

**LANGUAGE TRENDS 2019**  
LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PRIMARY  
AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND  
SURVEY REPORT

by Teresa Tinsley



## INTRODUCTION

*Language Trends is an annual survey of primary and secondary schools in England, designed to gather information about the current 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 was carried out from January to March 2019 and gathered evidence from 776 primary schools (up from 692 in 2018) and 845 secondary schools, of which 715 were state-funded and 130 independent – again slightly more responses than in 2018.*

Response rates	Primary*	State secondary	Independent secondary
	13%	24%	19%

\*Out of a sample of 6,000.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/languages-boost-to-deliver-skilled-workforce-for-uks-businesses>

2. The British Academy, Languages in the UK. A call for action, (2019). Online: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/languages-uk-academies-statement>

3. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, A National Recovery Programme for Languages, (2019). Online: <https://nationalrecoverylanguages.weebly.com/>

4. Bernadette Holmes and Florence Myles, White Paper: primary languages policy in England – the way forward, (2019). Online: [www.ripl.uk/policy/](http://www.ripl.uk/policy/)

5. W. Ayres-Bennett and J. Carruthers, Policy Briefing on Modern Languages Educational Policy in the UK, 2019: <https://www.modernlanguagesleadershipfellow.com/app/uploads/2019/01/Policy-Briefing-on-Modern-Languages-Educational-Policy-in-the-UK.pdf>

## POLICY BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The core findings of the previous (2018) Language Trends report concerned inequity in provision and access to language learning in the secondary sector and, in primary schools, stasis and inconsistency in the development of languages as a statutory subject in Key Stage 2. Since then, the Government has re-stated its ambition for 90% of pupils to sit a GCSE in a language by 2025 and has set up a national languages centre and nine school hubs to raise standards of language teaching in secondary schools.<sup>1</sup> This year's survey provides an important opportunity for respondents to reflect on the impact of the new GCSE and A level examinations, designed to be more rigorous and promote higher standards of learning, which were taken by students for the first time in summer 2018. A new Ofsted framework, which will govern all school inspections from September 2019, has also been published, with a focus on the intent and implementation of the curriculum, as well as its impact.

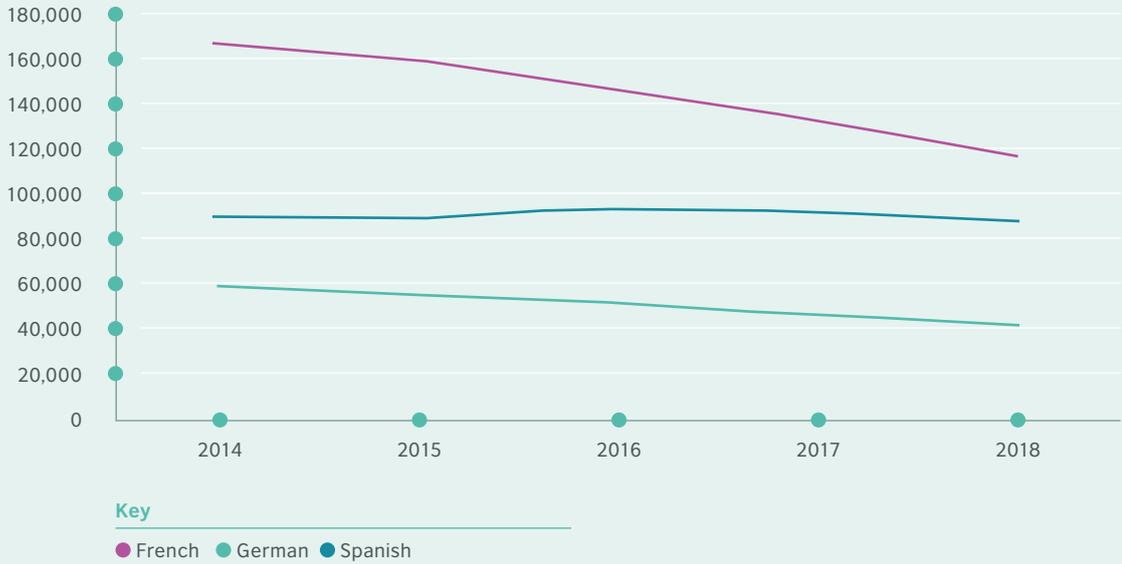
Concern about the UK's 'language deficit' has been mounting in recent months, largely motivated by exam entry statistics showing declining numbers opting for languages at GCSE and A level. A coalition of organisations including the British Council has engaged with the British Academy's call for a national strategy to enhance engagement with the rest of the world, declaring that 'monolingualism is the illiteracy of the 21st century'.<sup>2</sup> Along similar lines, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages has called for a National Recovery Programme for languages.<sup>3</sup>

Policy attention has also been given to the development of primary languages. A White Paper published by a network of specialist researchers set out the key priorities to address in order to meet the ambitious expectations of recent national curriculum reforms.<sup>4</sup> These include planning for progression, defining expected outcomes, developing pedagogy and local agreements in support of smooth transition to Key Stage 3, and strengthening monitoring and assessment arrangements. Focussing more broadly on policy across the UK, a Policy Briefing<sup>5</sup> on languages produced by a consortium of university researchers set out differences and similarities across the four nations, together with short, medium and long-term recommendations for developing training and support.

**EXAM FIGURES**

Over the past five years, there has been a 19% reduction in entries for GCSE languages, with French and German each seeing declines of 30% over this period. Spanish presents a more stable picture, with just a 2% decline in entries between 2014 and 2018.

GCSE entries in French, German and Spanish at the end of Key Stage 4, England<sup>6</sup>



	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
● French	166,167	158,730	146,349	133,536	117,046
● German	60,362	55,839	52,328	46,510	42,296
● Spanish	89,949	89,920	94,067	92,652	88,022

Other languages, accounting for around 10% of total language entries, have seen a 6% growth in numbers, led by Arabic, Chinese, Modern Hebrew, Portuguese, Italian and Polish, which have all increased in numbers by more than 10%. Other languages which have seen declines in GCSE entries include Bengali, Gujarati, Japanese and Russian.

At A level, French and German have seen substantial ongoing declines in take-up since the mid-1990s, while numbers for Spanish have risen practically every year. All three subjects shed candidates between 2017 and 2018, with French down 7%, German down 16% and Spanish down just 3% in what was the first year in which the new A level courses were examined. Provisional entry figures for 2019 show French rallying with a 4% increase and Spanish increasing by 10%, but German down by 2.5%.<sup>7</sup>

**“MONOLINGUALISM IS THE ILLITERACY OF THE 21ST CENTURY”**  
BRITISH ACADEMY

6. Source: Department for Education, GCSE and equivalent results in England 2017/18 (revised), Table S6.

7. Ofqual, Entries for GCSE, AS and A level, Summer 2019 exam series, published 24 May 2019.

A level entries in French, German, Spanish at the end of Key Stage 5, England<sup>8</sup>



	2016	2017	2018
● French	8,459	8,306	7,714
● German	3,446	3,281	2,760
● Spanish	7,455	7,566	7,369

### SURVEY FINDINGS: LANGUAGES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Almost all primary schools responding to the survey were teaching a language in Key Stage 2 curriculum time, and many had considerable experience of doing so. Three quarters (75%) started teaching a language more than five years ago. One third of responding primary schools (33%) also report teaching a language in Key Stage 1 – the lowest proportion recorded since Language Trends first surveyed primary schools in 2015, when 44% reported doing so.

