

LANGUAGE TRENDS 2010

Language Trends in secondary schools 2010-11

This report summarises findings from a survey of secondary schools carried out during the autumn term of 2010 by CILT, the National Centre for Languages, with support from the Association for Language Learning and the Independent Schools' Modern Language Association. It is based on responses to a questionnaire sent to a representative sample of 2000 secondary schools in England (1500 maintained schools and 500 independent schools). The survey has been carried out annually since 2002 to track developments in language provision and take up. Findings are based on responses from 711 schools – an overall response rate of 36%.

Key findings

- Continuing downward trend in numbers studying languages in KS4, also in evidence post 16
- Welcome for focus on languages within the English Baccalaureate, coupled with concern about the challenges for the supply and training of teachers, and the exclusion of non-GCSE accreditation
- Widespread concern about recent changes to GCSE assessment procedures
- Development of primary languages now starting to be felt in secondary schools
- Reduction in curriculum time for languages, particularly in KS3

Main quantitative findings

The number of students studying languages in KS4 continues to decline in state secondary schools, with the trend remaining downward.

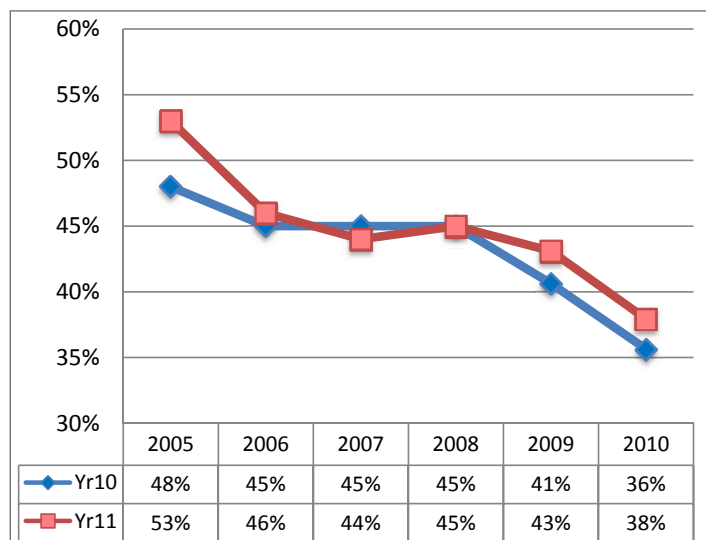


Chart 1: Maintained schools with more than 50% participation in KS4 languages

Chart 1 shows declining numbers of schools reaching the 'benchmark' of 50% of pupils studying a language in KS4, and a lower figure for Year 10 than Year 11, suggesting that that numbers for GCSE may well decline for at least another two years. Our figures show that the number of schools in the top band for participation, where more than 75% of pupils study a language, has dropped from 26% to 21%. There is no pattern of decline in the independent sector, where a language is compulsory in KS4 in nine out of ten schools. The tendency for higher levels of language learning to be associated with privilege is mirrored in the state sector, where schools with higher levels of social deprivation are considerably more likely to have lower numbers of pupils studying a language.

However, the picture is mixed: while almost half of state secondaries have seen falls in pupil take-up of languages at KS4, one in four reports increased numbers over the last three years. German and French are still the languages affected, although the declines are less steep than in previous years. Spanish continues to increase, although less sharply than previously. More schools now offer Spanish than German at all levels.

Provision for languages outside the 'big three' is more likely to be outside curriculum time, or as an enrichment option post 16, than on the normal timetable. The exception to this is Urdu, which, in the schools where it is offered, is commonly on the timetable in KS4 in maintained schools. As can be seen from the table below, pupils attending independent schools are more likely to have opportunities to study Arabic, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin and Russian than those in the maintained sector. This has implications for the opportunities which will be open to them in future:

