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Article:

Parrish, A. (2020) Curriculum change in modern foreign languages education in England: barriers and possibilities. *The Language Learning Journal*, 48 (5). pp. 534-554. ISSN: 0957-1736

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2018.1557733>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *The Language Learning Journal* on 14 Jan 2019, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09571736.2018.1557733>.

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Curriculum change in modern foreign languages education in England: barriers and possibilities

Abstract

This paper considers the languages on offer in secondary schools in England and the possibility of enacting curriculum change with a view to reducing the dominance of French, Spanish and, to a lesser extent, German as a possible way to increase take-up of modern foreign languages post-14. Questionnaires were completed by 666 students aged 14-15, 70 head teachers and 119 heads of modern languages in secondary schools throughout England, investigating students' views as to the languages they would like to learn and their views of particular languages as well as the views of senior and middle leaders on the factors which impact on the teaching of modern languages. The paper concludes that students are interested in a wider range of languages than is currently available, for reasons primarily relating to usefulness. It also finds that schools are constrained by operational concerns preventing them fully considering the possibility of teaching a wider range of languages. Implications for national-level language policy and the culture of school accountability are discussed.

Keywords

Secondary education; Modern Languages curriculum; Educational leadership; School policy; Modern foreign languages

Introduction

Languages in schools: practice & policy

It is a widely held, but not empirically supported, view that the British are poor language learners (Milton & Meara, 1998). Whilst British students' ability to learn languages may be comparable with students in other countries, numbers of students taking the subject post-14, post-16 and at university have been in decline over recent years (Bawden, 2013; British Academy, 2009; Tinsley & Board, 2017; Vidal Rodeiro, 2017). Nevertheless, there is a clear

need for languages education (see for example CBI, 2012; UKCES, 2012; Tinsley, 2013; Tinsley, 2017) and for the teaching of a wider range of languages (Tinsley, 2013; 2017) than is currently on offer. Exam entry data reveal that the range of languages being taught in English schools has always been narrow: currently 89.03% of all GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education, the exams taken at age 16 in England and Wales) language entries are in French, German and Spanish, and French alone accounts for 42.37% (Tinsley & Board, 2018). This nevertheless represents a broader range than has been seen in previous years, as is shown in Figure 1

[Figure 1 near here]

As can be seen from the Figure, German has been losing ground to Spanish since the subject of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) was made optional in 2004, and other languages have been gaining in popularity. German nevertheless retains a considerable lead over Italian, the next biggest language, which accounts for 1.5% of GCSE entries (JCQ, 2018b).

There is no legislative reason why this should be so; the most recent version of the National Curriculum, which sets out what should be taught in state-maintained schools in England, stipulates that ‘any modern foreign language’ may be taught (Department for Education, 2013a: 2). This is an update both to the previous version which stated that languages taught ‘may include major European or world languages’ (Department for Education, 2011) and the first incarnation which foregrounded the teaching of languages of the European Community (Department of Education and Science/Welsh Office, 1988), but has had no discernible impact on the range of languages on offer.

In light of this flexibility, the government can be considered at once both to have taken an all-inclusive approach to languages, creating a curriculum which encompasses all possible languages spoken in the country and globally, and simultaneously to have abdicated all

responsibility for establishing a position on these matters. In addition, the decision to make languages optional post-14 from 2004 has led to a sustained decline in numbers of students sitting GCSE exams in language subjects, with a slight temporary reprieve after the introduction of a performance measure including a language in 2010 (Tinsley & Board, 2017; Education Datalab, 2015). This has had a subsequent effect on exam entries at post-16 (Vidal Rodeiro, 2017).

The situation is further complicated by the culture of accountability evident in the English education system. Schools are held accountable both to Ofsted, the school inspectorate, and the Department for Education through school league tables. These league tables report on a range of measures and send contradictory messages regarding the importance of languages – the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measure includes a language at GCSE, whereas Progress 8,¹ a newer measure, does not. In some schools, this has had an impact on not only the number of students taking a language (Gill, 2017), but also on the academic attainment profile of these students, with higher attaining students tending to be the ones taking a language (Education Datalab, 2015). Previous studies have considered the ‘classed nature’ of curriculum choice in schools (Abrahams, 2018, p. 15; see also Bleazby, 2015; Coffey, 2018; Constantinou, 2018; Lanvers, 2017a) in light of the current ‘trends’ in schools’ delivery of the post-compulsory curriculum, and support this notion. Severe grading in the subject has also been blamed for the decline in numbers (Education Datalab, 2015; Harris & Burn, 2011; Lanvers, 2017b; Robertson, 2017; Taylor & Marsden, 2014; Titcombe, 2008).

