

# Positively Plurilingual

The contribution of community languages to UK education and society



*The fact is, more and more businesses are looking for employees with language skills, and these career opportunities have to be highlighted for young people*

Miles Templeman, Director General, Institute of Directors

*We should not be in the business of making children forget what they know*

Joseph Lo Bianco, Professor of Language and Literacy Education,  
University of Melbourne



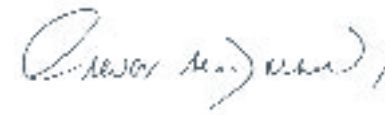
# Introduction

The predominance of English and its importance both for our nation and as an international lingua franca are not in doubt. But alongside English other languages are becoming increasingly important to the UK as globalisation, international communications and labour force mobility transform economic and cultural life. Building on existing language skills and expertise is of direct benefit to individuals, fosters greater social cohesion, improves skills available to employers, contributes to our national prosperity and makes us better prepared to contribute positively on the global stage.

As a nation seeking to play a key role in global trade and diplomacy, we need to be able to draw on a diverse range of languages to further our strategic and economic aims: and these are already represented among the languages spoken by our schoolchildren. Yet, in our haste to ensure they acquire good English, we frequently miss the opportunity to ensure they maintain and develop their skills in their other languages too. Rather

than thinking in terms of an 'English-only' culture, we should be promoting 'English plus'. We know that children are capable of acquiring more than one language and that doing so brings a range of educational benefits, including cognitive advantages, enhanced communication skills and an openness to different cultural perspectives.

The UK is rich in linguistic resources. Let us use these resources to benefit us all – socially, culturally, educationally and economically.



**Sir Trevor McDonald**

Patron of CILT, the National Centre for Languages

*Rather than thinking in terms of  
an 'English-only' culture, we  
should be promoting 'English plus'*



## A linguistic resource

More than one in eight of English primary schoolchildren already speak a language other than English before arriving at school and this number is increasing<sup>1</sup>. In some schools the proportion is already much higher. In building our linguistic capacity as a nation, we can harness the benefits of children's head start in languages. We know that successful language learning is likely to involve both extensive exposure to the language and an emotional engagement with those who speak it<sup>2</sup>. Community language learners have access to both, so any additional investment in developing their skills is likely to provide value for money in terms of outcomes. People who already speak more than one language find it easier to learn new languages than monolinguals<sup>3</sup>.

## An educational resource

Thomas and Collier's large-scale<sup>4</sup> study of different approaches to the education of children learning English as an additional language in the US proved conclusively the superiority of education using their own language as well as English over an English only approach in terms of overall academic achievement.

Being able to access knowledge in both languages is a key element in educational success, whether or not students are actually taught bilingually<sup>5</sup>.

A study of London secondary school students from Portuguese backgrounds found that those who had attended Portuguese classes were five times more likely to obtain five or more GCSEs at A\*-C than those who had not been encouraged to develop their home language<sup>6</sup>.

Being able to speak two languages improves a child's ability to use and learn language in general. Children can learn about something in one language and talk about it in another, and this process helps them to understand the subject better<sup>7</sup>.

Reports<sup>8</sup> by UK school inspectors recommend building on pupils' linguistic and cultural diversity to improve attainment in English. They show how drawing on pupils' cultural backgrounds can enrich the learning of all pupils across the curriculum. Appropriate use of the home language in addition to English can improve literacy and understanding.

A study of 11-year-olds in Hackney who routinely used three languages in addition to English showed these children outperforming monolinguals from similar backgrounds, and, atypically, boys ahead of girls in their reading<sup>9</sup>.

## An intellectual resource

Language is a key intellectual tool and one that underpins our ability to be effective as individuals and members of society. Ellen Bialystock of York University, Canada studied the different areas of the brain stimulated by language<sup>10</sup>. She found that bilingual people are better at multitasking because they constantly exercise the part of the brain known as the pre-frontal cortex. This reinforces attentional processes. She also established that being bilingual exercises the brain and dramatically lessens age-related mental decline. Pre-school children who are bilingual are quicker to understand the symbolic function of letters and score twice as high as monolingual children in recognition tests of written characters. Bilingual children who have been exposed to literacy and stories in both languages are advantaged in learning to read<sup>11</sup>.

