

Language Trends 2021

Language teaching in
primary and secondary
schools in England

Survey report by Ian Collen



Introduction

The 2020-21 school year has brought challenges to education in England in ways which we could never have imagined. Language teachers had to re-think priorities quickly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and we know that they did so with aplomb. On behalf of the British Council and Queen's University Belfast, we would like to put on record our sincere thanks to teachers for participating in our research in this unprecedented year. Without teachers' participation, our research would not be possible.

Almost twenty years old, Language Trends 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. Since 2015 there has also been an annual survey in Wales, and since 2019 a biennial survey in Northern Ireland. The Language Trends series shows general shifts in data and seeks to provide a springboard for teachers, school leaders, academics, inspectors, policy makers and the general public to consider particular aspects of language learning more deeply.

Headline findings

The headline findings for 2021 are:

- Language teaching was suspended at one in five primary schools in January 2021 due to Covid-19. The impact has been felt more acutely in deprived areas;
- As a further result of Covid-19, 64% per cent of responding primary schools and 38% of state secondary schools have no international activities within their school, a huge increase on previous years. Very few virtual international activities have been initiated or maintained;
- Teachers in state secondary schools report that two in five pupils in Key Stage 3 did not engage with language learning during the first national lockdown, leading to time lost to language learning for a lot of pupils;

- Withdrawal of some pupils from language lessons continues to be a concerning issue at Key Stage 3;
- There has been a large decline in the number of pupils entered for GCSEs and A levels in 'Other Modern Languages' (i.e. languages other than French, German, Irish, Spanish and Welsh);
- Whilst French is the most popular language at Primary, Key Stage 3 and GCSE, Spanish is the most popular A level language for the second year in a row.

Good news stories

It is clear from our survey that teachers are working incredibly hard and there are many good news stories. As we look to the future, it will be important to consider what new ways of working we want to retain from this period in history. We will share more of these good news stories in the body of the report, but some positive developments include:

- Resourcing and opportunities for online CPD have increased;
- Although there is less contact between primary and secondary schools, primary schools are collecting more data on students' language progress;
- Primary schools are reporting better pupil progress in language learning than in previous years.

Policy context and background

In 2004, GCSE languages became optional in England, but there was a commitment to introducing a language at Key Stage 2 (ages 8-11). The intention of the government at that time was for primary languages to ignite a passion for language learning. Languages have been statutory at Key Stage 2 since 2014.

Whilst primary languages are now enshrined in policy, and this is to be welcomed, some schools lack the provision and capability to effectively deliver languages (Tinsley and Dolžal, 2018). There have also been calls for an implementation strategy to better realise the political will for primary languages (Holmes and Myles, 2019), in the sense that the government has made a strong policy commitment to primary languages, but the

operationalisation of the same is challenging in practice.

The National Curriculum must be taught in all local authority maintained schools in England and the National Curriculum Framework stipulates that languages are compulsory from ages 7-14. At Key Stage 2, the requirement is for a foreign language to be taught, and this can be a modern or an ancient language; at Key Stage 3 (Years 7-9, ages 11-14) the requirement is specifically for a modern foreign language. A number of schools in England are now academies and free schools; there is no requirement for these to follow the National Curriculum, though in practice most do.

Some state academies have narrowed Key Stage 3 to two years in order to allow for three-year Key Stage 4 provision, which leads to the GCSE examination at age 16. This means that many pupils stop language learning before or just after their 13th birthday (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, 2019).

At Key Stage 4, Modern Foreign Languages are safeguarded as an entitlement area at GCSE level (DfE, 2014). The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measure, introduced in 2010, included a GCSE language (ancient or modern) and reportedly, albeit temporarily, impacted school curriculum policies (Clemens, 2011). Languages form one of the five pillars of the government's EBacc measure of school performance alongside English, mathematics, the sciences and the humanities (geography or history). The government's ambition is for 90% of pupils in England to be taking all EBacc subjects for GCSE by 2025.

The introduction of the EBacc did have a temporary effect on improving uptake of languages at GCSE in 2013; however, in 2017 only 38.2% of pupils in the state sector were entered for a language, and of those pupils who entered four out of the five components, 80.4% were missing the languages component (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, 2019). We know that 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 (Mills and Tinsley, 2020). In requiring the inclusion of only three EBacc qualifications (from sciences, history, geography, languages) for some school reporting mechanisms such as Progress 8, languages are not necessarily part of the assessment in many schools (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, 2019). A review of GCSE grading in Modern Foreign Languages (Ofqual, 2019) led to grade adjustments for GCSE French and German, but not Spanish, from awarding bodies in England as of summer 2020.

Teachers report 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,

importantly, making the number of pupils in Year 12 language classes financially viable. Following concern from key stakeholders that this modular structure of A level was not preparing young people for university study, which was considered the main purpose, A level languages were 'decoupled' for first teaching from September 2016, meaning the reformed AS and A levels are now standalone qualifications and the AS no longer counts towards the A level.

In seeking to add depth and rigour to the post-16 Curriculum, AS and A level qualifications are therefore once again linear, whereby student outcomes at A level no longer comprise marks awarded in Advanced Subsidiary components.

There have been UK-wide proposals in 2020 from the British Academy, working with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK, for a National Languages Strategy¹, including a number of proposals which relate directly to England. Of particular note is the call for a languages premium, a financial incentive to encourage schools to run (small) A level classes in Modern Foreign Languages.

Research outline

This year, the British Council contracted Queen's University Belfast to conduct the Language Trends England research. Ethical approval was secured 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 and informed consent to take part.

The research question guiding the study was 'what is the current situation for language teaching and learning in state primary, state secondary and independent schools in England?' The research method was in keeping with previous series of Language Trends i.e. to use questionnaires. The questionnaires were developed in autumn 2020 in consultation with an Advisory Panel who represented, among others, practising school teachers, subject associations, school leadership associations, Ofsted, the Department for Education and universities.

The survey (using questionnaires) was carried out from mid-January to mid-February 2021. Schools were invited by email to participate, using the Department for Education's (DfE) official Register of Educational Establishments in England. At the time of data collection, most pupils and staff were working from home. Against the ambient backdrop of Covid-19, it is most pleasing that the number of participating schools has increased significantly from 2020. After data sets had been cleaned, a total of 1,511 schools took part (compared to 928 schools in 2020), of which 756 were state primary

1. See: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/towards-national-languages-strategy-education-and-skills/>

schools, 617 state secondary schools and 138 independent schools.

Table 1: Overall response rates by sector

Response rates	Primary	State Secondary	Independent
	12.6%	21.2%	21.7%

Univariate and some multivariate analysis was performed on the quantitative data to identify overall trends; qualitative comments were analysed by means of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) using deductive coding. These codes were then quantified in order to identify common themes across the data set.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Respondents reported that in 53% of primary schools in England, language teaching was discontinued during the first national lockdown from 23 March 2020 to late June 2020. During this time in these schools, there was no online teaching and pupils were not provided with work for languages.

For those 47% of schools which did continue to teach languages, only five per cent taught live using video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet or MS Teams. On average teachers reported that three out of four children had regular access to a computer or tablet during the first lockdown, but pupils' lack of regular access to digital devices posed a problem for over half of those schools which continued with language teaching. One teacher reported:

“Work was sent home initially but only later were online lessons taught. At this point languages were not taught live but weekly language work was sent. Not all children accessed or completed the work so there are gaps in knowledge.”

Teaching was disrupted during the first term of the 2020/21 school year with pupils and staff often absent for periods of self-isolation. By the time of data collection in January and February 2021, one in five schools continued to suspend language teaching:

“Languages continued at the beginning of the January 2021 lockdown. Five weeks in to lockdown, we stopped this, in order to reduce our online content. Many families were becoming overwhelmed with the amount of work to do so we have opted to keep home learning simpler.”

In one school where languages did continue, a teacher reported:

“Live lessons to all children in school and at home during second lockdown. Assignments posted weekly on class Notebook for all classes during both lockdowns. Progress could only be assessed if pupils handed in their work for marking, whereas in a normal year all pupils' progress is assessed.”

These data point to the fact that languages remain a marginal subject which many primary schools find challenging to deliver alongside manifold competing demands. The pandemic has exacerbated this.

A total of 62% of responding state secondary schools reported there was a 'big negative impact' on language teaching during the first national lockdown (23 March 2020 to late June 2020) and a further 26% of schools said there was a 'small negative impact'. Only eight per cent of schools reported no impact.

The social class divide can be clearly seen: 71% of state schools in the most deprived areas reported a 'big negative impact' on language learning; 52% of state schools in the most affluent areas reported the same. By comparison just 16% of independent schools reported a 'big negative impact'.

