Language learning in primary schools – policy has clear potential but could be better. This is the conclusion reached by researchers assessing the success of the policy requirement for children to learn a foreign language at primary school four years after its introduction in 2014. In short: it needs more support to be a success.

The DfE, critics, teachers, parents and policy makers, has focussed on language learning and teaching in primary schools in recent years and analysis and recommendations have been made in the White Paper: ‘Research in Primary Languages’ (RiPL). English is changing rapidly across the country is patchy and Britain lags behind other European countries when it comes to language learning and teaching. The DfE should be applauded for this next step in the policy requirement for children to learn a foreign language at primary school. But, as the Chair of our Research Institute for Primary Languages (RiPL), Professor Florence Myles explained: “It’s clear from our research that simply requiring all primary schools to teach a foreign language is not enough. There are schools which illustrate exemplary practice, but a high proportion of schools struggle to ensure clearly planned progression to boost motivation and increase uptake of languages in the earlier years. The RiPL White Paper makes ten recommendations: this is the conclusion reached by researchers assessing the success of the policy requirement for children to learn a foreign language at primary school four years after its introduction in 2014. In short: it needs more support to be a success.”


Brendaerolle Holmes MBE, co-Chair of RiPL further comments: “We must be realistic: we recognise that there are competing pressures for time in the primary curriculum and that teachers need help to implement and sustain the policy requirement. But we take a positive approach in this White Paper. The RiPL White Paper gives us an opportunity to address the challenges of a diverse and rapidly changing world. Getting the right skills in languages from an early age means an even greater challenge for the political world. It is crucial if we are to remain in the having of number of pupils studying languages at GCSE and A-Level.”


Current challenges for the implementation of the policy requirement for children to learn a foreign language at primary school four years after its introduction in 2014. In short: it needs more support to be a success.

1. Time allocation: there is plenty of evidence that children learn best when they are engaged in purposeful activities supported by very active cognitive development. The RiPL White Paper recommends that children are given at least 15 hours a week to learn languages in school, this is based on evidence from across the world of the benefits of learning a second language in the early years. However, the Department for Education (DfE) White Paper Primary Languages Pedagogy (pp. 9-11) states that it is up to individual LEAs and schools to decide how to allocate time for learning a foreign language. This is a significant issue: it makes it even more important that the RiPL White Paper recommends a clear primary curriculum: and that reaching expected standards in reading, writing and maths is not enough. There are schools which illustrate exemplary practice, but a high proportion of schools struggle to ensure clearly planned progression to boost motivation and increase uptake of languages in the earlier years.

2. Primary Languages Pedagogy: the DfE should invest in professional development for primary teachers by providing funded opportunities to study foreign languages, and develop strong links with universities. Teachers need to be sensitised to the multilingualism of many children in their classes and the important role of teacher language proficiency and training; appropriate and effective teaching strategies; and the links with L1 literacy and the languages children know and are learning (iii. Efficient teaching needs to be strengthened, for both monolingual and EAL children. iv. Progress strategies: crucial role of teacher language proficiency and training; and appropriate and effective teaching strategies; and the links with L1 literacy and the languages children know and are learning. v. Teaching time, teacher language proficiency, and teaching approach play a crucial role in raising attainment; this is crucial if we are to reverse the decline in the number of pupils studying languages at GCSE and A-Level.

3. Lessons from research into primary language learning – implications for practice

i. During much of middle childhood children learn implicitly and need rich and plentiful input to learn for take up; sufficient time needs to be allocated to language learning.

Middle childhood is characterised by very active cognitive development; they will need to face the challenges of a diverse and rapidly changing world.

ii. Middle childhood is characterised by very active cognitive development.

iii. Strong early L1 literacy skills are associated with higher FL attainment during the course of middle childhood.

iv. The number of pupils with English as an additional language has increased steadily in schools; and recognition and understanding of primary languages is often based on the assumption of equal opportunities to learn a new language. To raise standards in languages we need to take a strategic approach to access to a broad, balanced and high quality curriculum in primary schools.

v. Teaching time, teacher language proficiency, and teaching approach play a crucial role in raising attainment...