2020 is the first year that Language Trends has specifically asked about gender bias at KS4. The survey shows that in the independent sector teachers report there is no significant difference between boys and girls in the uptake of GCSE languages; this can partly be explained by the compulsory nature of languages post 14 in a significant majority of independent schools. However, in the state sector, there is some evidence that gender plays a role at GCSE:

To what extent is there a gender bias towards girls in take up for languages at KS4 in your school?				
None – more boys than girls take languages at KS4	None – numbers of boys and girls taking languages are fairly equal	A slight bias – around 55% girls	A marked bias – around 60% or more girls	Not applicable (single sex school)
3%	40%	22%	23%	12%

Languages are the only EBacc pillar subject in which there is a gender imbalance. Recent research by the British Council and Education Policy Institute¹⁴ has shown that being male, being disadvantaged, or having identified special educational needs makes a pupil less likely, on average, to achieve a grade 4 or above in a modern

foreign language GCSE. If a pupil is female, they are more than twice (2.17 times) as likely as a male pupil to achieve at least a grade 4 in a language GCSE. In this year’s Language Trends survey, teachers commented:

“We have more girls in our higher sets, so they tend to be better disposed to the subject.”

“There are no visible male role models as language teachers in our school.”

“We have more boys in the bottom sets so they are less likely to continue with a language. Issues with engagement and aspiration.”

In mixed gender state schools in the survey, the average number of pupils taking a language at Year 10 is 51%. In single sex state schools, this jumps to 74%; in all-boys schools it is 71%. All-boys schools are more likely to have a three-year KS3, offer enrichment languages in addition to the curriculum, and set aside at least three hours of language learning at KS3. This difference between mixed gender and all-boys schools could be explained by a range of socio-economic factors: the all-boys schools in the survey represent all parts of the country except for the Midlands and the North East and, whilst many are academy convertors, the majority have retained academic selection and are in the lowest quintile for FSM. Nevertheless, the crude data gap between co-educational schools and all-boys schools is stark on the surface and suggests that languages tend to be a higher priority on the curriculum in all boys’ schools than in mixed-gender schools. More research is needed in trends in boys’ learning in MFL to better understand this phenomenon.

Post 16 / A level

154 of the 271 state schools and almost all of the independent schools indicated that they have post-16 pupils.

The demise of AS levels

In the year 2000, the government introduced Advanced Subsidiary levels (AS levels), assessing knowledge, skills and understanding appropriate to the end of Year 12 and which contributed to 50% of the mark of the full A level grade. The aim at that time was to broaden post-16 study and over the past twenty years the majority of pupils took four AS levels in Year 12, continuing with three of these to full A Level standard in Year 13. During this period, A levels were modular and, for a time, pupils could resit as many modules as they wished.

14. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/boys-language-gcse>

Teachers reported that many students took a language as a fourth AS level, with no intention of converting to a full A level, but nevertheless developing their language skills beyond GCSE and, crucially, making the number of pupils in Year 12 language classes financially viable. Following concern from key stakeholders that this modular structure was not preparing young people for University study, which was considered their main purpose, A level languages were ‘decoupled’ for first teaching from September 2016, meaning the reformed AS and A levels are now standalone linear qualifications and the AS no longer counts towards the A level. Just 25% of state schools and 23% of independent schools are offering stand-alone AS level qualifications in the 2019/2020 school year. Reasons for not offering AS level given by state schools include:

“Finance / staffing but also students concentrate on getting the best predicted grades in the 3 A levels as this is all universities require.”

“Little interest from students if AS level is not improving access to university.”

“No longer viable as it takes such a lot of time out of the curriculum - it makes more sense to focus on the A Level after 2 years.”

Reasons for not offering AS level given by independent schools include:

“In practice, AS is not really co-teachable, despite claims to the contrary by the exam board. All pupils are encouraged to take full A Levels.”

“We have been offering AS until this year, but our school has decided to stop offering AS qualifications and asking students to start with 4 full A level subjects instead.”

Uptake at post-16

34% of state secondaries and 46% of independent schools report fewer pupils taking a language post 16 than in previous years. This can partly be explained by the aforementioned demise of AS levels and the return of many schools to three linear A levels. The data this year confirm the results of previous years, but also show that languages post-16 in the independent sector are, like the state sector, no longer secure.