Teachers reported that on average:

- In the state sector, one in three pupils did not have regular access to the internet and two in five pupils did not engage with language learning during the first national lockdown;
- By comparison, teachers in the independent sector reported that on average one in twenty pupils did not have regular access to the internet during the first lockdown and one in ten pupils did not engage with language learning during the first lockdown.

During the national lockdown in January 2021 the number of pupils in the state sector not having regular access to the internet halved to an average of one in six. The number of pupils not engaging in language learning was reported to be one in five. Almost all (98%) of teachers reported that they felt much better prepared for online teaching in 2021 than in 2020.

Data collected as part of a large-scale pupil survey for Language Trends Northern Ireland 2021 revealed that for Year 8 pupils (Year 9 in Northern Ireland, n= 1528 from 38 state secondary schools), 54% said that learning languages online was more difficult than learning online for their other subjects.

The implications of the pandemic on all aspects of society moving forward cannot be underestimated. The data presented from this year's survey show that everyone needs to be attuned to the disruption to children's language learning over the past two school years.

Findings from the Primary School survey

Profile of responding schools

The survey was sent to 6,000 state primary schools in England. The main selection criterion was 'schools with pupils from five to eleven years of age'. It is acknowledged that this meant middle schools and those primary schools which do not cover the full age range were not included: a particular issue in the North East where there are a number of middle and junior high schools. It is pleasing that responding schools represented all areas of the country and there is no single area which is overly underrepresented when compared to the sample. The healthiest response rate was achieved in the South East, closely followed by the North West.

Table 2: Responding primary schools by region

Region	Sample	Achieved	Response Rate
London	365	45	12.3%
South East	1,082	181	16.7%
South West	995	116	11.6%
East Midlands	686	64	9.3%
West Midlands	494	48	9.7%
East of England	875	113	12.9%
Yorkshire and the Humber	480	43	9%
North East	161	19	11.8%
North West	862	127	14.7%
Total	6000	756	12.6%

In terms of socio-economic profile, the main indicator comes from each school's Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME) statistic. The current FSME average for primary schools in England is 17.7% (up from 15.9% in 2019) and it is likely, given the Covid-19 pandemic, that this average will increase over the next few years. Using raw data from the Department for Education's 2020 school census the research team calculated the FSME quintiles for state primary schools in England:

Table 3: Free school meal quintiles for state primary schools in England.

	Free School Meals Entitlement
Quintile 1 – least deprived	0 - 6.3%
Quintile 2	6.4% - 10.8%
Quintile 3 – around FSME average	10.9% - 16.8%
Quintile 4	16.9% - 26.6%
Quintile 5 – most deprived	26.7% and above

In an ideal world 20% of responding schools would be in each quintile. Table 4 shows that 58% of schools responding to Language Trends England were in quintiles 1 and 2 i.e. more favourable than England's FSME average and in lesser deprived areas of the country. Whilst the profile of responding schools is slightly more balanced than in previous years, work remains to be done to encourage participation from primary schools with a high number of pupils entitled to free school meals. The profile of responding schools could mean that data presented in this report paints a picture which is slightly more favourable than the reality:

Table 4: Participation in our survey by quintile

	Percentage participation in our survey
Quintile 1 – least deprived	29%
Quintile 2	29%
Quintile 3 – around FSME average	19%
Quintile 4	13%
Quintile 5 – most deprived	10%

Languages in the Curriculum

Under normal circumstances, languages are now embedded in the curriculum of the majority of schools:

Figure 1: The time since responding primary schools started to teach languages

Seventy-eight per cent of responding schools report that they have been teaching languages at Key Stage 2 (Years 3-6, ages 8-11) for more than five years, which is an increase on the 75% reported in Language Trends 2019.

In almost all schools the curriculum now plans for substantial progress in one language over the four years of Key Stage 2 (now 91% of schools, up from 78% in 2019). In developing the curriculum, 66% of schools report that they use the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages, 48% of schools use the DfE Programmes of Study, half of schools use commercial schemes of work and four in ten schools use schemes of work developed in-house.

In terms of assessing pupils, the most frequent form of assessment remains informal assessment of each pupil.

