



BRIEFING PAPER

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Language teaching in schools (England)

By Robert Long
Shadi Danechi

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Contributing authors: Robert Long, Social Policy, sections 1-4
Shadi Danechi, Social and General Statistics, section 5



Summary

Languages are a part of the National Curriculum in England from ages 7-14, with the requirements at Key Stage 3 specifying that a modern language is taught. Revised content for GCSE, AS and A level languages has been in place since September 2016.

Most pupils will be required to take a GCSE in a modern language under Government plans for the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) to be taken by 75% of year 10 pupils by September 2022, and 90% of pupils by 2025.

Ofsted reports have found important strengths in language teaching in English schools, alongside significant weaknesses. A 2015 report on Key Stage 3 identified modern languages classes as requiring significant improvement, particularly in light of the introduction of the strengthened EBacc.

The majority of schools teach one or more of French, German and Spanish, but the Government does not promote the teaching of particular languages. In 2015, concerns were raised about the withdrawal of GCSE and A level qualifications in lesser-taught languages such as Arabic, Japanese and Polish. Following discussions between the Government and exam boards, qualifications in many of these languages were retained.

Language learning in England is consistently poor when compared with foreign language learning in other countries, and there have been regular calls from industry and educational bodies for the levels of attainment to be raised.

This briefing relates to England only. It discusses the teaching of ancient and foreign languages, and does not include information on the teaching of English for students with another first language.

1. What must be taught

1.1 The National Curriculum: maintained schools

Requirements for languages

The National Curriculum must be taught in all local authority maintained schools in England (this requirement does not apply to academies and free schools – see section 1.2).

The National Curriculum [Framework](#) sets out that languages are required to be taught at Key Stages 2 and 3; that is, from ages 7-14. At Key Stage 2, the requirement is for a foreign language to be taught; at Key Stage 3 the requirement is specifically for a modern foreign language.

After the age of 14, all pupils in maintained schools have a statutory entitlement to provision in four 'entitlement areas', one of which is the study of a modern foreign language:

[The other entitlement areas] and [a] modern foreign language are not compulsory national curriculum subjects after the age of 14, but all pupils in maintained schools have a statutory entitlement to be able to study a subject in each of those four areas.

1. schools must provide access to a minimum of one course in each of the four entitlement areas
2. schools must provide the opportunity for pupils to take a course in all four areas, should they wish to do so
3. a course that meets the entitlement requirements must give pupils the opportunity to obtain an approved qualification.¹

At Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11), the Framework states:

Teaching may be of any modern or ancient foreign language and should focus on enabling pupils to make substantial progress in one language. The teaching should provide an appropriate balance of spoken and written language and should lay the foundations for further foreign language teaching at key stage 3.²

At Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14):

Teaching may be of any modern foreign language and should build on the foundations of language learning laid at key stage 2, whether pupils continue with the same language or take up a new one.³

Languages have been included on the curriculum at Key Stage 2 since September 2014. It was introduced as one of the changes made following the Coalition Government's National Curriculum review. The Library briefing on [The School Curriculum in England](#), SN06798, provides background.

¹ Department for Education, [The national curriculum in England: framework document](#), p7

² Ibid., p213

³ Ibid., p215

Programmes of study

[Programmes of study](#) have been published for languages study at Key Stages 2 and 3.

The programme of study for Key Stage 2 states that:

Pupils should be taught to:

1. listen attentively to spoken language and show understanding by joining in and responding
2. explore the patterns and sounds of language through songs and rhymes and link the spelling, sound and meaning of words
3. engage in conversations; ask and answer questions; express opinions and respond to those of others; seek clarification and help*
4. speak in sentences, using familiar vocabulary, phrases and basic language structures
5. develop accurate pronunciation and intonation so that others understand when they are reading aloud or using familiar words and phrases*
6. present ideas and information orally to a range of audiences*
7. read carefully and show understanding of words, phrases and simple writing
8. appreciate stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language
9. broaden their vocabulary and develop their ability to understand new words that are introduced into familiar written material, including through using a dictionary
10. write phrases from memory, and adapt these to create new sentences, to express ideas clearly
11. describe people, places, things and actions orally* and in writing
12. understand basic grammar appropriate to the language being studied, including (where relevant): feminine, masculine and neuter forms and the conjugation of high-frequency verbs; key features and patterns of the language; how to apply these, for instance, to build sentences; and how these differ from or are similar to English