The teaching of modern foreign languages is also affected by inconsistencies in provision at primary level. Whilst teaching in this phase is now compulsory (Department for Education, 2013b), it commonly represents less than an hour a week of curriculum time (Tinsley &

¹ The EBacc measure includes GCSEs in English, maths, a science, a humanities subject and a foreign language. Progress 8 includes eight subjects, of which three must be EBacc subjects.

Board, 2017b). Language Trends data reveal that collaboration between primary and secondary schools is declining (Tinsley & Board, 2016) and Chambers' (2014) study of twelve secondary school MFL teachers found substantial variation in the approaches taken to transition, with little indication that collaboration between the phases was taking place. Bolster, Balandier-Brown and Rea-Dickins (2004) found that neither staff nor students perceived long-term advantages in having begun a language at primary school. Their case study, which took place in one secondary and five of its feeder primaries, found that the opportunity to build on prior learning was not being taken and attribute the lack of long term benefit to this cause (Bolster et al., 2004). This disconnect is clearly problematic; Bolster (2009) found that in a case study of an independent school (one funded by student fees rather than the state), students who had continuity between primary and secondary phases displayed increased motivation towards their language study when compared with those who did not. Given the flexibility provided by government policy on language teaching, the decision of which language should be taught is one which is delegated to schools. However, as noted, teaching is generally confined to one or more of French, Spanish and German. Indeed, Britain's geographic and socio-economic position means that there is no clear and obvious choice of language to be learned (Trim, 2004), although concerns about the future role of English, or at least British English, as a lingua franca have been raised in light of the 2016 vote to leave the European Union, known as Brexit (Johnston, 2017; O'Grady, 2017; Ostler, 2018; Ridealgh, 2017). Much has been made in the period since then of the impact Brexit will have on languages, with the economic impact of Britain's monolingualism highlighted (Hogan-Brun, 2017). The All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages has issued a checklist for government officials which makes the case for 'a post-Brexit plan in education . . . with specific actions to ensure the UK produces sufficient linguists to meet its future requirements as a leader in global free trade and on the international stage' (All-party

parliamentary group on modern languages, 2016). In addition, the chairs & presidents of learned societies in the UK concerned with languages and languages education² wrote to ‘urge the UK Government to develop a well-articulated policy on language education and research . . . from primary school through to Higher Education and beyond’ (UCML, 2017).

Given the relative homogeneity of languages taught across schools, the lack of restriction placed on schools by the National Curriculum and the decline in take-up, it seems prudent to investigate students’ views of the languages on offer in their schools as part of a consideration of the modern foreign languages curriculum. However, this is only part of the story, with policy decisions, and the restrictions on the same, another key element of possible curriculum change.

School leadership and decision-making

In light of this decentralised model of school decision and policy-making around languages, attention must turn now to the processes which take place in schools themselves. Although both terms have been used in schools, a distinction must be made between ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ –leadership has connotations of vision and values whereas management often is associated more with processes and structures (Bush & Coleman, 2000). To emphasise the point, the concepts could alternatively be expressed as ‘strategic leadership’ and ‘operational management’.

Earley & Weindling (2004) note that strategic leadership (encompassing such decisions as which languages should be taught to which students) is:

largely seen as being a key responsibility of senior staff, particularly the headteacher and leadership team and the school’s governing body . . . This does not mean,

² Linguistics Association of Great Britain; The Philological Society; British Association for Applied Linguistics; University Council of Modern Languages; University Council of General and Applied Linguistics; British Association of Academic Phoneticians

however, that middle managers/leaders and other staff will not be able to contribute to strategic thinking; [they] are likely to be perceived by organisational leaders as an important source of information . . . particularly on their areas of . . . expertise. (p. 118)

Middle managers or leaders include heads of department, who are more concerned with implementing strategies within their departments than creating the strategies (Earley & Weindling, 2004; Turner, 2003). Research in an Australian context reviewed by Gurr and Drysdale (2013) found that the impact of middle leaders was heavily dependent on the way in which their role was understood by the school, but that the potential for having an impact on school improvement and student outcomes was significant, if not always realised. Brown and Rutherford (1999) similarly noted that the head of department's role was 'critical, yet highly ambiguous' (p. 232).

