

Language Trends 2017

The annual survey on the health of languages in both primary and secondary schools in England has just been published by The British Council (authored by K. Board and T. Tinsley). Overall the report confirms the same issues that have been beleaguering our sector since the Language Trends survey was initially published in 2002. However, there are also some positive signs emerging from this study.

The sets of data collected through the survey is rather unique in that it allows us to access the journey of a school subject longitudinally whilst providing feedback to the government on how policies are being implemented. Below is a summary of the key findings of Language Trends 2017. To access the full report, see:

https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trends_survey_2017.pdf

Context and core questions

Some core questions relating to the performance of languages continue to represent the backbone of this piece of research. In particular, the survey focusses on primary languages and their transition to Key Stage 3 (KS3) since languages became formally embedded in the school curriculum; the impact of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) on KS4; the new GCSE and A-Level specifications; the extent of the 'A-Level' crisis in terms of whether the measures adopted to counteract languages' decline are working; issues relating to school funding.

Additionally, a number of comments from teachers have been collected with emphasis on language exchanges and child safety and, taking into account the most recent political move to exit the European Union, on a number of issues relating to Brexit and the impact it is having on language teaching and learning after the referendum.

Key findings

1. The primary sector

Disparity in practice and provision. This year, 12% of the schools to which the survey was sent responded. Findings at primary levels reveal that there is much disparity in practice and provision of languages across England. In particular, this disparity relates to the application of a structured approach to language teaching for some schools compared to other schools in which only the 'bare minimum' is being done. This last point seems to be linked to the lack of knowledge on the part of teachers on how to implement language strategies rather than a lack of willingness to do so: encouragingly, 88% of teachers surveyed claim to be firmly committed to language teaching at KS2.

CPD and funding. Another relevant aspect highlighted by this year's research is the continued need for training, development and guidance to support teachers. Nearly 24% of staff do not take part in

CPD (Continuing Professional Development) activities for languages (up by 9% since 2015) and schools seem not to be training their staff directly. Rather, schools seem to rely on support from external organisations such as Local Education Authorities, commercial organisations, and secondary schools. However, schools have been experiencing a reduction in access to external providers also due to funding pressures nationally. On a more positive note, however, one third of schools have a specialist language teacher within their staff (36%).

Transition to KS3. The continuity and regularity of language classes in the primary sector continues to suffer whilst priority is given to other 'core' subjects such as English and Maths. This attitude exacerbates well-known issues for languages as it becomes increasingly harder to create room for formal assessment for our subjects. In this respect, the transition to Year 7 continues to remain an issue as secondary teachers do not know what to expect from pupils. In particular, the perception of what pupils can achieve in a language class varies greatly from the primary to the secondary sector when applying a set of similar descriptors taken from KS2: primary schools are confident in the abilities of their pupils and have high expectations for the transition stage, whilst the secondary sector reports low expectations overall. Generally, this data seems to suggest that more could be done at primary level to bridge such gap.

Patchy results. The overall picture for languages at primary level remains patchy and it is felt that there is little consistency in what is happening nationally. Generally, it is also felt that the schools that replied to the survey are those doing well as the engagement with the survey remains low for primaries.

2. The secondary sector

Overall, 24% of the state schools and 22% of the independent schools contacted took part in the survey.

Impact of the new curriculum. For the secondary sector, the survey has recorded a reduction in the provision of the languages curriculum at KS3 to two years in order to prepare students for GCSEs over three years. This development is having an impact on access for students to study a language over three years: now 80% of schools start GCSE preparation in Year 9.

Number of pupils in decline. Additionally, a decline in dual linguists in the independent sector (from 45% to 37%) has been noted as one quarter of these schools are withdrawing AS courses in languages (the figure for the state sector stands at 15%). A further squeeze in the number of pupils studying our subjects comes from the move to reduce the number of A-Levels from four to three.

EBacc. Unfortunately, the expected surge in language take-up after the introduction of the EBacc has been short-lived as nearly half of the schools surveyed (48%) report that this measure has had negligible effects on language studies carried over to the sixth form.

Social inequality. Some relevant data has also been gathered on the issue of social inequality in the provision of languages whereby school disadvantage has been measured through free school meals (FSM) as proxy. The data shows that areas with high levels of FSM are more likely to experience language disapplication with lower opportunities to study two languages, a lower take-up at GCSE, and the reduction of KS3 to two years.

Schools in disadvantaged areas also seem to have issues with the supply of language teachers and fewer opportunities to access CPD. Interestingly, the highest participation rates for languages at GCSE have been recorded in London's LEA (which continues to grow year on year) whereas the lowest participation rate has been observed in LEAs in both the North East and West – which, perhaps not so remarkably, also has the highest proportion of vote in the referendum to leave the EU.

Positive signs. Whilst some of the data collected does not seem encouraging, positive signs come from the introduction of the EBacc. As the government hopes that 90% of pupils will take the EBacc, 38% of state schools in deprived areas are planning for **numbers to increase take-up** year on year. Figures remain stable for independent schools with an uptake of 82% and state schools in non-disadvantaged areas (43%).

Schools also continue to benefit from working with **Foreign Language Assistants (FLAs)**: 73% of independent schools and 33% of state schools employ one. FLAs' contributions remain highly valued in the sector by both teachers and learners as they help to promote the development of oral and listening skills, offer an improved understanding of culture awareness, and increase motivation in pupils.

The publication of the **Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review** by the Teaching Schools Council in November 2016 contains fifteen recommendations to achieve effective language pedagogy at KS3 and KS4 (<https://www.tscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MFL-Pedagogy-Review-Report-2.pdf>)

3. Further issues

This year's survey has also highlighted a number of additional matters:

- School exchanges are becoming more difficult to organise due to new Health and Safety regulations; many parents have also reported their reluctance in letting children stay with strangers. The funding for school exchanges seems to be decreasing, too.
- With the decrease in student exchanges, now language teaching and learning seems to be confined to the classroom more than ever although teachers are trying to integrate e-learning in their practices to increase pupils' exposure to the target language and culture (for example, through the use of Skype or pen-pal systems).
- Languages still continue to be perceived as second class subjects; there is a lack of funding and support to teach the new curriculum; there is widespread national apathy towards language learning.
- A particular concern regards the fate of the secondary language teaching force: 35% of language teacher come from the European Union. What is going to happen to these colleagues? Will we experience further issues with recruitment?
- Spanish continues to be growingly popular. Not much movement can be seen in smaller languages. Independent schools tend to teach a larger variety of languages.

UCML's position

UCML believes that languages are needed now more than ever. We are eager to work with colleagues in the different educational stages and collaborate with language learning associations to pursue a unified view that supports transitions and reaches out to a wider audience. Encouraging signs from engagement continue to be passed on by sister associations such as ALL (Association for Language Learning: <https://www.all-languages.org.uk/>) and UUKI (Universities UK International; UUKI are planning to launch a successor to Routes into Languages) which share UCML's core objectives.

UCML endeavours to support such work and continues to represent, and lobby for, languages nationally. We believe in facilitating dialogue between the different stages of education and uphold the value of our subjects by taking on an active role in bringing new channels of communication into being and encouraging sector-wide collaborations.

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Dr Elena Polisca

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