

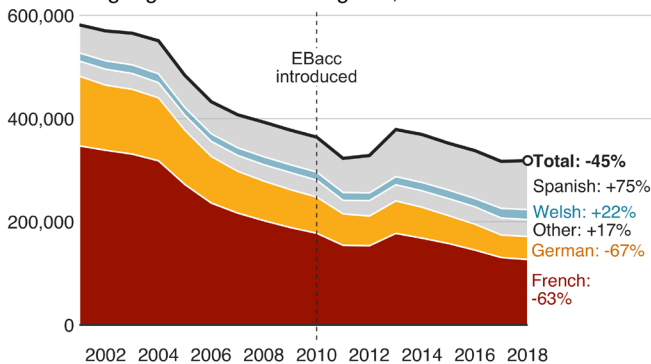
Supporting Modern Foreign Languages in your School: A guide for governors

This paper has been produced primarily for secondary schools, and in association with the British Council and the National Governance Association (NGA). It is designed to assist governors, trustees and governing boards to support language learning in their schools, academies and trusts.

In February 2019, the BBC published findings that showed learning foreign languages at school had hit an 18-year low across the UK.

GCSE languages dropping

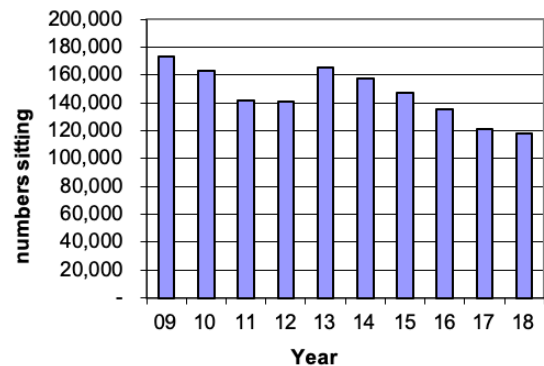
GCSE language exams sat in England, Wales and N Ireland



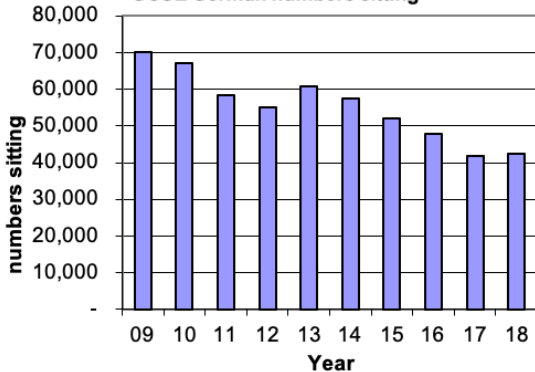
Source: Joint Council for Qualifications



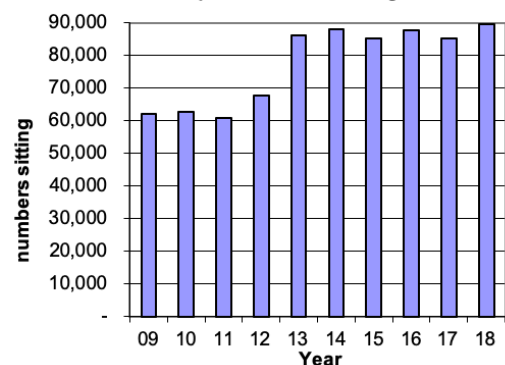
GCSE French numbers sitting



GCSE German numbers sitting



GCSE Spanish numbers sitting



The All Parliamentary group for modern languages [has called for a national recovery in languages](#) and identified high-level goals. Five organisations (the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Association of School and College leaders (ASCL), the British Academy, the British Council, and Universities UK) are planning how this might be delivered via a UK-wide programme strategy.

Why is language learning important?

“We are calling for a step change in the way that we as a nation approach language learning. With the possibility of Brexit, at a time when we need to communicate with the world better than ever before, language learning is in decline at almost every life stage and in numerous contexts.

Language skills cannot be perceived as nice-to-have. The UK has the potential to become a linguistic powerhouse. If it did, it would be more prosperous, productive, influential and, literally, healthier. Languages must be the wind in global Britain’s sails.”

David Cannadine, President of the British Academy

Government perspective in England

“As Britain leaves the European Union, it’s more important than ever to show how much we value international opportunities, language-learning, and ensuring our young people have a global outlook.”

Damian Hinds, Secretary of State World Education Forum March February 2019

The proposed new Ofsted framework, effective from September 2019, has increased the focus on the EBacc, which includes languages. The Ofsted framework states:

“The curriculum remains as broad as possible for as long as possible. Pupils are able to study a strong academic core of subjects, such as those offered by the EBacc.”

Industry opinion

Employers value languages, as they are increasingly important to make sure we can compete in the global market. Because of this, languages are increasingly becoming a requirement for many graduate schemes, such as those offered by Lidl.

