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Is progression in primary languages possible? Reflections from a large-scale longitudinal research study

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ABSTRACT

The Curriculum and Assessment Review's Interim Report (CAR [2025]. *Interim Report*. Crown Copyright. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6821d69eced319d02c9060e3/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_interim_report.pdf) flagged potential concerns relating to the efficacy of languages teaching particularly in primary schools. In response, this paper explores how 'substantial progress' (DfE [2013]. *Languages Programmes of Study: Key Stage 2. National Curriculum in England*. Crown Copyright) in language learning can be defined in terms of both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes and discusses recent research evidence indicating that demonstrable progress in language learning throughout the four years of learning at primary school is possible. In light of the numerous challenges primary schools face with implementing the languages curriculum, the key factors (e.g. amount and quality of language input, teacher confidence and expertise, continuity across key stages) which may impact progression are discussed.

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Introduction: the current state of play

The Key Stage 2 Languages Programme of Study (DfE 2013) stipulates that all children 'should make substantial progress in one language' during the four years of statutory (foreign) language learning (from age 7 to 11) at primary school. However, in the decade since the new curriculum was introduced, the efficacy of primary languages provision has been continuously debated and the sector has faced considerable challenges, such as limited curriculum time, low teacher confidence and subject knowledge, lack of guidance, and lack of continuity across KS2-KS3 transition (Holmes and Myles 2019). The interim report of the Curriculum and Assessment Review published in March 2025 identified languages as a subject area facing particular challenges and highlighted the need for curriculum 'evolution' (across all subjects) to ensure a balance of breadth and depth of content, an increase in teacher capacity, competency and confidence, and the removal of barriers to progress for all learners (CAR 2025: 6). Whilst the Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025) sets out the ambition for high standards and outcomes for all, there continues to be uncertainty regarding what outcomes might realistically be expected in the context of all learners achieving 'substantial progress' in the learning of one language at primary school (Tinsley 2019).

As well as uncertainty regarding the route and outcomes for progression in primary languages, considerable variation in provision exists across different settings in terms of the language taught, the time allocated to languages, the resources used and the linguistic expertise and confidence of

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the staff member(s) teaching a language (Collen 2021; Collen and Duff 2025; Tinsley 2019). This variation in provision can undermine confidence in primary languages and has led to many secondary schools simply 'starting again' with languages when students join them in year 7. Such decisions can undermine students' sense of progress in their language learning and in turn can have a negative impact on motivation (Chambers 2019a; Graham et al. 2016), as well as devaluing the efforts of many primary schools to provide a successful, engaging and rich languages curriculum. It is important therefore to consider what might constitute 'substantial progress' within this context in order to provide stronger support and clearer guidance for primary schools to support their delivery of the primary languages curriculum, as well as enable a more clearly defined, consistent foundation to be laid for secondary schools to build on.

Defining progression: linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes

The National Curriculum guidance (DfE 2013) contains ten statements to define in general terms expected learning outcomes for primary languages. Notably, the stated attainment targets are concerned primarily with the development of linguistic knowledge and skills, including, for example: 'explore the patterns and sounds of language ...', 'broaden their vocabulary ...', 'understand basic grammar ...', 'listen attentively ...', 'read carefully ...', as well as drawing on familiar language in written and oral production (DfE 2013: 2). Despite the description of these general linguistic aims, however, teachers have expressed a strong desire for more detailed guidance in terms of the specific language (e.g. vocabulary and grammar) that should be covered at primary level (Collen and Duff 2024, 2025; Kasprowicz and Graham forthcoming).

The National Curriculum presents an arguably fairly narrow definition of 'substantial progress' which is first and foremost focused on linguistic progression. It is important to acknowledge, however, that progression can be defined more broadly than linguistic knowledge acquisition alone. Indeed the purpose of study outlined in the National Curriculum guidance also makes reference to broader non-linguistic outcomes, such as developing students' 'curiosity and ... understanding of the world', ability to 'communicate for practical purposes' and 'learn new ways of thinking' (DfE 2013: 1). The benefits of language learning in primary school for promoting more positive attitudes (e.g. Bolster, Balandier-Brown, and Rea-Dickins 2004) and higher motivation for language study (e.g. Kissau, Adams, and Algozzine 2015) as well as developing broader social and emotional skills, such as intercultural competence (e.g. Byram and Doyé 1999; Koro 2018; Woore, Molway, and Macaro 2022), creativity (Graham et al. 2020), tolerance and empathy (e.g. RiPL 2024a; Rodriguez 2022; Sofronieva 2015) are widely acknowledged. When asked about the rationale for languages teaching in primary schools, head teachers and teachers consistently cite the importance of languages for developing students as well-rounded individuals, fostering intercultural awareness and building confidence and tolerance (Kasprowicz and Graham forthcoming; RiPL 2024b; Woore et al. 2020). Further, students themselves recognise the value of languages for building deeper cultural connections, as well as fostering linguistic skills (Savory 2025). Yet there are no explicitly stated learning outcomes related to these aspects, despite widely held beliefs about the importance of developing children's social and emotional skills (OECD 2023a; Graham and Porter 2025a).