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government which formed in 2010 placed a focus on increasing autonomy in schools (Earley, 2013; Glatter, 2012) , but Glatter (2012) notes that paradoxically 'most school practitioners consider themselves significantly constrained by government requirements' (p. 564) despite this focus. In the current climate, the accountability measures which are an increasing part of the educational landscape ensure that even academies, which are not officially bound to the National Curriculum, feel compelled not to deviate far from it in order to comply with the centralised testing and reporting regime; Earley notes that 'school leaders may talk the language of vision but the space in which they can lead may be narrow' (2013, p. 15).

In a 2007 survey it was found that head teachers were often struggling to allocate time to strategic concerns, and many were in fact more comfortable with an operational role (Earley, 2013); by 2012, 78% of heads responding to the Leadership Landscape Survey reported

delegating some strategic responsibility to their senior team (Earley et al., 2012). Heads reported having to make time for strategic planning, for example through senior team ‘awaydays’ or planning weekends (Earley, 2013) as time in the school day was increasingly accounted for elsewhere.

Against this backdrop, the potential barriers to curriculum changes faced by school leaders when considering languages in their schools are relevant to a consideration of curriculum change. This is not something which has previously been investigated, and combined with student views of the languages taught, provides a chance to consider whether there is scope for change within the English educational system.

Research questions

The study addressed one over-arching research question, namely:

Is it possible to break away from the dominance of French, Spanish and, to a lesser extent, German in English schools?

This was operationalised into two sub-questions:

1. What are students’ views of the languages on offer in their schools?
2. What are the barriers to changing the languages on offer?

Head teachers and heads of modern languages in schools took part in the study alongside students in Year 10 – those aged 14-15 and who were in the first year of GCSE courses, which according to current national policy represents the first year of post-compulsory languages education.

Method

Online questionnaires were designed to allow data to be collected from head teachers, heads of languages and Year 10 students. Head teachers and heads of languages in 437 schools in

twenty-two local authorities were contacted directly via email with an invitation to participate in the project. Targeted schools represented a spread of geographical areas and a mix of urban, rural and coastal schools as well as all University Technical Colleges (UTCs; n = 31) and Studio Schools (n = 35) that were open in the 2014/15 academic year. These new types of school cater solely for students aged 14-19 and as such do not have to offer a language as part of their curriculum. The questionnaire was also circulated through teacher networks,³ social media and the researcher's professional contacts.

Student questionnaires were completed online and respondents were recruited through participating head teachers and professional contacts.

Participants

Responses were obtained from 70 head teachers and 119 heads of department from schools located in all regions of England. 666 students from fifteen schools in six local authorities completed questionnaires. No EAL learners were present in the sample. A breakdown is shown in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

Instrument

Student questionnaire

Students were asked whether they were taking a language for GCSE, and if so to indicate which. They were then asked whether they had been able to study the language they wanted, and if not, which they would have preferred. In addition, participants were asked whether they would have taken a language if another language had been available, and whether they would have liked to learn any languages in particular.

³ Network for Languages South East, Network for Languages West Midlands, Routes into Languages Yorkshire & The Humber, National Association of Head Teachers

Finally, students were asked to consider the twenty languages in which GCSEs were available and categorise them under one of four headings: ‘Everyone should learn it’, ‘people should have the option to learn it’, ‘it’s not important to learn it’ or ‘I don’t know’. This involved dragging and dropping the languages into labelled boxes. Students were then asked to give reasons for their responses in an open text section. They were also invited to give any other relevant comments; all comments have been copied directly including misspellings, punctuation errors and original emphasis.

Staff questionnaire

Initially, staff were asked which languages were taught in their schools and to which year groups. Similarly to the students, staff respondents were then asked about the importance of a range of languages, this time in terms of how widely they should be taught in schools.

Categories were labelled ‘should be available to all students nationally’, ‘should be available to the majority of students nationally’, ‘should be available to some students nationally’ and ‘need not be offered to students’. Respondents were again asked to give reasons for their decisions; similarly all comments have been copied directly including any errors.