“Young people skilled in the languages of Europe, China and other key markets around the world, can look forward to exciting and rewarding careers.”

Dr Adam Marshall, Director General of the British Chambers of Commerce

“Having language skills under your belt will help make you stand out from the crowd, whether you’re applying for an entry level position, a management role or an internal transfer.”

Steve Cassidy, Senior Vice President and Managing Director, UK and Ireland, Hilton

“If the UK is to be successful as a globally open trading nation, it will need more of its people to be able to communicate adequately in those new markets.”

CBI/Pearson Education Skills Survey 2019

Potential earnings for Language Graduates

Students with modern language degrees, five years after graduation, earned more than those studying law, physical sciences or biological sciences (link to the Hansard report of the House of Lords debate is provided in Further information).

Key reasons to learn a language

Languages are an enabler of success:

- Recent studies show a positive correlation between second language learning and academic achievement (Steele et al, (2015).
- Language learners develop the ability to communicate with self-awareness and confidence in the face of spontaneity, and gives us explicit language knowledge and strategies to help us learn other languages in the future.
- Learning a language gives us significant transferable skills as it reinforces our linguistic competence and the use of grammar and syntax. They also give us an understanding of how to develop a good memory.
- Learning a language means we are spending time learning something challenging; we are developing our resilient brain and supporting decoding and analytical skills.
- Learning new languages leads to a measurable improvement in our attention capacity (Vega-Mendoza et al, 2015, Cognition).
- Intercultural awareness and skills for the future workplace: young people need languages to become culturally agile, ready for the mobile and inter-connected jobs of the future. Students with experience abroad on Erasmus+ already have an unemployment rate 23% lower than that of non-mobile students.
- Language learning is a marker of social advantage in the UK, the more disadvantaged you are the less likely you are to be able to learn a language to a high level at school.

Challenges for MFL departments

Staffing: MFL departments have fewer full-time teachers than previously to support with visits and exchanges.

Financial constraints: low take-up at GCSE and post-16 means MFL subjects are not considered viable in some schools given the current financial pressures in education.

Attitude and Grading: the perception that MFL subjects are difficult means that students don't choose them. This is supported by statistical evidence, and there is a historical anomaly which means that pupils from similar starting points putting in similar effort achieve on average over half a grade less in MFL than in history and geography (ie other comparable, 'traditional academic' EBacc subjects).

Transition: the varied approach of offering different languages at primary schools means it is difficult to build effectively on prior learning in Year 7.

Recruitment: the combination of fewer MFL graduates and the government's successive missed targets for MFL teacher recruitment means it is difficult to recruit specialist MFL teachers.

Retention: MFL entrants to the profession are among the group of subjects seeing the biggest exit from the profession in the early years of teaching (NFER data, 2019).

Visits and Exchanges: 65% of state schools responding to the Languages Trends survey say pupils do not have the opportunity to practise their language skills outside the classroom (715 respondents).

Source: Language Trends 2019, NFER data, Ofqual blog, DFE

Support your MFL department

Key questions to consider:

- Does your school consider languages a key subject? Is the senior management team communicating this effectively to pupils, staff and parents?
- Have the percentages of pupils taking MFL over the last four years at GCSE and A level in your school fallen?
- What has your school done to reverse a decline in MFL take-up, if there is one? What has been the impact?
- Are you aware of the current staffing for MFL? Is support being given for subject-specific continuous professional development training?
- Is MFL included in the School Improvement Plan?
- What opportunities are there for pupils to practise their language learning skills outside the classroom?
- Are there legitimate reasons why individuals or groups of pupils maybe excluded from language learning? For example, those eligible for the pupil premium or pupils who are EAL may shine at languages.

Practical ways to help your MFL department

- Restructure the curriculum or options to encourage pupils to choose a foreign language.
- Ensure appropriate numbers of hours for language teaching at KS3 and KS4.
- Promote the importance of foreign languages, for example, support for international experience, visits, trips and Erasmus schemes.
- Develop relationships and encourage collaboration with primary schools to support effective transition.
- Liaise with local universities, language institutes, subject associations, and local businesses which support MFL.
- Develop promotional information for parents at option evenings, and information and careers advice.
- Support continuous professional development for MFL teachers through subject communities.
- Encourage and support opportunities for pupils to practise their language skills outside the classroom.
- Encourage governors and parents with language skills to act as role models for language learning.

Further information and support

Language learning: German and French drop by half in UK schools, 27 February, 2019, BBC News
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-47334374>

A National Recovery Programme for Languages, All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, 4 March 2019

<https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/A-national-recovery-programme-for-languages.pdf>

Hansard report of House of Lords debate 9 April 2019 (question asked at 2.45pm, pages 445-447)

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/pdf/lords/2019-04-09>

Evaluating new GCSEs in French, German and Spanish, 14 February 2019, Ofqual blog

<https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2019/02/14/evaluating-new-gcses-in-french-german-and-spanish/>

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