#### Languages taught

French is taught in 75% of schools, and Spanish in 29% - these are the main languages taught. There have been greater proportions of schools reporting teaching Spanish every year since 2012 (when only 16% of schools did so). Since then, French has remained stable at around three quarters of schools and there have been no significant increases registered in other languages, which are taught in only a small number of schools (German: 5%, Chinese: 3%, Latin: 2%, other languages: 1% or fewer schools in each case).

#### Time for languages

Around four out of five schools (81%) report that they allocate a set time per week for language learning, and this tends to be between 30 and 60 minutes. However, few schools (17%) have a set number of hours for language learning per year and only three respondents were able to say what this was – varying between 14 and 39 hours). A third of schools with a set time per week say that, in practice, pupils do not

always receive the time allotted:

- » Yes, but not every term. We have done a ½ termly unit of French and Spanish this year
- » The time slot may differ each week or it may be done every other week

Where there is no set time per week, this can provide an opportunity for language teaching to be integrated flexibly with the teaching of other subjects and classroom routines:

- » Linked as cross-curricular within topic-based learning, but also following a set scheme to ensure good vocabulary coverage

However, in many cases respondents' comments suggest that without a set time per week, language teaching is often ad hoc and minimal:

- » People are just teaching it as and when; however, it is a very low priority for lots of teachers and tends to get squeezed in towards the end of the year
- » I teach music and French during PPA<sup>9</sup> time. If I can fit both subjects in, I do. Often music takes up the most time and priority

When schools make use of a specialist teacher, this appears to have the effect of anchoring languages in the timetable:

8. Source: Department for Education, A level and other 16-18 results 2017-2018 (provisional), table 2a.

9. Planning, Preparation and Assessment: the time set aside for teachers during the working day for these activities.

*This is improving due to the use of a Teaching Assistant, who is a native speaker, being booked to support each class. Her presence means that now teachers stick to the timetable, regardless of other pressures, much more than they used to*

» *I am part of a PPA team of peripatetic Music, Spanish and PE teachers. As we are a 3-form entry primary school, the three of us release the class teachers religiously every week. This means that PE, Music and Spanish are taught consistently and successfully every week*

» *French is covered by a MFL specialist during PPA time so it is the same allotted time each week, however many SEN\* and target children are taken out of French lessons for interventions*

Schools with lower Key Stage 2 attainment, and those with lower percentages of EAL\*\* pupils are statistically less likely to set aside a specific time for language learning each week. In terms of the actual time allocated, in Years 5 and 6, schools are statistically more likely to spend less time on languages if they have higher levels of students eligible for Free School Meals, higher levels of Pupil Premium funding, a higher proportion of students identified as having EAL, and if they are in urban areas. For example:

» 10.6% of schools in the highest quintile for FSM allocate 'less than 30 minutes' or 'no time' to languages in Year 5, in comparison to 3% of schools in the lowest quintile for FSM.

» 11.9% of schools in urban areas allocate 'less than 30 minutes' or 'no time' to languages in Year 6, in comparison to 3.9% of schools in rural areas.

In Years 3 and 4 there is no pattern emerging based on school characteristics. However, there is a tendency to take different approaches to timetabling languages in Year 6. Some schools reduce time or suspend language teaching altogether to concentrate on SATs\*\*\*, while others increase the time for languages:

» *Year 6 are currently doing spelling during their Spanish time in preparation for SATs*

» *Extra time in Years 5 and 6 to allow for more complex written tasks*

Schools with higher Key Stage 2 attainment scores are statistically more likely to allocate more time to languages in Year 6.

### Progression and inspection

Four out of five schools (80%) say they plan for 'substantial progress in one language over the four years of Key Stage 2', though many admit that the word 'substantial' is open to interpretation:

» *We plan for progress - of course - but whether that progress is substantial is an interesting question. I don't think our secondary school colleagues would call it substantial.*

Just 15% of schools formally assess each child on their progress in language learning, although nearly half (48%) do so informally. There has been no clear change in the assessment of pupil progress over the last three years. Schools that do not assess or record pupils' progress in languages are on average in receipt of higher levels of Pupil Premium funding and have lower Key Stage 2 attainment scores than schools that report assessing their students in some way.

Nearly one third of responding primary schools (31.5%) have been inspected by Ofsted in last 12 months. Just over a quarter (28%) of those schools which had been inspected said that language provision was included either in the process or in the report. Comments indicate that inspection of languages was often unsystematic or perfunctory:

» *The inspector observed the end of a Y4 French lesson, but this was not directly referenced in the report*

» *There was no inspection as such, but the language teacher talked briefly with the inspector and the language was included in the report*

### Staffing

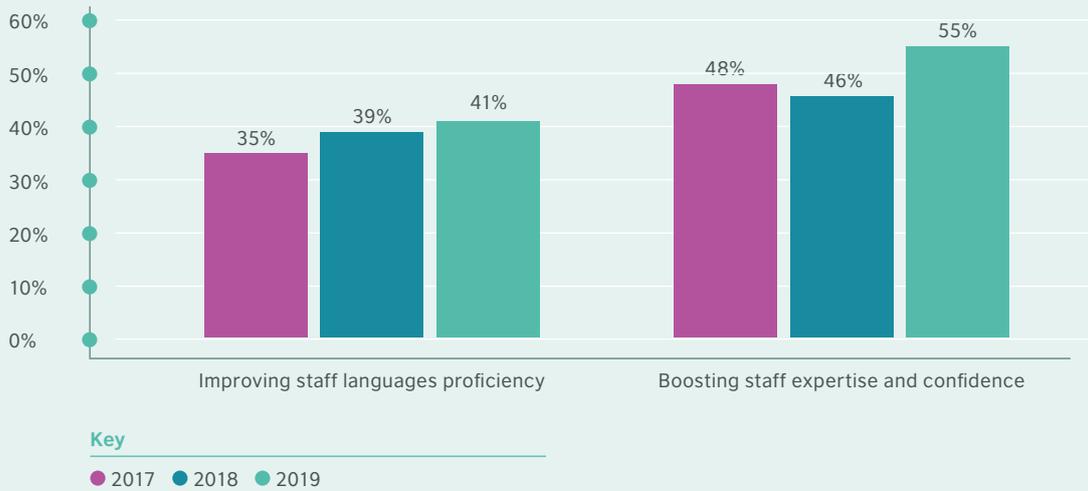
There has been a slight decrease in the use of specialist language teachers – 46% of schools employ language specialists, whether as peripatetic teachers or staff members, the same proportion as last year but down from 49% in 2016. One third of schools rely entirely on specialists to provide language teaching, while in a further 13% of schools, specialist language teachers work in conjunction with class teachers. Consistent with the slight decline in the use of specialist language teachers, class teachers are increasingly involved in provision for languages: 62% in 2018 compared to 55% in 2016.

Schools with lower levels of FSM, lower levels of Pupil Premium, and higher Key Stage 2 attainment are statistically more likely to make use of specialist language teachers (whether internal or external to the school).