Staff were asked about the importance of the views of a range of different stakeholders when making decisions regarding which languages to teach. The item was worded ‘When decisions are made regarding which languages to offer, how important are the views of the following people?’ and ten stakeholders were listed, namely the head teacher, school governors/trustees, senior leadership team, head of languages, parents, students, other staff, local employers, local post-16 providers and local primary schools.

Head teachers were asked ‘how important are the following factors to you in deciding which languages to offer?’ and given fourteen response items. The full wording of the items is presented in Table 9 in the Appendix alongside the short forms which are used in the

analysis. As can be seen from the table, these items all relate to practical considerations except the final one, which considers usefulness. This concept has been discussed by Coffey (2018), who notes that it is part of a wider discourse, with meaning varying according to, amongst other things, social capital. The meaning made of the concept by the respondents was not considered relevant in the present study, but rather its relative value compared to other factors such as staffing. Heads of department were asked a similar question in a different form. They were asked to categorise the same items using the labels ‘Important to me and to the head / school leadership team’, ‘Important to the head / school leadership team but not as important to me’ ‘Important to me and to the head / school leadership team’ and ‘Important to me but seems less important to the head / school leadership team.’

Staff were also asked about the reasons for past or anticipated changes to the range of languages on offer.

Results

What are students’ views of the languages on offer in their schools?

Which languages are students learning?

At GCSE, five different languages were being taken. Arabic was only being taken by one student and can therefore be presumed to be a home languages GCSE rather than one offered in class, although there were no clear data provided to confirm this. As would be expected, French was the most common language (66 students, 43.1%) followed by Spanish (50, 32.7%) and then German (37, 24.2%). Chinese was being taken by 13 students, all from one school (8.5%). Figure 2 shows how these numbers compare with national data on GCSE entries.

[Figure 2 near here]

Chinese was disproportionately highly represented compared to approximately 1% who sit the exam nationally (Tinsley & Board, 2016) due to the presence of the language at one of the participating schools.

Which languages would students have liked to learn?

When students who had previously reported that they did not get to do the language they wanted were asked to indicate which language they would have liked to study; ninety-nine responses were given and twelve languages were mentioned. These are shown in Figure 3.

[Figure 3 near here]

Eleven students also indicated that different languages being available would have affected their decision not to take a language, nine of whom specified a language. Two suggested German, six Spanish, one Italian and one Latin.

When the responses from both sets of students are combined, 42.6% of students indicated that they would have liked to learn Spanish, with the next most popular languages being Italian and German, at 16.7% and 14.8% respectively (see Figure 4).

[Figure 4 near here]

In a separate question, students were asked whether there were any languages that they would have liked to learn ($n = 335$). In total 26 different languages were mentioned (see Table 10 in the Appendix), including some languages which are not offered at GCSE. The top ten most mentioned languages are shown in Figure 5.

[Figure 5 near here]

As can be seen from the figure, just over half of all responses were accounted for by three languages, including one of the Big Three. Latin was a surprisingly popular choice. Whilst the top two languages are the same as those mentioned by students in the questions

previously discussed, here Chinese has overtaken German. It must be remembered that responses to all three items show the languages that students would have liked to study had they had the opportunity, and so languages they did have access to do not feature in their responses.

Perceived importance of specific languages

Responses to the three items discussed above relating to individual languages excluded the languages which respondents had been able to study, whether they took the opportunity or not, and assessed students' personal interests. Students were also asked to categorise languages according to how widely they felt they should be taught, revealing the general value placed on particular languages regardless of whether they were studied. Scores were weighted in order to establish which languages were the most important to respondents: 'Everyone should learn it' was given a weighting of 4, and 'I don't know' a weighting of 1. Once scores for each language were combined, their rankings were compared, revealing that the most popular languages were French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Japanese and Russian.

Students gave clear importance to the major European languages and most commonly taught non-European languages, but responses indicated that community languages (those spoken by minority communities in the UK, for example Urdu and Panjabi) were considered less important to learn; of the 964 responses in the 'I don't know' category, 57.1% referred to such languages.

