

# Foreign languages and science provision in primary schools

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## Introduction

This note explains the methodology and underpinning findings that informed HMCI's commentary on foreign languages and science provision in primary schools that was published on 19 May 2016.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodology

During November and December 2015, lead inspectors on all short and full primary school inspections (a sampling pool of approximately 300 inspections) were asked to collect additional information on foreign languages provision, where possible.<sup>2</sup> In practice, evidence of foreign language provision was retrieved from 106 inspections. The main areas investigated were:

- the priority of and learning time given to the subject
- the challenges involved in providing high-quality language teaching
- transition from primary to secondary school.

As part of the languages review, two online questionnaires were also run to collect further information from parents and language specialists or teachers. The parent questionnaire received 215 responses and 276 responses were received from current language specialists or teachers working in primary schools. Both of these questionnaires were administered through Survey Monkey. In addition, 15,682 pupils responded to a single languages question included in the pupil questionnaire carried out during routine inspections between November 2015 and April 2016.

A similar process focusing on science provision was applied to all short and full primary school inspections (approximately 530 inspections) in January and February 2016. Specific evidence on science was collected from 234 of these inspections.

For both parts of the subject review, the schools selected from the available inspection pool at these times offered a range of primary schools across Ofsted's

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<sup>1</sup> HMCI's monthly commentary: May 2016, Ofsted, May 2016; [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmcis-monthly-commentary-may-2016](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmcis-monthly-commentary-may-2016).

<sup>2</sup> This process was not mandatory and lead inspectors were told that the integrity of the inspection was paramount.

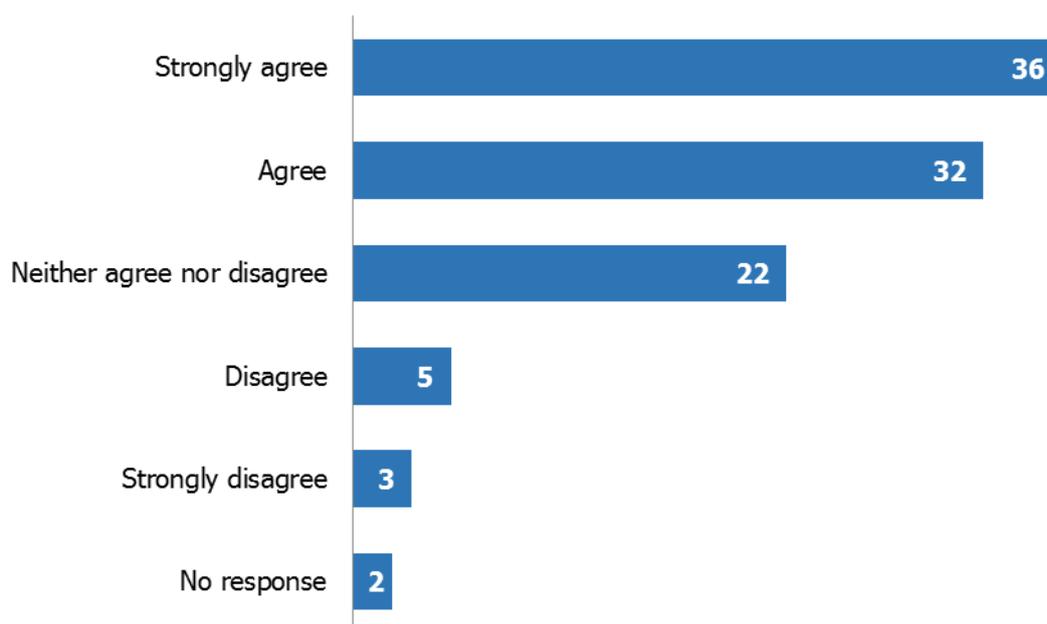
regions and inspection types (either short or full inspections). Owing to risk assessment (outstanding schools are not regularly inspected), a small selection bias is present in the sample. However, the findings are sufficiently representative of primary schools to help signpost some important issues within the current primary school curriculum.

