

Rethinking the Purpose of Language Education

| Suzanne Graham and Alison Porter | 14th May 2025 | Opinion Piece

In the following opinion article Suzanne Graham and Alison Porter argue that primary language education needs a more meaningful and coherent rationale than it currently has. Their research offers suggestions for such a rationale, demonstrating that focusing on both linguistic skills and non-linguistic outcomes like creativity and empathy develops essential competencies for global citizenship, while potentially also solving some of the challenges of transition from primary to secondary education.

Language learning in primary schools is a global policy initiative, believed to offer numerous benefits, including improved cognitive and social development. Yet, in the UK, and particularly in England, there remains a struggle to establish coherent, attractive, and meaningful rationales for primary language education. While the case has been made for the [economic value of language learning](#), this arguably does not provide a strong enough rationale for the implementation of a primary languages curriculum (nor indeed motivate pupils at primary or in early secondary school). The absence of a more meaningful rationale may explain why implementation of the primary languages curriculum continues to be a challenge 11 years after it was first made a requirement. This opinion piece explores the value of alternative rationales and motivations, for learners, teachers and policymakers.

The Official Position

Researchers have long advocated shifting policy drivers toward broader socio-cognitive benefits, such as global citizenship (empathy) and new ways of thinking (creativity). Since 2013, England's [National Curriculum for Languages](#) (NCL) has underpinned language learning across both primary and secondary phases. It states that language study should provide the foundation for learning further languages, equip pupils to study and work in other countries, and promote positive attitudes, describing it as a "liberation from insularity" and an "opening to other cultures". It also emphasizes "new ways of thinking". However, these last three aims are not explicitly listed as outcomes for teaching. Learners are also expected to make "substantial progress in one language", but the NCL does not define what constitutes such

progress. Clarifying these ambiguities would help strengthen the underlying rationale and promote a more cohesive approach to implementation.

Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives

Teachers' beliefs about the purpose of language education also shape how the curriculum is implemented. A [recent survey](#) of primary language teachers revealed that they prioritize widening cultural understanding and developing citizens with a global outlook as language learning goals. Similar views were echoed by [614 secondary school teachers](#). Meanwhile, [research into learner motivation across primary and secondary school](#) suggests that students are primarily interested in language learning for communicative purposes and to explore new cultures.

Balancing Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Outcomes

These findings highlight that both teachers and learners recognize the value of language education beyond linguistic proficiency. The development of creativity and empathy—key competencies identified by the [OECD](#) as essential for navigating modern global challenges—is increasingly important. Yet how language learning can support these skills tends to be overlooked by [school leaders and policy makers](#). Furthermore, primary teachers may feel torn between delivering substantial linguistic progress, as expected by Ofsted, and nurturing the non-linguistic benefits they personally value.

Fortunately, growing evidence demonstrates that a dual focus on linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes is not only possible but highly effective. Our [research intervention](#) in ten primary schools across England and Scotland used multimodal digital stories with learners aged 9-10. These stories, sourced from [storyweaver.org](#), and simplified to be slightly beyond students' current proficiency levels, were integrated into the learning platform Nearpod. The intervention was grounded in the principle of supported challenge—providing high-quality linguistic input alongside engaging visuals, native speaker recordings, and scaffolded comprehension strategies, in which learners drew on their knowledge of phonics, vocabulary, and grammar to understand the stories. There were also tasks designed to promote creativity and empathy. For example, students were encouraged to think creatively and empathetically by imagining characters' emotions and perspectives while reflecting on their own connections to the stories. Stories set in Francophone or Hispanic countries gave learners opportunities to think beyond their immediate world,

to explore wider societal issues, and to reflect on what they had in common with the stories' protagonists.

This approach led to statistically significant gains in French and Spanish vocabulary and reading skills, surpassing those achieved in traditional 'business as usual' lessons. More strikingly, it also enhanced students' creativity, particularly their ability to think flexibly and consider multiple perspectives—skills essential for success in today's world. These results demonstrate that integrating linguistic and non-linguistic learning objectives is not only viable but beneficial for young learners.

Strengthening the Primary-to-Secondary Transition

A persistent challenge in language education is sustaining learners' motivation as they transition from primary to secondary school, an issue that is as pressing as the practical difficulties associated with transition that are discussed elsewhere. Many who enjoy language learning at the primary level become disengaged at secondary school, where the focus shifts toward more assessment and written accuracy. This drop-off suggests a disconnect between the engaging, exploratory nature of primary language learning and the more structured expectations of secondary education, as well as between learners' goals and what the curriculum offers them. A coherent rationale that bridges both phases—emphasizing both linguistic and socio-emotional benefits—could help maintain student enthusiasm and commitment.

A Renewed Rationale for Language Education

To maximize the impact of language education, we advocate for a more coherent rationale that assigns equal weight to linguistic, cognitive, and social-emotional benefits. Such a well-articulated framework could help persuade primary school leaders to prioritize language learning within their broader educational strategies. Moreover, such a rationale could bridge the gap between primary and secondary education and sustain student motivation.

Encouragingly, the National Consortium for Languages Education has already supported schools in incorporating non-linguistic benefits into their curricula. These schools have developed projects that emphasize to learners the non-linguistic benefits of language learning, including creative thinking and global citizenship. By embedding these attributes into their language programmes, they offer a model for how language

learning can support the personal development of students across both primary and secondary phases.

In conclusion, language learning should not be viewed solely as a means to economic ends, least of all in primary education. Instead, it should be recognized as a powerful tool for equipping young learners with the social, emotional, and cognitive skills necessary for global citizenship. Only by embracing this broader perspective can the UK develop a compelling and sustainable rationale for languages, not just at primary level but also beyond.

About the Author

Suzanne Graham is Professor of Language and Education at the Institute of Education, University of Reading. She has led or co-led several large, funded research projects in the field of second language education at both primary and secondary levels of education. She was Principal Investigator for the Nuffield Foundation's Progress and Preparedness research project, a longitudinal study exploring the language and motivation development of learners of French aged 9 to 11 years. She has published widely in the areas of motivation, self-regulation and language comprehension.

Alison Porter is an Associate Professor at the University of Southampton (Languages, Cultures and Linguistics). She has participated in research projects in both primary and secondary schools, exploring the effects of systematic and principled French literacy instruction. In KS1 she investigated using gesture as a memorisation aid for formulaic chunks. Alison currently leads the Research in Primary Languages network (www.rtpl.uk).

Most recently Alison and Suzanne have co-led the [Digital Empowerment in Language Teaching](#) research project, exploring the impact of digital tools on the development of linguistic and non-linguistic skills in young learners.