There were considerably more student responses in the 'Option' (1555) category and the 'Not important' (1306) category than in the 'Everyone' (494) category, indicating a general sense that languages were not something that everyone should study. Indeed, some student

comments referred to the lack of value found in language learning, for example 'I feel that they are a waste of time' (STJ_33) and 'WE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO DO THEM' (STD_4).

Reasons given

The reasons for interest in the languages specified were coded and found to fit three broad themes. Almost half of codes (49.2%) refer to the (perceived) usefulness of the language. A further 30.6% refer to how much the student liked the language, and 9.1% refer to getting a good grade. Figure 6 shows how the responses were distributed.

[Figure 6 near here]

In line with previous studies (Adey & Biddulph, 2001; Stables & Wikeley, 1999), usefulness was found to be a key motivator in students' preferences. Responses were generally fairly specific, although they did fall along something of a spectrum. At the more abstract end of the spectrum, usefulness was discussed as a vague, general concept, for example 'Beautiful language and useful' (STC_10), but there was no mention of transferable skills in any response. Some responses were very specific, such as 'speak italian when singing' (STC_4) or 'Latin for manuscript translation' (STD_11). In between these two extremes were responses relating to family connections, such as 'because my family is Italian' (STI_7) and 'because I'm half Greek' (STI_19), or travel plans: 'Because I go on holiday to Spain a lot' (STH_279). Whilst it is difficult to usefully quantify the results given the variation in numbers of students citing each language, it is notable that amongst the most commonly-cited languages, only four reasons for learning French related to usefulness whilst numerous reasons for wanting to learn Italian, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese were coded in this way. Students frequently mentioned family or social connections as reasons for wanting to learn particular languages. Spanish, French and Italian were most likely to be thought useful for travel, and German for family reasons; Chinese was most likely to be considered useful for

business and economic reasons. Latin and German were the languages most likely to have been cited as ‘useful’ in a general sense; a third of respondents mentioning usefulness as their reason for choosing these languages were vague as to what they were useful for.

What are the barriers to changing the languages on offer?

The importance of a range of stakeholders

Non-parametric Friedman tests were carried out on the data for the stakeholder items responded to by both groups of staff after it was established that most items were non-normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilk, $p < .005$) and there were a high number of outliers. This allowed data to be compared within-subjects (i.e. allowing responses from the same respondents to different items to be compared).

For head teacher data, the test was significant ($n = 38$, $\chi^2(9) = 182.904$, $p = .000$) and pairwise comparisons carried out in SPSS and adjusted with a Bonferroni correction revealed that there were significant differences in the distributions of scores, as shown in Figure 7 and Table 2.

[Figure 7 near here]

[Table 2 near here]

The test was also significant for the head of department data ($n = 71$, $\chi^2(9) = 313.155$, $p = .000$). Pairwise comparisons carried out in SPSS and adjusted with a Bonferroni correction revealed that there were significant differences in the distributions of these scores as shown in Figure 8 and Table 3.

[Figure 8 near here]

[Table 3 near here]

Mann-Whitney U tests revealed no significant differences between the scores for each stakeholder between the two staff groups (see Table 4).

[Table 4 near here]

Looking at the two sets of responses together, two main groups of stakeholders emerge. Across both sets of respondents, whether considered together or individually, the distributions of scores for head teachers, heads of department, SLT, students and parents were significantly different from those for other staff, local employers, post-16 providers and feeder primaries, which all had lower medians. Some effect sizes (those comparing heads and heads of department with external stakeholders and other staff) were very large according to Cohen's (1988) breakdown (.1 – small; .3 – medium; .5 – large; .7 – very large) and the results can be used to divide the stakeholders into those which were influential in the decision-making process, and those which were much less so. Governors sit in between the two groups.

It is notable that local employers and post-16 providers, as well as feeder primaries, were given such low importance in the decision-making process. Indeed, it was these stakeholders who were most likely to be attributed no importance, along with 'other staff': whilst heads of department were most likely to attribute post-16 providers no importance, for head teachers it was other staff (see Table 5).

[Table 5 near here]

The findings demonstrate very clearly an inward-facing approach to language teaching, focusing almost entirely on what happens within the institution without looking outward to the earlier or later stages of students' educational careers. This approach, which could be described as pragmatic, perhaps reflects the limited space in which schools can develop a strategic vision for languages.