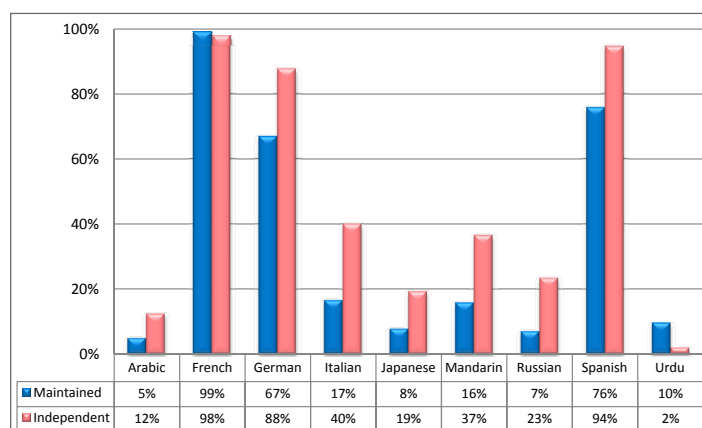


Chart 2: Languages offered any level, including in the curriculum at KS3, KS4, post 16 level or outside curriculum time

Post 16

Recruitment to language courses post 16 appears to be very fragile, contrary to some positive signs seen in last year's survey, with more schools reporting a decline than an increase in numbers in both maintained and independent sectors. If anything, the drop out from German post 16 appears more pronounced than last year, and we are seeing a decline in French, which had improved last year. Spanish continues to increase, more slowly than before in the maintained sector, although still strongly in independent schools.

Alternative accreditation

We have tracked the growth of alternative accreditation to GCSE and A level for a number of years, as offering a more 'diverse menu of courses' was a measure recommended by Lord Dearing in his 2007 Languages Review. Around 45% of maintained schools now offer alternative accreditation to GCSE and A level - down slightly on the previous year - and fewer are considering this as a future option. However, feedback from schools involved in offering alternatives is very positive, albeit tempered by concerns about the future viability of these qualifications if they do not count towards the English Baccalaureate¹.

In KS3 the Foundation Certificate in Secondary Education (FCSE) is the most popular option, offered by 14% of schools (up slightly on last year) and in KS4, NVQ language units are the most popular alternative to GCSE, offered by 13% of schools, up from 10% last year. The number of schools offering Asset languages has declined from 16% to 11% in KS3 and 10% to 7% in KS4.

The independent sector varies significantly from the maintained sector in its use of alternative accreditation to GCSE and A Level, as can be seen from the charts below:

