

Breaking down barriers to opportunity in language learning at primary school

What teachers are saying about using our research-based approaches...

"The children absolutely loved the task and were talking about it for days after. I think they found a real sense of achievement that they could 'translate' a French story by themselves and understand it. We also had a discussion about how this felt and related it to the experiences of EAL children who may have newly arrived in Scotland."

Policy context: Language learning from age 7 became a requirement for primary schools in England in 2013. Twelve years later however, there is still considerable variability in implementation, outcomes and access to high-quality language learning provision. This threatens a successful transition to secondary school language learning and overall language outcomes in England.

Key recommendation: Breaking down barriers to opportunity in language learning at primary school requires better and more accessible support for teachers in terms of professional development, buy-in from school leaders, detailed curriculum guidance, and clarity around expectations for learning and teaching.

Key Research Findings

Teacher factors are crucial: Learner outcomes for primary languages are **strongly impacted by teacher** linguistic and pedagogical expertise, and curriculum time for languages. These **vary greatly nationally**, with less favourable levels especially in more socially disadvantaged areas, and the supply of proficient primary language teachers is short. Primary school teacher factors continue to influence learning outcomes in the first year of secondary school, with **implications for primary-secondary transition**.

Teachers are unsure of what is expected for learning outcomes, what progression looks like and how to assess learners at primary school.

Like **secondary school language**

teachers, their teaching rationale is to develop learners as **tolerant global citizens** who can communicate in another language.

Children do make year on year progress in languages, however, when the conditions are right: when they receive **45-60 minutes** of teaching each week, when their teacher follows a **structured programme of work**, and when **school leaders** emphasise the **importance and status of languages**.



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"The children enjoyed making predictions and one of the boys who finds it difficult to focus was delighted that he correctly predicted that the dog would escape. One of the more able children recalled vocabulary from previous units that we could use. (...) I was particularly pleased with the speaking of one of my less able boys. His pronunciation was brilliant! "

Current research:

Digital Empowerment in Language Teaching (DELTEA). ESRC-funded. 2022-2025

Progression in Primary Languages (PIPL). UKRI-funded 2022-2026.

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if you would like to learn more about our research, invite us to speak at your event, or collaborate with us to improve or evaluate your primary languages initiatives.

Learner motivation is enhanced by a sense of progression and learning focused on challenge, communication and culture. Progression in oracy and literacy skills can be achieved by teaching that addresses both knowledge (phonics, vocabulary and grammar) and skill (oracy) development as **mutually enhancing**.

Digital technology can break down barriers: online CPD groups, digital teaching resources including AI-powered speaking apps with feedback can **meet teacher professional development, language proficiency and well-being needs**. They can also support improved pupil **linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes**.

Better understanding of the wider benefits of language learning is needed. Teacher focus on imagination and intercultural understanding in language lessons, alongside proficiency, can **enhance learner creativity and empathy**. These attributes **align with important goals for school leaders**. Strengthening awareness of these benefits could enhance headteacher buy-in for primary languages and ensure adequate curriculum provision in all schools.

Policy Recommendations

Provide free, high-quality, research-informed digital CPD for primary language teachers to improve teacher proficiency and sense of wellbeing across the UK. It should include opportunities for teacher community-building and improvement of linguistic proficiency.

Give schools access to digital language resources including digital stories and AI-powered speaking apps.

These provide equitable access to challenging and motivating content as well as offering a uniformly good model of language use.

Create non-statutory guidance which outlines unambiguously: how much weekly teaching time is needed for languages; what the minimum content of teaching should be; what the expected levels of attainment are for years 3-6; how attainment can be assessed and what free digital assessment tools can be used.



Work with us!

Research in Primary Languages (RiPL) represents researchers and education stakeholders who have a keen interest in languages education. We have a strong history of engagement with teachers, through, for example, events to explore literacy in primary practice, preparations for an Ofsted Deep Dive and building challenge and creativity into languages teaching. We have conducted research exploring progression in KS2 language learning, **KS2 to KS3 transition**, the effects of **phonics and strategy instruction on learning outcomes and motivation at KS3**, the use of games for **language assessment, grammar** and **vocabulary** learning and **French literacy in primary schools**. We are a named partner with **Oak Online Academy** and contributed to planning and resourcing their primary FL provision. We are currently working alongside the **National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE)**, informing their provision at both secondary and primary phases.

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