

# Every language is an asset

**The *Bulletin's* Adam Zulawski looks at the current state of language qualifications and asks why, despite lip service from the government, there is inadequate support for the teaching and accreditation of community languages.**

There are currently 21 language GCSEs available, but how many languages are spoken in the UK? Exact figures are difficult to come by, but the 2008 Annual School Census found there were around 240 languages being spoken by school children in addition to English.

The 2011 Census was a missed opportunity, with just two small questions relating to languages: 'What is your main language?' and 'How well do you speak English?'

## Political changes

Government took away the requirement to pursue at least one language GCSE in 2004. Since then, there has been a steady decline in entries for language GCSEs,

particularly French and German.

According to JCQ exam entry data, in just seven years, the number of entries in French GCSE has halved, from 318,963 in 2004 to 154,221 in 2011.

Asian languages have also seen a fall, with Urdu, Panjabi and Gujarati all showing small reductions in numbers of candidates over the same period.

In the same year, the European Union expanded even further into eastern Europe, entitling citizens from eight new countries to migrate to the UK if they so wished.

The only joining country with a language offered at GCSE is Poland; entries in Polish GCSE have shot up, from just 323 entries in 2004 to 3,369 in 2011.

## New initiatives

The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has emphasised the importance of languages, telling the *Guardian* in Autumn 2011: 'It is literally the case that learning languages makes you smarter,' and that he would like to have children learning a second language from the age of 5.

Mr Gove has begun two key initiatives designed to increase language learning. The first is an initiative to get more Mandarin Chinese learned in schools.

With China about to become the world's largest economy, it is certainly in the UK's interest to nurture our children's ability to converse in what will be the language of business before long.

A number of Chinese supplementary schools now have a significant intake of children without Chinese roots, suggesting that many UK parents are taking the initiative for their offspring, rather than waiting for mainstream schools to extend the provision of Chinese language support.

The second initiative that Mr Gove has championed is the English Baccalaureate (EBacc).

This performance indicator shows how many GCSE pupils have achieved a C or above in English, mathematics, two sciences, a foreign language and history or geography.

Although not an official qualification, it is included in league tables from early 2011 – and schools have hurried to reorganise their GCSE options for pupils, so that they can increase the number who are achieving it. The Teacher Development Agency announced in March 2012 that it has had a much higher number of enquiries into language teaching this year, and the number of registrations for language

## Case study: the Society of Indian Teachers and Associates (SOITA)

Using a grant from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, SOITA encouraged and supported seven Asian supplementary mother-tongue schools to enter their pupils for the Asset Languages scheme from OCR during the 2009/2010 academic year.

The schools were Shri Swaminarayan Temple and the Hindu Cultural Society in Barnet, Oshwal Association UK in Croydon, Tamil Art and Culture Academy in Lewisham, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad UK, Ramgarhia Gurdwara, and London Tamil Sangham – which are all in Newham.

Between them, the seven schools covered four languages: Gujarati, Hindi, Panjabi and Tamil.

SOITA consultants delivered in-house training to their teachers, covering the philosophy and administrative procedures of the Asset scheme and guidance on how to prepare pupils for external tests.

Schools also received a 70 per cent subsidy for the exam fees via the grant.

A total of 217 pupils took 586 tests across the Breakthrough, Preliminary and Intermediate categories, and 547 were completed successfully, a pass rate of 93 per cent.

Due to this success, six of the seven schools entered more pupils into the Asset scheme in the next academic year, this time with parents paying the full fees to OCR.

Eight other Asian schools are now keen on replicating this Asset Languages scheme, so SOITA is currently seeking a grant for the project.

*Harbans Juneja, President of SOITA*

GCSE courses is showing a rise. This is almost certainly the influence of the EBacc.

## What is being done?

According to the 2008 Annual School Census, four of the fifteen most spoken languages by children in England (Somali, Turkish, Tamil and Yoruba) are not offered at GCSE. Children are being denied the opportunity to gain qualifications and recognition of their skills.

Perversely, schools are also missing an opportunity to increase their EBacc numbers. With changing economies and new performance indicators, it would make sense for the government to increase the number of language GCSEs available.

The Asset Languages scheme from OCR shows the appetite for more recognition of language skills, with its wider range of languages and modular format.

But if Britain wants to show the world it is a linguistically diverse and skilled country, then examination boards must be encouraged to expand the range of languages being accredited at all levels. Supplementary schools are leading the way in a campaign to expand the range of languages assessed and accredited at all levels, including Asset (see page 10 and 11).

## Partnerships

Although 92 per cent of primary schools offer a language to at least one year group during curriculum time, a major obstacle to building on this foundation is the availability of resources.

Supplementary schools can offer resources and teachers, as well as the immersive second-language environments that mainstream schools cannot.

The HoLA Project (see front page) demonstrates how partnerships between mainstream schools and supplementary schools teaching mother-tongue languages has enhanced the language learning of hundreds of primary school pupils in



### Girls from the Saraswati Gujarati School celebrating the festival of Eid

Saraswati Gujarati classes started in 1995 at the Aapka Centre, Leicester. Children can enter the school aged 5 and take the Gujarati GCSE as young as 12. As the school's reputation and intake have grown more activities have been introduced, including Indian music, dance, arts and crafts classes, and maths and English tuition to complement mainstream schools in the area.

Sheffield. Secondary schools are registered as exam test centres, whereas the vast majority of supplementary schools are not.

To increase the number of pupils obtaining A\*-C grade GCSEs, a school does not have to teach 'community' languages – simply collaborate with local

supplementary schools to enable pupils to sit the exams.

The language sub-culture that supplementary schools are so good at nurturing is something mainstream schools should be looking to embrace, and

partnerships make sense on many levels.

## New campaigns

Whatever happens in the future, we know that languages are going to become more and more important as technology breaks down old barriers.

The BBC is acknowledging this with *The Lingo Show*, a new programme designed specifically for pre-school children, which introduces them to different languages, including Mandarin, French, Urdu and Polish.

The *Speak to the Future* campaign is supported by the British Academy, the Chartered Institute of Linguists and other organisations (see *Bulletin Issue 18*). Through its five objectives, the campaign emphasises how we must change our focus for languages – first and foremost 'Every language should be valued as an asset'.

[www.assetlanguages.org.uk](http://www.assetlanguages.org.uk)  
[www.speaktothefuture.org](http://www.speaktothefuture.org)

## What is the Asset Languages scheme?

- The Asset Languages assessment scheme has been developed by the examination board OCR and covers 25 languages, including French, Spanish and German, as well as many others – from Arabic to Yoruba.
- It is ideal for achievement in languages at primary school level and can be used to motivate beginners of any age to make progress. Breakthrough and Preliminary tests are equivalent in standard to Key Stages 2 and 3 of the national curriculum, whereas Intermediate is equivalent to GCSE.
- Asset is very flexible because a learner can be entered for a test in one skill only, if they so choose, or all four in the language concerned.
- Qualifications gained under the Asset Languages scheme are nationally recognised.