Research by Jim Cummins<sup>12</sup> of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, shows that bilingual children perform better in school when the school effectively teaches the mother tongue and, where appropriate, develops literacy in that language. By contrast, when children are encouraged to reject their mother tongue and its development stagnates, their personal and conceptual foundation for learning is undermined.

...in the thinking quarters of the brain, one language feeds the other

## A cultural resource

Just as biodiversity is seen as providing a resource for the planet and our future survival, so the wisdom and understanding represented in the diverse range of languages spoken by our schoolchildren provides a cultural resource capable of enriching us all. Schools and communities which draw on this provide vibrant, creative environments in which to live and develop. Many of the languages spoken by our schoolchildren have millions of speakers worldwide. Others have the status of endangered languages and deserve our protection.

London's bid to host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was based on its presentation of itself as a multilingual, global city, able to connect with people across the world. The success of the Games will depend on our ability to sustain this positive image and back it up with the language skills needed to provide a good experience for visitors from across the globe.

## A family and personal resource

Parents normally want to pass on the languages they speak to their children, and family relations are enhanced if children can communicate well with grandparents and other family members. The maintenance of these languages does not mean they will be less proficient in English, or that they will be less adapted to life in British society<sup>13</sup>.

Research from the University of Southampton shows that learning their mother tongue helped foster a positive sense of their compound identity among primary schoolchildren<sup>14</sup>.

Research into young people's multilingualism in Leicester<sup>15</sup> showed that they viewed their bilingualism as a sign of sophistication and flexibility:

***I think in both languages***

***I use Bengali outside when I see older people; it's rude for me to speak to them in English, so I salaam them ...***

***Most of us would have gone to a doctor's or a solicitor's or something with someone and translated for them ...***

Or, as Rhea Chatterjea from Singapore put it,

***English and Bengali, together they make me truly me***

## An economic resource

There is an increasing range of job opportunities for speakers of many different languages in both the public and private sectors. Language skills enhance employability and bring benefits to both individuals and employers<sup>16</sup>. There is a need for bilingual workers in a range of public service fields, from housing to relationship counselling<sup>17</sup>.