Improving staff proficiency in languages, and boosting the expertise and confidence of staff teaching languages, are increasingly being identified as key challenges for primary schools:

\*Special Educational Needs  
\*\*English as an Additional Language  
\*\*\*Standard Assessment Tests

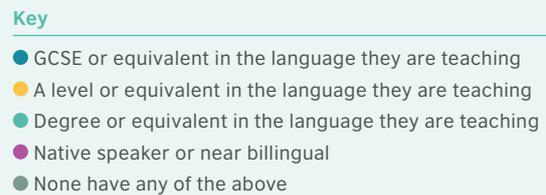
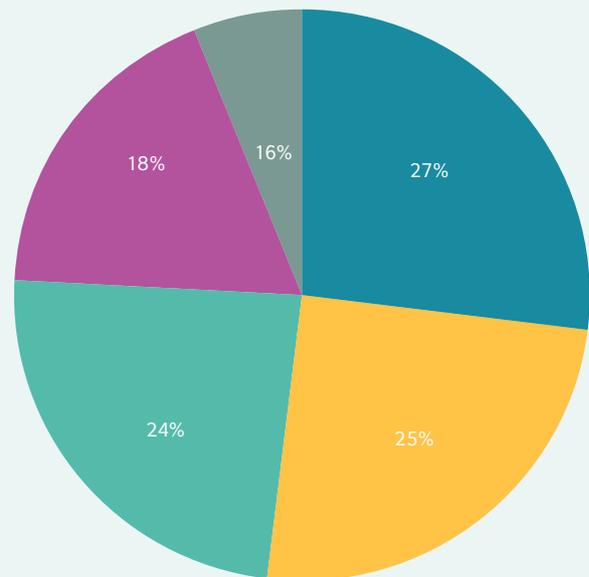
Respondents identifying staff training issues as a main challenge, 2017-2019



However, participation in CPD<sup>10</sup> for languages is low. Only one in five schools where classroom teachers are responsible for language teaching have provided these teachers with language specific CPD in the past year, and in the case of specialist language teachers, just over a quarter have done so. Where classroom teachers have received CPD, this is most frequently internal CPD organised by the specialist teacher, whereas the specialist teachers who have accessed CPD are most likely to have attended a course or conference, or taken part in networking meetings – in some cases very actively.

There is a huge variation between schools in terms of the language expertise existing among their staff. While 42% have a native speaker or graduate in the language they are teaching, one third (33%) have no qualification higher than a GCSE held by any of their teachers responsible for languages. This is the largest proportion yet recorded and, combined with the low level of participation in CPD for languages, must be a real concern for the consistent development of the subject. Schools with higher attainment levels (percentage of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths), are statistically more likely to employ higher qualified staff to teach languages, i.e. with an A level or above in the language they are teaching.

Figure 3: Highest level of language qualification/competence held by teachers in the school



10. Continuing Professional Development

**International engagement**

There is evidence that the level of international engagement by primary schools is diminishing. Half of primary schools in the survey report no international activity (up from 46% in 2018), while the proportions of those reporting international partnerships and involvement in international projects appears to have dropped significantly. However, 11% of primary schools report being involved in e-twinning – an option which was not included in the 2018 survey. Only 5% of primary schools host Language Assistants – the same proportion as in 2018.

	2018	2019
The school has one or more partner schools abroad	35%	27%
Involvement in international projects	22%	16%
Pupil exchanges	5%	2%
School trips abroad	12%	8%
Teacher exchanges	6%	7%
Teacher CPD abroad	9%	7%
E-Twinning	-	11%
None	46%	50.5%

A downturn in international engagement by primary schools is confirmed by comments such as the following:

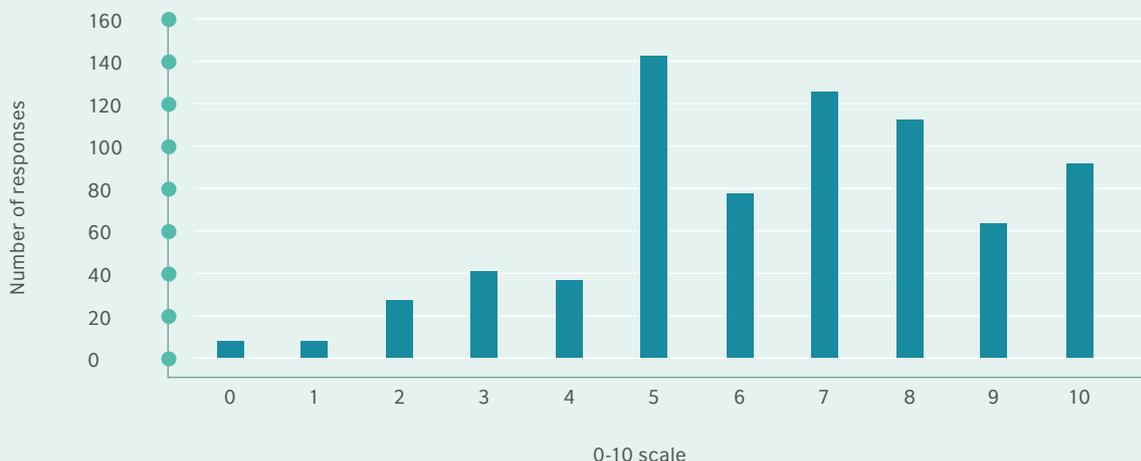
» *Prior to 2013 we were able to link with schools in France, to host students here and to visit them there. We simply cannot afford this sort of link any longer. In the harshest of terms, the benefits of this kind of work with other countries and in improving pupil skills with languages, was not celebrated in our Ofsted inspections or outcomes. As a result of the two factors - lack of finances and limited noticeable outcomes - we made the decision to stop international engagement in favour of other wider curricular work that was of greater benefit and more impactful*

**“WE STOPPED OUR INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS THIS YEAR AND LAST YEAR AS WE ARE A SCHOOL THAT REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT, SO WE ARE NOT DOING EXTRA PROJECTS NOW AND JUST FOCUSING ON WHAT OFSTED IS EXPECTING.”**

**Attitudes of senior school managers**

Respondents were asked to rate the importance which senior school managers attribute to language learning in the primary curriculum. Bearing in mind that many respondents may have themselves been senior school staff (the invitation to complete the survey was addressed to the Headteacher with a request to forwarding to the Languages Coordinator), the results show positive but not overwhelmingly enthusiastic attitudes towards languages. About a third (36%) report that their senior management rates languages highly (scoring 8 points or above), but the same proportion give the subject a generally negative rating of 5 or below, with the average point score being 6.5:

*How does your senior leadership team rate the importance of languages in the curriculum?*



Respondents note that primary school leaders have to balance the multiple demands of different subject areas.

- » *They want us to deliver a rich and varied curriculum, but this comes with many different subjects as well as MFL*
- » *With the demands of a very busy curriculum, I often feel French is way down the list*
- » *It is never discussed at staff meetings and rarely put on the SDP.<sup>11</sup> Ofsted also don't appear to check up on it or pay much attention to it. That could be why the senior management don't pay too much attention to it*

The relative importance given to languages often depends on individual interests and convictions:

- » *SLT rate language learning highly partly because the Headteacher is a modern language graduate. The school holds the British Council Full International Award*

Where respondents gave a rating of 5 or below, their comments paint a picture of schools under multiple pressures, without the time, funding or skills to make languages a priority:

- » *Funding is a huge issue for the school which impacts on all aspects of MFL teaching - and most other foundation subjects. We do our best with resources available but need any extra cash to manage SEND<sup>12</sup>*
- » *It is important. But as a balance with every other subject, it is one that relies on a higher degree of professional knowledge and ability and thus can fall off the curriculum when there is a lack of either*

Teachers are more likely to state that their senior leadership team rate the importance of language learning in the primary curriculum highly if they come from a school with lower levels of FSM eligibility and lower rates of Pupil Premium funding. There is also a relationship between senior management's perceived attitude to languages and Key Stage 2 attainment levels, with higher ratings correlating with higher attainment levels.

