

Research Brief

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Languages at Key Stage 4 2009 – 2011: evaluation of the impact of Languages Review recommendations: baseline findings from the first year of the evaluation

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Introduction

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) is conducting a longitudinal research study on behalf of the Department for Education (DFE) to examine:

- languages provision and uptake at Key Stage 4 (KS4) in maintained secondary schools in England and the factors which support languages uptake at KS4
- heads of languages' perceptions of the impact of the Languages Review recommendations on languages at KS4
- changes in languages provision and uptake at KS4 from 2009 to 2011.

The study consists of an annual survey of a nationally representative sample of secondary schools in England (in 2009, 2010 and 2011) and case study visits to a small number of schools in autumn 2009 and 2010.

This research brief reports on findings from the 2009 survey and the first round of case study visits. It provides a baseline picture of provision and support for languages at KS4. A full report on all three years of the evaluation will be published in spring 2012.

Key findings

The first year of the evaluation indicates that:

- Heads of language departments consider good teaching and support to be central to encouraging language uptake at KS4, and constraints of the options system to be the main barrier. Many schools are reported to have received excellent support for languages in 2008/09 in terms of staffing, training and resources.
- Some schools report a positive impact of the Languages Review recommendations but there is a low level of awareness of the Review in the majority of schools.

- 19 per cent of schools set a benchmark¹ for languages uptake in 2009/10 (at an average level of 64 per cent) but 62 per cent of schools had actual levels of uptake lower than 50 per cent. In schools where languages are optional (69 per cent of schools), 80 per cent had levels of uptake below 50 per cent.

Methodology

The research methodology incorporates both quantitative and qualitative strands of work.

The quantitative strand comprises a questionnaire and a data collection exercise. In spring 2009 questionnaires on languages provision at KS4 were sent to heads of languages in a nationally representative sample of 2500 schools (80 per cent of all maintained schools in England). In all, 1134 heads of languages completed the questionnaire (a response rate of 45 per cent). In autumn 2009 a short data collection sheet to investigate actual levels of uptake in Year 10 was sent to a sub sample of 1106 heads of languages. A total of 697 returned the sheet (a response rate of 63 per cent).

The qualitative strand comprises case study visits to five schools where languages are optional at KS4. The first round of visits took place in autumn 2009. Interviews were conducted with heads of languages, languages teachers and a teacher with responsibility for or involvement in the options process. In addition, focus groups were conducted with Year 9 and Year 10 pupils. The schools were selected from the responding schools as examples of good practice in encouraging languages provision at KS4.

Main findings

Languages provision and accreditation at KS4

More than two thirds of the heads of languages (69 per cent) surveyed reported that languages would be an optional subject at KS4 in 2009/10; 11 per cent said that languages would be compulsory for some but not all, and 18 per cent said that languages would be compulsory for all pupils at KS4.

Schools in the sample expected to be teaching and accrediting a variety of languages from 2009/10. They reported that they would be offering mainly French, Spanish and German, but small numbers of schools said they would be offering other languages such as Italian, Mandarin and Urdu. Schools expected to be offering the same accreditation pathways regardless of the languages they taught: 99 per cent of schools would be offering the GCSE full course at KS4, 43 per cent GCE AS level, and 17 per cent Asset Languages. Fast tracked GCSE courses would be offered in about a third (34 per cent) of schools. High levels of GCSE uptake were also reported in the autumn data collection (which examined actual rather than predicted uptake), with 94 per cent of heads of languages offering GCSE pathways, but actual figures for AS and Asset were lower than those predicted, with 10 per cent of schools offering AS languages and 6 per cent Asset Languages.

A higher proportion of schools with the following characteristics offered a wider range of languages and accreditation pathways: higher achieving schools, schools with low proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and schools where languages were compulsory. In addition to this, a higher proportion of schools with higher proportions

¹ In 2006 a letter from the then Schools Minister to Headteachers set out the Department's expectation that all schools should set a benchmark of between 50 and 90 per cent for their KS4 pupils studying a language leading to a recognised qualification.

of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) taught the languages of their local communities.

