

News

Migrant pupils' linguistic skills 'wasted' in class

By Liz Lightfoot
Education Correspondent

CHILDREN in Britain speak at least 300 tongues but their expertise is being wasted because schools concentrate on English and a few European languages, says the National Centre for Languages.

The changing linguistic map of Britain gives the country a unique opportunity to build skills in the languages of countries emerging as trading partners, it says.

A survey published yesterday by the centre, known as CILT, identified 300 languages spoken by 702,000 children in England, 104 spoken by 11,000 in Scotland and 98 by 8,000 in Wales.

London is the most linguistically diverse area but other parts of the country share 196 languages between them. Demographic change has introduced bilingualism to more schools. Teachers in the Scottish Borders, for example, which traditionally had few bilingual pupils, are now educating the children of Portuguese and Russian-speaking families working in fishing.

Wrexham in North Wales had few community language speakers five years ago but the survey found 25 languages in schools, including Portuguese, Polish and Shona.

Some of the most widely spoken languages belong to countries which will be increasingly important for trade and international relations, such as Urdu, Turkish,

Chinese, Bengali and Arabic, says the report.

Though a minority of schools encourage children to continue learning their home languages, most say they do not have the resources to provide tuition in a range of different tongues.

The centre argues, however, that many of the children of immigrants continue to study their languages in classes provided by their communities and that schools could do more to liaise with home tutors and encourage pupils to gain qualifications.

At a time of concern over the declining number of pupils continuing with a modern foreign language after the age of 14, the skills of bilingual pupils could be harnessed, it says.

"The UK has a major linguistic asset not currently sufficiently recognised in language policy and planning: children who are growing up with a knowledge of languages, such as Panjabi, Polish, Somali or Yoruba.

"Business leaders have drawn attention to our country's need for capability in a wider range of languages. Yet nine per cent of our secondary school children and over 10 per cent of primary children already speak another language at home," said Isabella Moore, CILT's director.

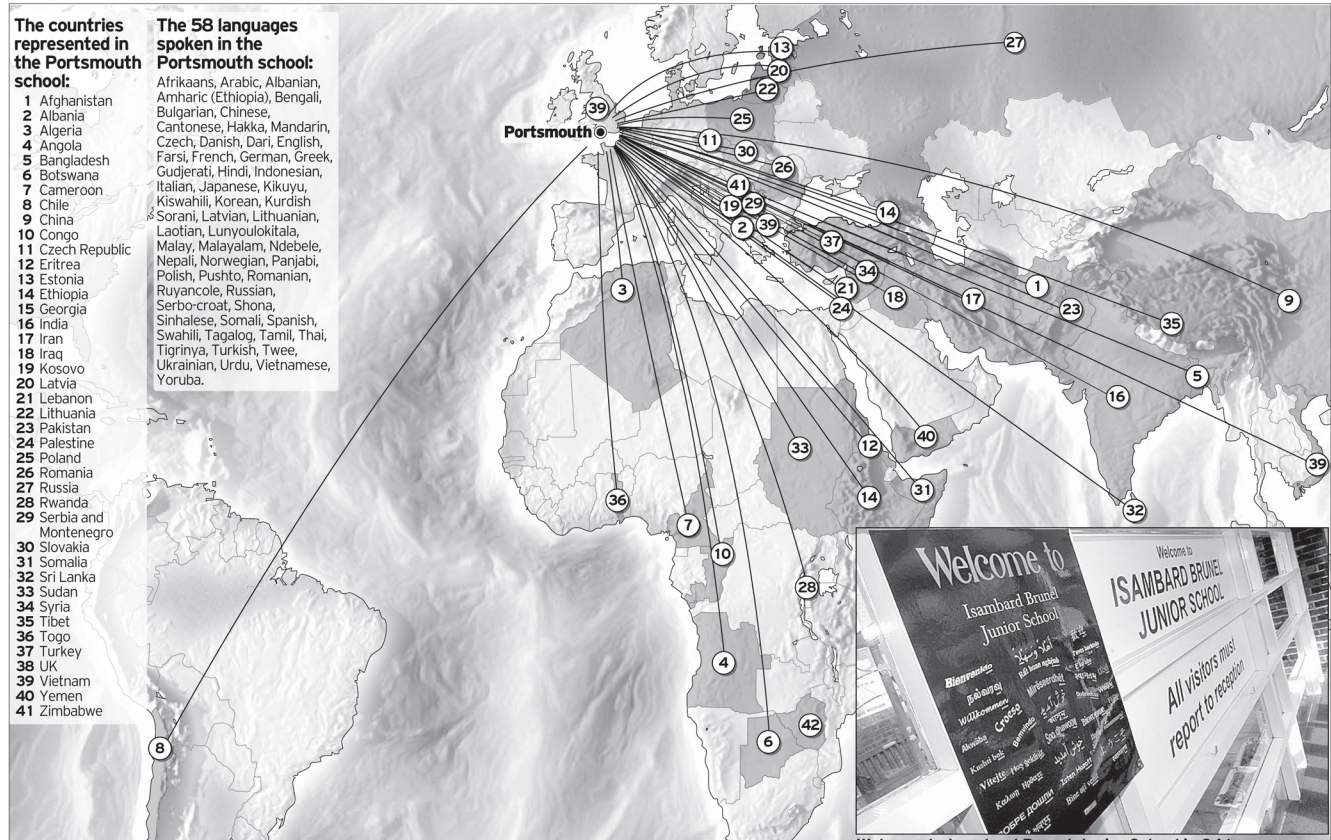
Extra money is given to schools for children with English as a second language but the centre says resources should also be put into helping competence in their home languages.

