

Authored article

HMCI's monthly commentary: May 2016

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)
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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, comments on the study of science and foreign languages in primary schools.



Introduction

In his latest commentary, Sir Michael Wilshaw says that the emphasis in recent years on English and mathematics at key stage 2, while absolutely essential, should not be at the expense of other important subjects. He believes that compulsory subjects like science and modern languages have become the 'poor relations' of the primary school curriculum. However, these subjects, when taught well, can boost literacy and numeracy skills and raise

standards in English and mathematics. Evidence from recent Ofsted inspections and feedback from teachers, parents and pupils have highlighted a number of common concerns surrounding the provision of both science and foreign languages at key stage 2. Sir Michael says that a sharper focus needs to be placed on these subjects to make sure that children leaving primary school are better prepared to meet the more rigorous academic challenges they will face at secondary school.

Read about the [methodology and findings that informed this commentary](#).

Commentary

Last autumn, in the [first of my series of monthly commentaries](#), I reflected on the strong performance of England's primary schools and the steady rise in the number of pupils achieving well in their national curriculum tests at the end of key stage 2. I remarked that over 60,000 more 11-year-olds left primary school in 2015 with a good command of English and mathematics than just 3 years earlier. I also said that these improved test outcomes were supported by Ofsted's own inspection findings. Our latest statistics show that 87% of primary schools were judged as good or outstanding at their most recent inspection.

There is little doubt that the main factor driving this success has been the strong emphasis on improving the basic knowledge and skills of primary school pupils in reading, writing and numeracy. However, a number of recent studies have suggested that this focus on the so-called '3 Rs' has pushed other compulsory subjects, notably modern foreign languages and science, to the margins of the curriculum in many primary schools. (See [Primary science: is it missing out? – recommendations for reviving primary science](#) and [Language trends 2015/16: the state of language learning in primary and secondary schools in England](#).)

This is a concern because the government has said that it wants the vast majority of pupils who started secondary school last September to take the full suite of English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects, including science and a foreign language, when they come to sit their GCSE examinations in 2020. This drive to raise the academic achievement of our young people is a laudable ambition but undoubtedly a very challenging one.

In 2015, less than half of all pupils studied a foreign language at GCSE and, although science is a core subject that should be studied by all pupils to age 16, only 74% of pupils took it to GCSE level to qualify for the EBacc. It seems clear that if the government's ambition is to be met, primary schools will need to lay the foundations in these subjects before their pupils move on to study them at secondary school.

With this in mind, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) reviewed the quality and breadth of provision in science and foreign languages in the primary schools inspected in the last two terms. Evidence was drawn from 340 routine inspections (234 with a focus on science and 106 with a focus on foreign languages). In addition, we took into account the views of hundreds of parents, teachers and pupils.

HMI found that the majority of primary-age pupils enjoy studying science and having the chance to learn a foreign language. However, inspectors also found weaknesses in the provision of both subjects. In particular, in too many schools they found:

- a lack of time allocated to the study of science and foreign languages
- a lack of teaching expertise, particularly in respect of foreign languages
- poor working arrangements with partner secondary schools that failed to ensure effective transition and progression

Lack of time allocated to the study of science and foreign languages

In around two thirds of the primary schools visited by HMI, pupils spent less than 1 hour per week learning a foreign language. Many school leaders and classroom teachers told inspectors that the time available to devote to this subject was often seriously constrained and their school was struggling to squeeze foreign language lessons into an already tight curriculum.

Some of the parents we surveyed echoed this view. One commented that: "Due to lessons being sporadic, there doesn't seem to be much content and my son never feels like he is progressing." Another remarked that the study of foreign languages at their child's primary school "is only given token attention".

While the vast majority of schools were spending 4 hours or more each week teaching English and mathematics, none devoted a similar time to teaching science, the third core subject on the primary curriculum. Around two thirds indicated that they spent between 1 and 2 hours a week on science teaching. However, for around a fifth of the schools, less than an hour was given to learning the subject. In one case, pupils said that they couldn't remember the last time they had had a science lesson.

Lack of teaching expertise, particularly in respect of foreign languages

The generation of teachers entering the profession in recent years was not, in the main, required to study a foreign language to GCSE. This has resulted in a shortage of language specialists at primary school level that can only be addressed through significant investment in the professional development of staff. Just under half the teachers who responded to the HMI questionnaire said that they lacked confidence in their ability to teach a foreign language to their pupils.

Some of the schools we inspected employed a peripatetic language teacher to make up for the lack of specialist subject knowledge within the staff room, although this type of support was not always available.

Inspectors found that teachers' lack of confidence and subject knowledge tended to be less of a problem when it came to science than for foreign languages, with the majority of primary teachers having studied the subject at least up to GCSE. Nonetheless, HMI found that the quality of science teaching was variable and that there was a link between teachers' subject knowledge and how well pupils were developing their scientific skills.

Poor working arrangements with partner secondary schools failed to ensure effective transition and progression

As our report [Key Stage 3: the wasted years?](#) highlighted last year, transition between key stages 2 and 3 is too often poorly managed. It found that teaching in the first 3 years of secondary school often fails to build on the skills and knowledge pupils have gained at primary level.

HMI found that this absence of effective cross-phase working was a concern in around half the schools inspected in relation to foreign language learning. As a consequence, inspectors were told that when children started secondary school, many either repeated what they had learnt at primary school or found themselves studying a new language altogether.

One parent commented:

“ My son was taught French at primary age, but changed to Spanish at high school, making the French almost a waste of time. The schools are within a mile of one another! I would like local schools to communicate better so that the language they have been learning at primary can be continued through to high school.”

For science, inspectors found that in just over half the primary schools inspected, pupils were not well prepared for the rigours of key stage 3. Schools must work more effectively together across the phases to ensure that pupils move seamlessly from

primary to secondary, building on and quickly extending the knowledge and understanding of the scientific method necessary to study science successfully.

Not an 'either/or' situation

Inspectors found that the best primary schools are capable of providing effective teaching in science, foreign languages and all other subjects, without undermining pupils' progress in literacy and numeracy. It should not be an 'either/or' situation. The best primary schools recognise that providing excellent teaching in subjects like foreign languages and science promotes good literacy and numeracy skills. This complements, rather than detracts from, the focus on English and mathematics.

In my years of experience as a headteacher, I often found that good language and science teachers were among the best at engaging with children and instilling in them an abiding interest and curiosity in the subject. If children are 'switched off' by poor, unchallenging lessons, this is likely to have an impact on the future take-up of these subjects. We must therefore ensure that primary-age pupils are inspired by effective teaching of science and foreign languages, from properly trained and qualified staff, and that the pupils' enquiring minds and natural curiosity are nurtured.

It is fair to say that in recent years, Ofsted's inspections of primary schools have prioritised the quality of provision in English and mathematics. In my view, this has helped to bring about the improved performance and standards I referred to at the start of this commentary.

However, the evidence from this recent investigation has convinced me that we need to put as sharp a focus on the other subjects as we do on English and mathematics. As a result, I have reminded inspectors that they should always be looking closely at the subjects of the wider primary curriculum, including science and foreign languages, as set out in the inspection handbook.

We need to ensure that primary schools are preparing pupils effectively for the more rigorous academic challenges that they will now face when they reach secondary school.

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