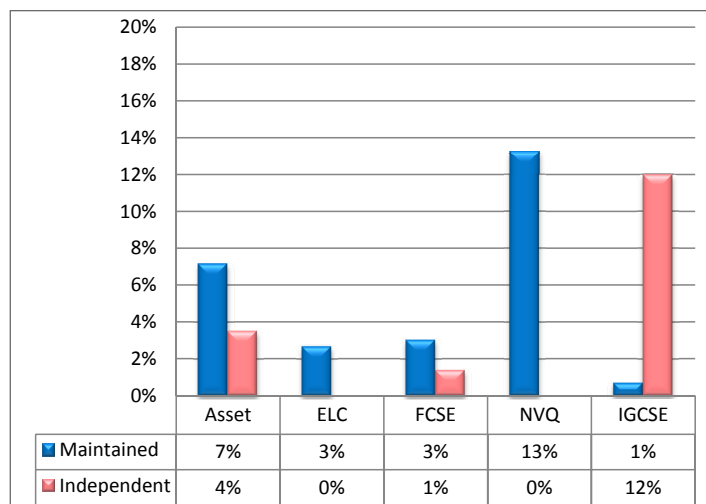


Chart 3: Alternative accreditation to GCSE at KS4

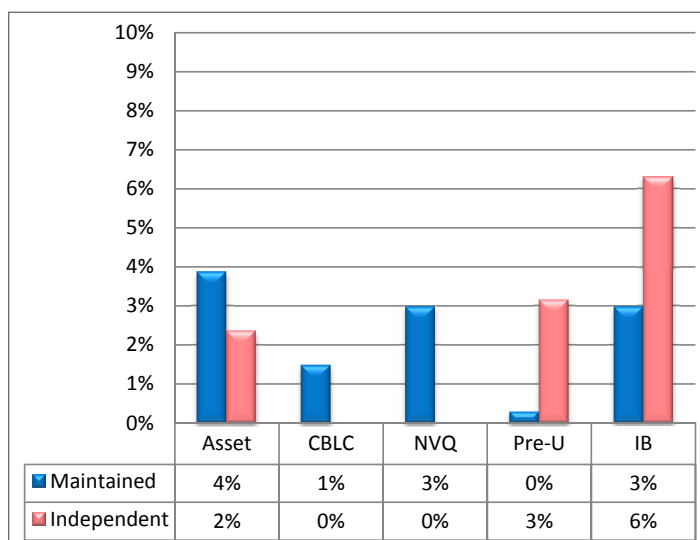


Chart 4: Alternative accreditation post 16

Respondents report very positively on the impact of various forms of alternative accreditation on both motivation and achievement:

Asset Languages have improved motivation with more able students and has kept weaker students on task a bit better throughout Year 9.

CBLC is brilliant and relevant. I am disappointed that this is the last year.

FCSE is very accessible for the Y8/9 students and ensures they take languages very seriously.

NVQ has been a tremendous boost for take up and attainment.

All involved in teaching the IB are finding it a very positive experience (Independent school).

IGCSE does not involve controlled assessment, allowing us to deliver a less exam-oriented course (Independent school).

Where there has been an increase in take up, it is likely that this is attributable to a range of factors. However, the responses show that it is school policies which are the biggest determinant of an increase in take up, highlighting the crucial role of leadership in a school. Teachers report a range of ways in which leadership teams have been able to support languages.

GCSE

Teachers took the opportunity to express what appears to be universal concern about the recent changes to the GCSE assessment regime. These criticisms were in addition to those reported in previous years about 'harsh grading' (in comparison to other subjects) and the 'dull' and 'unstimulating'

Footnote

1. This point, which because of the timing of the survey is only touched upon in the responses, has been the subject of many strongly worded communications received in CILT since the publication of the White Paper. Schools committed to increasing uptake in languages and unconvinced by GCSE have seen alternative courses which offer real life scenarios in a work context as more appropriate. They feel they meet the needs and interests of their students, and are more motivating and equally demanding. Teachers feel their efforts and those of their students are being unfairly downgraded by being excluded from counting towards the English Baccalaureate and are anxious that they should continue to be recognised within the performance tables.

There is a real danger that provision for less academic students will suffer because schools will focus only on qualifications which count towards the Baccalaureate.

nature of the GCSE syllabus. New 'controlled assessments' were introduced for speaking and writing, which were intended to give learners more flexible opportunities to choose the content through which they studied the language. They were also intended to reduce the stress of the final oral exam. However, these assessments are reported by schools as being time-consuming to administer, demotivating for students, and are seen mainly as a test of pupils' ability to memorise:

The introduction of Controlled Assessments is a completely backward step to GCSE language learning, badly thought through and administered by all exam boards. It impedes progress and learning and makes for poor preparation for A Level.

We are currently considering changing from GCSE to IGCSE because of the internal assessments. It will be difficult for us to find time to fill in the writing assessments and to mark them, as we are reluctant to take time away from the teaching.

I feel that the new specifications for GCSE are having a detrimental effect on pupils' motivation and enjoyment of language learning.

Each of the exam boards has different guidelines which are being interpreted in different ways by language departments under pressure to improve results.

CILT also has evidence that the introduction of controlled assessments, particularly in GCSE Chinese, Urdu and Italian, has prevented some candidates from accrediting their language skills. Where these have been gained outside the classroom or in complementary schools, teachers do not always have the expertise to conduct the assessments.