The starred (*) content above will not be applicable to ancient languages.⁴

The programme of study for a modern foreign language at Key Stage 3 states that:

Pupils should be taught to:

Grammar and vocabulary

1. identify and use tenses or other structures which convey the present, past, and future as appropriate to the language being studied

⁴ Department for Education, [National curriculum in England: languages programmes of study](#), 11 September 2013

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2. use and manipulate a variety of key grammatical structures and patterns, including voices and moods, as appropriate
3. develop and use a wide-ranging and deepening vocabulary that goes beyond their immediate needs and interests, allowing them to give and justify opinions and take part in discussion about wider issues
4. use accurate grammar, spelling and punctuation

Linguistic competence

1. listen to a variety of forms of spoken language to obtain information and respond appropriately
2. transcribe words and short sentences that they hear with increasing accuracy
3. initiate and develop conversations, coping with unfamiliar language and unexpected responses, making use of important social conventions such as formal modes of address
4. express and develop ideas clearly and with increasing accuracy, both orally and in writing
5. speak coherently and confidently, with increasingly accurate pronunciation and intonation
6. read and show comprehension of original and adapted materials from a range of different sources, understanding the purpose, important ideas and details, and provide an accurate English translation of short, suitable material
7. read literary texts in the language [such as stories, songs, poems and letters] to stimulate ideas, develop creative expression and expand understanding of the language and culture
8. write prose using an increasingly wide range of grammar and vocabulary, write creatively to express their own ideas and opinions, and translate short written text accurately into the foreign language⁵

1.2 Academies and Free Schools

Academies and free schools, which make up a majority of the secondary schools in England, do not have to teach the National Curriculum, although in practice many follow it at least in part. They are, however, required to provide a broad and balanced curriculum.

1.3 GCSE, AS and A level subject content

The Coalition Government undertook significant reforms to GCSEs and A levels, which are continuing under the Conservative Government. Full background is available in the Library briefing [GCSE, AS and A Level reform](#), SN06962.

The reforms included consultations on revised GCSE subject content and assessment objectives in both ancient and modern foreign languages, taught from September 2016:

⁵ Department for Education, [National curriculum in England: languages programmes of study](#), 11 September 2013

[GCSE ancient languages](#)

[GCSE modern foreign languages](#)

Similar consultations have taken place to produce reformed subject content for AS and A level ancient and modern foreign languages, also to be taught from September 2016:

[GCE AS and A level ancient languages](#)

[GCE AS and A level modern foreign languages](#)

2. Quality of provision, levels of achievement

2.1 Ofsted reports

In January 2011, Ofsted published a report on modern languages provision from 2007-2010, [Modern languages: achievement and challenge](#).

The report's key findings included that:

At primary level:

- Achievement was good or outstanding in just under six out of ten of the primary schools visited;
- Teaching was good in two thirds of the lessons observed. Despite some occasional shortcomings in pronunciation and intonation, primary teachers' subject knowledge and their teaching methods were predominantly good;
- Senior leaders were very committed to introducing modern languages into primary schools. Weaknesses lay in assessment, and the monitoring and evaluation of provision, often because leaders did not feel competent enough to judge language provision.