This comment from a teacher in a state schools is indicative of many:

“All of French, Spanish and German have seen their numbers halve initially from 10 down to 5 approximately, following the decline of AS levels and students no longer studying a 4th subject to AS, most of these students actually did carry on to A level but now as they choose 3 subjects the numbers have actually declined further. In the last 5 years German has not run twice due to only 2/3 students opting and for the first time next year

French will not run in Year 12 due to only 2 students opting.”

There was also some evidence of Year 12 and Year 13 classes being taught together, pupils teaching themselves through online learning and schools working across consortia to share A level teaching:

“No French this year. Three pupils in German taught vertically with Year 12 and Year 13 in the same class. Seven pupils in Spanish taught vertically.”

“We have one student in A level Spanish following an online course.”

In some state schools, teachers are starting to feel the financial pinch at A level, with all sorts of notional numbers of what constitutes a viable class:

“We have two students in Year 13 this year, but none for next year. Groups are always small but there is now increased pressure from the Senior Leadership Team to have at least eight students in a group, which may mean that we will never have an A level group in the future. Students are often reluctant to opt for languages as they see it as a difficult option.”

“In our school there are timetable clashes with science and maths, so even the students who wish to do languages are being told they can’t because they clash with the so-called priority subjects.”

In the independent sector, comments show that teachers are deeply concerned about declining uptake:

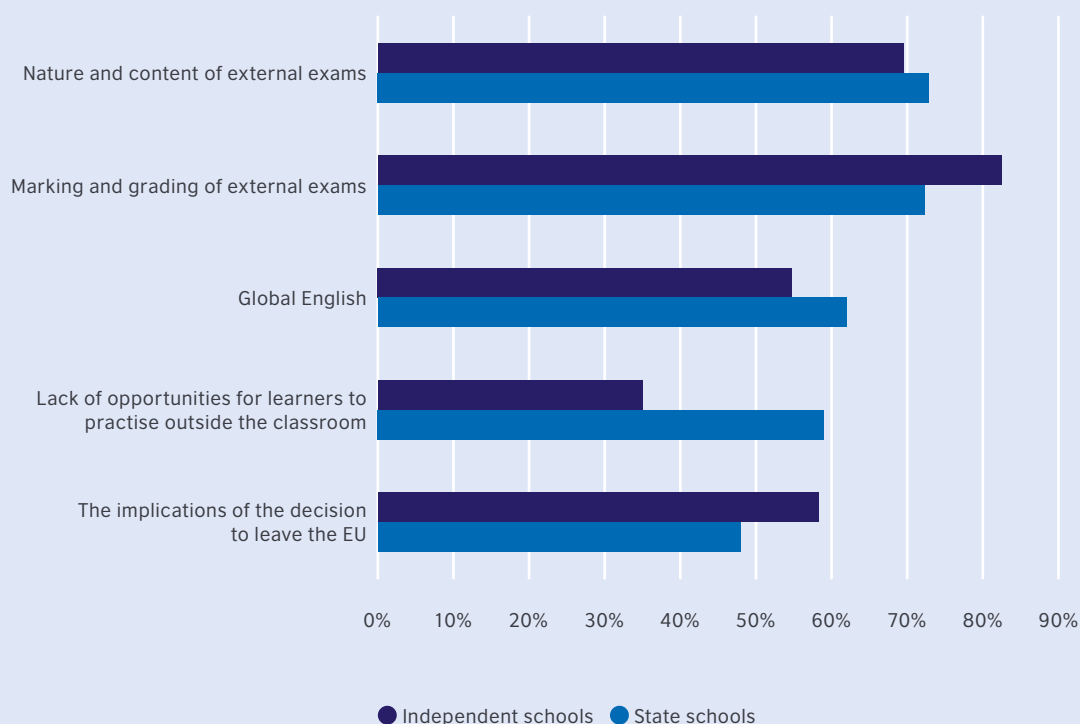
“Last year was the first year ever that we had no students studying any languages in the L6. We currently have no German A level students at all.”

“Before the new 3 A Level format and with the old AS level exam in the summer, we had around 10 students taking French, Spanish was about 8 and German was about 5. All 3 languages are struggling to attract more than a couple of students now.”

“Current level of difficulty of the subject and it is hard to get high grades compared to other subjects. The fact only 3 subjects are now taken at A Level instead of 4 has majorly impacted languages. Students see science as the most important subject to study which they often take alongside Maths or Business Studies. There is therefore no room for MFL.”

On a brighter note, and similar to figures collected in Language Trends 2019, 20% of state secondaries, but just 11% of independent schools, report more pupils taking A level languages than in previous years. Teachers reported that numbers were up due to stable staffing, the fact that pupils enjoy language learning and there is support from senior leadership. Some schools reported that their numbers are up, but only because neighbouring schools no longer offer languages.