## Findings – foreign languages

### Pupils’ enjoyment of languages

- The pupils spoken to during the inspections commonly indicated positive views in learning foreign languages. This was the case in 87 of the 106 schools. Inspectors found that pupils had a negative view of foreign language learning in only five schools.
- This is corroborated by the pupil questionnaire at inspection. An additional question relating to foreign language enjoyment was added to the standard framework questions asked of pupils between November 2015 and April 2016. In total, 15,682 pupils from all short and full inspections carried out over this period responded to the question ‘I enjoy studying foreign languages’ of which 68% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Responses to the question ‘I enjoy studying foreign languages (for example French, Spanish, Latin, Mandarin)’ (%)**



The total number of submissions was 15,682.

The pupil questionnaire extract was taken on 21 April 2016.

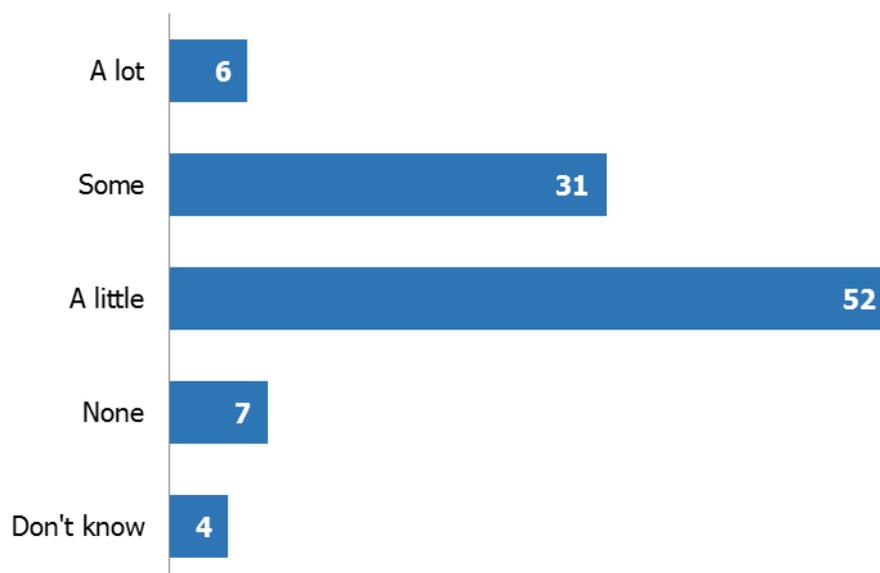
Responses that were not submitted to maintained schools or that were left entirely blank were not counted.

Percentages are rounded and may not add to 100.

## Lack of time allocated to the study of foreign languages

- In 73 schools, inspectors found that pupils spent less than an hour a week on their foreign language learning. Pupils spent between one and two hours a week learning languages in another 29 schools. No schools in the sample dedicated more than two hours per week to foreign language teaching.
- Over a quarter of the school leaders spoken to at inspection said that time constraints presented the main challenge in delivering foreign language provision in their school.
- In addition, approximately two fifths of the language specialists or teachers who responded said that one of the biggest barriers to teaching a foreign language in primary schools was time.
- Over a third of the parents who responded suggested that primary schools placed some or a lot of importance on pupils learning a foreign language. Around half indicated that only a little importance was attached to the subject (see figure 2).

**Figure 2: Parent responses to the question 'In your experience how much importance do primary schools place on learning a foreign language? (%)**



Based on responses of 214 parents.  
Percentages are rounded and may not add to 100.