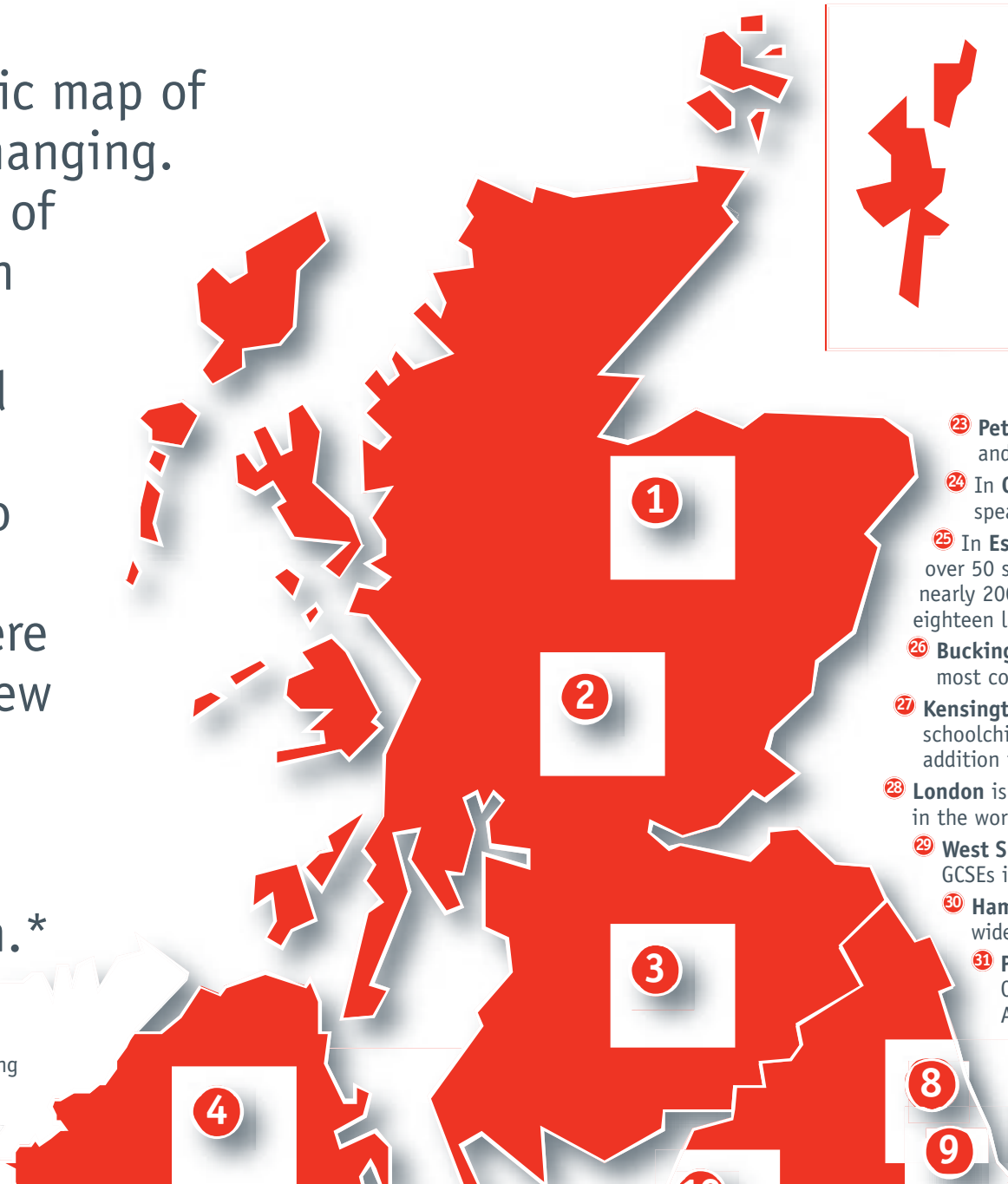
Employers are increasingly recognising the advantage and good marketing sense of communicating in the language of their customers. Globalisation means that the vast majority of businesses have customers, partners, suppliers or employees from other parts of the world. The predicted dramatic growth of the 'BRIC' economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China) will boost demand for the languages spoken in these countries<sup>18</sup>.

A recent conference at the University of London Union<sup>19</sup> showed how African languages can provide a resource for development and progress. Development workers who can speak African languages are in a better position to communicate messages about health awareness, increasing agricultural productivity and the eradication of poverty. These languages have also much to contribute to the development of education and cultural life in Africa.

The linguistic map of the UK is changing. The number of languages in use is growing and diversity is spreading to parts of the country where previously few languages other than English were spoken.\*

- <sup>1</sup> In **Scotland** over 100 languages are spoken by schoolchildren, including some not recorded as being spoken in England or Wales such as Chechen, Faroese, and Kadazan.

- <sup>2</sup> Languages spoken in



- <sup>21</sup> **Wolverhampton** won a European Award for Languages for its community languages provision.
- <sup>22</sup> In **Leicester**, over 10,000 schoolchildren speak Gujarati. Complementary schools teach Polish, Ukrainian and Somali, as well as Asian and Middle Eastern languages.

- <sup>23</sup> **Peterborough** teaches Italian, Urdu and Panjabi in its primary schools.

- <sup>24</sup> In **Coventry**, one in five primary pupils speaks another language.

- <sup>25</sup> In **Essex** there are 24 language groups of over 50 speakers, including Shona with nearly 200. Essex schoolchildren sat GCSEs in eighteen languages last year.

- <sup>26</sup> **Buckinghamshire** Panjabi and Urdu are the most commonly spoken languages.

- <sup>27</sup> **Kensington and Chelsea** 75% of schoolchildren speak another language in addition to English.

- <sup>28</sup> **London** is among the most multilingual cities in the world, with over 300 languages spoken.

- <sup>29</sup> **West Sussex** 50 students annually gain GCSEs in community languages.

- <sup>30</sup> **Hampshire** Nepali is the most widespread of 51 languages.