The importance of a range of factors

The findings were tested for normality and were found to differ significantly from a normal distribution. As an ANOVA was thus unsuitable, a Friedman test was carried out which established that significant differences existed ($n = 38$, $\chi^2(13) = 175.733$, $p = .000$). Pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni correction identified where these differences occurred, as shown in Figure 9 and Table 6.

[Figure 9 near here]

[Table 6 near here]

The tests revealed that the distribution of scores for staff expertise, the availability of a GCSE and likely future usefulness were significantly different from those for offering the same or different languages as local schools and offering a language which is not widely taught, which all had lower medians. These results suggest that it is the former three factors which were important in the decision-making process, with the latter significantly less so, and the remaining factors sitting in between.

Table 7 shows the number of heads of department who perceived each item to be important to their head teacher, and the number who rated each as important to themselves. These scores have been produced by combining the number of participants who rated items as 'Important to me and to the head / school leadership team' or 'Important to the head / school leadership team but not as important to me' for the head teacher perceptions, or 'Important to me and to the head / school leadership team' and 'Important to me but seems less important to the head / school leadership team' for the head of department.

[Table 7 near here]

Looking at the data descriptively, the most important three factors for head teachers are staff expertise, the availability of a GCSE and the likely usefulness of the language. Two of these

(staff expertise and the availability of a GCSE) were also perceived by heads of department to be the most important for head teachers, and two (staff expertise and likely usefulness) were cited as heads of department's most important factors. Teaching the same or different languages to local schools and teaching a less-widely taught language were the three least important factors for all.

The pattern found with stakeholders, where the most highly rated options relate to internal aspects of the school and the least highly rated items were external, has not been replicated in its entirety here, although externally-orientated items were found to be the least highly rated in both questions.

Reasons for past or future changes

Forty-six head teachers and 64 heads of department responded to an item asking when the range of languages at their school last changed and forty-five head teacher participants and sixty-nine heads of department responded to the question asking whether they anticipated the range of languages being different next year. When asked about reasons for these changes, all responses were coded into 22 general themes which were then grouped into four overarching codes, plus 'other', as shown in Table 8; each was assigned to all appropriate codes meaning some responses were coded more than once. Some respondents gave more than one reason.

[Table 8 near here]

The most common reason given was staffing and staff recruitment, with 46 of the 105 responses relating to this. Some related to retention and recruitment, for example 'current staffing is secure' (HoD_165), 'we have strong staffing in French & German, and one teacher of Spanish' (HT_171) and 'introducing Mandarin or Arabic would probably start with one teacher and, as such, be a timetabling risk: what if they leave?' (HT_183). Others were connected specifically to staff skills, for example 'The languages the teachers are qualified in' (HoD_89). There were a number of respondents who simply wrote 'staffing'.

Student preference, curriculum planning and timetabling were also found to be important.

Head teachers were concerned with student voice as much as they were with staffing, and the timetable was the third most important factor. No head teachers mentioned the ease or difficulty of the subject or the languages taught in feeder primaries and none mentioned results, although they were mentioned nine times by heads of department ('Exam results / league table tyranny' [HoD_107]).

Student and parent preference were mentioned by both sets of respondents, with students being mentioned two or three times as often as parents. In the earlier question regarding which factors are important in decision-making, staffing and student/parent preference scored highly for both sets of respondents, meaning that the two sets of results broadly corroborate one another.

In terms of student preference, some references were general: 'student choice' (HT_213) and some specific: 'Pupil choice - fewer are choosing languages in general and German the least popular' (HT_208); 'Spanish seemed more appealing to students as many go on holiday to Spain' (HoD_153). We can infer from these findings that schools are listening to and taking into account the views of students, but are nevertheless constrained by operational concerns such as staff recruitment. There is also a risk that schools are creating their own interpretations of the views and needs of their students rather than really engaging with them, as noted by Braun et al., (2011). It should also be noted that student preference was not one of the factors which emerged as influential in staff decision-making. Some of the comments relating to parent preferences were positive in tone and some negative: 'Parental complaints this year and last year about their children being unable to continue with French' (HoD_84).