Top five challenges to providing high quality language teaching - state and independent schools



Barriers to uptake at all levels

When asked which challenges teachers see are most pressing to providing a high quality language learning experience, teachers responded with the following top 5:

The first two challenges are congruent with the findings of Language Trends 2019, but 'lack of opportunities for learners to practise outside the classroom', which was in second place in the state sector and third position in the independent sector in 2019, slips to fourth place in the state sector and fifth place in the independent sector. A new prompt in this year's survey was 'global English' and both independent and state sectors report that it is a significant issue to providing high quality language teaching. The implications of the decision to leave the EU are also seen as a challenge.

1. Nature and content of external exams

In comments teachers reported that the switch back to three linear A levels in England is a barrier. In terms of examination content (and examination specifications), some respondents reported that material needs to be updated:

"The content of the specification means that pupils' life experiences are not taken into account e.g. many students cannot talk about work, voluntary work or charity work in their own language never mind the target language (or put themselves into the role of a manager or charity organiser - these tasks have been on exam papers!)."

"The nature of the exams at GCSE level and A level is extremely damaging to the subject. They are ridiculously challenging and nonsensical in many ways. They fail to recognise what pupils can do and penalise them constantly and try to catch them out, demoralising all but the best of the pupils. It is not good enough to then lower the grade boundaries in order to compensate for the severe grading of MFL subjects. The enjoyment of the subject is reduced as pupils are forced to jump through multiple hoops in a very artificial examination paper."

2. Marking and grading of external exams

The issue of grading is a wide-ranging one and many views were expressed by respondents. These include the extent to which grades are felt to be a fair reflection of student 'ability', perceived inconsistency in the application of marking criteria/ quality of marking, the effect of 'native speakers' and the inaccessibility of (particularly top) grades. An absolute majority of qualitative comments identify grading to be problematic in terms of a perceived lack of fairness in the grades awarded to candidates:

"New GCSE is putting pupils off. GCSE and A level language study is likely to result in a lower final grade than other subjects."

"Easier to get high grades in other subjects. Most able students encouraged to do maths and sciences and we are wanting the same able students. Middle

ability and low ability students are put off by the new specification but ironically would still be able to study a language at university. They just wouldn't achieve an A. Harsh grading compounds this situation."

"The fact that it seems impossible to get top grades at A level is demoralising and certainly not enticing."

Although the effect of native speakers in the A level cohort has already been addressed by Ofqual adjustments, involving the expansion of the A* and A grades at A level so that non-native speakers are less disadvantaged, the issue did still arise as a barrier to uptake in some schools:

"Languages are perceived as hard – there is difficulty in achieving A at A level compared to other subjects. In our school there is a perception that the qualifications are for native speakers, or that they skew the marks."*

3. Global English

'Global English' is understood to signify that English is spoken in every part of the world, both among speakers within a particular country who share a first language, and across speakers from different countries and first language. In 2006, David Graddol, in a book published by the British Council entitled 'English Next,' predicted that by the end of 2020 global English may mean the end of 'English as a Foreign Language' in many parts of the world. The data collected in his year's survey show that there is some evidence that 'global English' could be detrimental to the uptake of foreign languages. One teacher responded as follows:

"Students perceive languages as too difficult or often say that they don't see the value of languages when everyone in the world speaks English!"

Of course, now we have reached 2020, and the whole world does not in fact speak English. However, in classrooms across England, the perception from children who have not had an opportunity to experience other languages and cultures can be one of 'English is enough'.

4. The implications of leaving the EU

To what extent, if any, has the UK's recent departure from the European Union had an impact on pupil motivation to study languages at your school?		
	State Schools	Independent Schools
Pupils are less motivated to study European Languages	53%	28%
Pupils are more motivated to study European Languages	3%	2%
There has been no particular impact on pupil motivation	44%	70%

The data show that the ramifications of leaving the EU are being felt more acutely in the state sector than in the independent sector. Many of the teachers responding 'there has been no particular impact on pupil motivation' qualified their response with '...yet!', suggesting it is too early to tell. Qualitative comments from the independent sector show that schools can benefit from hosting international pupils and language assistants, who are now a luxury in almost all state schools. Furthermore, within the state sector, 27% of teachers reported that as a direct result of leaving the EU funding for initiatives in languages has decreased and 31% of teachers say that languages are less valued by the school community (SMT¹⁵, parents/carers/governors).