A clearer understanding of the route and rate of progression, in terms of both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes, is critical to support efforts to more closely align language teaching across phases (particularly from Key Stage 2 through to 3) and reinforce the rationale for languages as a foundation subject at primary level. Within this paper, this issue is explored through current research evidence demonstrating students' progression in primary languages. Here, progression is viewed primarily through the lens of linguistic knowledge acquisition, in line with the outcomes stated in the Key Stage 2 Languages Programme of Study (DfE 2013). Nevertheless, the value of the non-linguistic skills students gain through language study is also acknowledged (see e.g. Graham and Porter 2025b).

Evidence of progression in primary languages

Typically, the majority of research investigating young learners' language learning in instructed contexts has focused on the learning of English as a second or foreign language (e.g. Enever 2011; Jaekel et al. 2022; Tragant and Muñoz 2023). In such contexts, whilst linguistic progression has been observed, prior knowledge and out-of-school exposure have been found to be key factors mediating language development (de Wilde, Brysbaert, and Eyckmans 2021). In contrast, school contexts in many English-speaking contexts such as England are able to offer only limited exposure to the language being learnt (typically 30–60 minutes per week in schools in England [Collen 2021]), and very often there is minimal out-of-school exposure. Therefore, it is important to explore the extent of progress that is possible and the factors mediating successful learning in such contexts.

Despite the well-documented challenges plaguing primary languages provision in England, the vast majority of primary schools have endeavoured to provide students with the opportunity to learn a language as part of a broad and balanced curriculum, with 82.5% of responding primary schools in the most recent Language Trends survey having taught languages for more than five years (Collen and Duff 2025). Whilst there remains relatively little policy guidance in terms of expected outcomes for languages by the end of primary school, a growing body of research evidence is exploring what 'substantial progress' might mean in practice.

Findings from the University of Reading's Progression in Primary Languages project (a longitudinal study with over 2200 children examining French, German and Spanish learning from Years 3 to 6, age 7 to 11) found that with consistent, regular input, children's vocabulary knowledge (ability to recognise the meaning of words) and phonics knowledge (ability to recognise key sounds and map these to appropriate spellings in the language) significantly increased with each additional year of study (Kasprowicz 2025b). Similarly, some initial learning of basic grammatical concepts (e.g. article agreement, verb agreement) in French, German and Spanish was observed, although progress in grammatical knowledge development tended to plateau in later years of learning. Further, across all three languages, children demonstrated the ability to recall and use language in creative, unscaffolded activities, even when no target language prompts were provided (e.g. writing a letter to a pen friend) (Figure 1).

These findings align with existing research exploring young learners' linguistic development in instructed settings, which have similarly demonstrated progress in vocabulary and grammatical knowledge development (e.g. Courtney 2017; Graham et al. 2017), as well as in listening, reading and speaking skills (e.g. Cable et al. 2012; Enever 2011). Such evidence demonstrates that with regular, consistent, high-quality input in the language being learnt, children begin to develop linguistic knowledge and skills commensurate with the broad expectations of the National Curriculum (DfE 2013).

In terms of non-linguistic skills, initiatives such as the DELTEA project (led by University of Southampton and University of Reading) have demonstrated the potential benefits of a dual focus on linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes in primary school. Notably the project highlighted the potential of using resources such as stories for not only enhancing linguistic skills (e.g. vocabulary and reading) but also developing key social and emotional skills such as creativity (e.g. ability to think flexibly and consider multiple viewpoints) and empathy (Graham and Porter 2025a).

Such findings provide promising evidence that progress (in terms of both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes) can and does happen over the four years of learning a language at primary school.

Optimal conditions for progression

Despite promising evidence that progression in primary languages is possible, it is important to acknowledge that progress often tends to be highly variable and susceptible to the considerable variation (in terms of individual, pedagogical, and contextual factors) that is evident across primary school settings. Therefore, it is important to consider the factors that might contribute to

Example from Year 3 student 'Frankie'

Bonjour Mathime je m'appelle Frankie
 Ça va?
 je suis 8^{ème} ans old.
 je like un glace vanille and un croque
 monsieur.
 Au revoir

Example from Year 5 students 'Beth' and 'Jamie'

Bonjour,
 Je m'appelle Beth
 J'ai 10 ans
 J'aime les couleurs violet on vert
 J'aime les lapins
 Au revoir,
 Beth

Salut! J'aime le sushi et le riz. J'ai un chien noir et deux chats
 et blanc. Ça va? Comment t'appelles-tu. J'ai 10 ans. J'aime
 le serpent parce que c'est drôle.