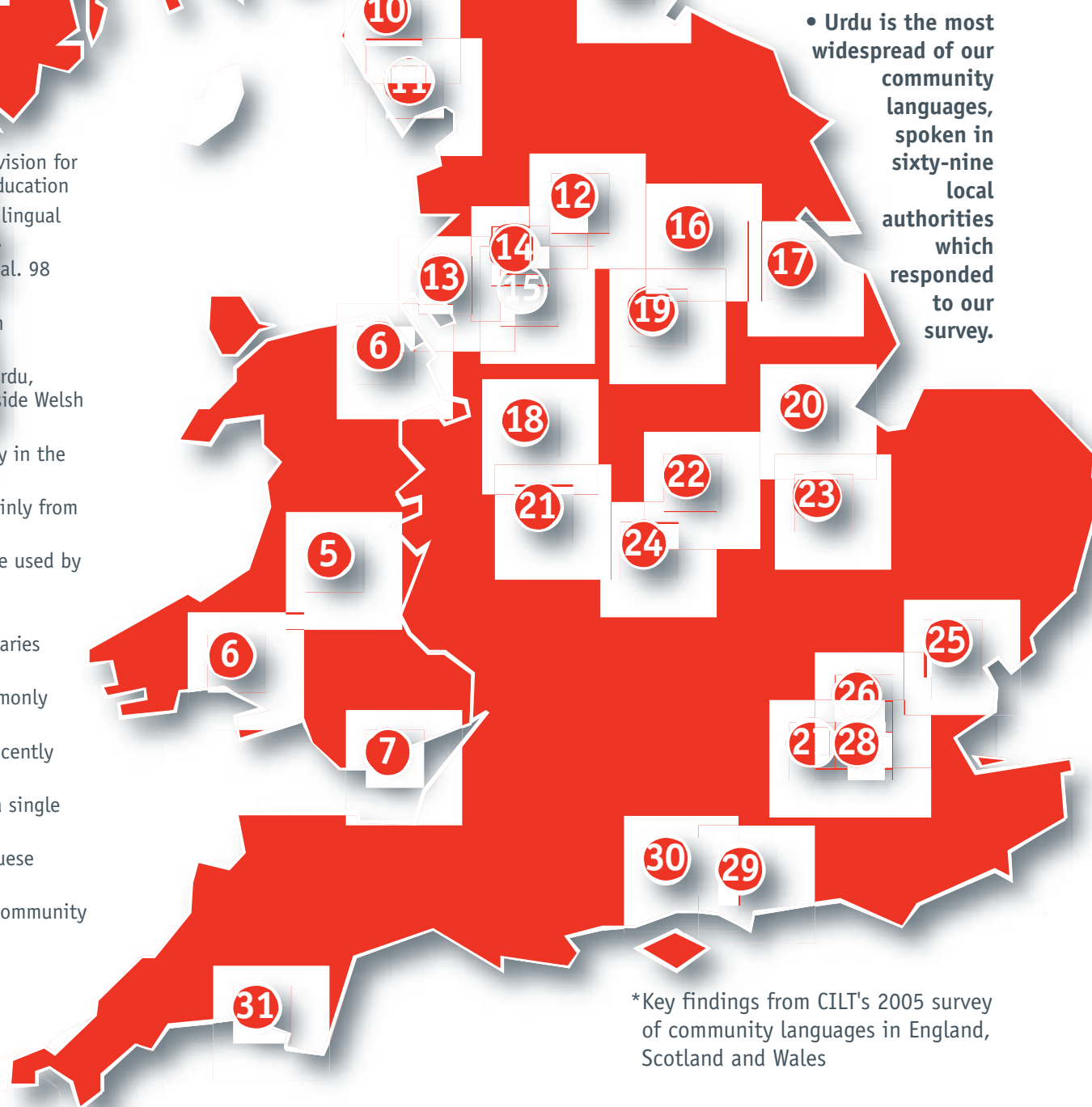
- <sup>31</sup> **Plymouth** 63 languages spoken: Cantonese, Bengali, French and Arabic are the most common.

• **Sixty-five of the languages spoken by UK schoolchildren are also spoken by more than 10 million people worldwide**

one-third or more of Scottish local authorities include Arabic, Cantonese, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Panjabi, Russian, Spanish, Thai, Turkish and Urdu.