### Final comments

Free comments at the end of the survey provide a useful reminder of the success and satisfaction that many schools are deriving from teaching a language in Key Stage 2. One quarter of these comments were about positive experiences and children's enjoyment of the subject:

- » *We are very fortunate to have an effective set up for Key Stage 2 languages. The children receive rich cross-curricular language learning delivered by a Key Stage 2 - trained language specialist, every week. We also have a successful twinning with a school in Normandy and visit this school regularly. We also host 45 French pupils in our school*
- » *Our school values a positive approach to language learning as a life skill, but also as a way to embrace*

*other cultures. Our school's pupils are encouraged to be open to other cultures - a journey we take them on through LinguaMarque (we were the first school to acquire the Gold award in February 2017), and through the Rights Respecting Schools programme (we currently hold the Silver award)*

Schools described different approaches they have successfully developed in response to children's existing multilingualism:

- » *We have a large group of EAL children whose English levels are poor and therefore, improving those will always be a priority in a school like ours (especially because it is assessed formally in SATs!). However, the children all enjoy learning about the Spanish culture and language and it provides them with a good basis for secondary school*
- » *Our choice to teach Polish as our MFL has been very positive in creating community links within the school and in the wider community. Our Polish speakers who make up 1/5th of the school feel that their language is being valued and proud that their non-Polish speaking peers are learning their language*

Other comments focused on challenges that languages are facing at primary school, most notably, low teacher confidence and the need for more CPD, constraints on curriculum time and the desire to spend more time on languages from a younger age. A number of comments expressed frustration that secondary schools often start students at 'point 0' without taking into account progress already made in Key Stage 2. Primary school teachers understand why secondary schools often have to do this, but feel that it frustrates learners and puts them off the subject:

- » *We have repeatedly tried to engage the languages department at the local secondary school to take an interest in our language learners and the skills they have achieved, but with no success. This is a source of huge frustration as these language learners are confident and competent in French but are then expected to go right back to the beginning again. This is one of the reasons we are losing language learners. My experience is that the secondary sector is not interested in what the primary sector is doing to meet the Primary National Curriculum objectives*

11. School Development Plan

12. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

### TRANSITION FROM KEY STAGE 2 TO KEY STAGE 3

The surveys for primary and secondary schools included a number of questions designed to mirror each other and tease out issues relating to pupils' transition from primary to secondary school.

Just under 45% of primary schools report having contacts with the language department of at least one of their local secondary schools, and 53% of secondaries say they have contacts with at least one of their feeder primaries. A wide variety of types of collaboration were reported in the primary survey, although most by small numbers of schools. The most common form of contact is the informal exchange of information on language teaching at the point of transfer (21% of schools in the survey). Respondents provide examples of successful collaboration:

» *MFL lessons have formed part of Year 5 or Year 6 transition days. One of the local secondary schools provides a suggestion of language teaching for Year 6, Spring term 2 (6 weeks plan) that includes everything they would like children to cover before reaching secondary. We often use this as a revision pack and as homework*

» *We collaborate on a transition project which is started in the second half of Year 6 and completed in the first half of Year 7. Year 6 pupils take their Language Portfolio with them to secondary school so they can share their language progress and current achievement with their new language teacher*

However, figures from the last six years show there has been a clear decline in collaboration between primary and secondary schools in relation to language learning: the proportion of secondary schools which liaise with primary schools has dropped from 77% to 53% since 2014, while only 45% of primary schools now have contacts with their local secondary schools, down from 54% in 2014:



Contacts between primary and secondary schools in relation to languages



**Key**

● Secondary schools with contacts with primary ● Primary schools with contacts with secondary

Comments from secondary schools indicate that they are aware of the need for greater coordination with primary schools, highlighted as crucial in practically every report on the topic – but have been unable to sustain links due to lack of funding or changes of staff.<sup>13</sup>

- » We used to deliver German to a large feeder school but have no staffing to offer this, due to cuts
- » We used to go to primaries once a fortnight to teach but I am no longer given the time to do so by the school

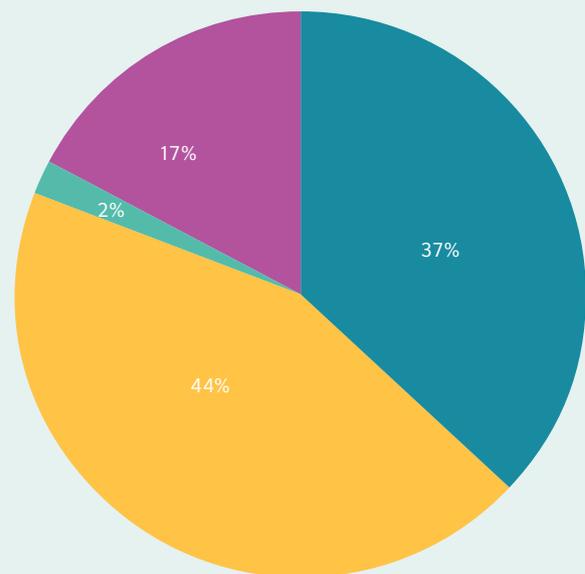
The majority of receiving secondary schools (69%) are not provided with any data on pupils' prior attainment in language learning when they arrive in Year 7. Ten per cent receive data on fewer than 1 in 10 pupils but a similar proportion (9%) receive data on more than three quarters of the cohort. Secondary teachers report requesting data but not receiving it without any formal process in place, and often rely on pupils' own accounts or on only the most basic information:

- » Whether they are considered strong/medium/weak. Some but not all primaries send examples of pupil work
- » None currently shared. We have asked in the past via surveys but not received enough information to be able to use it effectively to plan. We have to adapt as we go in Year 7 and differentiate accordingly
- » Pupils report what they've done but often cannot voice their real learning experience, e.g. claiming fluency but only really being able to count to 10, and similar

**Perceptions of year-on-year improvements, primary and secondary**

Since languages were introduced as a statutory subject in Key Stage 2 in September 2014, schools responding to the survey should now have seen at least one cohort complete four full years of primary language teaching and progress to secondary school. We should therefore expect both primary and secondary schools to report year-on-year improvements in language learning outcomes for successive cohorts of pupils. Just over a third of primary schools (37%) regard outcomes for their Year 6 cohorts as improving year on year, while 44% think they are about the same.

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

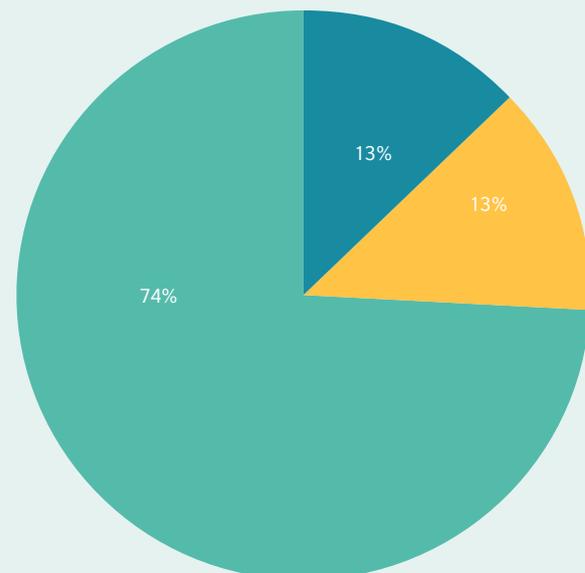


**Key**

- Yes
- About the same
- They tend not to be as good as previously
- Don't know/other

However, only 13% of secondary schools regard their current year 7 cohort as having received a better preparation for language learning in Key Stage 2 than previous cohorts, and the same proportion judge them to be less well prepared. The vast majority (74%) judge standards to be about the same.