Figure 1: The time since responding primary schools started to teach languages

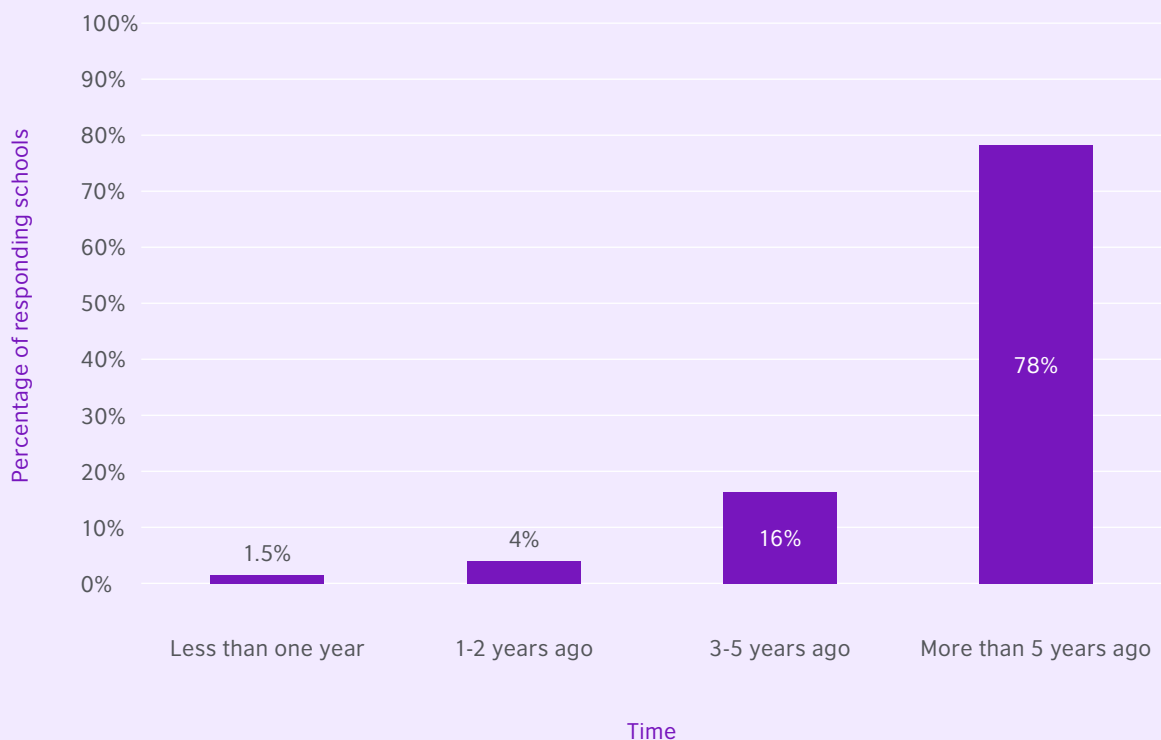


Figure 2: How primary schools assess pupils

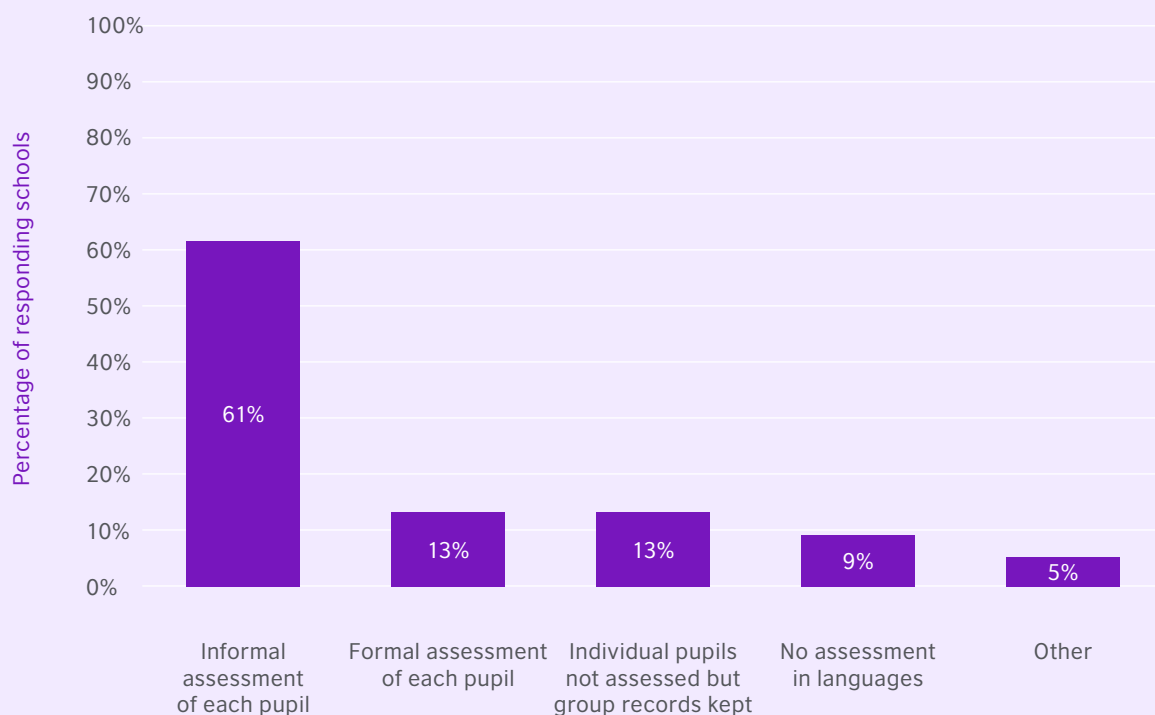


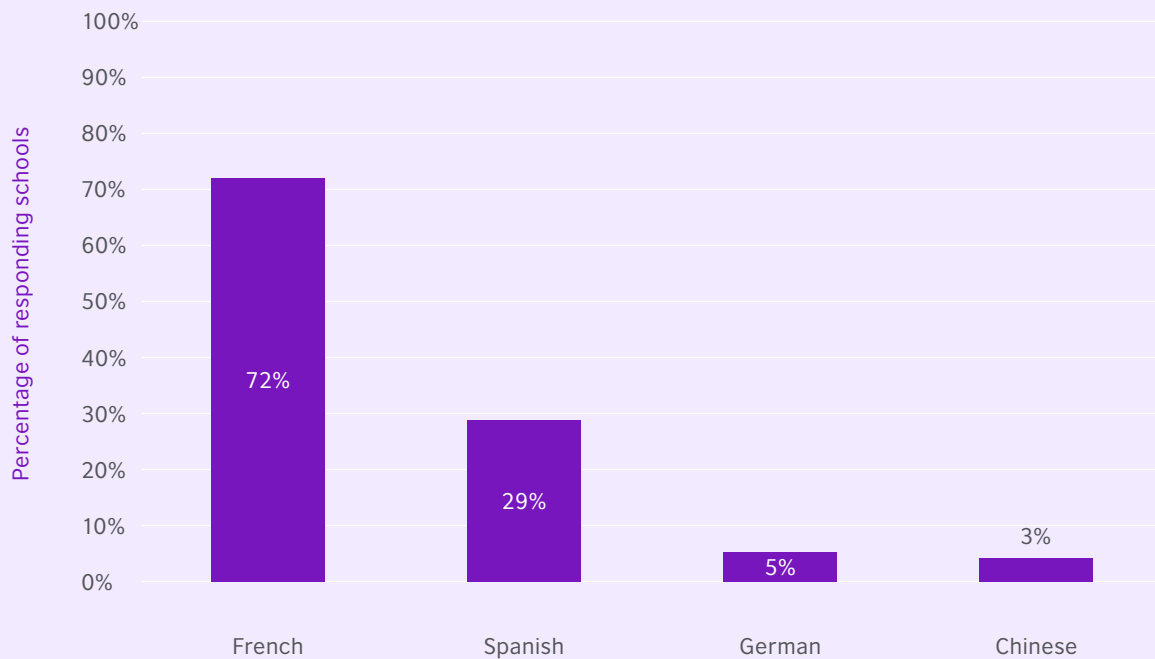
Figure 2: How primary schools assess pupils

In the 'other' category, more innovative forms of assessment included:

- A language passport where pupils 'travelled' to a series of francophone countries as they learned more words;
- A lingua badge system, developed in consultation with education advisors in the local area, to motivate children;
- Use of the free Language Magician assessment tool²;
- And use of assessment materials provided by the Primary Languages Network.

We consider assessment of primary pupils again later in the report when looking at transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3.

Figure 3: Most often taught languages in primary schools



Languages taught at Key Stage 2

Figure 3: Most often taught languages in primary schools

French continues to be the most taught language at primary level and is significantly ahead of Spanish. Later in the report, it can be seen that this trend is not replicated at GCSE or A level. The popularity of French at primary may be due to teachers teaching the language which they themselves learned at school, in the hey-day when French almost had the status of a universal subject for all. Less than three per cent of responding primary schools offer one of Ancient Greek, Arabic, British Sign Language, Danish, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, or Latin.

Interesting facts

Three out of four primary schools which offer German are in quintiles 1 and 2 of FSME i.e. located in more affluent areas.

A few schools report teaching Makaton as a cross-curricular endeavour.

Time for languages

When languages are taught at Key Stage 1 (Years 1-2, ages 5-7), it tends to be for less than 30 minutes in 72% of schools. By the time compulsory language learning starts in Key Stage 2, time does increase to an average of 45 minutes per week in the majority of schools.

In Years 3 and 6, teachers reported the following time for languages:

Table 5: Time for languages in Years 3 and 6

	Less than 30 minutes	30 – 45 minutes	More than 45 minutes but less than 1 hour	Between 1 and 2 hours	No language teaching
Year 3	8%	52%	29%	11%	-
Year 6	5%	45%	34%	15%	1%

Sixty-five per cent of schools which teach languages for more than one hour per week are in quintiles 1 and 2. A minority of schools (n=18) have a set time for languages per year, as opposed to weekly teaching. Delivery tends to be either linked to thematic planning within other areas of the curriculum and language is taught ad hoc, or the school has language days where teaching centres on a particular language:

“There are six units to cover across the year (one per term) and it is up to the teachers to determine how this works in their curriculum. Some teach a lesson each week, whereas others prefer to have a French day, or afternoon, where they cover more material in a longer time, but less frequently.”

Whether schools have a set time for languages per week or a set time per year, it is noted that in practice pupils in three out of ten schools do not receive their timetabled allocation, particularly in Year 6:

“Due to emphasis on SATS year 6 tend to have less language teaching however after SATS the intention is to complete more. Some teachers aren’t confident in teaching MFL and give it less priority than other subjects.”

“Sometimes if the curriculum demands are high, or there is a testing week or other events such as Harvest, language teaching is often dropped for that week.”

Language learning is a slow process requiring plentiful and high-quality language input. The provision of language teaching in primary school is encouraging, but evidence does suggest that time and teacher proficiency are key factors. We know from recent research (Graham et al., 2017) that the ideal conditions for teaching languages in primary schools are a minimum of one hour of contact time per week.

International engagement

Last year, Language Trends reported that in the period 2018-2020, international engagement opportunities for pupils and teachers decreased. It is not surprising, given the Covid-19 pandemic, that we note another decrease in international engagement this year across all key indicators:

Table 6: Longitudinal data relating to international activities in schools

	2018	2019	2020	2021
The school has one or more partner schools abroad	35%	27%	19%	18%
Involvement in international projects w/Involvement in international projects	22%	16%	10%	8%
Host a language assistant	5%	5%	2.5%	2%
None	46%	50.5%	61%	64%

In light of restrictions on international travel opportunities, there will be work to be done to recover and build on the international engagement which was extant in many schools prior to the pandemic. In free comments, a minority of schools (n= 13) expressed dismay that they can no longer take part in reciprocal eTwinning, following the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union, but many schools (n= 143) reported that they have plans to (re)establish links with partner schools after the pandemic:

“We have established informal links with schools in France, Italy and Russia, which we intend to develop into a more formal and structured arrangement through the British Council.”

“We have close links with the Confucius Institute. They join us for Chinese New Year celebrations, lend us Chinese realia and come in for special assemblies. We also have students who are studying at university

come and shadow the teacher for a term, several of whom have been fluent native speakers of a foreign language and have enhanced our language provision.”

“We have some contacts with a school in Madrid and regularly host students from the Netherlands. We exchange songs and work with a school in Uganda. We used to have the British Council International School Award, but in recent years this [...] has lapsed. It is something I would love to develop in the future.”

