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Boys unwilling to learn languages

By Sean Coughlan
BBC News education reporter

Teenage boys can barely be encouraged to speak English let alone learn another language, says the Chief Inspector of Schools, David Bell.



Is Katie Boyle-style "nul points" French undermining Kevin's efforts?

The voice of language learning in England's schools is in danger of becoming almost entirely middle class and female, he said.

Mr Bell said it might be better to teach the subject in single-sex classes to make boys less self-conscious.

Language learning was also often weaker in schools in deprived areas, he said.

Speaking at the publication of Ofsted's annual report, Mr Bell pointed to the risk of modern language learning becoming a ghetto for girls in leafy suburbs.

'Teenage thing'

"There's a danger that it becomes a middle class girls' subject," said Mr Bell.

"We know that girls are doing modern languages more than boys and that schools serving deprived areas are not providing as many opportunities for modern foreign languages.

“ Is it that 'teenage thing' of boys not being prepared to speak English, let alone French or German ”

David Bell, chief inspector of schools

"But why might boys not be doing it? Does it come back to confidence? Or is it that 'teenage thing' of boys not being prepared to speak English, let alone French or German," he said.

"It should cause us some concern, because we want more people to learn a modern language."

Mr Bell said secondary schools were already experimenting with single-sex classes for science lessons - and that it would be "absolutely reasonable" if schools adopted a similar

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approach to teaching modern languages.

"It would be daft to take an ideological stance," over single-sex teaching groups, he said, if that approach worked for modern languages.

Sharp decline

Modern languages have faced a period of decline in secondary schools - with a 14% fall in pupils taking French GCSEs this year. A study from the QCA exams watchdog has warned about weaknesses in the subject.

A longer-term consequence of this has been pressure on university language departments - as they have had to draw from a shrinking pool of potential applicants.

Higher education funding authorities have warned of the possible need for mergers, as a number of university language departments now have fewer than a dozen undergraduates.

The image of modern languages as being the preserve of better-off students was reinforced by figures from the Independent Schools Council last year which showed that 60% of all A-level grade As in French were achieved by pupils in independent schools.

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