Impact of primary languages

The development of primary languages is starting to have an impact in secondary schools. Four out of five secondary schools are now receiving significant numbers of pupils who have studied a language in KS2, and the vast majority have taken at least some measures to cater for this. There are some excellent examples of cross-phase planning and bridging work with feeder schools – often promoted via the local authority. Schools use a variety of means to assess prior learning: 12% of state secondaries explicitly test pupils on entry, others assess by achievement or ability after a period of time. Some 14% of state secondaries have a policy of starting to teach a new language to all pupils in KS3 and 28% are planning for progression by allowing pupils to continue with the same language. This compares with 49% of independent schools who allow for pupils to continue with the same language.

However, there is also evidence of reluctance on the part of some secondary schools to take prior learning into account, because the impact of KS2 languages on the cohorts coming through is not yet seen as sufficiently consistent:

Delivery is very patchy in feeder primaries, so we continue as we used to.

More consistency is needed [in primary languages] if it is to be meaningful.

We have really noticed the excellent work done in primary schools to encourage a positive attitude towards language learning even if they have not done a great deal of language.

The recent decision to step back from making languages statutory in the primary curriculum has, perhaps, added to the impression in some secondary schools that it is not an initiative that they need to take into account in their planning. We see

this as a major risk for the development of coherent quality language teaching across phases, and one which should be addressed in primary schools by continued support and training, and in secondary schools by better planning and liaison in those schools where this is not yet in place.

Key Stage 3

There have been widespread changes to KS3 provision for languages over the last three years, including modifications to the curriculum (in one third of state secondaries) to take into account what is learned in language lessons in KS2. Of key concern is the fact that an increasing number of maintained schools (one in five compared to 14% last year) have shortened KS3 to two years. This represents a significant reduction in the amount of time spent on languages for those pupils who do not take the subject to GCSE, and is further evidence of the 'wash back' effect of making languages an optional subject in KS4.

Respondents also express concern about reduced lesson time for languages – this is happening in about one third of maintained schools and also in the independent sector, though to a lesser extent:

Students should have at least 3 hours languages lessons per week to make good progress at KS3. This is not currently the case in my school where Spanish is only taught for 1 hour/week and French for 2.

Until the government realises that Language learning MUST begin in Primary School, or become compulsory in all Secondary schools up until GCSE, the skills will never develop.

Participation in CPD

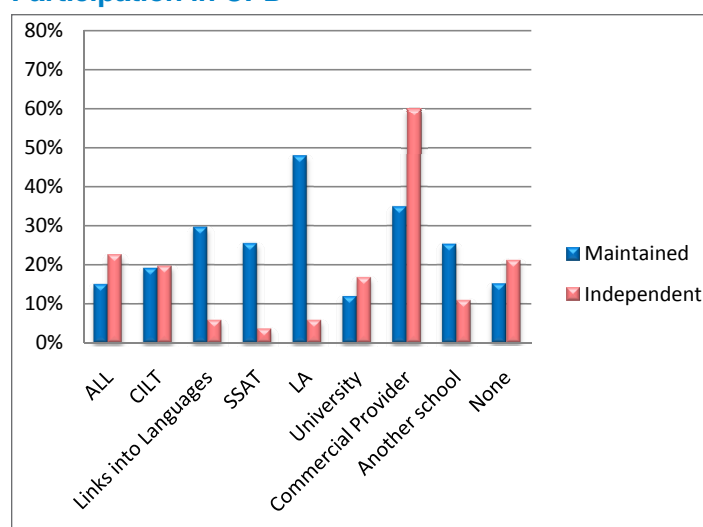


Chart 5: Participation in CPD in the past year

Language teachers have been able to access CPD from a range of providers and generally speaking there is a high level of participation. However, it is a concern that 15% of language departments are not taking part in any sort of CPD at all, particularly if these are ones registering very low levels of participation and achievement in language learning.

Economic restraints and problems from cover policy mean that most CPD is organised internally with little input from outside. This has therefore been more general - whole college related - and less MFL specific.

I would like to be more innovative in teaching, but need everyone on board which is difficult due to lack of training time.