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



**Key**

- They tend to be better prepared
- They tend to be less well prepared
- Little change

13. See, for example, Holmes and Myles (2019).

### Primary respondents' comments

» *The level of language learning is much higher than before with the focussed Spanish lessons that we have now. The children can say a lot more on a range of topics in the target language and they understand elements of Spanish grammar (feminine/masculine, etc)*

» *There has been a single French teacher for the last three years, so that teacher is able to plan the progression across KS2. When the current Year 6 children were in Year 3, the language teaching varied by teaching staff, so the progression was not consistent. From that time, all children have been taught by the same teacher and the progression has increased as a result*

Secondary schools comment above all on the variation between primary schools:

» *The experience students have at Key Stage 2 is too mixed and we need to start from scratch when they start Year 7*

» *Huge variation from primary feeder schools. If anything, it has got worse over the last few years*

While some identify an improvement as a result of the preparation pupils have received in Key Stage 2, others believe that the gains seen following the introduction of statutory status for languages are now being lost:

» *More emphasis on grammar in primary school is really helping them access languages quicker at secondary school*

» *Whereas we could see a marked improvement after 2014, this year has now reverted to the "before 2014" situation, where students were coming to Key Stage 3 with little language learning experience*

### FINDINGS FROM THE SECONDARY SURVEYS

Although French remains the language most commonly taught in English secondary schools, there is a trend for slightly fewer schools – both state and independent – to offer it. For example, at Key Stage 3, 91% of state schools now report offering French, compared to 94% in 2015. Post-16, 84% of independent schools offer French, compared to 90% in 2017. The shrinkage is more marked for German, with 40% of state schools offering the language in Key Stage 3, compared to 48% in 2015 and 66% of independent schools offering German at Key Stage 4, compared to 79% in 2017. Spanish appears much more stable in both sectors and in across all Key Stages.

Very small numbers of state schools offer languages other than these three, and some of those that have done in the past appear to have withdrawn from doing so (e.g. 7% of this year's state school respondents offer Italian as a GCSE whereas in 2018, 9% did). Independent schools are still catering for a much wider range of languages.

### Community languages

The immense majority of both state and independent schools (86% and 83% respectively) provide some sort of facility for pupils who are learning other languages or speaking other languages in their home to take public exams in these subjects. Others (4% state, 2% of independents) have pupils who take them but externally to the school. Teachers described what support they offered and which languages were involved:

» *Most common languages are Polish and Portuguese but others we will organise if there is a corresponding exam. Students have a few lessons of exam training before the exam period but no formal lessons*

» *Arabic / Polish / Portuguese / Italian / Greek / Bengali / Spanish - by acting as an exam centre but also but giving some support (past paper / sometimes teacher or TA support*

» *We have entered students for Italian and Japanese most recently. I have arranged for students to go to local schools for the speaking component or for a visitor to come in and conduct the exams*

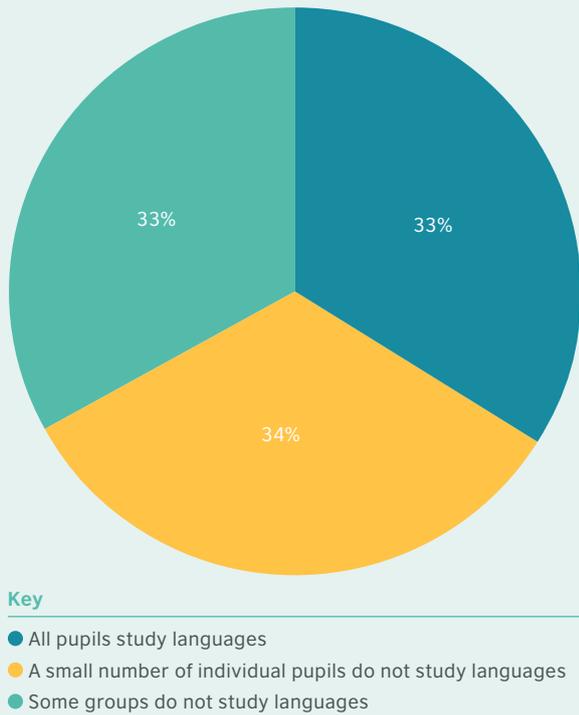
### Participation in Key Stage 3

The trend to bring forward GCSE choices to Year 8 in some state schools has been identified as a concern in the past, since it means that large numbers of pupils are receiving only two years of language teaching in Key Stage 3 in secondary school. The new Ofsted framework discourages this and the proportion of schools reporting the practice has not increased again this year. Although 33% of state secondary schools have groups of Year 9 pupils whose language education has already effectively been terminated, this is slightly down on the 2018 figure of 34.5%. This practice does not exist in the independent sector, although a small number of individual pupils may not study a language in Year 9. Respondents report:

» *Some SEN students are not in the mainstream classes and don't study a language in year 7 and 8. From year 9 students choose courses; the more able have to study a language, but the rest of the students can choose so may choose not to*

» *In years 7 and 8 lower ability sets do not study a language. Pupils opt out of languages at the end of year 8, meaning we have very low numbers at year 9 and above*

State schools' approaches to participation in language learning in Year 9



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 lower proportion of students identified as having EAL. They are also slightly more likely to be in the North of England.

Some illustrative statistics:

- » 54% of schools in the highest FSM quintile state 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 state that 'some groups do not study a language', in contrast to 32.6% of Community schools and 30.9% of Academy converters.

**Time allocation for languages**

The majority of state schools (55% in Key Stage 3 and 61% in Key Stage 4) allocate between two and three hours per week for language learning.<sup>14</sup> This norm has not changed much over time. A smaller group - around 15% - of state schools allow only a very short time for language learning in Key Stage 3. These schools have a significantly higher proportion of students eligible for FSM, a higher allocation of Pupil Premium funding, lower Attainment 8 results, and a higher proportion of pupils identified as having EAL. For example, 27% of schools in the highest FSM quintile state that pupils receive less than 2 hours per week, as opposed to only 11% of schools in the lowest FSM quintile. However, these schools – with the exception of those with higher proportions of EAL

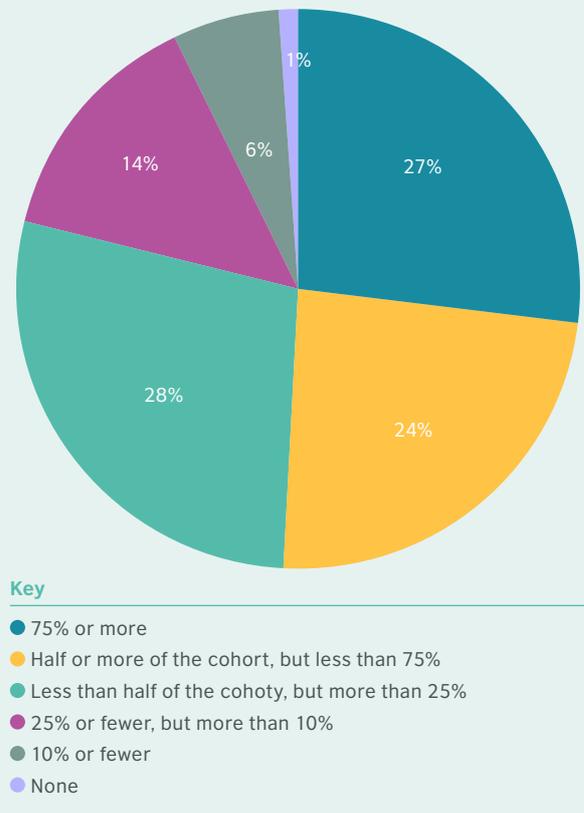
pupils - tend to allocate a longer time for languages in Key Stage 4, once GCSE choices have been made - perhaps to make up for the lack of ground covered in Key Stage 3. Respondents comment that languages are perceived as a difficult subject and where pupils have not been able to make sufficient progress in Key Stage 3, they do not have the confidence to choose it for GCSE.