At secondary level and post-16:

- The overall progress made by students at Key Stages 3 and 4 was good or outstanding in over half of the lessons observed. However, there were weaknesses in "too many" lessons, particularly in speaking, listening and reading in modern languages.
- In many of the secondary schools visited, opportunities for students to listen to and communicate in the target language were often limited by many teachers' unpreparedness to use it.
- Despite declining numbers choosing foreign languages generally, in the specialist language colleges visited, numbers remained high. In half of the 28 specialist language colleges visited, the curriculum was judged to be outstanding.
- Most secondary students had positive attitudes to learning languages despite low take-up in Key Stage 4. Their intercultural understanding, however, was weak in the majority of the schools visited because they did not have good opportunities to develop it.
- Teaching in Key Stage 4 was focused on achieving good examination results, but this did not always prepare students sufficiently for study at a more advanced level, post-16.
- Most of the secondary schools visited had not yet modified their Year 7 curriculum or adapted their teaching of languages to build on the increasing amount of work being undertaken in primary schools.

- Teaching and learning were good in most of the post-16 providers visited, and the relatively small numbers of students on modern language courses achieved well.⁶

In September 2015, Ofsted published a report on [Key Stage 3: the wasted years?](#), which was critical of several aspects of education at KS3, including modern foreign languages (emphasis in original):

Inspectors observed MFL, history and geography lessons at Key Stage 3 in 51 routine inspections carried out during June and July 2015. Inspectors reported significant weaknesses in all three subjects. Too often, inspectors found teaching that failed to challenge and engage pupils. Additionally, low-level disruption in some of these lessons, particularly in MFL, had a detrimental impact on the pupils' learning. **Achievement was not good enough in just under half of the MFL classes observed, two-fifths of the history classes and one third of the geography classes.**

It is no surprise, therefore, that there is low take-up in these subjects at GCSE. Some pupils told inspectors that they were not taking these [English Baccalaureate] EBacc subjects at Key Stage 4 because they did not enjoy them or had found them difficult at Key Stage 3, particularly MFL. A small number made an explicit link between their choices and the quality of teaching that they had received at Key Stage 3. **This is a serious concern given the government's ambition for all pupils starting Year 7 in September 2015 to take the EBacc subjects when they reach their GCSEs in 2020.** Improving the Key Stage 3 provision in these subjects will be crucial to raising the EBacc success rate in the coming years.⁷

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is discussed in more detail in section 3 of this briefing.

In May 2016, Ofsted published findings on [Foreign languages and science provision in primary schools](#) that raised concerns about the amount of time dedicated to languages at primary level, the amount of teaching expertise available, and the poor engagement with secondary schools as children moved on.⁸

2.2 Language teaching: support and quality

Language trainee teacher support

Eligible non-salaried trainee teachers on postgraduate programmes may qualify for a training bursary – an incentive payment designed to attract highly-qualified trainees in shortage subject areas, such as languages.

The Department for Education's '[Get Into Teaching](#)' website provides information on teaching languages and the support available. [Subject knowledge enhancement](#) (SKE) courses provide support for students to build up their subject knowledge. SKE courses are fully funded and

⁶ Ibid., p6-7

⁷ Ofsted, [Key Stage 3: the wasted years?](#), September 2015, p5. Summary of findings available at Ofsted, [Too many students let down in early stages of secondary school](#), 10 September 2015

⁸ Ofsted, [Foreign languages and science provision in primary schools](#), 19 May 2016

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students may be eligible for a training bursary of up to £5,600 to support them during the course.

[Bursaries](#) are also available for trainee language teachers. Languages are amongst the highest priority subjects (only maths attracts higher funding support), with bursaries of up to £26,000, and scholarships of £28,000 potentially available depending on the qualifications of the applicant.⁹

Bursaries are available to train to teach modern foreign languages, community languages and ancient languages including Latin and Ancient Greek. Classics courses where the majority of the course is in an ancient language are also eligible, while other classics courses are eligible for the history bursary. Trainees do not need to apply for a bursary – if they meet the eligibility criteria, payments will start when they begin their course. Broader background on support for trainee teachers is available in the Library briefing [Initial teacher training in England](#), SN06710.