- 3 The benefits of bilingualism are recognised through provision for Gaelic, and there is strong demand for Gaelic-medium education
- 4 **Northern Ireland** is now becoming a more diverse multilingual society, while Irish-medium schools are also flourishing.
- 5 **Wales** 21% of the population of Wales is already bilingual. 98 languages are spoken by at least 8,000 children.
- 6 **Flintshire and Carmarthenshire** are among seven Welsh authorities with Japanese speakers.
- 7 **Cardiff** has speakers of at least 94 languages. Somali, Urdu, Bengali and Arabic are among the most common, alongside Welsh and English.
- 8 **Newcastle-upon-Tyne** is the most multilingual authority in the North East, with 70 languages spoken.
- 9 Portuguese-speaking children in **South Tyneside** are mainly from Angola.
- 10 In the **North West** of England at least 139 languages are used by schoolchildren.
- 11 **Cumbria** has Saturday schools in Chinese and Bengali.
- 12 In **Calderdale**, fifteen primary schools and eight secondaries have high multilingual populations.
- 13 **Liverpool** Arabic, Chinese and Somali are the most commonly spoken languages.
- 14 **Oldham** Portuguese, Latvian and Czech speakers have recently joined a population already rich in Asian languages.
- 15 **Manchester** has 129 languages with 37 represented in a single school.
- 16 **Wakefield** has increasing numbers of Polish and Portuguese speakers.
- 17 **North Lincolnshire** is seeing an increased demand for community language classes.
- 18 **West Midlands** supports tuition in over 50 languages.
- 19 In **Sheffield**, 2,000 children attend classes in the community schools network.
- 20 The **East Midlands** has large populations of Asian-language speakers.

• Urdu is the most widespread of our community languages, spoken in sixty-nine local authorities which responded to our survey.



\*Key findings from CILT's 2005 survey of community languages in England, Scotland and Wales

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Just as people need many years' study to achieve high levels of competence in English, so too children who speak other languages need to study them formally in order to improve their competence and become literate. Policy makers have already taken steps to support the learning of community languages.

Drawing on the skills and expertise of those who speak community languages will promote citizenship and complement the Government's broader work on the promotion of social cohesion

DfES, *Languages for all, languages for life*

**Successful schools reach out to their communities. They often make premises available for community use, which builds bridges and can develop dialogue**

DfES, *Aiming high: Raising the achievement of minority ethnic pupils*

**Successful provision for community languages requires the full support of the schools' senior management team to create an environment where teachers and students recognise and celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity**

QCA, *Community languages in secondary schools*

**The Assembly Government believes that it is important to provide opportunities for language development and accreditation in ... community languages**

Welsh Assembly (2002), *Languages Count*

**It will be important to provide opportunities for linguistic development and accreditation for those who wish to continue to develop their skills in a heritage or community language or who wish to develop a language which is a significant part of their cultural identity, including British Sign Language**

Scottish Executive (2000), *Citizens of a Multilingual World*

Within this policy context, schools and local authorities are already developing approaches which encourage children to develop their plurilingualism and others to value it.

At **Newbury Park Primary School**, all pupils learn some simple phrases of a 'Language of the Month' chosen from one of the 44 languages spoken by pupils. Parents and pupils are involved in producing ICT-based materials and teachers learn alongside the children.

**St John the Baptist High School** in Woking has developed a thriving relationship with the Woking Chinese Association which is boosting demand for classes from both the community and from other pupils.

**Shawlands Academy** in Glasgow teaches Urdu to 200 pupils, alongside French and German.

**New Cross Hospital** in Wolverhampton has integrated Panjabi into its Foundation Year Modern Apprenticeship in Health and Social Care, with spectacularly successful results.

**Ofsted** quotes the example of a North London school which developed students' understanding of literary terms for GCSE English by asking them to cross-reference definitions in their own languages. CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approaches are used extremely successfully in the bilingual schools operated by foreign embassies, such as the **Instituto Cañada Blanch** in London, and there is scope to apply these positive experiences to other languages.



There is no evidence to support the view that speaking languages other than English in the home is socially divisive or that it is incompatible with a British identity. Rather, the evidence would suggest that bilingualism promotes a respect for diversity and an ability to navigate different cultural realities

Dr Jim Anderson, Goldsmiths College, London

An Academic Language Development Programme at **Kings College, London** found that tapping into bilingual experiences uncovered a wealth of cultural experiences and interests which students had been reticent to mention and which vastly improved their personal statements for university application.