One teacher in a state school commented:

"Teaching has not changed. However, some parents are not supporting language learning because of Brexit."

In one school, the teacher reports negative attitudes from the pupil body towards international school trips:

"I have heard some comments from pupils regarding language trips no longer being important to them – to date it has been very rare to hear that in our school."

However, leaving the EU has had less of an impact in other schools:

"Brexit has not yet had its impact on our language learning but it is difficult to promote language usefulness and also about working/studying in Europe given the Brexit vote."

5. Lack of opportunities to practise outside the classroom

Teachers in many schools report that languages remain confined to the languages classroom and this leads to pupils not seeing the real world benefit of learning languages without the realisation that they may one day be able to put that skill to use. Too many pupils spend their time learning a language without the realisation that they may one day be able to put that use skill to use.

"Our students are really culturally deprived, they do not leave the county as a whole and 'everyone speaks English' is what we're up against, despite some real input into making lessons and outside curriculum interesting. Pupils never speak Spanish, except when in my classroom."

Staffing

Department sizes appear to be shrinking with 26% of state schools and 30% of independent schools reporting less staff (compared to 24% and 20% respectively in 2019).

Reasons from the state sector for declining staff numbers include:

“As staff have retired / deceased they have been replaced less. Initially this was absorbed by the dept no longer delivering primary school lessons or other subjects in the school, e.g PSHE / English / General studies.”

“Slightly fewer as we no longer have any students doing two languages at KS3/4. Also hours for A level students have been cut from six per week to five per week.”

Almost 70% of state schools and 90% of independent schools have at least one teacher of languages who is a citizen of a European Union Member State (excluding Ireland). Comparable statistics from the 2019 Language Trends survey for the EU27 (i.e. including Ireland) were 67% (state) and 79% (independent). There thus appears to be an even greater reliance on teachers from outside the UK and Ireland.

State school departments ranged from two to thirteen teachers, plus language assistants in some schools, with an average of 5 teachers. In 32% of state schools, departments had at least one teacher who was completing their NQT¹⁶ year. Independent school departments ranged from 3 to 32 teachers, with an average complement of 12.6 teachers.

International engagement

As in previous years, opportunities for engagement in the international dimension of school life are more widespread in the independent sector. The table compares the findings from 2020 with those from 2018, but it is important to keep the differences in sample size (785 secondary schools in 2018, 320 in 2020) in mind when interpreting these figures:

	State Schools		Independent Schools	
	2018	2020	2018	2020
The school has one or more partner schools abroad	31%	37%	41%	37%
Pupil exchanges	29%	25%	53%	50%
Teacher exchanges	4%	2%	2%	2%
School trips abroad	81%	84%	90%	96%
Teacher CPD abroad	2%	4%	8%	15%
We host Language Assistants	23%	25%	50%	70%
Work experience abroad	15%	11%	33%	39%
Joint Curriculum Projects	10%	7%	17%	7%
None	11%	9%	3%	4%

School trips abroad remain buoyant in both sectors, but there is more evidence this year that the traditional pupil exchange of going abroad to stay with a host family is declining. Given the government’s announcement¹⁷ in early 2019 of £2.5 million to fund school exchanges for up to 2,900 pupils with priority to those in receipt of the Pupil Premium allowance, it will be interesting to see if the trend for school exchanges can be reversed in future years.

Within the state sector there is variation in international engagement. Schools which have lower FSM eligibility are more likely to offer a wider variety of international engagement opportunities. One teacher from a school in the North of England which has an FSM eligibility of over 30% (above the secondary FSM average of 14.1% in England) stated:

“We struggle to run trips due to the poverty of the students that we teach. We have run cinema trips to see foreign films but this is hard work as the community that the school serves has a wide rural hinterland. Many students don’t have a passport, have never been on holiday in the UK never mind Europe. Teacher CPD is pushed by the MFL department but due to lack of funding often becomes self-funded rather than school funded. It also takes place outside of school hours, so the idea of the school supporting Teacher CPD abroad is a fantasy.”

Teacher CPD abroad and teacher exchanges remain underdeveloped, and indeed financially out of reach for almost all teachers, in both sectors.