**Take-up in Key Stage 4**

As in previous years, the survey has revealed great variation between state schools in terms of the proportions of pupils taking a language in Key Stage 4. While more than a quarter (27% in Year 10) report 75% or more of the Key Stage 4 cohort taking a language and are thus well on their way to achieving the government's target of 90% of the cohort by 2025, 21% have only small numbers for languages (less than a quarter of the cohort).

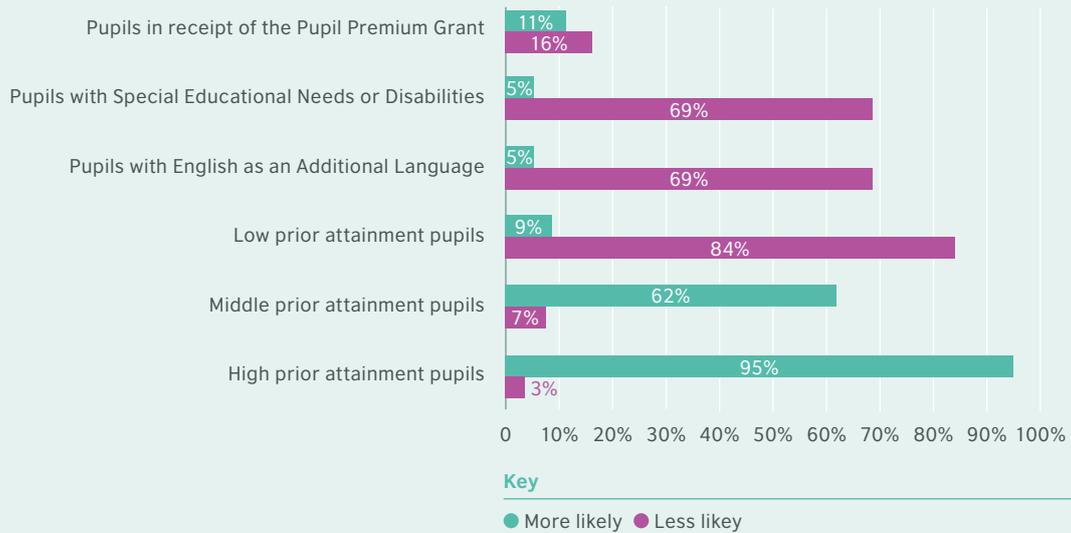
Schools with less than 25% of the cohort taking a language are statistically more likely to have high levels of FSM, high levels of Pupil Premium, low Attainment 8 scores, and are more likely to be Sponsor Led Academies and Foundation schools. Rural schools, and those in coastal areas are also more likely to have take-up of below 25%. Half of the schools in our sample that have been judged by Ofsted as requiring improvement have 25% or fewer pupils doing languages in Year 10. At the other end of the scale, more than half of responding schools in London have at least 75% of the cohort taking a language.

Take-up for languages in Year 10 (state schools)



14. Where pupils study two languages, respondents were asked to state the total time for both.

Which pupils are more or less likely to be taking a language in Key Stage 4, by category (state schools)



Take-up trends reported by state schools show only slight fluctuations in relation to findings from previous years. About a quarter (23%) of schools say that they have more pupils studying a language in Year 10 than last year, but a very similar number (25%) say they have fewer. The 2% difference is reversed in Year 11.

In many independent schools, a language is mandatory in Key Stage 4. Where it is not, there appears to be a trend towards lower take-up:

- » Closer to 100% - it's only the VERY rare exception when a pupil's learning difficulties prioritise the dropping of all languages (perhaps 1-2 pupils in a cohort of 263)
- » It is getting much harder to recruit
- » Very concerned about the dip in multiple linguists

Rather than indicating that schools are working to increase numbers in line with government policy, these findings suggest a fairly stable picture as regards take-up. However, what is clear is that the changes over the last three years have disproportionately favoured high prior attainment pupils and disfavoured lower prior attainment pupils, in access to language learning at Key Stage 4, in both independent and state schools. Ninety-five per cent of state schools say that more high prior attainment pupils are now taking a language than in recent years, and 84% of state schools (70% of independent schools) say that low prior attainment pupils are less likely to be doing so. Pupils with SEND are also less likely to be taking a language.

Respondents comment:

- » Languages are sold as very important to do and strongly recommended but are perceived as hard by pupils so lower ability pupils don't tend to do MFLs when they feel/it is felt they can do better in other subjects [independent school respondent]
- » I have fought for Modern Languages NOT to be the first subject to be dropped by SEND - often because of the skills the language is more accessible to them i.e. Chinese/Russian for dyslexics. Less writing too. I continue to fight this one. There are a couple of students with autism profiles which do render language activities, role-play etc less inclusive [independent school respondent]
- » New GCSE is too demanding for lower attaining pupils. They are dissuaded as it is too challenging - even at foundation - and not seen as relevant for them. Even though we are a 'boy heavy' school, boys are under-represented in MFL at GCSE as the nature of the reformed GCSE favours girls [state school respondent]
- » We differentiate our KS3 course to cater for all abilities, but the GCSE exam does not provide questions which students working at Grade 1-3 can access, not even on the Foundation Papers. Therefore, these students would achieve higher grades in other subjects [state school respondent]
- » The decision on whether a pupil continues is based on ability in maths. So, an able child in maths who is weak in MFL (for whatever reason) may still be compelled to take a language [state school respondent]

The exam system is overwhelmingly identified as the key factor affecting take-up for both GCSE and A level and a whole section is dedicated to this below.

## Staffing

Responding state schools reported having between 1 and 25 members of staff teaching languages, including full and part-time and Language Assistants. Most commonly, language departments are made up of 4 or 5 members of staff, though one independent school reports having as many as 40.

Most schools (61% state, 68% independent) say that this staff complement has not changed recently. However, 15% state (10% independent) say they have more staff and 24% state (20% independent) report having fewer:

» *We used to be a language college, got into special measures and dropped our status. We are now GOOD with a fabulous SLT which really value MFL. We teach well and pupils enjoy MFL so we recruit more pupils now. Due to budget we have a small department and very big classes at KS3/4*

» *We have a gap year student from Germany (our exchange school) but this won't exist next year as the school needs to save money due to the Teachers' Pension Scheme extra costs so that post has gone for now*

There is little sense therefore that schools are seeking to increase their staff complement in languages in order to cater for growing numbers. Around a third of state schools (34%) and a quarter of independent schools (24%) report difficulties recruiting languages staff, and a lower proportion say that retention is a problem. Schools are more likely to report difficulties recruiting languages staff if they are in the South (38%), rather than in the Midlands (33%) or the North (21%). The East of England is the region that reported this challenge the most – with 47% of schools in the East of England reporting difficulties with recruiting, as opposed to only 16% of schools in the North West.

The responses highlight the dependency of English schools on staff who are EU27 citizens. Two thirds of state schools (67%) and 79% of independent schools have one or more staff who are EU27 citizens. Some schools reported having very high proportions – '5 out of 6', '11 out of 13', 'all 6 of us', etc.

## Post-16

Around two thirds (65%) of responding state schools and 89% of independents have post-16 pupils and, of these, 39% of state schools and 42% of independent schools report currently having fewer pupils taking a language than in previous years. Previous surveys – and indeed A level figures – have highlighted steep declines in French and German. Only 10% of independents say they have more pupils post-16 taking languages than before, although 19% of state schools have increased numbers.