Challenges to meeting the National Curriculum requirements

From a list of ten, primary teachers were asked to select which, if any, were challenges to meeting the National Curriculum requirements for modern or ancient languages at Key Stage 2. We have asked a similar question pre-pandemic and, overall, this year’s findings resonate with previous reports. The change this year is that two out of three teachers see the impact of Covid-19 as an additional challenge to the already existing challenges. Just seven per cent of respondents said that they do not see any challenges. It will be important that recovery plans include opportunities to rebuild language learning and schools’ international engagement. The challenges are ranked below:

Table 7: The challenges to meeting the National Curriculum requirements

		Rank
Impact of wider restrictions in relation to Covid-19	66%	1
Insufficient curriculum time in general	51%	2
Need to use curriculum time to ‘catch-up’ in other subjects due to Covid-19	49%	3
Staff language proficiency	47%	4
Accessing language-specific CPD	19%	5
Funding and resources	16%	6
Finding suitably qualified teachers	10%	7
Other reasons	7%	8=
School does not experience any challenges	7%	8=
Achieving support from parents/carers	5%	10

Aside from the challenges presented by Covid-19, the biggest challenge for teachers is (lack of) time, followed by staff language proficiency and accessing language-specific CPD. Over the past school year, 32% of responding schools have availed of CPD, usually online. This is an improvement on the 2020 figure (28%):

“I attended many online CPD sessions, including PHORUM, ALL Language World, TILT webinars, Cultural organisations lectures (Consejería, Institut Français, Goethe Institut) and RIPL (Research in Primary Languages) meetings.”

Other teachers report having taken part in upskilling courses delivered online by universities, Ofsted, the Primary Languages Network, Language Angels and neighbouring secondary schools.

What is working well

Teachers of primary languages work hard to generate enthusiasm for language learning. Teachers were asked about what they perceive to be working well in primary languages in general. A total of 668 teachers provided qualitative comments, all very positive. This large data set was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The three main themes generated from the data set were:

1. The teacher’s competence;
2. The pupils’ motivation;
3. Resources.

Theme 1 – the teacher’s competence

The teacher’s competence is key: in the early stages of learning a language children tend to adopt the attitudes of their significant others (e.g. parents/carers, siblings, friends and the teacher); after some first-hand experience in learning and using the language, children form their own attitudes, which are mostly shaped by classroom processes. Children’s initial attitudes have an effect on their future attitudes to language learning, their language learning self-concept and cultural outlook (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2020). In comments, where teachers reported that the teacher of primary languages was a subject specialist, an absolute majority reported that languages in their school were going well. We also know from research (Graham et al., 2017) that the teacher’s own language ability is a key influencer of success:

“When staff are confident and well led, languages teaching is very successful. Children are enthused and excited by purposeful lessons that allow them to progress and know that they are progressing. Learning that incorporates culture in conjunction with language including vocabulary and grammar is

most successful. Support networks like Languages in Primary Schools on Facebook and the Association for Language Learning hubs are very important for sharing ideas and developing pedagogy as are groups like Research in Primary Languages and the National Centre for Excellence in Language Pedagogy. International links are very important and where they are used effectively children see their peers who speak other languages as inspiration for their own learning.” (Teacher, quintile 1 school, West Midlands)

“Children enjoy Spanish lessons but it needs to be taught more consistently; we need to capitalise on more opportunities to integrate Spanish and behave in a more supportive and collaborative manner to improve planning and imbue teachers’ with greater confidence re Spanish subject knowledge and teaching.” (Teacher, quintile 5 school, North West)

Theme 2 - The pupils’ motivation

The second theme relates to the motivation and enthusiasm of the pupils – unsurprisingly, as any teacher of primary-aged children will tell you, children generally love learning a language. Comments such as the following were frequent:

“Children have a real enthusiasm for learning a new language. It also means that children with English as an Additional Language enjoy sharing their language with their peers.” (Teacher, quintile 5 school, London)

We know from recent research (e.g. Gibson, 2019; Lawyer and Lanvers, 2019) that among pupils in Key Stage 2 intrinsic motivation is high: students appear to enjoy language learning for its own sake and not because they feel they ‘ought’ to be learning a language.

Theme 3 – resources

Teachers reported that resourcing of primary languages has improved over the years. There was plentiful evidence of teachers building on commercial resources and being connected to subject associations. The Research in Primary Languages Network (RiPL) received notable mentions (n=27) across the data set.

“Clear planning with clear progression across the year groups. A mixture of multimedia resources to inspire the enjoyment of learning a new language. [...] Multicultural days with a focus on other languages and valuing the rich diversity of languages of the children in our school generally makes children appreciate and motivate them to learn and feel that it is an all-inclusive environment.” (Teacher, quintile 4 school, South East)

Even better if...

It is clear that many aspects of primary languages are going in the right direction. Teachers were asked how language teaching could be made better: there were no pre-determined answers; teachers were free to write what they thought. The most frequent response was for ‘funding’, often specifically calling for funding to be used to employ a specialist teacher of languages. This was closely followed by time to upskill teachers in languages.

“On a national level, it would be helpful if schools could be given some guidance about the amount of time they should be spending on languages, so that there are not such huge differences between schools. It would also be helpful to have a list of grammar and structures which should be covered by the end of Year 6, so that children are all taught the same grammatical content, albeit in different contexts.” (Teacher, quintile 2 school, North East)

Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3

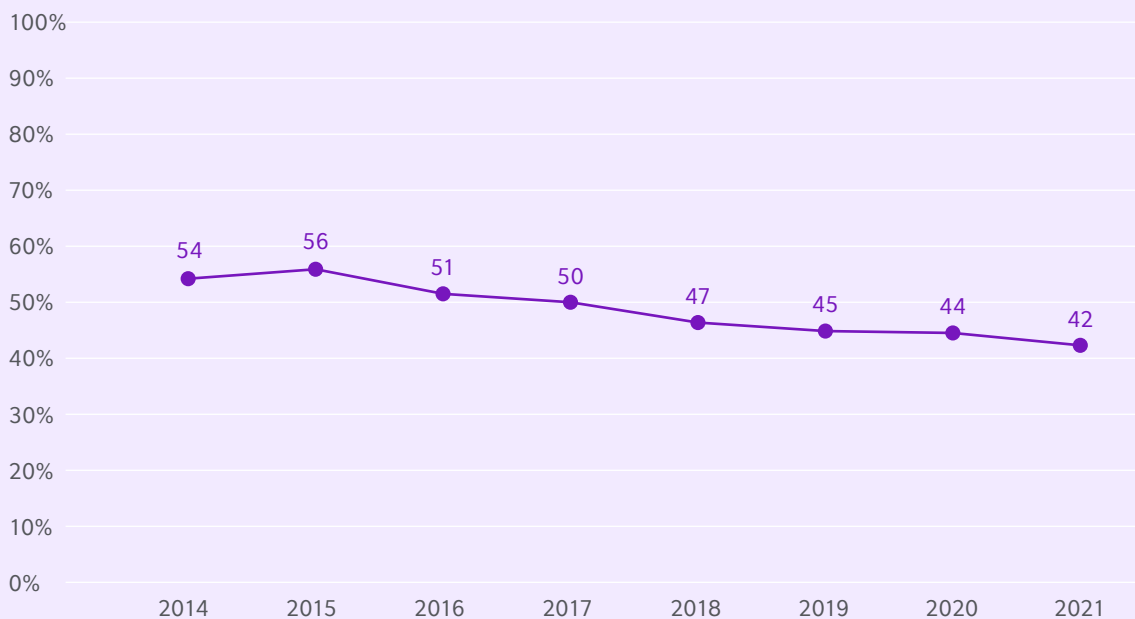
The Languages Programmes of Study for Key Stage 3 in England provide that teaching may be of any Modern Foreign Language. Secondary schools are not required to offer the same language that pupils learned at Key Stage 2. However, teaching, ‘should build on the foundations of language learning laid at Key Stage 2, whether pupils continue with the same language or take up a new one’ (DfE, 2013: 99). Therefore, language teaching at Key Stage 3 should not begin at ground zero. The MFL Pedagogy Review (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) and the Primary Languages White Paper (Holmes and Myles, 2019) recommend collaboration between primary and secondary schools and information exchange at transition.

Language Trends data show a seven-year decline in contact between primary and secondary schools. Consistent with previous years’ findings, nearly half (49.7%) of state secondaries report that they have no contacts with any primary schools and the majority (71.9%) report receiving no information on pupil prior attainment in relation to languages. The primary school data evince a continued deterioration.

Figure 4: Percentage of primary schools reporting contact with secondary schools

Almost a quarter (24.5%) of primary schools which do have contact with secondary schools report that they participate in network/cluster meetings and provide information on pupil language learning progress at the point of transfer, up from 22.1% and 17.5% respectively in 2020. Primary schools also appear to be gathering more pupil data: the five-year trend evinces a decline in non-assessment and an increase in informal assessment.

Figure 4: Percentage of primary schools reporting contact with secondary schools



● Percentage of primary schools in contact with secondary schools

Figure 5: Trends in gauging levels of progress in language learning (primary)

Informal exchanges of information continue to be the most popular form of contact (48.7%), followed by ‘other’ (36%).

Twenty-five of the 109 primary schools indicating ‘other’ types of contact commented on how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted efforts to establish links between KS2 and KS3:

“We are making links with local secondary schools to arrange visits and for either teachers or students to come in to deliver lessons to our pupils. Unfortunately, this has been put on hold during the pandemic.”