Other important factors to both sets of respondents were curriculum planning and timetabling (27 comments) and student preference (25 comments). In terms of timetabling, some referred

to issues of flexibility: ‘We have the ability to offer other languages and do tasters after school but not the flexibility in the curriculum to offer them in curriculum time’ (HoD_4), where others specifically mentioned curriculum time being devoted to other subjects: ‘additional time on the timetable being given to Maths and English’ (HoD_102); ‘We currently only have 2 hours per week of MFL time across all year groups due to the proportion of curriculum time given to English, Maths and Science’ (HoD_163).

By categorising the codes more broadly, a pattern of importance emerges. The majority of comments related to operational concerns such as staffing, timetabling and results (136 of 207 coded items). The next most common theme was preferences (of staff, students, parents, SLT and governors) with 49 coded items. In line with the findings relating to stakeholders and important factors, external concerns accounted for only five items.

The external reasons related to feeder schools (3 comments) and local employers (1 comment). The school mentioning a local employer (‘Our largest Local employer is Sellafield. The French have many nuclear engineers working there’ [HT_202]) had indicated in the earlier item that the views of local employers were very important, giving a score of 88. One of the comments mentioning that feeder schools informed their provision had been made by a head of department who had indicated that the views of local primaries were somewhat important when decisions were made (a score of 61) and another that they were not at all important (a score of 10). The remaining two schools were UTCs and so in the comments, they referred to students’ previous schools rather than primary schools, and had indicated that local primary schools were unimportant.

Discussion & conclusion

The data reveal that student respondents showed interest in a more diverse range of languages than is currently on offer in schools. The reasons given varied by language; whilst reasons

commonly related to travel or something inherent in the language itself, Spanish was popular due to its perceived ease, Japanese was seen as useful for something specific and comments relating to Chinese often referred to it being widely spoken or a challenge.

Despite this student interest, staff data suggest that there are substantial barriers to changing the range of languages on offer. Comments suggest that where changes had been made or were anticipated, staffing was a key reason, as was timetabling and curriculum planning. Indeed, more than half the comments given referred to operational concerns such as these. Data relating to the factors which staff valued when making decisions mirrored these responses, with staff expertise emerging as the most important.

Findings relating to the views of stakeholders demonstrate very clearly an inward-facing approach to language teaching, focusing almost entirely on what happens within the institution without looking outward to the earlier or later stages of students' educational careers. For students, this means that the opportunities to know what other options might be available are limited (Abrahams, 2018) and as such their understanding of language teaching and learning is also restricted to what is available in their own school. This can have an impact both in terms of their possible progression to post-16 language study (Abrahams, 2018), and the successful transition from primary school. The problematic nature of primary-to-secondary transition in languages has been identified in previous studies, with communication between the two phases identified as a particular problem (see Bolster et al., 2004; Chambers, 2014; Tinsley & Board, 2016), and the disconnect between school leavers' skills and those that employers are looking for has also been identified (see UKCES, 2012), these findings should act as a warning signal to language-in-education policymakers.

When the factors which were influential in the process were considered, the inward-looking theme could also be identified. The expertise of the current staff was the most significant

factor, followed by the availability of a GCSE. Whilst this is not dictated or influenced by the school itself, it has a direct impact given the nature of the results-driven educational climate previously outlined. By considering exam availability, there is nothing in the data to suggest that the schools were looking for external guidance on which languages are appropriate; it is more likely, especially in light of comments relating to certification ('I think ALL students should have facility to take a qualification in a language if they choose and if they have studied for it, whether that is a curriculum language, something self-studied, or a home language. There should be accreditation for all languages' (HoD_114)) that they were concerned with student and league table outcomes, which are inward-facing concepts. This finding mirrors that of Lanvers (2018) who found that although head teachers expressed 'progressive and comprehensive visions' (p. 140) for the teaching of MFL, in practice they found that school MFL policy must be dictated by the pressure of league tables.

The third influential factor, however, fits less well into this thesis: namely the likely future usefulness of the language. This **may be due to its distinct nature when compared to the other factors included in the question, which were all practical considerations with relatively objective interpretations**, where usefulness is a subjective analysis of a language's qualities. It is not directly linked to the school itself (although it may be influenced by the community the school serves) and is to some extent dependent on the individual's construction of what the future will look like. Coffey (2018) notes that instrumental constructions of usefulness, as often propagated by schools, are easy to refute for students who do not envisage their futures aligning with this notion, and Lanvers (2018) found a link between schools' views of the needs of their students and the curriculum they provided. Both these studies and others (Bleazby, 2015; Constantinou, 2018) have found a link to socio-economic status or social class in perceptions of the value of individual subjects, including MFL. Nevertheless, given

that usefulness itself is not a factor which is internal to or dependent on the school, it is more closely aligned with the less influential factors, which were all external to the school.

