The study examined the impact that the 2014 statutory inclusion of foreign languages (FL) at Key Stage 2 (KS2) has had on teachers’ perceptions of FL teaching and learning in the classroom. It also asked about MFL teachers’ perceptions of children with English as an additional language (EAL).

What the researchers did
16 MFL teachers in the Greater Manchester area completed an online questionnaire, which asked about their teaching experiences, the make-up of the school population, current FL provision in the schools, and ideas for best FL practice. The teachers had varying levels of teaching experience. Six were chosen for interview (see, right, p.4). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 30 mins. to one hour. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded. Themes and sub-themes were identified.

The researchers wished to use a qualitative approach to find out how teachers perceived MFL teaching in their primary schools, and what perceptions they had regarding EAL children’s aptitude for language learning and attainment compared to children with English only.

What they found
Teachers made both positive and negative comments.

- Teachers felt that MFL was ‘inconsistent’. In other words, other subjects tended to have greater priority, and MFL was taught differently to other subjects (more playful approach).
- The crowded curriculum was perceived as having a negative effect on MFL provision.
- All teachers noted that MFL had a low status on the subject hierarchy, meaning that it was often seen as ‘dispensable’, and received low provision of materials and training.
- Teachers were aware that they needed to use alternative and additional skills in teaching MFL.
- With regard to pedagogy, the different and often ‘unique’ teaching methods were seen as raising barriers to learning on the one hand, but as invoking a positive pupil response to learning on the other hand.
- MFL was not seen as equal to other subjects as it was not assessed in the same way as the core subjects.
- Teachers reported a lack of innovative (i.e. not just games) training, and professional development.
- The small amount of time dedicated to MFL suggested to pupils that learning a language was not a priority.

- All teachers highlighted the enhanced abilities of EAL children to access MFL.
- EAL children were perceived as having more developed metalinguistic (language) awareness than English only children.
- Children with limited English had the chance to participate on an equal footing in MFL classes, which was not always the case in other subjects.
- Teachers reported that EAL children progressed faster in MFL, were better equipped to learn another language, had more confidence, and a more positive attitude to learning; they were more willing to ‘have a go’.

Things to bear in mind
The study was a small-scale study from only one area of England.