“...An exchange of pupil led workshops was discussed and started in November but then Covid struck”

The pandemic notwithstanding, the deterioration in reported contact continues at a similar rate to last year. State secondaries report only a slight decrease in face-to-face contact, such as outreach teaching and sending pupils into primary schools.

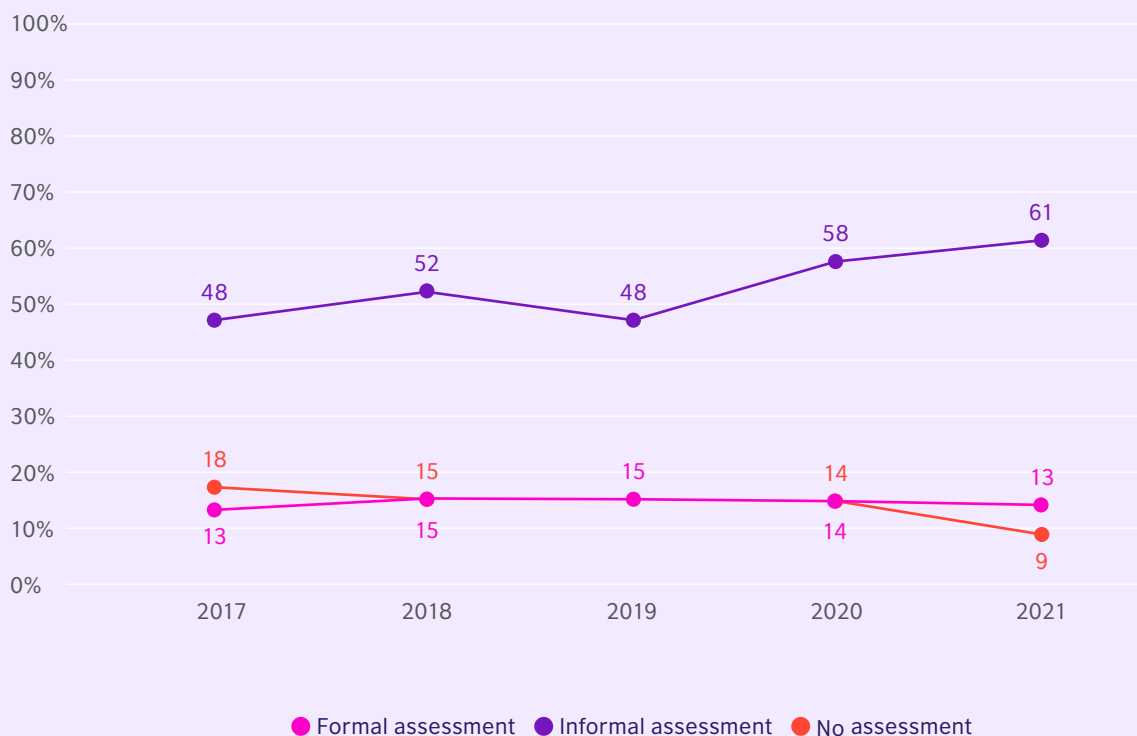
Table 8: Contacts between state secondary and primary schools in relation to languages

What kind of contact, if any, does your school have with any of your local primary schools in relation to language learning? (State Secondary)	2020	2021
None - we do not have any contacts with any primary schools in relation to languages.	47.9%	49.7%
We go into one or more primary schools to provide outreach language teaching for children	18.5%	17.4%
We send our pupils into primary schools to work with Key Stage 2 pupils	16.6%	12.7%
We participate in joint projects, festivals or competitions	11.2%	11.2%

Underlying issues, including staffing and lack of funding, appear to hinder collaboration. Both primary and secondary school teachers commented on these systemic issues:

“We have had quite extensive contact with our partner primary schools in the past through Foreign Language Assistants and colleagues going in to deliver language learning. Extensive funding cuts have resulted in these falling by the wayside.”
[secondary]

Figure 5: Trends in gauging levels of progress in language learning (primary)



“We used to go into local primary schools and provide language lessons but we are no longer able to staff this.” [secondary]

“In the past we used to hold meetings involving the language department of the secondary school and all the language teachers of the primary school in the family of schools, as all the primary school teach the same language, use the same scheme of work, and feed the same secondary school (mostly). Nowadays, with the cuts in education many things have changed. No more money to release primary and secondary teachers so they can attend those meetings being the main one, I would say.” [primary]

Only three per cent of state secondaries report that all Year 7 pupils continue with the same language they learned at Key Stage 2. Two thirds offer continuity to some pupils, whilst ten per cent report that pupils start from scratch.

As in previous years, state secondary teachers highlight the variety of feeder schools and languages learned, often to different levels, as barriers to continuity at Key Stage 3. Several secondary teachers describe Key Stage 2 provision as “patchy” and perceive a lack of consistency across their feeder schools:

“We have over 40 feeder primary schools with vastly differing amounts of KS2 language study. We have developed a transition curriculum assuming very little language knowledge from KS2.”

“The provision is still so sporadic and uncoordinated that it is having little positive impact on MFL learning – the positive is that it exposes pupils to an MFL at this age but the teaching is patchy across local primary schools and there is no joined up thinking or logic to provision in the area. It would really help all pupils if primaries offered a coherent MFL curriculum that was standardised across areas at least, then secondary schools could take greater account of experiences and teaching and learning at this level when designing the KS3 curriculum.”

As highlighted in previous Language Trends reports, primary and secondary schools exhibit diverging attitudes towards pupil progress in language learning at the point of transfer. 2021 data show that primary perceptions continue to be positive (see figure 6): 77% report that Year 6 outcomes were sustained (35.9%) or improving (41%).

By contrast, 87% of secondaries report that pupil progress was about the same (69.3%) or worse (17.6%) This represents a deterioration on previous years (see figure 7).

Figure 6: Primary teachers' perceptions of outcomes at end of Year 6 over time

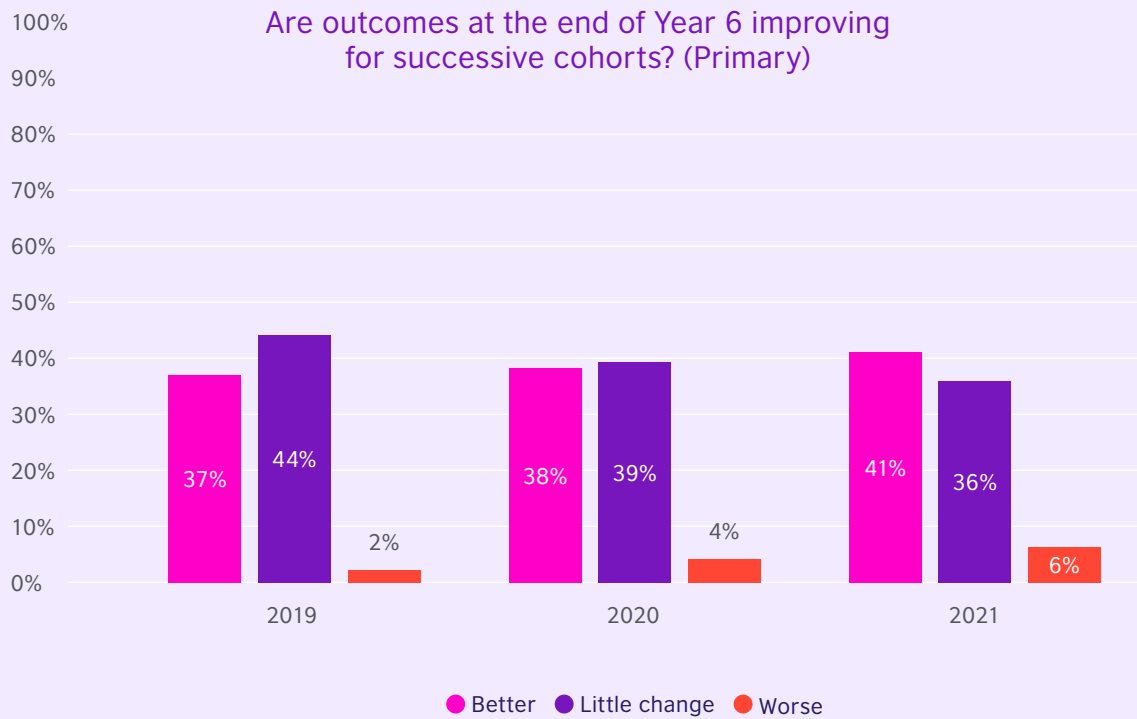
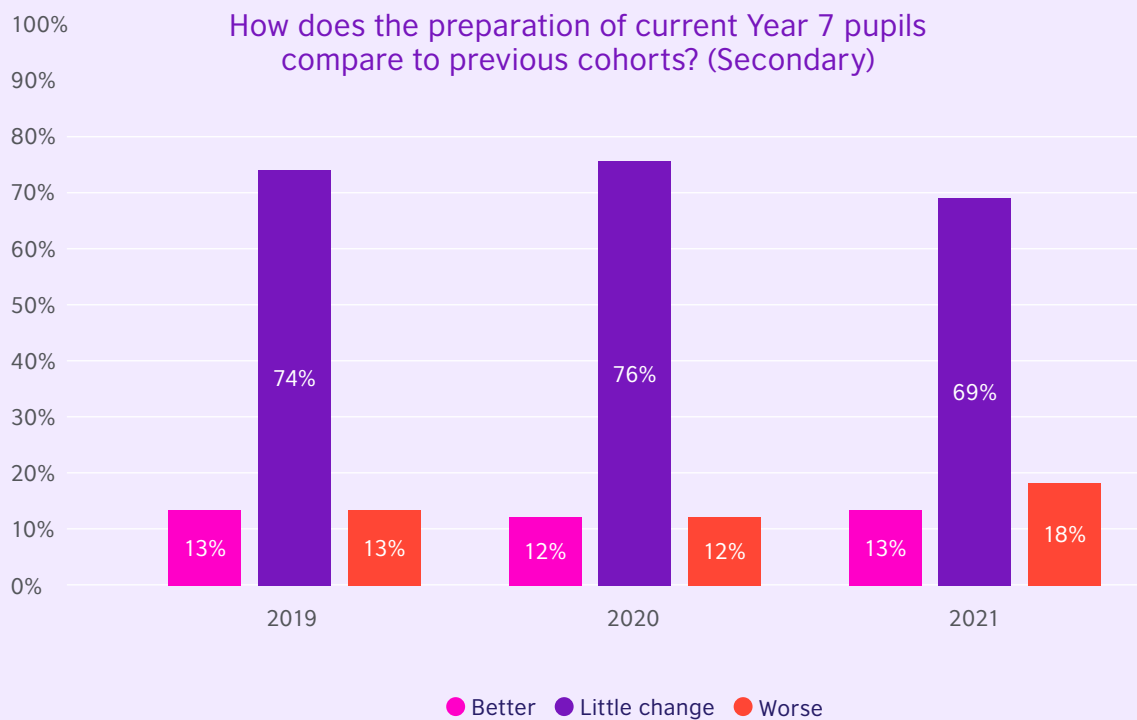


