Foreign language learning: What really matters at Key Stage 2

1. The Research Team

We are a group of researchers from the Universities of Reading and Southampton. Our work focuses on identifying the classroom conditions and practices that lead to the best learning outcomes for primary school children in foreign language learning. In turn we investigate how teachers can best be supported to implement those conditions and practices. We collaborate with schools and teachers across England and national organisations such as the National Consortium for Languages Education, informing their provision at both secondary and primary phases. We co-lead the Research in Primary Languages Network.

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2. Executive Summary

England's Curriculum & Assessment Review (2025) calls for *high standards for all* and a curriculum fit for a *changing world*. Yet uneven provision of high-quality foreign language teaching at primary school undermines both ambitions. Low teacher confidence and expertise are consistently highlighted by schools as barriers to good learning outcomes in foreign languages, contributing to country-wide variation in learner progress across Key Stage 2 (KS2), low teacher morale, and challenges in teacher recruitment and retention.

Our research shows that to improve this situation, teacher development and the conditions in which teachers work must be addressed. When teachers are given protected time for research-informed professional development—particularly using digital approaches that strengthen literacy and skills of creativity and empathy —learner outcomes improve. Progress also requires sufficient curriculum time and leadership that recognises the value of foreign language learning more broadly.

To support this shift, national guidelines are needed to guide school leaders in creating the right conditions for foreign language education at KS2. These should include commitment to 60 minutes a week of curriculum time for language learning and 2 hours a month of teacher professional development.

3. Policy Context

Across England, foreign language learning is seen as both essential and problematic.

On the one hand, government funding announcements present language skills as 'essential to business success in the global marketplace'. The 2025 Curriculum & Assessment Review highlights how they are a vital part of England's revised National Curriculum by supporting 21st century skills like creativity and empathy and the 'understanding of human culture'. On the other hand, despite the National Curriculum requirement that all children make 'substantial progress' in a language across KS2 so that 'the foundations for further foreign language teaching at key stage 3' are laid, learning outcomes by age 11 vary hugely across England, contributing to problems around primary to secondary school transition.

Professional development provision for primary languages has remained limited across successive governments, alongside sparse guidance on what schools should teach and for how long each week. As a result, teachers feel ill-equipped to teach foreign languages at KS2 and lesson time for languages is squeezed. These issues are especially acute in areas of greater social disadvantage, resulting in inequalities in accessing language education.

4. Research Aims

To address such challenges:

- We tracked the learning of over 2000 children across 17 schools through annual tests to quantify the impact of teacher and school factors on the amount and rate of linguistic progress made across KS2 in French, Spanish and German.
- We delivered digital professional development (DPD), training offered in an online, digital format to teachers and equipped them to use digital and AI-based materials to teach French and Spanish. We then assessed the DPD's impact on teachers' professional motivation and children's learning outcomes in a classroom intervention involving 11 schools (1,200 learners) in England and Scotland.

5. Research Findings

- Learners made significant linguistic progress across KS2 in French, German and Spanish. This was greater when (i) they were taught by a specialist language teacher using a structured scheme of work, (ii) when they had one hour a week of protected language teaching, and (iii) when school leadership actively and visibly supported language learning. **Being taught by a specialist teacher is equivalent to having 1 extra year of language learning. 60 minutes a week of language instruction is a key threshold – resulting in significantly better outcomes for learners.**
- DPD boosts the professional motivation of all teachers, especially their sense of competence. It enhances their ability to use digital technology and methods that improve their learners' linguistic development, understanding of culture, creativity and empathy. **Teacher sense of competence had a critical influence on children's learning outcomes. Children taught by teachers who had received DPD and used multimodal stories incorporating text, sound and images were 65% more likely to improve their reading proficiency, 135% more likely to improve their creativity and 166% more likely to improve their ability to show flexible thinking than those in a control group.**

6. Key messages

- **Teacher Expertise and Protected Curriculum Time Drive Measurable Gains in Progress.** Improved outcomes come not through curriculum content alone, but by ensuring the workforce capacity and school-level conditions that enable high-quality language teaching.
- **Research-Informed Digital Professional Development Strengthens Both Teacher Sense of Competence and Children's Outcomes.** Investment in sustained, research-informed teacher development addresses two pressing policy concerns: workforce retention and raising attainment.

7. Policy Implications

Guidelines should be drawn up to support school leaders in creating optimal conditions for languages, covering the following:

- Primary schools show their commitment to foreign languages through policies, practices and resources that support teacher development, wellbeing, and effective teaching.
- Primary school teachers receive two hours a month of accessible online professional development to boost both their language skills and their competences for teaching foreign languages.
- Primary school learners receive 60 minutes a week of protected foreign language learning, based on a structured learning programme coupled with opportunities for deeper and richer learning around culture, comprehension and communication.
- Schools are supported to develop languages policies linked to the revised National Curriculum for Languages, that make explicit a commitment to 60 minutes a week of language teaching, 2 hours a month of teacher professional development and to curriculum content that combines structure with rich cultural learning.