The Schools Minister gave the following overview of Government policy in response to a [Parliamentary Question](#) in January 2018:

The Government offers financial incentives, including scholarships and tax-free bursaries, for trainee teachers. These are typically worth up to £26,000 for trainees in priority subjects, including modern foreign languages (MFL). The Department has also developed a number of measures to encourage more MFL specialists into initial teacher training (ITT). These include targeted marketing campaigns, providing support to potential ITT applicants across priority subjects to increase the proportion of successful applications; and providing seed funding to higher education institutions to develop an offer for languages degree students to opt-in to complete qualified teacher status alongside their undergraduate degree.

The Department has developed programmes including the 'Teacher Subject Specialism Training' (TSST), to attract existing teachers into MFL. TSST aims to enhance the MFL expertise of current teachers and provide more targeted support to help returning teachers and career changers into the profession.

The Department is creating expert hubs for languages that will share best practice in pedagogy among schools. These hubs will improve access to high quality, modern MFL teaching. Further details will be announced in due course.¹⁰

The DfE has published information on the [Teacher Subject Specialism Training](#) mentioned by the Minister. The training is free, and is intended to improve the subject knowledge of non-specialist teachers and returning teachers:

In addition to non-specialists and returning teachers, teacher subject specialism training in modern foreign languages (MFL) also targets specialist MFL teachers who are not currently teaching MFL but who need refresher training, to enable a move back to an MFL role. This training could also be of benefit to

⁹ Department for Education Get Into Teaching, [Bursaries and funding](#) [accessed 28 August 2018]

¹⁰ [PQ 123110, 24 January 2018](#)

teachers who may be able to teach a second language in addition to their specialist subject. Eligible participants for this include:

- teachers not currently teaching MFL with post A level MFL qualifications
- teachers not currently teaching MFL who have good A level qualifications
- teachers not teaching MFL who are native/ near native speakers
- non-specialist teachers currently teaching MFL in addition to their specialist subject
- specialist MFL teachers who are not currently teaching MFL and who need refresher training to enable a move back to an MFL role
- specialist MFL teachers who have the capacity to teach a new language in addition to their language specialism
- teachers who are looking to return to the profession
- overseas trained teachers

Quality of language teaching

As noted in section 2.1, the [2011 Ofsted report](#) identified good teaching in two thirds of the lessons observed in primary school, with primary teachers' subject knowledge and their teaching methods described as predominantly good. Some weaknesses lay in the assessment, and the monitoring and evaluation of provision, often because school leaders did not feel competent enough to judge language provision. The [2011 report](#) stated that in many of the secondary schools visited, opportunities for students to listen to and communicate in the target language were often limited by many teachers' unpreparedness to use it, and that teaching in Key Stage 4 was focused on achieving good examination results, but this did not always prepare students sufficiently for study at a more advanced level, post-16. However, teaching and learning were good in most of the post-16 providers visited, and the relatively small numbers of students on modern language courses achieved well.¹¹

The September 2015 Ofsted report on [Key Stage 3: the wasted years?](#) identified language teaching that failed to challenge and engage pupils at KS3 as a particular concern.¹²

In the House of Lords [debate](#) on progress in teaching foreign languages in schools in January 2015, Baroness Coussins raised concerns about the assessment of language teaching in schools:

Baroness Coussins (CB): My Lords, the Question is about progress. The problem is that we have no real idea about that, because there is no benchmark either to help schools to interpret the national curriculum guidelines consistently, or for pupils to know what level of competence they should achieve at the end of each key stage. Will the Minister agree to consider introducing a

¹¹ Ofsted, [Modern languages: achievement and challenge 2007-10](#), January 2011

¹² Ofsted, [Key Stage 3: the wasted years?](#), September 2015, p5

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light-touch measure for progress linked to the Common European Framework and apply it to all key stages?

Lord Nash: In April last year, we published a set of key principles for assessment, produced as a result of consultation on accountability. We also announced last May a new package of pupil assessment methods developed by teachers for their fellow teachers. Schools are able to develop whatever methodology of assessment they like. However, I will take note of what the noble Baroness says and look at that further.

[...]