## Lack of teaching expertise

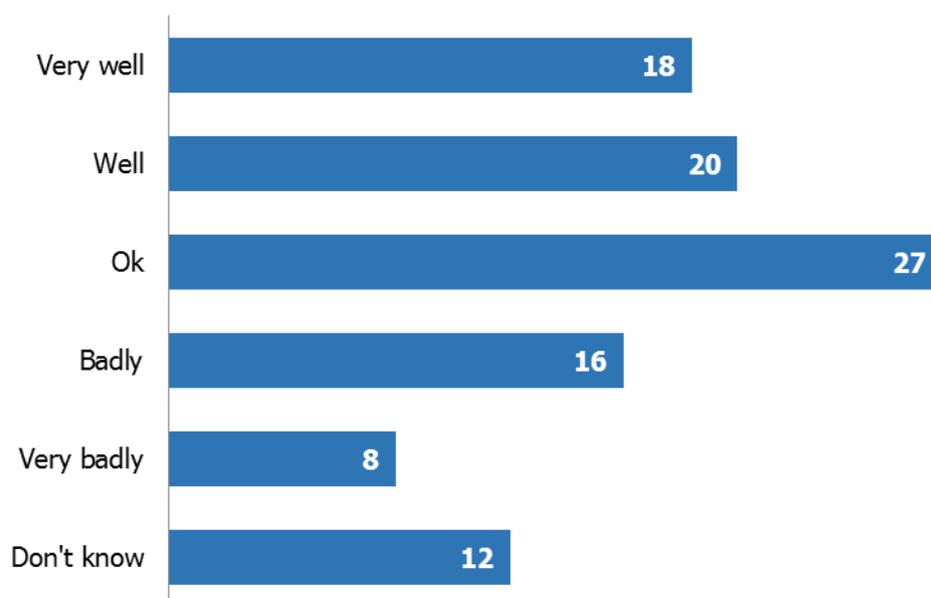
- Inspectors found that, in over half of the schools in the sample, the lack of confidence, subject knowledge and need for training was the biggest challenge to improving the quality of their foreign language provision.
- This lack of expertise was also highlighted in the questionnaire for language specialists or teachers as a particular concern for primary schools in meeting the requirements of the national curriculum. Respondents indicated that teacher

confidence and subject expertise was the main concern for just under half of respondents.

## Transition arrangements

- In half of the schools, inspectors reported that the primary schools were not working well with secondary schools to ensure that there is effective transition in foreign language learning from primary to secondary.
- In 28 of the primary schools, inspectors determined that pupils were not well prepared for further study of a foreign language at the end of key stage 2. In nearly all of these cases, the evidence also suggests these schools engage poorly with partner secondary schools.
- Parents' views on transition from the questionnaire were mixed (see figure 3).

**Figure 3: Parent responses to the question 'How well was/has your child's prior learning been built on at secondary school?' (%)**



Based on responses of 127 parents.  
Percentages are rounded and may not add to 100.

## Findings – science

### Pupils' enjoyment of science

- In nearly three quarters of the 234 schools inspected, pupils carried out practically based investigations in at least half their science lessons. In these schools, pupils often told inspectors they like science because they get to carry out experiments and that they love investigating.

### Lack of time allocated to the study of science

- Inspectors found that in two thirds of primary schools in the sample, pupils were taught science in weekly lessons. In other schools, science was often taught as part of a wider topic either on science days, in a half termly block or as part of a generic creative curriculum. In 33 schools, inspectors established there were no separate science lessons. In one school, inspectors found that science had not been taught at all during the autumn term.
- The vast majority of the primary schools inspected highlighted that they spent four or more hours on teaching English and mathematics. Not one, however, devoted a similar amount of time to science. Around two thirds of the schools spent between one and two hours on science teaching. A fifth of schools spent, on average, less than an hour a week. In one school, pupils said they couldn't remember the last time they had had a science lesson.

### Lack of teaching expertise

- Through observations of learning and the focused work scrutiny inspectors found that the scientific evaluations and conclusions made by pupils were limited in almost half of the schools inspected.
- In around half of the schools, inspectors noted that there was little feedback or guidance focused on science knowledge and understanding.

### Transition arrangements

- Inspectors found that pupils were well prepared for studying science at key stage 3 in a third of schools. Preparation was judged to be adequate in around two fifths of the schools and was poor in around 30 schools.

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