Figure 7: Secondary teachers' perceptions of outcomes at end of Year 6



Findings from secondary and independent school surveys

A total of 617 state secondary schools and 138 independent schools responded, giving healthy response rates of 21.2% and 21.7% respectively.

Profile of responding schools

An inclusion criterion for the sample was schools with pupils in the 11-16 or 11-18 age ranges. This means that there are two significant gaps in the following data: (i) 13-18 schools are not included (a particular issue in the state sector in the North East), and (ii) sixth-form colleges were unable to participate. Responding schools represented all regions of England, but with a better-than-average participation rate in the South and East of England:

Table 9: Responding state and independent secondary schools by region

Region	State Secondary Sample	State Secondary Achieved	State Secondary Response Rate	Independent Sample	Independent Achieved	Independent Response Rate
London	425	76	17.9%	138	26	18.8%
South East	454	112	24.7%	150	34	22.7%
South West	273	66	24.2%	77	21	27%
East Midlands	254	47	18.5%	35	*	-
West Midlands	346	59	17.1%	61	9	14.8%
East of England	326	90	27.6%	65	22	33.8%
Yorkshire and the Humber	291	59	20.3%	42	11	26%
North East	131	29	22.1%	14	*	-
North West	429	79	16.8%	55	*	-
Total	2929	621	21.2%	637	138	21.7%

*Achieved 7 or fewer (concealed to protect identity of participating schools)

State secondary free school meal quintiles

The average percentage of children entitled to Free School Meals (FSME) in secondary education in England is 15.9% (up from 14.1% in 2019). Like at primary, this average is expected to increase over the next year as the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic take hold. Throughout children's language learning journey, there is strong evidence of a link between FSME percentages and levels of uptake at key transition points (Henderson and Carruthers, 2021).

The research team arranged schools in our sample into five quintiles based on their publicly available FSME statistic:

Table 10: State secondary, Free School Meals Entitlement quintiles

	Free School Meals Entitlement
Quintile 1 – least deprived	0 – 7.6%
Quintile 2	7.7% - 12%
Quintile 3 – around FSME average	12.1% - 17.3%
Quintile 4	17.4% - 25.5%
Quintile 5 – most deprived	25.6% and above

Table 11: Percentage of schools in each quintile responding to our survey

	Percentage participation in Language Trends
Quintile 1 – least deprived	29%
Quintile 2	21%
Quintile 3 – around FSME average	17%
Quintile 4	17%
Quintile 5 – most deprived	16%

In an ideal world, each quintile would attract 20% participation. There is statistically significant overrepresentation of schools in quintile 1 (least deprived) and statistically significant underrepresentation of schools in quintile 5 (most deprived). Whilst the profile of responding schools is slightly more balanced than in previous years of Language Trends, the data which follow may present the situation for language learning in more favourable light than the reality in many schools.

Languages at Key Stage 3

French remains the most popular language at Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14), taught in 91% of responding state schools and 92% of responding independent schools, followed closely by Spanish in 74% and 89% of state and independent schools respectively. German is offered at Key Stage 3 in 36% of state schools and 70% of independent schools; the state figure shows a noticeable decline on the figure from Language Trends 2018 when 44% offered German at Key Stage 3.

German is now particularly patchy across the country. Of the state schools in our survey teaching German at Key Stage 3 (n=226), four out of five are in quintiles 1 and 2 (i.e. above the England average for FSME). The South East, South West, West Midlands and East of England are statistically more likely to have state schools offering German compared to other regions; the North East has the lowest rate with just 17% of responding schools offering German.

Just over half of state schools offer more than two hours but less than three hours of language teaching per week. By contrast, and somewhat surprisingly, one in three independent schools offers less than two hours per week of language teaching at Key Stage 3.

However, there is substantial evidence of schools teaching languages other than the 'big three' at Key Stage 3. A total of 39 state schools offer Mandarin as a full curriculum subject, 34 offer Latin, 11 offer Italian and there is evidence of Arabic, British Sign Language, Polish, Russian, Turkish and Urdu being offered as timetabled subjects in a small number of schools.

Disapplication at Key Stage 3

The withdrawal of pupils from language lessons in the state sector can again be seen this year; the most concerning column is the apparent growth of 'some groups' of pupils not studying languages. This question was first asked in Language Trends 2007 when just two per cent of schools reported that a minority of pupils were withdrawn from languages.

Table 12: Longitudinal data on disapplication from languages at Key Stage 3

	All pupils study languages	A small number of individual pupils do not study languages	Some groups do not study languages
Year 7 2019	66.1%	28.5%	3.8%
Year 8 2019	60.5%	33.9%	4.2%
Year 7 2020	67.5%	28%	4.5%
Year 8 2020	60%	35%	5%
Year 7 2021	67%	26%	6%
Year 8 2021	62%	29%	8%

By the time pupils reach Year 9, up to 20% of schools report that some groups of pupils are not learning a language. This can be explained by some schools offering a two-year Key Stage 3. As in more recent years of Language Trends, schools where some groups do not study a language 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.

Independent schools are not immune to this phenomenon, though they are much less likely to report groups of pupils being disappplied from languages. Seventeen per cent of independent schools report that individual pupils are withdrawn in Years 7 and 8; this figure climbs to 30% for Year 9.

“Some pupils with Special Educational Needs do not study a language. Often if a pupil requires extra support in core subjects, they will be withdrawn from languages.” (Independent school, South West Region)

“For SEN or EAL reasons a very small number may do no languages. In Years 8 and 9 when pupils study 2 languages SEN and EAL pupils usually only study 1.” (Independent school, East of England Region)

Seventy-five per cent of independent schools offer pupils a choice as to which language(s) they study at Key Stage 3, compared to an average of just 29% of state schools. A socio-economic divide can be seen: 38% of state school pupils at a quintile 1 school have a choice as to which language(s) they study; for quintile 3 pupils this drops to 27% and for the most deprived in quintile 5 this drops to 14%.

Languages at Key Stage 4

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, examinations in summer 2020 were cancelled. GCSE grades in England were awarded based on pupils' centre assessment grade or calculated grade, whichever was higher. In terms of overall entries, there were noticeable increases in French and Spanish, though this does have to be offset against a roughly two per cent increase in the school population of GCSE

normal age. It must be borne in mind that both the following graph and the similar A level graph later in the report are a reflection of entries, not pupil numbers i.e. dual or triple linguists are conflated in the data.