Given concerns about the availability of support in the future due to funding cuts, and policy proposals which favour schools taking on greater responsibility for their own training, we asked respondents which formats they preferred for CPD. The responses shown in the chart below indicate a fairly conservative preference for external one day events in both the independent and maintained sectors, but also an openness to in-school activities, whether internally or externally run. This could be because teachers are more used to the traditional approach of external one day events and have not had the opportunity to experience other modes of CPD.

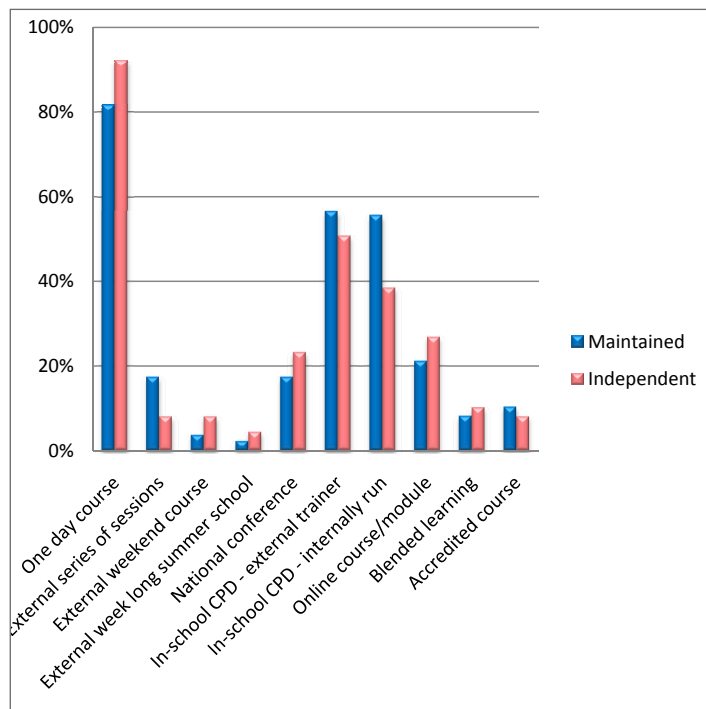


Chart 6: Preferred format of CPD

Impact of policy changes

The Schools White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' was published towards the end of the response period for this survey and therefore no question was specifically asked about the new policies contained within it. However, many respondents chose to comment on its implications for languages, and the improved status which is given to languages within the English Baccalaureate. They are excited that it may provide the impetus for changes they would like to see but worried about the challenges they will face in rebuilding provision:

I feel that the new proposals from the coalition government will shake things up and if the English Bac goes ahead the future will be brighter for languages, however we should maintain alternative accreditation.

In view of the recommendations of the White Paper we are investigating ways of making languages compulsory for at least 50% of next year's cohort.

English Baccalaureate will mean an overhaul of KS3 - pressure from SMT for students to achieve C grades at GCSE by the end of year 9.

Very glad to see the government reverse trend of demise of languages. Concerned that many schools will find it hard to recruit the MFL teachers they now need. The Government needs to ensure excellent training in place.

I wonder whether we will have enough language teachers in the future to deliver the new curriculum in view of the confusion over government support for language teaching in recent years.

There are concerns expressed about the impact of cuts or reallocation of funding:

We are a language college and I am concerned that the funding under the new government will not now be used for languages.

We are very concerned about the effect of cuts to the funding of various external institutions supporting us in schools at a time of MFL crisis...

And about the direction of policy on languages as a whole:

There is a lot of uncertainty about how languages are going to develop in the years ahead, and I feel we need clear guidance and support in order to ensure maximum possible success.

Past and current governments have made promises to raise the status of language learning, but they never seem to act on their words.

More support is needed from society as a whole. We need to give kudos to learning languages not just within the school but nationally.

The Curriculum Review, announced recently, will provide an opportunity to debate the issues raised more widely, and to put forward evidence on what makes language teaching successful.

Full statistical tables and the survey questionnaire are available at www.cilt.org.uk/research_and_statistics.aspx.



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