15. SMT: Senior Management Team

16. NQT: Newly Qualified Teacher; the first year of teaching following successful completion of Initial Teacher Training

17. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/25-million-to-boost-international-exchanges-for-schools>

Sharing good practice

The final question on the survey asks teachers to identify any initiatives which have improved uptake of languages in their school and/or share any good practice which has promoted languages in their school. 72% of state school respondents and 61% of independent school respondents chose to provide this information. Having conducted a thematic analysis on the data, the three most frequent suggestions (themes) to improve uptake are:

1. High quality teaching and learning at Key Stage 3;
2. Having a department with established teachers who have harmonious relationships with their pupils;
3. Visits abroad during which pupils have visits to practise their languages.

As well as various careers' talks by successful former pupils, A level students mentoring Key Stage 3 students, the National Spelling Bee and translation competitions, and using the British Council International School Award as a framework for whole-school self-evaluation and quality assurance, some more initiatives which teachers report as improving language provision include:

- a languages day focusing exclusively on heritage and lesser taught languages;
- revamping the KS3 curriculum to focus on cultural aspects;
- revamping the KS3 curriculum to focus on working memory, cognitive load and 'chunking' of language, following the thinking of current applied linguists such as Gianfranco Conti;
- eTwinning at whole-school level;
- working closely with NCELP¹⁸;
- engaging with the MEITS¹⁹ project led by a number of universities;
- schools ring-fencing money to enable small A level classes to continue in the short-term.



18. National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy

19. Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies, funded under the Arts and Humanities Research Council Open World Research Initiative

Key Findings and Conclusion

Primary

There is a clear policy on languages in the primary curriculum. Teachers are doing their best to deliver primary languages but progress is hampered by a number of issues.

Firstly, there is a lack of strategy for implementation; teachers need better guidance, and appropriate resourcing, on how to embed languages into practice in the primary school. Policy makers need to make clearer the amount of time which primary teachers should devote to language teaching. The pupil experience is not consistent across England: in different schools in different parts of England pupils have varying experiences; in the best practice, pupils receive language teaching little and often throughout each week and make progress in a language across KS2. Secondly, there is a lack of CPD opportunities for teachers. Primary teachers are experts in the primary classroom, but they need support to fuse their already well-developed pedagogical skills with second language acquisition theory in relation to younger learners. Some teachers also need support to develop their own linguistic repertoire. Thirdly, this report shows that the international dimension is void from too many primary schools and underdeveloped in others. Many teachers believe that children need to connect language with culture and the world beyond England.

Transition from KS2 to KS3 is underdeveloped. Contact between primary and secondary schools in relation to languages is declining year on year, when one would expect the opposite to be happening as per the 7-14 National Curriculum Framework. Teachers in primary and secondary have different attitudes as to what progress at the point of transition looks like. Many children begin a new language at secondary and do not build on the language learned at primary. The survey highlights the complete lack of cross-phase planning between Year 6 and Year 7 and the fact that secondary teachers often do not even have information relating to what was covered at KS2. There is a will amongst teachers to work together, but the conditions in terms of financing and strategy have got to improve in order to enable them to effect change.

Secondary

The data from schools participating in this survey show that there is an increasing trend of pupils being disappplied from language lessons at KS3. The majority of disappplied pupils are removed for extra literacy support. More research needs to be done to understand and subsequently inform teachers about the role which languages could play in improving pupils' literacy, as well as the wider message which is sent out to other pupils when their peers are withdrawn from language learning.

At all levels of secondary education there are a number of barriers to overcome. A surprise finding this year is that global English is perceived by teachers as being a growing threat to foreign language learning in England. Pupils have the perception that 'English is enough'. Coupled with some parents' positions on the decision to leave the EU, many children are questioning why they should even have to learn a language.

Uptake of languages at GCSE remains far off the government's Ebacc target of 75% of pupils by 2022 and 90% of pupils by 2025. Schools cite 'the nature and content of external exams' and 'marking and grading of external exams' as the two main reasons that they find it difficult to recruit pupils. High and middle-attaining pupils often will choose GCSE languages, but low attaining pupils and pupils in schools with an above average FSM tend not to choose languages. There is also a gender divide between single-sex and mixed-sex schools. Boys' learning in MFL would merit more research.

At post-16, the decoupling of A levels has led to a reduced uptake in both state and independent sectors. If trends continue, this will lead to the pipeline to Higher Education and onwards to Initial Teacher Education drying up. Publishing Language Trends 2020 in the middle of a worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, there has never been a more crucial time for politicians, policy makers and school leaders to understand the role of languages in diplomacy, security, international relations and societal cohesion.²⁰

20. Thanks to Sarah O'Neill, PhD Student in Modern Languages Education at Queen's University Belfast, for her helpful comments on a draft of this report.