Both independent and state schools cited a consistent and interrelated mix of reasons for declining numbers post-16, summarised in the following comments:

» *Perceived difficulty of language courses; limited choices at A level with all students only now taking 3 subjects; more able students opting for sciences instead of languages; students do not 'need' a language for their desired university courses*

» *The new GCSE exams put off a lot of students, in particular: the listening in the Higher Tier in 2018, both for French and Spanish*

» *Classes have not run in the past few years due to small numbers of prospective students, and we have been told that a class would need to have 20 students to be financially viable*

» *Only 3 A Level choices. Seen as harder exam to achieve top grade - severe grading. General perception of students and parents as difficult and lots of hard work required [independent school respondent]*

However, there were also some positive comments about the impact of the new GCSE, as well as other reasons cited by the minority of schools where take-up has increased:

» *I believe the new GCSE course is having a positive impact. Positive relationships with their teachers at KS4*

» *Good reviews from parents and students, popular trips, work experience undertaken by sixth form students, talks by outside speakers*

» *We introduced Spanish as a third MFL 5 years ago and therefore that cohort is now moving through the sixth form*

» *Heavy marketing of the subject, extension programmes, not teaching with GCSE or other exams in mind, recruiting knowledgeable and engaging teachers, enrichment events [independent school respondent]*

The move to 3 A levels, which is seen as a fundamental factor leading to declines in take-up, is now quite widespread with only 30% of independent schools and 27% of state schools now offering AS examinations. Take-up for the Extended Project Qualification is notably higher in the independent sector – 27% as opposed to just 9% of schools in the state sector, but this too is reported as impacting negatively on take-up for languages. Take-up of accreditation offered by foreign governments or cultural institutes is very low – 4% in the independent sector and practically non-existent in the state sector (just one school).

## International experience and Brexit

As in the findings to the primary survey, there appears to have been a gentle decline in schools' engagement in international activities: pupil exchanges, joint curriculum projects, work experience abroad and school trips abroad are all being provided by 2% - 5% fewer state schools, although slightly more schools report involvement in teacher CPD abroad. The reasons given by respondents for declining participation in

international activities are funding, safeguarding concerns, and Brexit:

» *Our school is struggling to pay for cover when members of staff are away on trips. At the moment our very popular French trip was put on hold for those reasons*

» *We have had to cancel our school exchanges because of our new head's concerns over the new DBS<sup>15</sup> advice*

» *A rich variety of events have been cancelled due to Brexit (and partly more government red tape!), including two long-running exchanges*

Others report continuing or expanding involvement in international activities, often citing the Erasmus + programme:

» *We are just becoming involved in the e-twinning programme. An Erasmus project finished last year - new one in the pipeline. Very healthy German Exchange*

In the independent sector, schools are less likely than in 2018 to be undertaking joint curriculum projects with schools abroad, hosting Language Assistants, and organising pupil exchanges, school trips, and work experience abroad, though more say they have partner schools abroad compared to 2018.

There is a greater degree of involvement in almost all these types of activity in the independent sector than in the state sector:

2019	State	Independent
The school has one or more partner schools abroad	31%	45%
E-twinning	8%	3%
Joint curriculum projects	8%	9%
We host Language Assistants	23%	44%
Pupil exchanges	25%	48%
School trips abroad	79%	86%
Work experience abroad for pupils	10%	29%
Teacher exchanges	3%	2%
Teacher CPD abroad	5%	9%
None	12%	9%

The great majority (79%) of state schools (86% independent) organise school trips abroad and the vast majority in both sectors say that these have a language-oriented element. On average, state schools report between 60 and 70 pupils benefiting from language-oriented trips, although most commonly they involve 30 to 40 pupils.

A large minority of schools in both sectors (45% of state schools, 41% of independent schools) say that the implications of Brexit are a major challenge to

providing high quality language teaching. In the state sector, these schools are statistically more likely to be local authority-maintained schools, and slightly more likely to be in coastal areas. Respondents report that Brexit has 'cast a pall over languages' and mention concerns about future recruitment of language teachers and the impact on student and parental attitudes:

» *We have had parents mention that they do not believe their son/daughter should be studying a language as it is little to no use to them now that we are leaving the European Union*

» *Some students see no use to languages (particularly PPG students<sup>16</sup>) as they have never been abroad and probably never will. Since the Brexit vote there has also been a shift in attitudes*

When asked specifically whether Brexit has had an impact on pupils' attitudes towards language learning, 25% say that there has been a negative impact either on motivation to learn a European language or motivation to learn languages in general:

» *Impact felt when they choose their options. In their mind Brexit invalidates the need for language learning*

A substantial number of schools (36%) report that student responses are mixed – evidence that different sectors of society are taking up divergent positions as regards language learning:

» *Some pupils understand the implications of Brexit and the need for MFL teaching but others see it as a way to avoid learning a language as we will not be part of Europe any longer*

» *Comments, obviously heard at home, such as "now we've left/are leaving the EU you won't need this any more". This contrasts to EAL pupils and pupils of mixed heritage whose parents do actively encourage MFL and often have had experience of learning English to enable their life-chances*

Independent sector respondents are less likely to report that Brexit has had an impact on student motivation to learn languages – just 15%; however, 30% report mixed responses, with some less convinced about the need for languages, and others unaffected:

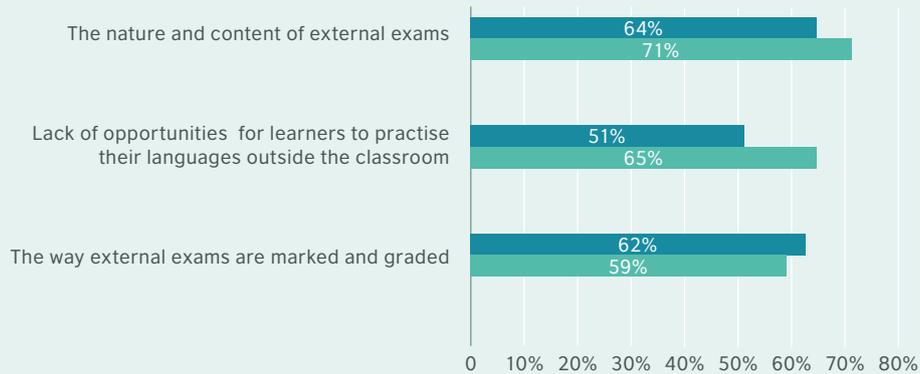
» *Some pupils view this as a reason to not be concerned as they feel English dominates in the world, others see it as more vital for business and job opportunities in the future*

» *Students in this school are very keen on language learning. The make-up is affluent with many international families; however, this is not a selective school*

15. The Government's Disclosure and Barring Service – relating to criminal record checks.

16. Students classified as disadvantaged in respect of which the school receives a Pupil Premium Grant.

Top three challenges to providing high quality language teaching – state and independent schools



**Key**

● Independent ● State

**Responses to the new GCSEs and A levels**

There was no specific question in the survey about exams and assessment, however the issue was brought overwhelmingly to the fore not only in the responses relating to declining numbers at GCSE and A level, but in a question about challenges schools face in providing high quality language learning. The ‘nature and content of external exams’ emerged as the most widespread concern in both sectors – cited by 71% of state school respondents and 64% of independent schools. ‘The way external exams are marked and graded’ was cited as the second highest concern by independent schools (62%) and also by 59% of state school respondents. A majority of respondents from both sectors also placed ‘lack of opportunities for learners to practise their language outside the classroom’ high on their list of concerns.

