



Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following project:

Wu, X. (2026). *World of Languages, Languages of the World (WoLLoW) in context: What research tells us about language learning and multilingualism in primary education*.

University of Oxford, Department of Education. https://theworldoflanguages.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/WoLLoW_LR-report_Final.pdf

WoLLoW in context: What research tells us about language learning and multilingualism in primary education

What is this research about and why is it important?

World of Languages, Languages of the World (WoLLoW) is an educational programme for pupils aged 7–15 that seeks to broaden how children engage with language. Rather than focusing solely on learning a single modern foreign language, it encourages pupils to explore how languages work, how they are connected, how they have evolved over time, and how they relate to communication, culture, identity and society. Through activities exploring language families, scripts, word origins and multilingualism, WoLLoW also encourages children to recognise and value the linguistic diversity within their schools and communities.

As primary classrooms become increasingly multilingual and schools are rethinking the aims of language education, an important question is whether programmes such as WoLLoW reflect what current research tells us about effective practice. This literature review was commissioned to answer that question. It brings together evidence from multilingual education, primary language learning, teacher and pupil perspectives, and research on identity and belonging to examine how WoLLoW can be understood within contemporary educational research.

What did we do?

- Reviewed research published mainly between 2016 and 2026 on primary language learning, multilingual education and language awareness.

- Synthesised evidence from systematic reviews, classroom studies, intervention research, policy reports and theoretical literature to provide a balanced picture of current knowledge.
- Examined four key themes:
 - effective approaches to language learning in multilingual primary classrooms;
 - the perspectives of teachers, pupils and families on multilingualism;
 - the relationship between multilingualism, identity, belonging and social understanding;
 - how WoLLoW relates to this wider body of evidence.
- Compared the educational principles underpinning WoLLoW with the wider evidence base to identify where the programme is well supported by existing research, where important questions remain, and priorities for future research.

What did we find?

- Research increasingly supports approaches that help pupils make connections between languages, rather than treating languages as completely separate. Such approaches are associated with greater curiosity about languages, stronger understanding of how language works, increased confidence in discussing language, and more positive engagement with linguistic diversity.
- The success of multilingual approaches depends not only on curriculum design but also on implementation. Teachers generally value multilingual education but often need professional learning, time and practical support, while pupils' and families' attitudes towards languages are shaped by wider social and cultural influences.
- Against this wider evidence, the review suggests that WoLLoW is closely aligned with contemporary thinking about primary language education. By encouraging all pupils—not only those who are already multilingual—to explore language families, scripts, word origins, language history and linguistic diversity, the programme reflects many of the educational principles associated with effective multilingual learning.
- The review suggests that WoLLoW's distinctive contribution may be to broaden the purposes of primary language education. Rather than focusing solely on proficiency in one language, it encourages pupils to develop language awareness, curiosity and an understanding of linguistic diversity as foundations for future language learning.
- While the wider evidence provides a strong educational rationale for WoLLoW, continued evaluation is needed to understand how the programme is implemented in different school contexts and the educational outcomes it supports.

What does it all mean anyway?

- The review suggests that WoLLoW offers schools an opportunity to rethink what primary language education can achieve. Alongside learning languages, pupils can develop curiosity about language itself, recognise the value of linguistic diversity and make connections between language, culture, history and identity.

- WoLLoW is most likely to realise this potential when schools:
 - encourage enquiry, discussion and comparison, rather than simply learning facts about languages;
 - support teachers to facilitate language-rich discussions with confidence;
 - connect WoLLoW with wider areas of the curriculum, including English, history, geography and citizenship;
 - recognise pupils' linguistic knowledge as a valuable resource while ensuring that sharing home languages is always voluntary and respectful.
- The review also highlights an important opportunity for future research. It is important to establish how the programme is implemented across different school contexts, how pupils, teachers and families experience it, and the conditions under which it can make the greatest educational contribution.

Question for reflection

How might schools make language awareness a meaningful part of everyday learning so that every pupil sees linguistic diversity as a shared educational resource?

Report: https://theworldoflanguages.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/WoLLoW_LR-report_Final.pdf

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