

Fewer than 1% of schools in England have full policies on second languages, language learning and English

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A tiny fraction of schools in England—about three in every 500—have whole-school policies that address foreign languages, English usage, and

integrating students who speak English as an additional language (EAL), new research published in the *British Educational Research Journal* indicates.

The study of almost 1,000 secondary schools, by researchers at the University of Cambridge, questions many schools' claims to being 'inclusive' spaces that value the linguistic diversity of their communities. It also suggests that [language](#) learning, and an appreciation of different languages, is being deprioritized, conflicting with Government ambitions for 90% of students to study a language to GCSE by 2025.

Schools in England are increasingly multicultural. Around 20% of students qualify as EAL, meaning they typically speak a different language at home. The study examined how schools navigate various issues this raises relating to languages: including students' use and acquisition of English; the status of modern languages in the curriculum; and schools' attitudes towards home and community languages.

The researchers reviewed every publicly available [policy](#) document from the websites of 998 [secondary schools](#) (about 20% of all those in England). Only six published dedicated schoolwide policies on languages. More schools had official policies on asbestos management, or whether dogs were allowed on [school grounds](#).

While most schools did have some specific language-related policies, these were often isolated, unclear and inconsistent; particularly on key issues such as supporting EAL learners, or the status of community languages like Polish and Urdu. Over a third (37%) failed to mention English, other languages, or even the term "language" in any public policy document.

The study authors suggest that the absence of connected language strategies could pose particular challenges for England's 1.7 million EAL

students. Only 6% of state schools, and 15% of schools overall, had explicit EAL policies.

They also encountered anecdotal evidence that some EAL students' experiences are disjointed as a result. One student, who had recently moved to the UK from Poland, described being told off for speaking Polish in one lesson when asking a friend for help, before receiving learning resources translated into Polish in her next class.

Karen Forbes, Associate Professor in Second Language Education at the University of Cambridge, said, "It's surprising that so few schools seem to have systematic policies concerning language education and language use."

"A major reason is probably is that school leaders just don't have time to devise a unified approach on linguistic diversity. But language is fundamental to how students learn, conceptualize ideas, and process information. The absence of clear policies is very worrying, especially for EAL students."

Although one in 10 state schools in the sample had EAL student populations exceeding 40% of the total, most only mentioned languages in passing, and usually within broader policies. In 33 schools, EAL was explicitly categorized as a "special educational need," contradicting the Government's own code of practice on [special educational needs](#) and disabilities.

Most policies on English reinforced national guidance requiring students to learn "standard English" across the curriculum. Surprisingly, however, some extended this beyond the classroom. One school expected parents to "explain when their child should use Standard English appropriately at home"; which, the study notes, non-English-speaking parents would find challenging. Seven schools banned other languages completely, including

at break times, with one going so far as to state that "students should be reprimanded for speaking other languages."

These policies often appear to clash with schools' public claims that they celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity. Forbes said that they could also hinder learning, especially in subjects that involve specialized language and terminology, which EAL students might grasp more quickly if they were allowed to translate them.

"Prohibiting students from even using their home language to talk to their friends at break time can seriously undermine a student's sense of belonging and whether they feel valued," she added.

The study also raises concerns about how far [language learning](#) and multilingualism are encouraged within the curriculum.

While modern [foreign languages](#) are mandatory to Key Stage 3 (age 14), the Government encourages their study to GCSE through the English Baccalaureate. About 65% of independent schools in the sample regarded language study to GCSE as compulsory, but just a quarter of state schools "required" or "encouraged" this.

Even at Key Stage 3, however, over 10% of schools had policies for "disapplying" students from supposedly compulsory language lessons, often to prioritize English and math. This disproportionately affected EAL students, who tend to have strong multilingual skills.

Dr. Nicola Morea, a co-author of the study, now based at the University of Reading, said, "Lots of research indicates that learning other languages supports English literacy skills. The argument that [students](#) should do less French or Spanish because they need to improve their English is potentially counterproductive."

The authors argue that language policy is best handled by schools—rather than nationally—because this allows them to tailor their approach to the needs and linguistic context of local communities. They hope the study will become the initial part of a larger project, leading to the development of a toolkit through which schools and [school](#) leaders can develop joined-up language policies.

"In some schools, even individual teachers seem to be unaware of how their colleagues are handling issues like expectations concerning English, or EAL student support," Forbes said. "Much of that could be resolved by developing shared principles and practices. That will need to come from schools themselves, so that it is meaningful in their own settings."

More information: Mapping school-level language policies across multilingual secondary schools in England: an ecology of English, modern languages and community languages policies, *British Educational Research Journal* (2024).

Provided by University of Cambridge

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