The countries represented in the Portsmouth school:

- 1 Afghanistan
- 2 Albania
- 3 Algeria
- 4 Angola
- 5 Bangladesh
- 6 Botswana
- 7 Cameroon
- 8 Chile
- 9 China
- 10 Congo
- 11 Czech Republic
- 12 Eritrea
- 13 Estonia
- 14 Ethiopia
- 15 Georgia
- 16 India
- 17 Iran
- 18 Iraq
- 19 Kosovo
- 20 Latvia
- 21 Lebanon
- 22 Lithuania
- 23 Pakistan
- 24 Palestine
- 25 Poland
- 26 Romania
- 27 Russia
- 28 Rwanda
- 29 Serbia and Montenegro
- 30 Slovakia
- 31 Somalia
- 32 Sri Lanka
- 33 Sudan
- 34 Syria
- 35 Tibet
- 36 Togo
- 37 Turkey
- 38 UK
- 39 Vietnam
- 40 Yemen
- 41 Zimbabwe

The 58 languages spoken in the Portsmouth school:

Afrikaans, Arabic, Albanian, Amharic (Ethiopia), Bengali, Bulgarian, Chinese, Cantonese, Hakka, Mandarin, Czech, Danish, Dari, English, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Kikuyu, Kiswahili, Korean, Kurdish, Sorani, Latvian, Lithuanian, Laotian, Lunyolokitala, Malay, Malayalam, Ndebele, Nepali, Norwegian, Panjabi, Polish, Pushto, Romanian, Ruvancole, Russian, Serbo-croat, Shona, Sinhalese, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Tamil, Thai, Tigrinya, Turkish, Tsee, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Yoruba.



English is a foreign language at school with 41 nationalities

By Stewart Payne

A QUICK glance around Isambard Brunel School illustrates the scale of the task that teachers in Portsmouth face as they try to

educate children from 41 countries who, between them, speak 58 different languages but often little or no English.

The welcome sign outside is in 13 different languages, reflecting the nationalities attending the state junior school. Inside, lavatories, staff room and head teacher's office are also identified in various languages.

Llyn Codling, the head teacher, is supporting a demand by the leader of the city council's education and children's services for extra government money to help schools to cope with the influx of pupils from abroad. Eleanor Scott, a Liberal Democrat councillor, wants

cash to provide extra lessons for both pupils and parents to help them to learn English.

Mrs Codling said: "I think people would be surprised if they knew how many languages are spoken in Portsmouth schools. People assume all children speak English, but that is not the case."

The school already works closely with parents from abroad, helping them to understand how the education system works and sending home newsletters in a variety of languages.

Portsmouth has long-established Chinese and Bangladeshi communities and many of its children are third generation and speak

English fluently. The problem arises with more recently arrived asylum seekers – those granted refugee status and those from East European countries recently admitted into the European Union. The biggest increase in pupil numbers in the past few years has come from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Dr Scott became so concerned at the numbers involved that she commissioned a report to find out where they were all from. It revealed that they were from 41 countries, speaking 58 languages.

In 66 of Portsmouth's 74 council-run schools, it has become necessary to use the services of 60 specialist

language teachers and classroom assistants to help pupils to understand their lessons. This additional support is provided by the city council's Ethnic Minority Achievement Service, but Dr Scott is concerned at the rising costs.

She said: "The Government is keen for education authorities to assimilate the children of new arrivals into the school system as soon as possible. This places an enormous burden of care on us and we want the Government to shoulder its share of responsibility."

She said she wanted additional funding to allow schools to provide intensive language courses, held in

classrooms and attended not just by pupils but also by their parents. The lessons would teach pupils to read and write in English.

"We cannot expect to get the best out of children if they are unable to understand their lessons," Dr Scott said. "We are at breaking point in this city and we need some proper help from the Government."

"My view is that we should adopt an approach seen in Israel of providing six months of intensive language training for the children and their families. We could also teach them something about the geography and history of this country and about living here."