Figure 1. Examples of writing in an unscaffolded task with no target language prompts given. These students receive 45–60 minutes of French teaching per week from a non-specialist teacher.

optimal conditions for language learning, particularly given the limited amount of curriculum time that is typically allocated to languages (Collen 2021) and the very limited out-of-school exposure available.

Protecting curriculum time for languages

One of the most critical factors mediating progress in language learning is the amount of input provided to learners (Muñoz 2011). Whilst curriculum time is understandably at a premium, it is crucial that sufficient time for language lessons is protected, guided by clear policy recommendations (Holmes and Myles 2019). The majority of primary schools currently allocate on average 30 to 60 minutes per week to languages teaching (Collen 2021), equivalent to approximately 2 to 4% of available curriculum time, well below the average time allocation in other, typically non-Anglophone, countries, for example, 11.4% in Spain, 9.4% in Finland, 6.3% in France, and 5.1% in

Germany (OECD 2023b). Notably, preliminary findings from the PiPL project indicate significantly greater linguistic outcomes (e.g. in terms of vocabulary acquisition) for students who received 50 to 55 minutes of language teaching per week, compared to those who received less time. Similarly, Graham et al. (2017) identified 60 minutes as a minimum threshold for weekly teaching time, observing consistently greater gains in vocabulary and grammar knowledge for children receiving 60 minutes of French teaching per week versus 45 minutes or less. Further, teachers often cite the challenge of protecting curriculum time for languages, particularly when other competing pressures arise, such as assessments, seasonal activities (e.g. school plays, sports days), and school trips. Collen (2021) notes that typically in around 30% of primary schools, students' timetabled allocation for languages may be disrupted due to such activities, particularly in the final year of schooling when priority is often given to preparation for the national SATS assessments at the expense of other foundation subjects such as languages.

Related to the issue of protecting curriculum time is the importance of having senior leadership support and the presence of a strong advocate for languages (often the person designated as languages lead) within school (Hunt et al. 2008). Head teacher interviews and teacher focus groups conducted as part of the PiPL project revealed that, regardless of whether they have expertise in the language being taught, both the senior leadership team and the languages lead play a crucial role in advocating for the importance and status of languages within the curriculum. Respondents highlighted that this advocacy is particularly important in contexts where a (typically non-specialist) classroom teacher or another member of staff (e.g. teaching assistant) teaches a language, to ensure that timetabled lesson time for languages is respected.

Providing high quality languages input

Alongside the need to provide sufficient input to ensure progression in language learning, there is the corresponding challenge of ensuring that students are exposed to rich, high-quality exemplars of the target language. The issue of how primary languages teaching is resourced (in particular who delivers the teaching) is another area where there is considerable diversity across schools. In the majority (63.6%) of primary schools, the generalist classroom teacher (who typically may have very little or no knowledge of the language being learnt) is the one tasked with the languages teaching (Collen and Duff 2025). Consequently, low teacher confidence and subject knowledge, exacerbated by very limited opportunities for continuing professional development, are frequently cited as key challenges for meeting the expectations of the Languages Programme of Study (Kaspruwicz and Graham forthcoming; Porter et al. 2020; Tinsley 2019). When asked about the challenges they currently face with the languages curriculum, non-specialist teachers participating in the PiPL project repeatedly raised concerns about their ability to provide high quality input in the language, with modelling accurate pronunciation being a particular area of concern. Further, low confidence (driven by lack of subject knowledge) undermined non-specialist teachers' sense of teaching competency and autonomy resulting in a feeling of inability to adapt and tailor the language teaching to suit their learners (who may have wide ranging needs, experiences and language backgrounds) and a correspondingly heavy reliance on pre-made schemes of work.

Digital, multi-modal tools provide one potential route to support languages teaching and ensure learners have exposure to high quality input in the target language (Graham and Porter 2025b; Holmes and Myles 2019). Indeed, in the PiPL teacher focus groups, respondents frequently highlighted the value of having access to digital resources with embedded audio to support their teaching.

In addition, given the necessity of generalist teachers engaging in primary languages teaching in many schools (due to the lack of funds for employing specialist teachers), upskilling of staff through continuing professional development is crucial to build confidence as well as develop the linguistic and pedagogic expertise needed to meet the expectations of the National Curriculum and ensure progression (Collen and Duff 2024). Online digital training opportunities, such as those offered

through the National Consortium for Languages Education and developed through the DELTEA project offer potential effective models of delivery (ALL 2025).

