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Tough new exams discouraging pupils in England from learning languages, say teachers

- **British Council Language Trends Survey 2019 finds concern that difficulty of exams contributing to declining numbers of pupils in England taking languages at GCSE and A-level;**
- **Primary and secondary schools see reduction in international activities, with just one quarter of state secondaries offering pupil exchanges;**
- **Brexit threatens to widen divisions between pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds;**
- **Disadvantaged pupils even less likely to study languages than three years ago.**

Tough exams are discouraging pupils in England from learning languages, according to a new British Council survey of more than 1600 teachers.

A large majority of teachers (71 per cent at state secondary schools and 64 per cent at independent schools) told the Language Trends Survey 2019 they were concerned about the content of language exams, a year on from the government's introduction of new and more rigorous GCSEs and A-levels. Many teachers also expressed concern with the way exams are marked and graded.

The new concerns come in addition to the long-term problem of the perception of languages as a difficult subject - one of the reasons for the ongoing decline in exam entry numbers. Since 2014 there has been a 19 per cent reduction in the number of entries for GCSE languages, with both French and German seeing a decline of 30 per cent, although Spanish has remained more stable with just a two per cent decline over the same period. At A-level, all three languages saw a decline in entries between 2017 and 2018, with German down 16 per cent, French seven per cent, and Spanish three per cent.

The most disadvantaged pupils continue to be far less likely than their peers to study languages at GCSE. Revisions to the syllabus in the past three years have had a disproportionate impact on lower attaining pupils, with 84 per cent of state schools (70 per

cent of independent schools) saying these pupils are now less likely to take a language than three years ago. Those with special education needs or disabilities are also affected.

At schools where less than 25 per cent of pupils takes a language GCSE, there are statistically higher levels of Pupil Premium, higher levels of pupils receiving Free School Meals, and lower Attainment 8 scores (the average of all a pupil's scores across eight subjects).

Brexit threatens to widen these existing socio-economic and academic divisions, with two in five teachers saying its implications pose a major challenge to providing high-quality language teaching. Twenty five per cent of teachers at state secondary schools and 15 per cent at independent schools reported a negative impact on pupils' motivation to learn a European language or languages in general, whilst a further third of teachers (36 per cent at state schools and 30 per cent at independent schools) reported that pupils had mixed attitudes towards languages as a result of Brexit. Teachers also noted an impact on parental attitudes, with some parents actively discouraging their children from learning languages.

The majority of secondary schools depend on EU citizens to help staff their language departments, the report found. As a result of declining language uptake in recent years, home-grown language teachers are in short supply and two thirds of state schools (67 per cent) and 79 per cent of independent schools employ one or more staff who are EU citizens. Around one quarter (24 per cent) of independent schools and one third (34 per cent) of state schools report difficulties recruiting language staff.

The report also reveals declining levels of international engagement in primary and secondary schools, with half of all primary schools offering pupils no international activity at all. The number of state secondary schools offering international experience has decreased by up to five per cent since last year, with just one quarter of state schools offering pupil exchanges abroad, compared to 48 per cent of independent schools. At the same time, teachers at both state and independent schools were concerned with the lack of opportunities for pupils to practice using languages outside of the classroom.

Lead researcher, Teresa Tinsley, said: "The report paints a picture of language learning in England becoming increasingly segregated along both socio-economic and academic lines.

"Pupils from poorer backgrounds and those who are less academically inclined are much less likely than their peers to acquire any substantial language skills or access foreign

cultures in any significant way, challenges that Brexit looks to exacerbate. We all know the pressures schools are under, but these inequalities are not good for our society or the future of our country.”

Vicky Gough, schools adviser at the British Council, said: “Everyone should have the chance to learn a language, but teachers report that many pupils – particularly the most disadvantaged – are being put off by the difficulty of exams and a sense that languages just aren’t for them. Coupled with a decline in the international experiences offered at primary and secondary schools, these findings paint an alarming picture.

“We need to give our young people more opportunities to learn about and engage with different cultures. Languages open up so many doors – not only are they a valuable skill highly sought after by employers, they also allow for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the wider world.”

Other findings in the report include:

- Very few state secondary schools offer the option for pupils to study a language other than French, German or Spanish, although independent schools cater for a much wider range of languages. French remains the most commonly taught language in English secondary schools, although previous surveys have revealed a steep decline in numbers taking French and German at A-level over the last two decades and a significant rise in Spanish.
- A large majority of state and independent secondary schools provide facilities for pupils who speak other languages at home to take public exams in these languages. However, some teachers expressed concern that grade boundaries were being skewed by the current grading system, putting non-native speakers at a disadvantage.
- Pupils at a third of primary schools that allocate a set time for languages each week are not receiving that time, and language teaching is often ad hoc and minimal, making it difficult for them to achieve the expected outcomes at the end of Year 6. Languages are often seen as lower priority than other subjects and may be pushed out of the timetable, for example during SATs exams in Year 6.

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Notes to editors

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[Download a copy of the Language Trends Survey here.](#)

PLEASE NOTE EMBARGO OF 3 JULY FOR THE REPORT.

About the Language Trends Survey 2019

The Language Trends Survey 2019 is the latest in a series of annual reports by the British Council started in 2002 which chart the health of language teaching in English schools. This year's research is based on an online survey completed between January-March by teachers in 776 state primary schools, 715 state secondary schools and 130 independent secondary schools across the country.

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