In **Bournemouth**, every secondary school is offering Asset Languages qualifications, available in more than twenty languages.

**Dorset Local Authority** has teamed up with **Tower Hamlets** to provide distance learning for Bengali speakers.

In **Wales**, the Welsh Language Board provides on its *Twf* website advice and encouragement to parents who wish to bring up their children bilingually.

**Haringey City Learning Centre** has set up a Polish link project involving English- and Polish-speaking children from Crowland Primary School.

**North Lincolnshire** conducted a survey of community languages spoken by schoolchildren for the first time in 2005, and is better able to develop planning and co-operation with community-run language classes.

**Woodbridge High School** won a European Award for Languages for its 'Teach a Friend a Language' competition, in which students pair up to learn each other's languages and put on performances for parents and the community.

**Goldsmiths College** is one of a number of teacher-training institutions offering PGCE courses in teaching community languages.

Arabic, Chinese and Russian networks have been set up on the **Specialist Schools and Academies Trust** website, to help teachers exchange ideas and good practice.

The **Languages Work** website [www.languageswork.org.uk](http://www.languageswork.org.uk) includes information on careers with a range of languages and case studies of their use in business and public services.

For these and other examples of good practice, visit CILT's community languages web pages at [www.cilt.org.uk/commlangs](http://www.cilt.org.uk/commlangs).

### Key factors in supporting community languages

- Increasing provision
- Providing opportunities to gain qualifications
- Use of the European Language Portfolio
- Local authority coordination
- Networking and sharing of resources
- Links to citizenship and global awareness
- Links to the world of work

- 1 DfES Statistical first release *Schools and pupils in England, January 2005*
- 2 Taeschner, T. (2005) *The magic teacher*. CiLT, the National Centre for Languages.
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- 5 Krashen, S. 'Why bilingual education?'. *ERIC Digest*.  
[www.ericdigests.org/1997-3/bilingual.html](http://www.ericdigests.org/1997-3/bilingual.html)
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- 8 Ofsted (2005) *Could they do even better? The writing of bilingual learners of English at KS2: HMI survey of good practice*. And Ofsted (2005) *Raising achievement of bilingual learners*. Ref HMI 2613
- 9 Sneddon, R., University of East London School of Education. Summary of research published at [www.naldic.org.uk](http://www.naldic.org.uk)
- 10 Bialystock, E., Craik, F., Klein, R. and Viswanathan, M. (2004) 'Bilingualism, aging and cognitive control: Evidence from the Simon task'. *Psychology and Aging*, 19 (2): 290–303.
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- 14 Souza, A. *Children see language as a feature of their identity*. Centre for Language in Education, University of Southampton. [www.naldic.org.uk/docs/BRB5.doc](http://www.naldic.org.uk/docs/BRB5.doc)
- 15 Young people and Community Languages in Leicester 'In their own words' Leicestershire and Leicester City Learning Partnership, 2006
- 16 CiLT, the National Centre for Languages (2005) *Talking world class: The impact of language skills on the UK economy*.
- 17 Scottish Executive Central Research Unit (2002) *Translating, interpreting and communication support services across the public sector in Scotland: A literature review*.
- 18 Graddol, D., *English Next*, British Council, 2006
- 19 University of London Union (2006) 'Linguistic diversity in Africa' conference.

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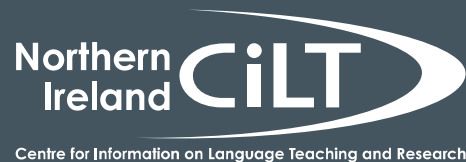
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## Positively Plurilingual

Our society is changing, and our need for good communication across cultures has never been greater. The UK has a major linguistic asset in its multicultural population which, if developed wisely and inclusively alongside English and other languages, has the potential to benefit society as a whole as well as improving the life chances of individual children.

This booklet presents some key findings from our 2005 survey of community languages in Britain. We aim to show how developing this asset is consistent with a wide range of existing social and educational policies, and our intention is to inform the work of policymakers throughout the UK.

Plurilingualism is a concept developed by the Council of Europe to refer to the totality of an individual's linguistic competences in and across different languages, which develops throughout life.



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