Reducing variation across settings to improve KS2-KS3 transition

Clear, detailed curriculum plans which introduce language in a sequenced manner with opportunities to recycle and revisit previously learnt information are also key to ensuring progression in language learning. However, the lack of clarity regarding the language and skills that should be prioritised in primary languages has resulted in significant variation across settings. Further, a survey with 151 primary school teachers revealed that the lack of guidance for curriculum planning has resulted in uncertainty around how to establish that children have indeed made ‘substantial progress’ in their learning (Kasprowicz and Graham [forthcoming](#)). Consequently, there have been repeated calls for the provision of non-statutory guidance to define the core language knowledge (e.g. vocabulary and grammar) that should form the basis of language teaching in primary school (Collen and Duff 2024, 2025; Holmes and Myles 2019; Kasprowicz 2025a).

Existing research has demonstrated the disruption to progression (in terms of linguistic knowledge development as well as in attitudes and motivation for language learning) caused by the lack of coherence in the transition from primary to secondary school (Courtney 2017; Graham et al. 2016; Graham et al. 2017). Consequently, non-statutory guidance might offer one option that could foster greater consistency across settings in terms of the foundational knowledge, skills and multilingual competencies that are introduced at primary school and which can be built on when students continue their language learning journey at secondary school, whether they continue learning the same or a different language (Holmes and Myles 2019; Kasprowicz 2025a; Porter et al. 2020; Wardle 2021). In this way, non-statutory guidance could help to ensure more consistent progression, in terms of the linguistic knowledge and skills that students are developing, throughout the four years of language learning at primary school and in the transition to secondary school.

Linked to the need for more detailed guidance to aid curriculum planning for primary languages, there is a corresponding need to establish more effective mechanisms for communication between sectors at the point students transition from primary to secondary school (Chambers 2014; Holmes and Myles 2019; Hunt et al. 2008; Kasprowicz 2025a). More than 50% of primary schools report having no contact with the secondary schools they feed into and of those who do have some established communication, only 27.5% provide information on language learning progress (Collen and Duff 2025). In their case study of eight pathfinder schools, Hunt et al. (2008) observed substantial variation in the transition arrangements in place across their participant schools, ranging from no existing mechanisms being in place, to informal arrangements for information exchange, through to well-established reciprocal activities (e.g. teaching observations, staff and pupil visits, standardised transfer documentation). However, they also observed that examples of effective transition often relied heavily on personal contacts and were therefore extremely vulnerable to change. Similarly, Chambers (2014) found very limited awareness amongst teachers of any school (and a lack of national) policy in relation to transition in languages; findings echoed by teachers participating in focus groups within the PiPL project. Further, Chambers (2019b) observed that students themselves often recognise a disconnect in their language learning experience at primary school versus secondary school. This disconnect can undermine students’ sense of progress and in turn negatively impact their motivation for language learning (Graham et al. 2016).

Consequently, there is a clear need for more robust transition arrangements to be established in order to ensure meaningful continuity, coherence and progression cross-phase (Chambers 2014; Holmes and Myles 2019; Hunt et al. 2008; Kasprowicz 2025a). This might include: (i) guidance at a national level to articulate clearly-defined aims, approaches and outcomes for primary languages, which can be adapted to suit the context, needs and students in any one school or network of schools, but which would serve to reduce variation between primary settings; (ii) robust processes to ensure more effective communication and information exchange between primary and secondary

schools; and (iii) collaboration on cross-phase curriculum planning and training amongst local networks of primary and secondary schools to better align practices and facilitate improved continuity and coherence appropriate to the particular local context and constraints.

Conclusion

More than ten years on from the introduction of the National Curriculum Languages Programme of Study at Key Stage 2 (DfE 2013), primary schools continue to deal with myriad challenges related to primary languages teaching. Nevertheless, a growing body of research evidence is demonstrating that progression is possible and with four years of regular, consistent, high-quality input, children can achieve the broad linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes outlined within the National Curriculum. Nevertheless, there is considerable variation in provision and consequently considerable disparity in language learning outcomes for children across different primary school settings. The challenge then becomes how to ensure that all primary schools are resourced and supported to be able to teach languages effectively. This paper has explored a number of factors which are integral to progression being realised, including: (i) providing sufficient, protected curriculum time for languages supported by those in leadership positions to emphasise the importance and status of languages within the curriculum; (ii) providing more detailed guidance to better align languages teaching across primary schools; (iii) developing teachers' subject knowledge (in terms of both linguistic and pedagogic expertise) to boost confidence, competence and autonomy in relation to language teaching; and (iv) implementing more robust structures to guide transition arrangements within local school networks. Languages are integral to a broad and balanced curriculum offering and it is vital that the necessary steps are taken to ensure that all children are given the opportunity whilst at primary school to lay a strong foundation for long-term language learning.

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