For the first time since records began, Spanish attracted over 100,000 entries, almost double the 2005 statistic. If current trends continue, it is likely that Spanish will be the most popular GCSE language by 2026. German decreased again, but the most concerning drop is in Other Modern Languages (i.e. languages other than French, German, Irish, Spanish and Welsh).

Figure 8: GCSE entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015-2020

Figure 8: GCSE entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015-2020

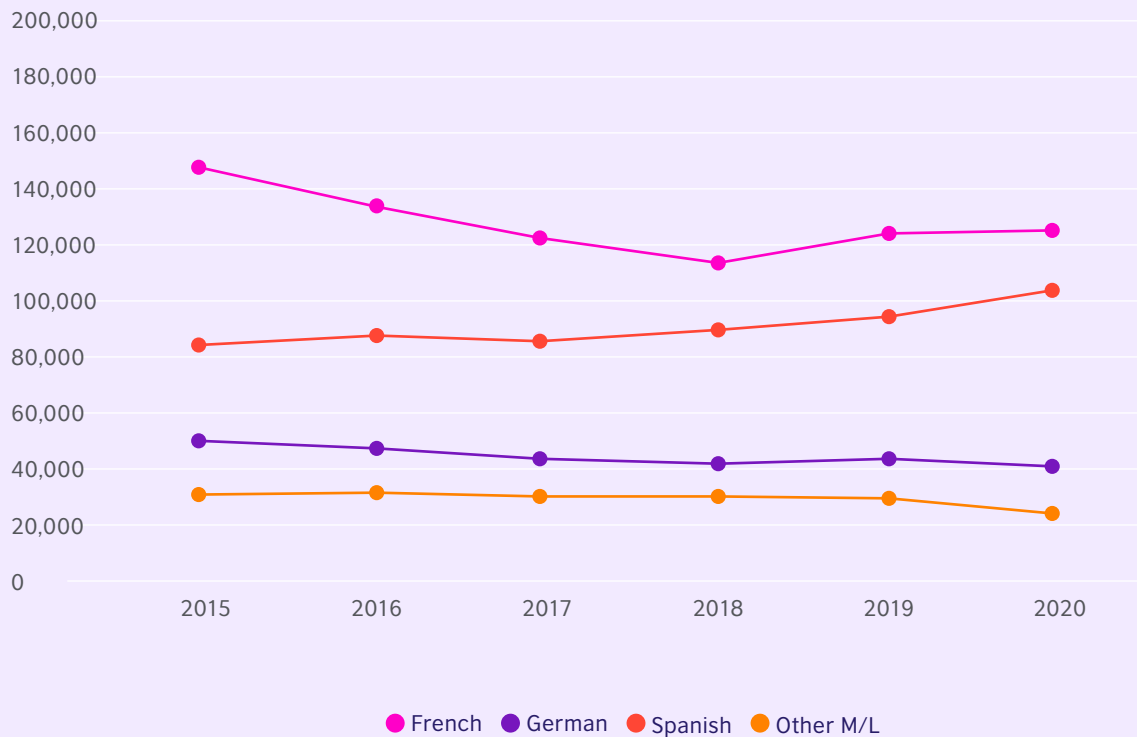


Table 13: GCSE entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015-2020 (Source JCQ)

	2005 baseline	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
French	251,706	147,356	135,401	121,095	117,925	122,803	124,404
German	101,466	51,986	47,913	41,762	42,509	41,222	40,748
Spanish	57,731	85,217	87,581	85,184	89,577	96,811	104,280
Other Modern Languages	28,182	32,090	32,704	31,668	31,437	30,997	22,344

Our data show that, on average, 84% of Year 10 pupils in the independent sector are currently studying a language for GCSE, compared to 53% in the state sector. We know from previous Language Trends reports that the shift for high and middle-attaining pupils to be more likely to do a language for GCSE has increased significantly in both sectors. Forty-four percent of independent schools in 2021 report that fewer pupils now do two languages for GCSE compared to five years ago. Just under five per cent of independent schools report an increase.

Seventy-seven per cent of responding independent schools use GCSE, 44% use IGCSE (some use both) and a handful use WJEC Level 2 in Global Business Communication, the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme and British Sign Language Levels 1-3.

Home and community languages at Key Stage 4

We asked state schools what support they provide to pupils who wish to take a GCSE in a home or community language and 603 schools responded. Multiple responses were permitted:

Table 14: Support schools offer to pupils to take GCSE in home or community languages (other than French, German, Irish, Spanish or Welsh)

The school pays examination entry fees for pupils	70%
The school actively collaborates with and promotes Saturday schools	4%
The school is aware of Saturday schools but does not collaborate with them	11%
The school facilitates the teaching of home or community languages during the school day	7%
No support provided	15%

Schools in quintiles 3, 4 and 5 are statistically more likely not to provide any support to pupils who wish to take a GCSE in a home or community language compared to schools in more affluent areas.

In our responding state schools, lesser taught languages are offered as GCSE exam options to some pupils (figures in brackets denote the raw number of schools): Arabic (35), Italian (64), Japanese (22), Mandarin (54), Polish (54), Russian (38), Urdu (38) and Other languages (12). The majority of state schools (97%) offer at least two hours per week of language teaching at Key Stage 4.

Forty-three per cent of independent schools offer Mandarin as a GCSE subject to some pupils and almost a quarter offer Russian.

A stark divide can be seen between independent and state schools when it comes to the Classics: 65% of independent schools offer GCSE Latin and one in three offer Ancient Greek, compared to nine percent and less than two per cent of state schools respectively.

Languages post-16

Official exam data show that for the second year running, Spanish is the most popular language at A level, replacing the long-standing tradition of French being in the top spot. German has declined slightly from 2020. However, as at GCSE, the most alarming dip is to be seen in Other Modern Languages, where entries have plummeted, most likely due to students at Saturday schools and in community learning settings not being awarded a grade for their work due to Covid-19.

Figure 9: GCSE entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015-2020

Figure 9: GCE A level entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015-2020

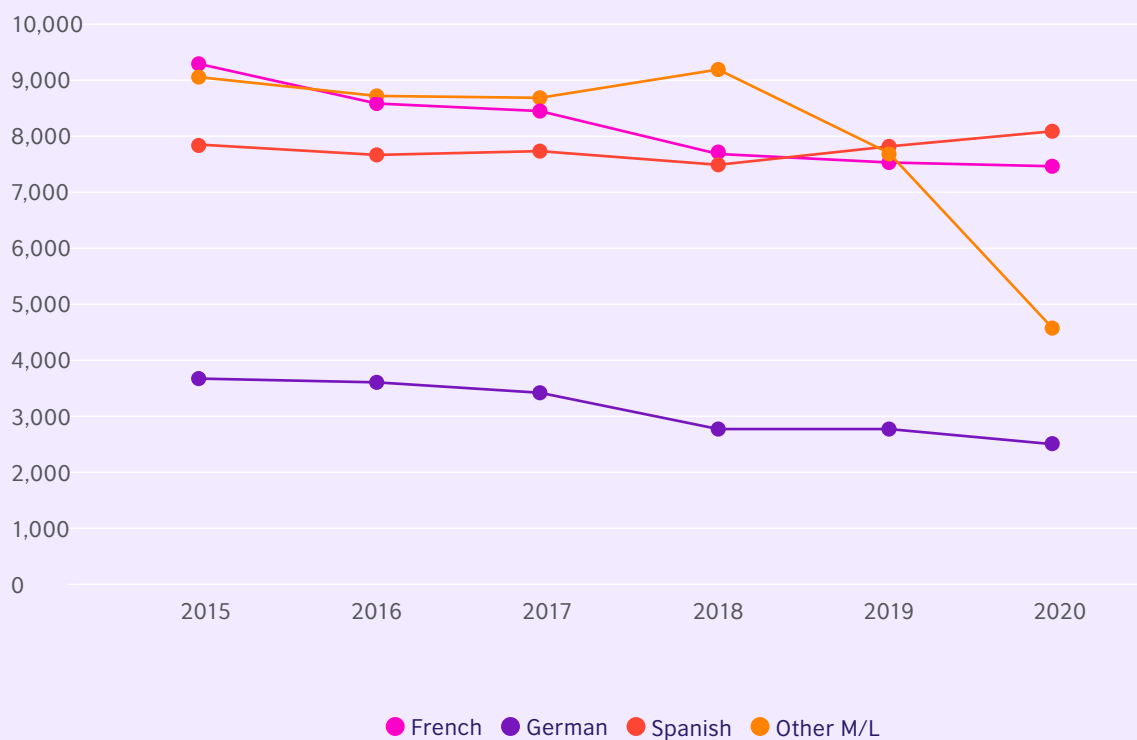


Table 15: A level Entries in French, German, Spanish and other Modern Languages in England (Source JCQ)

