

Modern Languages at Key Stage 3;
strategies that foster positive attitudes to learning languages
and lead to uptake at Key Stage 4

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Introduction and context

From January 2023 to June 2023, in line with the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) new Quality Improvement Strategy, inspectors engaged with pupils, practitioners, middle and senior leaders, and other stakeholders to explore some contemporary subject-specific themes. ETI's modern languages panel focused on language learning at Key Stage (KS) 3, exploring and evaluating strategies that foster positive attitudes to learning languages and lead to uptake at KS 4.

In December 2022 the Department of Education (DE) wrote to post-primary schools expressing its concern at the decline in the number of pupils studying modern languages and its intention to engage with schools on how to address the reduced uptake.

The British Council report, [Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023](#) notes that the high levels of enjoyment of language learning at KS 3, as reported by year 9 pupils, does not necessarily result in high uptake at KS 4. A headline finding from the report is that; *“young people often do not see the value of languages for their future career, or the importance of languages in the global workplace.”*

This ETI report highlights learning and teaching approaches that the pupils and practitioners we engaged with, report are working well at KS 3. The report also sets out several strategies, introduced recently, by a number of schools, which have yet to have an impact on uptake, but which demonstrate the value these schools place on languages, and their commitment to promoting language learning. Due to industrial action short of strike, there were no observations of learning and teaching. We hope that this report will stimulate further discussion and debate as schools and stakeholders continue to look for new and more creative ways to promote languages.

The modern languages panel would like to thank the twelve schools and organisations who supported this work (the panel's engagements are detailed in the Appendix).

The views of pupils

The following section outlines key messages from discussions with pupils from KS 3 and 4, and with a small number of post-16 pupils, across nine of the schools visited.

Languages are fun

A key theme running through all discussions was the pupils' enjoyment of language learning and their acknowledgement of how their teachers make the lessons fun and engaging. In particular, the pupils enjoy the interactive nature of their language learning, citing examples of games, sometimes played outside, quizzes, and competitions. Pupils articulated the benefits of using a wide range of resources, including digital technology, in school and at home, which supports their learning and develops their confidence.

I like the interaction in the subject such as the use of Kahoot and the whiteboard - we didn't get to do that in other classes. I liked the games and the competitiveness of them. I decided to do it for GCSE.

I enjoy challenges and team games.

KS 3 was about enjoying, getting used to, understanding and building up confidence to speak the language.

Languages help you connect with others

The pupils highlighted their pride in being able to speak another language. Those pupils who have engaged with speakers of other languages expressed their sense of achievement and satisfaction at having the confidence and skills to apply their learning in real-life situations. Pupils also said that knowing about different cultures, traditions, foods, and festivals, makes meeting other people and visiting different countries and regions where the languages are spoken more meaningful. Year 10 pupils who are learning Irish spoke very positively about their learning experiences in the Gaeltacht (regions in Ireland where the Irish language is spoken as the main community language).

Being able to have a basic conversation makes me feel good.

I am very proud of myself being able to talk in a different language to people in a different country. I am becoming more confident.

I like learning about the festivals. In August, there is a festival called La Tomatina...it is amazing and I would really like to go to one of those festivals!

Languages are useful

The pupils articulated how the skills they are developing through language learning, and the confidence it gives them, make them more employable. They also gave examples of potential career pathways which require language skills, and other opportunities, such as spending a year abroad when studying at university.

Learning a language adds another string to your bow. Learning a language also shows that you are a hard-working person because it is not easy learning a new language – there is a lot of work to it!

I would like to be a flight attendant and I have a great interest in learning languages as it will help me in my career.

Learning a language opens up more job opportunities.

Learning a language will help me to get into university – and if I do languages at university, I will get to spend a year abroad—that would be so good, in the sunshine!

Strategies that are working well

The following section outlines strategies, reported by the schools who supported this work, that motivate pupils and have resulted in steady or increased numbers of pupils opting to continue with learning a language at KS 4. We are also sharing approaches which schools have introduced and which they hope will lead to increased uptake at KS 4.

Focus on speaking

Much time and effort have gone into making language learning at KS 3 meaningful and enjoyable, with a focus on building the pupils' confidence in speaking. Schools are finding creative ways in which the pupils can practise speaking in a supportive environment and one that reflects how they like to learn. Building successfully on the rapid development of digital skills of both pupils and staff, teachers use a range of applications, online platforms and resources created in-house to model speaking which enables pupils to consolidate and expand vocabulary, as well as to pose and answer questions.

Contemporary language learning pedagogy

In one school, the Irish department has adopted an approach to language learning which strips back the amount of content to be covered and instead focuses on repetition, deeper learning and building up vocabulary and phrases in context. This department reports that, teaching the language using chunks and frames reduces cognitive load, particularly for beginner learners in settings with limited contact time. The department reports that the pupils are more self-assured when dealing with the language in a wide variety of contexts and are able to recall phrases confidently. As a result, the Spanish and French departments of this school are now introducing a similar model.

