

## Language learning gap widens between North and South of England

- **The Language Trends Survey 2017 shows the disparity in language learning is growing across England: 65 per cent of pupils take language GCSEs in Inner London compared to 43 per cent in the North East;**
- **London is the only part of the country where the number of pupils taking languages to GCSE is currently increasing;**
- **While teachers report that language teaching is becoming more firmly embedded in the primary curriculum and there are some positive developments at secondary level, challenges remain across the board.**

The language learning gap between the North and South of England is widening, according to a new report from the British Council.

Analysis of examination statistics in the Language Trends Survey 2017 – now in its fifteenth year – highlights that in summer 2016, 65 per cent of pupils in Inner London took a language GCSE compared to just 43 per cent in the North East. More than that, participation rates over the last three years indicate that London is the only part of the country where the percentage of pupils taking languages to GCSE is currently increasing.

Access to language learning differs along socio-economic lines too. Pupils in schools in more deprived areas are less likely to sit a language GCSE or to be given the chance to study more than one foreign language. These pupils are also more likely to be allowed to drop languages after only two years or even to be withdrawn from language lessons altogether.

In spite of this, teachers surveyed are reporting some positive developments overall. Language teaching is more firmly embedded in the primary curriculum: 88 per cent of respondents express ‘whole-hearted commitment’ to primary languages. Nearly two thirds of primary schools said they now have more than five years’ experience teaching the subject although there are still huge discrepancies between primary schools in terms of language teaching provision.

At secondary level, some state schools with very low uptake in languages say they are successfully increasing numbers, stimulated by the EBacc measure. Meanwhile 38 per cent of state schools are planning for numbers to increase year on year.

That said, challenges remain including a 'wide gulf of understanding' between primary and secondary schools about the levels achieved at the end of primary school. There is a marked decline in the number of pupils studying more than one language, particularly in the independent sector where 45 per cent of schools report a decrease in dual linguists.

Fewer opportunities to talk with native speakers and experience other cultures first hand – such as through school exchanges or hosting language assistants in the classroom – is also seen to be negatively impacting languages uptake in schools. There is some concern that this may be exacerbated even further by the UK's decision to leave the European Union.

**Lead researcher Teresa Tinsley, said:** "The report contains important messages for us all about the current place of language learning in our schools. It's absolutely vital that more people recognise that the ability to speak another language can be as important for a child's future as maths or science, and that it makes a significant contribution to overall literacy and knowledge about the world."

**Vicky Gough, Schools Adviser at the British Council, commented:** "Learning a language should not come down to geographical location or background, it should be for everyone. And as the UK comes to reposition itself on the world stage, it needs to be."

"Not only are the personal benefits of learning a language huge but the country's current shortage of language skills is already estimated to be costing the economy tens of billions in missed trade and business opportunities every year. If we are to ensure that the UK remains globally competitive in the current and ever-changing landscape, we need all of our young people to be given the chance to acquire these vital skills. And from businesses to parents to schools, we all have our part to play in making this happen."

The Language Trends Survey 2016/17 is the latest in a series of annual research exercises, charting the health of language teaching and learning in schools in England. The research is based on an online survey completed by teachers in over 700 state secondary schools, over 720 state primary schools and over 140 independent secondary schools across the country.

Other key findings in the survey were:

- There is little sign of an end to the decline in A-level numbers for languages – only a small minority (13 per cent) of those schools where numbers for languages have increased at GCSE as a result of the EBacc policy say that this has also improved take up for languages post-16;
- Although many schools are expecting numbers for languages at Key Stage 4 to increase year on year, teachers are concerned that the new GCSE exam will deliver poor results;
- Significant changes to Key Stage 3 are under way in preparation for the new GCSE exams – for example, a move to concentrate on one language only;
- Top of teachers' concerns are the increasingly difficult conditions for school exchanges, funding, and the exams system which is seen to be deterring pupils from taking languages at GCSE and A-level.

ENDS

**For more information or to arrange an interview, contact Kristen McNicoll in the British Council Press Office on 0207 389 4967 / 07765 898 738 or [kristen.mcnicoll@britishcouncil.org](mailto:kristen.mcnicoll@britishcouncil.org).**

**You can also reach the on-duty press officer on + 44 (0) 7469 375160.**

The Language Trends Survey 2016/17 will be available to download from Friday 16 June at: [www.britishcouncil.org/education/schools](http://www.britishcouncil.org/education/schools)

The Executive Summary is available to download via Dropbox [here](#).

A draft version of the full report is available upon request.

Some more detail on GCSE entries by local authority and region is provided below:

*Table B: Local authorities with the lowest participation rates for languages GCSE, 2016.*

Local Authorities	Participation Rates
Isles of Scilly	13%
Middlesbrough	28%
Blackpool	29%
Sandwell	30%
Oldham	32%
Knowsley	33%
Barnsley	33%
Redcar and Cleveland	34%
Isle of Wight	34%
Stoke-on-Trent	37%

*Table C: Local authorities with the highest participation rates for languages GCSE, 2016.*

Local Authorities	Participation Rates
Hammersmith and Fulham	75%
Newham	75%
Kensington and Chelsea	72%
Barnet	70%
Enfield	70%
Kingston upon Thames	69%
Wandsworth	68%
Brent	68%
York	67%
Southwark	67%
Ealing	66%
Hackney	66%
Sutton	66%

*Table D: Proportions of pupils taking languages GCSE by region, 2014-2016.*

Region	2014	2015	2016
Inner London	62%	64%	65%
London	61%	61%	62%
Outer London	60%	60%	61%
South East	51%	51%	50%
North West	51%	48%	48%
South West	49%	48%	47%
East	49%	49%	47%
West Midlands	47%	46%	46%
East Midlands	49%	47%	46%
Yorkshire and The Humber	46%	45%	44%
North East	45%	42%	43%

Independent research carried out on behalf of UK Trade & Investment by Professor James Foreman-Peck in 2014 shows that poor language skills and a lack of cultural understanding are holding back the UK's trade performance at an estimated cost of £48 billion a year. The report shows that without the relevant language and culture skills, UK businesses are lacking the necessary market understanding to effectively engage and maximise trade opportunities, particularly in fast emerging economies like BRIC.

#### **About the Language Trends Survey 2016/17**

Language Trends 2016/17 is the latest in a series of annual reports started in 2002 which chart the health of language teaching in English schools. Traditionally based on a nationwide survey of a large sample of secondary schools, in 2012 the research was extended to include primary as well as secondary schools. The report provides a comprehensive and current picture of language provision in English schools.

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Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body. The majority of our income is raised delivering a range of projects and contracts in English teaching and examinations, education and development contracts and from partnerships with public and private organisations. Eighteen per cent of our funding is received from the UK government.

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