	2005 baseline	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
French	12,716	9,332	8,753	8,539	7,874	7,607	7,557
German	5,481	3,791	3,617	3,422	2,859	2,864	2,666
Spanish	5,601	7,941	7,774	7,813	7,591	7,932	8,033
Other Modern Languages	6,249	9,039	8,884	8,862	9,091	7,762	4,606

Thirty-one per cent of state schools and 48% of independent schools in our survey state that the number of pupils taking post-16 courses in languages has decreased over the past three years, though qualitative comments in the data set often note that the number of pupils taking Spanish is increasing, reflecting the national trend:

“We have had a slight increase in our Spanish numbers this year but this is not significant and our classes sizes for French, German and Spanish remain below ten, below five in most cases. Our entire cohort for all three languages fits into one classroom.” (Teacher, quintile 2 school, London)

“Numbers reducing steadily since transition to three A levels, as language was often the AS level or 4th option.” (Teacher, quintile 3 school, South East)

“With Brexit and parental/media pressure, pupils now leave languages on the side. There is no money for trips, Brexit makes it very difficult. We had seven years of successful Erasmus, now it has stopped.” (Teacher, quintile 5 school, North West)

“We do the International Baccalaureate in four languages plus A-Level Latin. Most of our sixth formers do a language of some sort through the IB (IB B, IB Ab Initio or a Language Development option).” (Teacher, independent school)

For the first time, we can also see evidence of composite classes in Year 12 and Year 13:

“We have agreed that A-level languages will be vertical - Y12s and 13s are in the same class, in order to be financially viable, and to be given a full complement of class time.” (Teacher, quintile 1 school, East of England)

There has been much research into composite classes at primary level; future research would be desirable into the impact, positive and negative, of teaching A level languages as a composite class.

In schools where uptake at A level has increased, the following comments as to why are typical:

“Cultural capital, excellent promotion of languages as a skill, advice regarding taking a language along with another discipline such as Law or Medicine at university. Word of mouth and parental security as regards the quality of teaching. Enjoyment of the cultural aspects - film, trips, high quality literature teaching and potential to spend time / study abroad.” (Teacher, independent school)

“Teachers growing more confident at teaching A Level content; longevity of department with expertise at school; pupils joining from other schools in the Trust, knowing that the quality of languages teaching is excellent at our school.” (Teacher, quintile 1 school, West Midlands)

Eighty per cent of independent schools reported that the use of teacher predicted grades at GCSE in summer 2020 did not have any effect on uptake for post-16 languages. Just three per cent of responding schools said their uptake into Year 12 increased as a result.

Language teachers

One in five independent schools and one in five state schools responding to our survey have fewer staff in their languages department than in previous years. These statistics are somewhat more positive than those in 2020 but there continues to be little sense that schools are seeking to increase their staff complement in languages in order to cater for growing numbers.

“Languages are no longer compulsory for top sets at GCSE due to a change of Head Teacher.” (State school)

Eighty per cent of independent schools and 70% of state schools have at least one staff member in languages who is a citizen of the European Union (excepting Ireland). Half of responding state schools say that recruitment of staff is an issue:

“I am the only Spanish specialist in the school. My four French teaching colleagues are excellent linguists but have had to do a crash course in Spanish to meet the demand.” (State school)

“We have been struggling to find good staff for six years and the odd one we find doesn't stay. Not everyone wants to work in a challenging school.” (State school)

One in five state schools has a language assistant in this current school year, but only ten per cent of schools in quintile 5 have an assistant. Of those schools who do not have a language assistant, 71%

say this is because of financial pressures. Almost one in five of these schools say that they have never had a language assistant.

Sixty per cent of teachers in independent schools and 67% per cent of teachers in state schools have taken part in online CPD during the past year. The Covid-19 pandemic has facilitated an upsurge in teachers accessing webinars. A wide variety of providers were cited; the most popular options were webinars from examination awarding bodies, followed by the Association for Language Learning.

International engagement

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on international activities in schools. As in previous years, opportunities for engagement in the international dimension of school life are more widespread in the independent sector. Table 16 compares the findings from 2021 with those from 2018 when the sample size was similar to 2021:

Table 16: International engagement in state and independent schools

	State Schools		Independent Schools	
	2018	2021	2018	2021
The school has one or more partner schools abroad	31%	31%	41%	42%
We host language assistants	23%	21%	50%	69%
Joint Curriculum Projects	10%	8%	17%	11%
None	11%	38%	3%	11%

The most alarming statistic is that 38% of state schools and 11% of independent schools now report that their schools have no international activities. As education recovers from the past year, it will be important to make sure we build back schools which are rich in international activity.

“Trips abroad have been cancelled. Spelling bees were moved online. Mainly the educational visits aspects of language learning which is what really brings the subject to life.” (Teacher, quintile 4 school, London)

Sharing next practice

Everyone is wondering what the future will look like. Indeed, we have all learned a lot about education and ourselves over the past year. There will be various aspects of teaching language which we will want to build upon moving forward. We gave teachers space to tell us what is currently working well in language education. Reflecting the can-do attitude of languages teachers, an impressive 541 state school respondents and 119 independent school respondents, told us their views. Having conducted a thematic analysis on the data, the three most frequent suggestions (themes) to improve uptake are:

1. High quality teaching and learning, particularly at Key Stage 3;
2. Having a department with established teachers who have harmonious relationships with their pupils;
3. Commitment to languages from Senior Management.

Comments from teachers elucidate the themes. The comments have not been cherry-picked, rather they are reflective of the overall data set:

“We have 3 underlying principles we value in our Modern Languages curriculum: Mastery (we start GCSE in Year 9), Inclusion (all pupils are allowed to study a language) and Choice (we offer 4 languages from Year 7). And this is having a positive impact on pupils’ decision to study a language at GCSE.”
(Teacher, quintile 1 school, East of England)

“An increase in evidence informed practice embedding cognitive science into the curriculum to ensure success for all pupils. An enthusiastic and motivated team of staff. Profile of MFL at whole school level.”
(Teacher, quintile 3 school, North East)

“Well planned and sequenced curriculum, strong teachers with knowledge of building memory and strong subject knowledge and passion. A positive learning atmosphere.”
(Teacher, quintile 5 school, West Midlands)

“The Senior Management commitment to maintaining MFL as one of the core subjects at GCSE and also the commitment to the financial cost of employing 3 language assistants who have a beneficial impact on our results and enrich the pupil experience. Discovering new technologies which support remote learning but can be applied when we return to school.”
(Teacher, independent school, South East).

Even better if...

In terms of making language teaching even better, the most frequent request was for more curriculum time. Many teachers also reported that they cannot wait to get back to face-to-face teaching which involves freedom of movement in the classroom, trips abroad and opportunities to speak the language. Not surprisingly, reform to external examinations was also cited by many teachers:

“The Key Stage 4 examinations in England are exclusive rather than inclusive. The GCSE for some students is counterproductive and it puts off some students who love languages.”
(Teacher, independent school, South East)

Other ideas included a national campaign to promote languages, more language assistants to bring the subject alive and improved links between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3.

Conclusion

Throughout our survey it is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has permeated every aspect of language education.

Although languages are embedded in primary schools, and many schools plan for substantial progress in one language across Key Stage 2, languages were greatly disrupted in many primary schools during the national lockdowns. A most surprising statistic was the 64% of primary schools which reported having no international activities in their schools.

At secondary level, our data show that the most disadvantaged students are more likely to have been impacted negatively by the Covid-19 pandemic. Their schools are also less likely to offer them a choice as to which language they learn. The scale of disapplication of groups and individual pupils at Key Stage 3 further serves to send out the message that languages are not for all, despite being a pillar of the EBacc. Children who attend a quintile 5 school are statistically less likely to have a language assistant. As education in England bounces back from Covid-19, there is a need to include language learning and schools' international engagement in any recovery plan.

The decline in entries for Other Modern Languages (i.e. other than French, German, Irish, Spanish and Welsh) at GCSE and A level is a major concern. Whilst the awarding of examination grades in summer 2020 was problematic, all stakeholders need to learn from this situation. Two in five state schools and one in ten independent schools no longer have any international activities. At a time when the United Kingdom is renegotiating its place on the world stage, it will be important that schools seek to rebuild their international connections and activities. On y va! Auf geht's! ¡Vamos!³

3. With thanks to Sarah O'Neill, PhD Student in Modern Languages Education Policy at Queen's University Belfast for drafting the section on primary to secondary transition and for her helpful comments on the full draft of this report.

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