

A longitudinal survey of the implementation of primary languages from 2006-2008

What this research was about and why it is important

In 2002, the National Languages Strategy proposed a range of measures to improve language learning and teaching in England, including the commitment that all children in Key Stage 2 should have an “entitlement” to learn a modern foreign language. Following a period of investment and experimentation through “Pathfinder” projects in the early 2000s, the National Foundation for Educational Research was commissioned to investigate the implementation of the strategy in primary schools across England. In 2006, 2007 and 2008, the researchers ran questionnaire surveys with all local authorities and a large sample of schools. Overall they concluded that by 2008, a large majority of schools were teaching a language throughout Key Stage 2, and that around three-quarters of schools could be ready for compulsory languages teaching by 2011.

What the researchers did

- In all three years (2006-2008), the researchers sent a questionnaire to all local authorities in England asking about progress in teaching languages at KS2; each time, they received responses from at least 70 per cent of LAs.
- In 2006 the researchers sent a more detailed questionnaire to a large, nationally representative sample of schools, receiving over 4,000 replies (a response rate of 48 per cent). In 2007 and 2008, they sent repeat questionnaires to the schools which had replied in 2006; altogether, 68 LAs and 1,800 schools replied in all three years.
- The researchers understood that schools actively implementing MFL teaching could be more likely to respond to the survey, and they therefore followed up by telephone a smaller sample of schools who had not completed the survey, to correct any bias in the information collected.
- The researchers carried out statistical analysis of the questionnaire findings, and adjusted their statistical findings in light of the telephone survey, to present as full an overview as possible of developing MFL provision, including its strengths and weaknesses.

What the researchers found

- By 2008, over 90 per cent of schools were teaching MFL to at least some children in Key Stage 2, in class time. 69 per cent were providing the full entitlement for all KS2 year groups, though schools in disadvantaged circumstances were less likely to be offering languages.
- French was offered in 9 out of 10 schools, followed by Spanish (in 25 per cent of schools) and German (10 per cent); languages were typically taught in discrete lessons of around 40 minutes each week.
- Language lessons were most commonly delivered by class teachers, but specialist primary languages teachers, secondary school teachers, teaching assistants and others were also teaching languages
- The Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages was the most popular foundation for schools’ schemes of work for languages, though commercial schemes and locally produced schemes were also used.
- Less than half the schools had produced a written policy for languages, and only a similar number said they used any form of formal assessment/ recording of children’s progress in languages.
- Transition to secondary school and progression from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 were issues of general concern in schools, even though LAs reported offering support for transition.
- The main challenges identified by schools related to finding time for languages in a crowded curriculum, lack of staff expertise and confidence, and needs for resources and staff training (though provision and uptake of training increased during the period, with over two-thirds of schools receiving free training in 2008).
- The researchers concluded that overall, schools were making good progress toward meeting the entitlement to language learning throughout Key Stage 2, and that around 75 per cent were ready for a move toward inclusion of languages in the compulsory primary curriculum.

Things to bear in mind

- The researchers did not visit any schools directly, so this research survey depended on the ability of LAs and of schools to report accurately on the implementation of primary languages “on the ground”.
- The scale of the study lends real weight to the findings, and to the profile of strengths and weaknesses uncovered.
- The longitudinal nature of the research means that it provides a convincing picture of development in a new subject area, and how the system can respond positively to a policy initiative (the Languages Strategy) accompanied by investment in innovative pedagogy (including Pathfinder projects), in staff development (including the LA specialist advisory system), and in resources (including the KS2 Framework). The full report is available from <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11171/>.