Levels of languages uptake at KS4

19 per cent of schools reported that they had set a benchmark for languages uptake at KS4 in 2009/10 and 51 per cent of these thought that they would meet their target. In these schools, the average level of the benchmark set was approximately two thirds of pupils (64 per cent). Only ten per cent of schools had set a benchmark lower than 50 per cent (the minimum level recommended by the Department in 2006).

Actual levels of uptake in autumn 2009 varied considerably from school to school, with higher levels reported in schools where languages were compulsory for all or compulsory for some pupils. Overall, 19 per cent of schools reported levels of uptake within the benchmark range of 50 and 90 per cent, and 17 per cent reported levels above 90 per cent, but nearly two thirds of schools (62 per cent) had levels of uptake lower than 50 per cent. These were predominantly schools where languages were optional: 80 per cent of these had levels of uptake of less than 50 per cent (the lower end of the benchmark range) and half had a level of uptake at 25 per cent or less. However, some schools with optional status had achieved relatively high levels of uptake: 13 per cent reported levels of uptake between 50 and 90 per cent and 5 per cent reported levels higher than 90 per cent.

Factors supporting languages uptake at KS4

The survey and case study interviews also focused on the factors which encourage languages uptake at KS4. General school factors perceived to support languages uptake included: good resources, support from the school leadership team, and a strong languages department who were adopting exciting approaches to languages teaching and learning. Questionnaire responses showed that languages teachers had received substantial training in the last year (for example, on the new languages GCSE, the new secondary languages curriculum, the Key Stage 2 (KS2) Languages Framework, and new developments in ICT) and had wide access to resources and guidance (for example, from CILT (the National Centre for Languages) or the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA)). Many languages departments had received additional staffing support both within school (for example, a foreign language assistant or teaching assistant) and from external sources such as other schools and regional support networks. In the case study schools, teachers mentioned specific strategies they employed to encourage students to study languages at KS4, including praise and morale boosting, exchanges and trips, participation in the European Day of Languages, alternative accreditation at Key Stage 3 (KS3) and, more generally, interactive and innovative teaching.

Teachers engaged in a number of promotional activities to encourage students to continue with languages. Focus group interviews with Year 9 and 10 students revealed that they were taking on board their teachers' messages, in particular those about employability, the university entry requirement and communication skills. However, the discussions also revealed that students were primarily motivated by the intrinsic benefits of learning a language (for example, the fact that they would enjoy learning a language) rather than the extrinsic advantages (such as the fact that languages might increase their employability).

Both questionnaire and interview data indicated that optional status of languages at KS4 was the main barrier to uptake. For example, in some schools students were constrained in

their choices by the way in which options were blocked against each other or by the number of choices available to them; in others, languages faced competition from an ever-growing range of 'more exciting' subjects.

Impact of the Languages Review's main recommendations

Some heads of languages reported that the broader recommendations of the 2007 Languages Review (the Primary Languages Initiative, broader range of languages, flexibility of accreditation) were having some positive effect on uptake of languages taught at KS4, but relatively high proportions of schools reported no impact of these recommendations. In the case study schools, teachers were aware of the Languages Review, but said that it had not changed the way they worked.

Fewer heads of languages responding to the survey reported a positive effect of the more specific recommendations of the Review (the language Performance Indicators, changes to the Self Evaluation Form and the role of School Improvement Partners) or impact of the Department's stated expectation that schools would set a benchmark for uptake.

Conclusion and further stages of the evaluation

Findings from the first year of research provide a baseline picture of KS4 languages provision and uptake and support for languages in the survey sample for the 2009/10 academic year. They also provide some evidence of impact of the Languages Review in the second year of its implementation, though in some schools the level of impact is relatively low so far and there is limited awareness of the new initiatives that the Review recommends.

Research in the second and third years of the evaluation (autumn 2010 and 2011) will explore whether the position of languages at KS4 has changed (in terms of uptake of languages, breadth of languages offer, variety and flexibility of accreditation, resources and support) and examine the relationships between languages provision and school characteristics. It will also examine the perceived impact of the Review's recommendations when they have had the time to become more embedded.

Additional Information

This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.