By returning to the differences between strategic leadership and operational management which were discussed earlier, an explanation for this anomaly can be tentatively put forward. The stakeholders which were considered non-influential, as well as being external to the language teaching and learning process in the school, can also be seen to represent an element of strategic thinking. In planning their teaching (their operations) with students' future learning in other institutions in mind, or allowing for the prior learning which has taken place in institutions lower down the education system, schools would be acting strategically to enact their vision of what the right thing for their students would be. In taking into account the work done in other schools, whether locally or nationally, and planning their own operations accordingly, they would be taking strategic factors into account. However, this is in fact the reverse of the reported situation. Usefulness still sits uneasily within this hypothesis, but the data do not show the extent to which staff have reflected on what it means for a language to be useful, or how this should be judged, and so it is not clear to what extent this concept represents a strategic vision to them. In future work, usefulness would need to be considered separately and through a theoretical lens in order to tease out the importance of the concept in a more detailed way and fully understand its impact. In support of the strategic/operational hypothesis, the reasons given for changes made to the languages taught indicate that staff very much have operational concerns at the forefront of their minds: staffing and timetabling were found very clearly to be the most critical reasons for changes in the language offer at the participating schools, perhaps as a consequence of the well-documented shortage of MFL teachers (Allen, 2016), and very little mention was made of any strategic thinking. This is in line with the findings of Lanvers' (2016; 2018) studies into school leaders' beliefs regarding the importance of MFL. In light of these findings, we can

conclude that decisions were made in the spirit of management and not leadership. This is likely to also be symptomatic of the lack of centralised language-in-education policy or planning, leaving decisions around the teaching of languages devolved to individual schools who have to balance myriad concerns including, crucially, budgets and school performance in a changing educational landscape. As found in previous studies of school leadership, in such a climate the scope for strategizing is diminished leaving school leaders with only tactical options available (Earley, 2013; Hartley, 2007).

The findings suggest that barriers to changing the languages on offer are in fact structural and any change would need to be enacted at government, rather than school, level. This may be made possible by the creation of centralised language-in-education policy, which would give schools narrower parameters (Ball, 1994) within which to create their own school-level policies. For example, by limiting the range of languages that could be taught, secondary schools might be able to better collaborate with their feeder primaries to create more effective all-through provision, giving students more consistent exposure to particular languages. By attending to schools' operational concerns and the hegemony of league tables and performance measures, more flexibility to take a strategic approach may be opened up and school leaders may be able to think more strategically about provision which best suits their learners.

Acknowledgements

[Withheld for anonymity; provided on title page]

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Appendix

Table 9

Short forms of factor item wording.

Item wording	Short form
Expertise of current staff	StaffExpertise
Availability of resources in school	ResourceAvail
Cost of new resources	ResourceCost
Suitability of the language for the ability range of the school's learners	Suitability
Availability of a GCSE	GCSEAvail
Availability of an A-Level	ALevelAvail
Preferences of students/parents	StudentParentPref
Languages taught in feeder primaries	FeederPrimaries
Future recruitment of staff	FutureRecruit
Offering the same languages as in other local secondaries	SameLocal
Offering different languages to other local secondaries	DiffLocal
Offering languages which are widely taught nationally	Widely
Offering languages which are not widely taught nationally	NotWidely
Likelihood of the language being useful in students' future lives or careers	UsefulLikely

Languages which students would like to learn ordered by number of times cited.

Spanish (93)	Latin (20)	Portuguese (5)	BSL (1)
Italian (73)	Arabic (17)	Swedish (5)	Danish (1)
Chinese (62)	Polish (13)	Welsh (5)	Hawaiian (1)
German (34)	Greek (7)	Irish (4)	Turkish (1)
Japanese (33)	Dutch (6)	Hebrew (3)	Romanian (1)
Russian (27)	Gaelic (5)	Afrikaans (1)	
French (24)	Korean (5)	Bosnian (1)	