

**CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS**

# Attitudes Towards Language Learning in Schools in Scotland

**Most people in Scotland (89%) think that learning a language other than English in school from the age of five is important. This was regardless of people's age, educational qualifications, or socio-economic status.**

**The most common languages that people in Scotland think are appropriate for children in their area to learn are Western European languages.**

## Introduction

### Background and policy context

The Scottish Government has recognised the need to develop the nation's language capability to equip Scotland's young people with the skills and competencies needed in the new Europe and the 21st century global marketplace. In 2011, the Scottish Government made an ambitious languages commitment "to introduce a norm for language learning based on the European Union 1+2 model – that we will create the conditions in which every child will learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue." A Languages Working Group was set up in September 2011 to consider strategic implications for longer term delivery of the commitment. The Group's report and recommendations, *Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach*, were published in May 2012. The Scottish Government is working in partnership with local authorities and stakeholders to enable learning of the first additional language to start from Primary One with a second additional language to be offered by all schools at the latest from Primary Five.

### Methodology

Questions were added to the 2015 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA), funded by the Scottish Government, the University of Edinburgh, and Scotland's National Centre for Languages (SCILT) based at Strathclyde University. These questions investigated the attitudes of people in Scotland towards language learning in schools. The survey was carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen). 1288 adults aged 18+ responded to these questions as part of the SSA Survey which was carried out during the months of July 2015 to January 2016. Respondents are selected using random probability sampling from the Postcode Address File to ensure that the results are robust and representative of the Scottish

population. The survey was carried out by face-to-face interview with a self-completion element. Further results from the survey and a more detailed description of the methodology will be released later in 2016.

## Results

### Speaking a language other than English

SSA 2015 asked: *Do you speak a language other than English, even if it's just the odd word?* If they answered yes, respondents were asked: *Thinking of the language other than English you can speak best, how much can you speak?*

Seventy percent of people in Scotland said they spoke a language other than English, even if it was just the odd word. A third (33%) said they could speak the odd word, just over a quarter (26%) could speak a few simple sentences or parts of conversations, whilst about 1 in 10 (11%) could speak most or all conversations.

<b>Table 1: Whether respondent speaks a language other than English</b>	
	<b>%</b>
(No, don't speak a language other than English)	30
The odd word	33
A few simple sentences	17
Parts of conversations	9
Most conversations	4
All conversations	7
(Don't know)	-
(Not answered)	-
<i>Sample size</i>	<i>1288</i>

Whether, and how well, people speak a language other than English varied by level of education, age, and level of deprivation. Those with no educational qualifications were more likely to say they do not speak another language (66%) compared with those with a degree or higher education (15%). Those with a degree or HE were more likely to say they could speak a few sentences or parts of conversations (41%) and most/all conversations (14%) compared with those with a lower level of education (for example, of those with no educational qualifications, 6% said they could speak a few sentences or parts of conversations, and 6% most/all conversations).

Those aged 65 and over were the most likely to say they do not speak another language (44%) compared with all other age groups (for example, 18% of those aged 18-29 years old), whilst those aged 18-29 were most likely to say they could speak in all conversations (16%) compared to all other age groups (for example, 2% of those aged 65 and over). However, the age difference may be, at least in

part, related to the level of education people have, as older people are less likely to have formal qualifications than younger people. Additionally, those living in the most deprived areas of Scotland (based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)) were more likely to say they do not speak another language (46%) compared with those who live in less deprived areas (for example, 15% of those living in the least deprived areas said they do not speak another language).

### Importance of language learning from the age of five in school

Respondents were then asked *How important, if at all, would you say it is that all children in Scotland from the age of five learn a language other than English in school?* Most people (89%) said that learning a language from the age of five is “very” or “quite important”. Only 1 in 10 thought it was “not very” or “not at all” important.

Table 2: How important it is that all children in Scotland from the age of five learn a language other than English in school	
	%
Very important	59
Quite important	30
Not very important	8
Not at all important	2
(Don't know)	*
(Not answered)	-
<i>Sample size</i>	1288

The majority of people in Scotland think learning a language in school from the age of five is important, and this is true across age, gender, level of education, income or deprivation groups. Eighty five percent of people with no qualifications thought learning a language is “very” or “quite” important; the percentage was only slightly higher for people qualified to degree or HE level (91%).

### Which language should school children learn?

Survey respondents were then asked: *Thinking about languages other than English, which language do you think would be the most appropriate for school children in your local area to learn?* The most commonly chosen languages were Western European languages (63%), with almost a third (30%) saying children in their area should learn French and a quarter (25%) saying Spanish. Eight percent chose Gaelic, 7% British Sign Language (BSL) and 2% chose Scots. Only 9% thought children should learn a Middle Eastern and Asian language (6% said Mandarin, 1% Arabic and 1% Cantonese), whilst 5% chose a Central and Eastern European Language (5% chose Polish and less than 1% chose Russian).

<b>Table 3: Which language would be most appropriate for school children in your local area to learn</b>	
	<b>%</b>
Western European	63
Eastern European	5
Middle Eastern or Asian	9
BSL	7
Gaelic	8
Scots	2
Other (please specify)	2
(Don't know)	3
(Not answered)	*
Sample size	1288

Those who are aged 18-29 years were less likely than older age groups to choose a Western European language (for example, 54% of 18-29 year olds chose a Western European language compared with 67% of those aged 65 and over). Whilst those living in remote/very remote rural areas were more likely than those in less rural areas to choose Gaelic (for example, 24% of those living in remote/very remote rural areas chose Gaelic compared with 6% of those in large urban areas).

When asked about the next most appropriate language for school children in their local area to learn, Western European languages remained the most popular choice at almost two thirds (64%), but with slightly lower proportions choosing French (24%) and Spanish (19%) and more choosing German (18%) or Italian (3%). A slightly higher proportion thought children should learn a Middle Eastern and Asian (10%) or Central and Eastern European Language (7%). Similar proportions mentioned Gaelic (6%), BSL (6%) and Scots (2%).

## **Conclusions**

Most people in Scotland think that it is important that children learn a language from the age of five in school – this finding holds for people of different ages, levels of education and socio-economic status. The most common languages that people in Scotland think are appropriate for children in their local area to learn are Western European languages, particularly French and Spanish.

### **How to access background or source data**

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact [jonathan.wright@gov.scot](mailto:jonathan.wright@gov.scot) for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.