Another school spoke about how it has experienced success and seen greater pupil engagement in the learning and a significant increase in uptake at KS 4 by focusing on collaborative learning. The teacher selects from a wide range of cooperative learning strategies and reports that, when working together, in carefully planned pairs and groups, the pupils are more confident and more involved in their learning. The school believes that this approach, underpinned by a positive classroom culture, develops the pupils' social skills, boosts their self-esteem and encourages them to take risks in their learning, particularly when speaking the language.

Links beyond the classroom

Covid-19 put paid to many activities such as exchanges and trips locally and further afield, and face-to-face engagement with other schools, organisations, and agencies. All of the schools have re-engaged with others so that pupils can apply and progress their learning beyond the classroom. Not all engagement involves travel and the associated cost; schools have established virtual links with other schools, and matched pupils with pen pals. Summer 2022 saw the re-opening of the Irish Language summer residential courses in the Gaeltacht which many of the pupils attend to improve their fluency.

All of the schools visited value highly the support of the [Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research](#) (NICILT). Teachers and pupils spoke positively about the [Francofest](#) and [Hispanofest](#) competitions which develop the pupils' wider skills, including teamwork, creativity, communication and problem-solving, alongside their language, enterprise and information and communication technology skills. The schools also welcome the introduction of 'Languages Week', a NICILT initiative to celebrate and promote languages across the curriculum. Pupils and teachers of Irish spoke of their appreciation for and benefit from participation in extra-curricular activities and competitions organised by, for example, [Gael Linn](#).

Changes at KS 3

Approximately one-half of the schools visited reported that discussions were ongoing in relation to which languages, and in some cases how many, should be delivered at KS 3 in order to provide all pupils with an enjoyable and successful language learning experience, and to promote uptake at KS 4.

A school, where year 8 pupils study three languages, is responding to feedback from pupils that, for some, this was challenging. As a result, the school is exploring alternative delivery and timetabling arrangements, whilst retaining the three languages, so that all pupils have a positive experience of learning languages.

Another of the schools introduced a termly carousel model from September 2022, whereby year 8 pupils study three languages, and then choose two languages for the next two years. The teachers spoke about how this new arrangement puts the three languages on an equal footing, with the intent that the model will result in a more equal distribution of pupil uptake across the three languages. The teachers have worked together to devise new schemes of work so that pupils have an enjoyable and comparable experience of all three languages and can make a better-informed decision as they progress to year 9. This new model is being monitored closely by the school. Year 8 pupils who met with inspectors reported that they had enjoyed this approach to learning the three languages, with one pupil commenting that it gave them '*a taste of everything*'.

KS 4 accreditation

One school, in addition to offering GCSE Spanish, has introduced an alternative level 2 qualification, which has led to more pupils opting to continue with Spanish at KS 4. The two teachers in the department work together to share resources and plan lessons, and both classes are timetabled at the same time which means that it is possible for pupils to move between classes, depending on their progress. Inspectors met with a small number of the pupils involved who expressed their appreciation of the alternative option, as it gave them the confidence to continue with Spanish at KS 4. The teachers report that having the two pathways helps them to better fulfil their departmental vision that language learning is accessible to all pupils.

Challenges

Whilst the aim of this work is to celebrate success and identify what is working well, the pupils and teachers who spoke with inspectors articulated several barriers/challenges in relation to language learning. A small number of pupils expressed their disappointment at not being able to continue a language in KS 4 due to rigid option blocks. The teachers report that factors, such as timetabling constraints and variation in time allocation (given that schools have flexibility to interpret the minimum requirements for languages at KS 3, as set out in The Northern Ireland Curriculum), result in an imbalanced language learning experience across their schools. (Languages are compulsory in Northern Ireland post-primary schools at KS 3 (years 8-10). However, schools have the flexibility to determine the amount of time allocated to languages provision.)

Despite their best efforts to promote languages and make the pupils' learning experiences at KS 3 meaningful and enjoyable, the teachers report that the perceived difficulty of studying, and achieving well in, modern languages is a key reason why pupils do not choose languages at KS 4. Other barriers, reported by pupils and teachers, include the means of assessing, in particular the Listening and Speaking elements, the volume of content and the relevance of certain topics/themes at KS 4 to the everyday lives and interests of young people.

In discussion with inspectors, those pupils who had learned languages at primary school reported that they felt more confident in post-primary language lessons. [The Northern Ireland Languages Strategy](#), launched in 2012, sets out recommendations for language learning in schools, including the study of two modern languages as early as possible. It would be timely to test the efficacy and relevance of these recommendations.

Conclusion

It is heartening to hear directly from pupils that language learning is engaging and enjoyable, and that they appreciate the creative and interactive learning experiences provided by their teachers. The successful strategies, newly introduced approaches, creativity and willingness to change and adopt new ways of working outlined in this insight report are underpinned by a vision in those schools and departments to improve uptake at KS4 by making languages meaningful, enjoyable and accessible to all.

Appendix

Inspectors engaged with staff from twelve post-primary schools and held discussions with over one hundred pupils across nine of these schools.

Inspectors also met with representatives from NICILT and attended the Francofest and Hispanofest celebration events.

They also met with representatives from the [Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment](#) (CCEA) and DE, and attended the Research Launch of 'The Irish Language in English-Medium Post-Primary Schools in NI' organised by [An Gréasán](#).

The Education and Training Inspectorate

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