

Why do community schools exist for some languages but not for others?

Anke Friedrich (Cambridge Bilingual Groups)



When my daughter was about 4 years old we visited my parents in my old home town, and met some of their friends in a public place.

‘Does she speak English?’

‘Yes, sure, we are living in England, but she also knows German.’

‘Oh, she knows German AND English! How clever.’

‘Yes, she is in English nursery, but we only speak German at home’

I was pleased as any mother would be, but then, looking at the people around me, it suddenly struck me... 15% of inhabitants of the little former mining town that had been my home are immigrants (or children of immigrants) from Turkey or Russia, and I became acutely aware that probably none of the other bilingual children around me ever had elicited such excitement and admiration.

Good language – bad language? Child with a gift? – child creating a problem?

Imagine a Turkish parent saying to a teacher proudly ‘We only speak Turkish at home’ and the teacher being ecstatic...

Languages taught at school are the ones that parents and governments consider to be ‘useful’ and ‘valuable’. My own parents insisted on me learning French at school rather than Russian which at that point had only recently been introduced in West Germany.

A language useful for whom? To achieve what? Well, *useful* is a relative concept, it depends on who you want or need to talk to, really. To date, I have used my extremely limited French only to sing French pieces with my choir, but I really could have used Russian when I worked in a summer camp with 60 Chernobyl-affected Belarus children and their mothers. And, of course, recently knowledge of Ukrainian and Russian became highly valued skills. Who could have foretold that?

For our children, being able to express themselves age-appropriately in their home language is a most important skill they can acquire as this is their key to interaction with their wider family, the key to their heritage and identity. Unfortunately, not all parents realise this, as I learned in a school gate conversation with the newly immigrated father who proudly told me he wanted his daughter to learn French and German, and from now on it would be only English at home. I asked him about his own language, Malayalam, and whether his parents knew any English, French or German ... which they didn't. 😞

Moving to today, in Cambridge we have a very good landscape of community schools covering 22 languages, with some languages served by more than one school.

Thanks to data on students with EAL (English as an Additional Language) that I receive from the Council*, I know that the largest of these schools draw from a population of over 1220 (Polish), 568 (Turkish), and 480 (Chinese) children in Cambridge and Cambridgeshire, while the smallest existing viable schools build on communities with only about 50 (Czech and Slovak), 30 (Swedish) and even 25 (Finnish) speakers registered with the Council. The other languages are Arabic, Bulgarian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Tamil.

In comparison to the 22 languages covered, there are a further 90 different languages spoken by children in Cambridge and Cambridgeshire, of which more than 55 languages have 20 or more registered speakers. Given that the smallest existing schools have only 25 registered speakers, this indicates a potential for another 20 – 30 community schools.

The biggest communities with no schools at present are those with Bengali/Bangla (440 registered children), Malayalam (310), Romanian (240), Lithuanian (230) and Urdu (190) as language. These languages form the first part of what I call 'The Missing Schools' - something is indeed amiss here, when hundreds of children are missing out.

The ability to gain a qualification in their language quite often is a motivator for children and parents alike to develop their home language to a higher level and possibly include reading and writing as well. England is unusual in offering pupils the opportunity to gain a qualification, a GCSE, in 20 different modern languages: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese (Mandarin), French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Panjabi, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Sinhala, Spanish, Swahili, Turkish and Urdu. Generally, it is felt among community schools that those with associated GCSEs have an advantage over the others, in particular in retaining their students for longer, and in the opportunity for their children to develop more advanced written skills. Thus, five of these 'GCSE' languages form the second part of The Missing Schools, as currently they do not have a community school associated with them in Cambridge (there is one GCSE language with only 3 speakers which for this reason I do not include).

'Passing a GCSE in a heritage language is cognitively beneficial, enhances self-esteem, nurtures an individual's sense of identity and boosts career prospects. Taking a heritage language GCSE is beneficial because it accredits a young person at a time when they may be unable to fully access many other GCSE options due to their current proficiency in English. When taken early it may also be the first experience of a statutory examination that will help prepare pupils for any future GCSE entry. Passing a language GCSE at grade 5 and above contributes to the EBACC and also indicates a clear propensity for wider learning to anyone involved in the next stage of that young person's life, whether studying at college, following a training pathway or in work.'

EMTAS, Hampshire Council, 'The role of heritage languages in the educational landscape', 2022

Taking these two things together, I created the following list of community schools most obviously missing in Cambridge (while not forgetting the fact that there are another 10 languages with more than 25 speakers and no school):

The Missing Schools	Students registered with the Council (2021)	Exams available
Bengali / Bangla	441	AQA, IGCSE
Malayalam	310	
Lithuanian	229	
Urdu	195	AQA, Edexcel
Romanian	247	
Tagalog/Filipino	131	
Hindi	120	
Gujarati	60	Edexcel
Sinhala	47	IGCSE
Panjabi	24	AQA
Swahili	3	IGCSE

Now, is it just me seeing a trend here in which languages do have a school associated and which ones don't? Western European and East Asian languages are on the covered side, Eastern European and Asian languages are on the missing side. Why do some parents start a school and others don't? Is it what I first observed with my daughter many years ago: Good language – bad language; child with a gift – child creating a problem?

It might not be as simple as that, and there might be different factors at play for different languages and in different parts of the country. Here are some of the explanations I and others have come up with:

- Ignorance of the concept of community schools
- Lack of motivation to pass on or further develop the family language due to internalised perceived 'value' of their own language
- Lack of confidence to give teaching a try / adults not sufficiently literate
- Lack of capacity within the community to run a group
- Lack of funding
- The community too far spread out with limited transport

But the fact is, we do not know. For me, this is unfinished business and at present there are three conclusions I am drawing from this for myself.

i I would like to see some **research** going into confirming the enablers and barriers for starting community schools and other provision for bilingual children, and what factors make them 'successful' (however we define that). A study like this would not only be a very useful tool to help develop targeted support but could also be used for lobbying and fundraising.

ii In the meanwhile, locally I would want to see some cultural groups, the Council and mainstream schools step into this gap. I would like them to explore what their role could be in providing each and everyone of our deserving bilingual children and young people with **equal opportunities** to become linguistically and culturally competent and self-confident individuals who can reap the full benefits in their personal and later, perhaps, professional lives that come with it.

iii Unfortunately, it seems to be beyond my capacity to address either, working with the community schools as a volunteer in my spare time. But there is hope and I am waiting for the day that someone with an interest in any or all of these languages may find me, we will have a great conversation, and pull something off **together!**

*The Council data are based on disclosures by parents when enrolling children in school. Children in fee-paying schools, who are home-schooled or where parents do not give this information are in addition to the official numbers.

The numbers cited are for 2021, and combine Cambridge, South and East Cambridgeshire since some families travel considerable distances for their children to attend their community school.