Respondents cited in particular the difficulty of achieving a high grade in a language compared to other subjects, and the perception that students are not making good progress:

- » *I really like the new GCSE and A level specs but I think it is very difficult to get the higher grades in comparison to other subjects. I feel that we are really disadvantaged in the progress 8 measure*
- » *Many able linguists feel their chances of reaching the top grades are far greater elsewhere in the curriculum. Harsh and inconsistent marking from the Exam Boards has also knocked down numbers*
- » *Parents see student progress as low in comparison to their current grade on account of their targets which are set from KS2 English and Maths so do not encourage their children to embrace languages*

There were also comments about inconsistent standards, and the impact of ‘native speakers’<sup>17</sup> on grade boundaries:

- » *There are differences between the standards of the exams. We have seen this to be the case particularly where the same teacher is teaching both French and Spanish to GCSE and where students were studying both languages. Grades were one grade higher in French than in Spanish*
- » *In some languages (e.g. Italian) the number of native speakers taking the GCSE and A level exams are skewing the grade boundaries hugely - why is this allowed?*

**THE NATURE AND CONTENT OF EXTERNAL EXAMS EMERGED AS THE MOST WIDESPREAD CONCERN IN BOTH SECTORS.**

17. This is a contested term, which may refer to pupils with access to the language concerned with their homes or communities with varying linguistic profiles at many different stages in developing their languages.

## Final comments

Exam issues also emerged as absolutely the key concern in a final open question asking for any other comments on the situation for languages in secondary schools, with more than half of these being negative comments about the new exams, their difficulty, grading, and the new tier structure. Comments mainly focused on the increased difficulty at GCSE and A level, how this deters students from opting for languages, and the impact it has on school incentives to provide access to languages for all or most students – especially when schools feel pressure to get results, and achieving a good grade in a language is seen as harder than in other subjects. Linked to this theme, a smaller number of teachers commented specifically on equity concerns regarding access to language learning. Concerns were focused on languages becoming a subject only accessible to ‘higher attaining’ students and reducing access to language learning in the state sector, in perceived contrast to the independent sector.

- » *I am appalled by the increased difficulty of the Higher papers in MFL, and the direct impact that’s immediately had on the number of our pupils wanting to continue with Language studies, understandably. Pupils’ last experience of French/Spanish is one of failure, when they take a listening exam and feel they don’t understand half of it. It’s so discouraging for them*
- » *Government policy of successive governments has been a disgrace - it’s as if someone wants to deliberately do away with languages in the state sector. There is nothing for lower ability or SEN children - the GCSE is totally inappropriate. Until the issues of severe grading are dealt with things won’t change. The GCSE exams need to be made accessible and not be some ridiculously off-putting experience*
- » *There is lots of talk in the media that the government consider languages to be a vital skill and that businesses need more linguists, but this is not translated down into schools. Schools are struggling financially post academisation and are having to make choices about the curriculum and languages are the ‘niche’ subjects that are suffering*
- » *Morale is low. STEM is so promoted. The exam is too hard to attract a broad range of ability. School has made us optional despite good results, very disappointing [independent school respondent]*
- » *The competitive nature of the examination and its grade distribution does not reward students for their efforts. Currently the whole system demotivates students of all abilities once they understand the nature of our current grade distribution*

Respondents put forward a number of practical suggestions for ways in which these issues could be addressed, including:

- » *Making languages double-weighted, like English and Maths*



- » *Making languages a one-tier entry system with all grades available to all, like English*
- » *Prioritising languages in the same way as the government has with STEM subjects*
- » *Reviewing marking and grading in languages again*
- » *Assess students up to Grade 5 according to a fixed standard, and only use norm-referencing for the higher grades*
- » *Not specifying the same topics for French, German and Spanish (which is off-putting to potential dual linguists) and include more cultural options instead*
- » *Universities could do more to promote languages, e.g. by requiring a language for all courses which include a period of residence abroad*
- » *Provide adequate training for teachers of less-frequently taught languages (e.g. Arabic)*
- » *Resolve these questions before putting pressure on schools for increases in take-up*

## CONCLUSIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

### Primary

Many primary schools are deriving success and satisfaction from teaching languages and the subject is valued as a positive life skill and a way to embrace other cultures. However, there remains a considerable gulf between these schools and those where language teaching has yet to be developed so that children's learning can be a platform for progression in Key Stage 3. Low participation in CPD for languages is holding back the improvements we would expect to see in successive cohorts as a new subject becomes established. Where there is no reliable amount of time set aside each week and each year for language teaching it is difficult to ensure that children achieve the expected outcomes at the end of Year 6. Where primary schools make use of specialist teachers, this can act as an anchor for languages in the timetable and support consistent progression. Ofsted is not yet systematically inspecting languages in primary schools and there is little incentive for more Headteachers to invest in developing language teaching alongside myriad other priorities and pressures.

Because of uneven practice across the country, pupils attending different primary schools have divergent experiences of language learning in Key Stage 2. Those who attend schools in less advantaged socio-economic circumstances, and those where educational attainment is lower overall, are more likely to be taught languages for a shorter time and receive less systematic instruction without access to specialist teachers, than those attending schools with higher educational attainment and lower numbers of children from poorer homes (see charts right).

Collaboration between primary and secondary schools in relation to languages is on the decline. Huge inconsistencies in practice across the primary sector and a lack of systematic information exchange mean secondary schools have no secure basis on which to build learning in Key Stage 3. There is a will to remedy this in both sectors but a lack of time and resources to do so. Previously established relationships often wither when there are changes of staff or leadership.

### Secondary

The inequalities in access to language learning in primary schools are mirrored in Key Stages 3 and 4, with huge variations in provision and take-up very strongly associated with socio-economic status and educational attainment more generally (see chart right). Now Brexit threatens to widen the divide still further as different sectors of society take-up divergent positions as regards language learning, and some parents and pupils are questioning the need to learn a language.

Many schools are working hard to maintain take-up at GCSE and A level but overwhelmingly cite the 'nature and content of external exams' as the major barrier

to increasing numbers. Whilst there is little evidence that Key Stage 4 take-up is about to drop further, there is no sense either that schools are gearing up for any substantial increase. This is linked to the perception that GCSE is not attainable for lower achieving children (at least, not without considerably increased input and resources, which is not currently on anyone's agenda). Respondents also express concerns about the relative difficulty of the subject, the push for STEM at the expense of languages, inconsistent standards and a norm-referenced grading system which is skewed by candidates who have had opportunities to learn languages outside of school. The vast majority of schools in both sectors encourage such pupils to sit exams, where they exist, and provide facilities for them to do so, but respondents want to see marking and grading addressed in a way which is fair to all.

Post-16, the move away from AS to three A levels has been detrimental to take-up for languages, with German often being squeezed out altogether. Attention is needed at both ends of the educational system, and enough time allocated to languages in Key Stage 3, in order to address both short and longer-term challenges.

**MANY PRIMARY SCHOOLS ARE DERIVING SUCCESS AND SATISFACTION FROM TEACHING LANGUAGES AND THE SUBJECT IS VALUED AS A POSITIVE LIFE SKILL.**

Variations between primary schools

	Lower attainment	Lower EAL	High FSM	High Pupil Premium	Urban
Less likely to set aside a specific time for languages	x	x			
More likely to spend less time on languages in Years 5 & 6			x	x	x
More likely not to assess or record pupil progress	x			x	

	Higher attainment	Lower FSM	Lower Pupil Premium
More likely to allocate more time for languages	x		
More likely to deploy specialist language teachers	x	x	x
More likely to employ higher qualified staff	x		
Senior leadership more likely to rate languages highly	x	x	x

Variations between secondary schools

	Low Attainment 8 scores	Ofsted rating of 'Requires Improvement', 'Serious Weakness' or 'Special Measures'	High Pupil Premium funding	High proportions of pupils eligible for FSM	Low proportions of EAL pupils	High proportion of EAL pupils
More likely for languages to be a low priority for senior management	x	x	x			
More likely for some groups not to study languages in Year 9	x		x	x	x	
More likely to allocate less than 2 hours per week for languages in Key Stage 3	x		x	x		x
More likely to have less than 25% take-up in Key Stage 4	x	x	x	x		