Baroness Donaghy (Lab): My Lords, the Minister will be aware that I have expressed concern in the past about the changes in teacher education and the increasing difficulty of national planning. In view of the shortage of language teachers, does he envisage a situation where there will be a complete shortage of language teachers in certain parts of the country, and how does he plan to rebalance this particular problem? Will he speak to the university colleges of education and the church colleges about the importance of teacher education?

Lord Nash: I agree entirely with the noble Baroness about the importance of the matter. More than 1,800 places for modern language teacher trainees are allocated for 2015-16, which is an increase of 4%. As I say, we have substantially increased the bursaries, which were brought in for language teachers by this Government.¹³

2.3 European survey on language competences

In February 2013, the final report of the European Commission's European Survey on Language Competences, undertaken in England by the National Foundation for Educational Research on behalf of the Department for Education, was published. The [report](#) stated that "across skills and languages, England's performance did not compare well with the global average."¹⁴ A previous BBC [report](#) on the survey drew attention to some key findings:

[The report] said England was bottom in reading, writing and listening in the main foreign language taught - French for English pupils - while pupils started learning a language later than average and were taught for fewer hours a week than average.

It also found only 1% of foreign language students in England were able to follow complex speech. This compared with a Europe average of 30%.¹⁵

Referring to the survey in a House of Lords [debate](#) on foreign languages in January 2015, the Schools Minister Lord Nash stated that:

We do feel that we need to redress the situation in languages. The European Survey on Language Competences in 2012 showed

¹³ [HL Deb 26 Jan 2015 c9-10](#)

¹⁴ National Foundation for Educational Research, [European Survey on Language Competencies: Language Proficiency in England](#), February 2013, p18

¹⁵ BBC News, [Pupils in England worst for using languages independently](#), 21 June 2012

us that our 2011 GCSE students were the worst at languages across all the countries surveyed.¹⁶

2.4 British Council: Languages for the Future report

In November 2013 the British Council published its [Languages for the Future](#) report, which identified what it considered to be the ten most important languages for Britain's future, considering the impact on trade, security and influence. The Council's report stated that "the need for the UK to improve its capability in languages is incontestable,"¹⁷ and that the low level of proficiency in foreign languages in the UK posed a variety of problems:

This report argues that, while millions of people around the world are learning English, the UK has fallen behind by not devoting sufficient time, resources and effort to language learning.

The resulting language deficit, if not tackled, is a threat to our competitiveness, influence and standing in the world, as well as to our citizens' ability to play a meaningful role in the global economy and an increasingly networked and interconnected world.¹⁸

[An update](#) to the original report was published in 2017. The report cited Spanish, Mandarin, French, Arabic, and German as the most important languages to learn, with Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Japanese, and Russian also seen as important.¹⁹

2.5 British Council report: Language Trends report 2019

The British Council's annual [Language Trends report](#) in 2019 focused on the take-up of languages in schools, and the priority – in particular the time – given to language teaching. The report also highlighted concerns about the difficulty (real and perceived) of reformed languages GCSEs,²⁰ and about the lower likelihood of disadvantaged students studying languages. The report found:

- A large majority of teachers (71 per cent at state secondary schools and 64 per cent at independent schools) said they were concerned about the content of language exams
- Concerns about the difficulty of these exams were described by the Council as "in addition to the long-term problem of the perception of languages as a difficult subject - one of the reasons for the ongoing decline in exam entry numbers"
- Worries that the revisions to the syllabus have had a disproportionate impact on lower attaining pupils, with 84 per

¹⁶ [HL Deb 26 Jan 2015 c9](#)

¹⁷ British Council, [Languages for the Future: Which languages the UK needs most and why](#), November 2013, p6

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p19

¹⁹ British Council, [Languages for the Future: The foreign languages the United Kingdom needs to become a truly global nation](#), November 2017, p4

²⁰ For wider discussion of the GCSE reforms, see the House of Commons Library briefing, [GCSE, AS and A level reform](#), March 2017, SN 6962

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cent of state schools (70 per cent of independent schools) saying these pupils are now less likely to take a language than three years ago

- That Brexit may be impacting on languages: 25 per cent of teachers at state secondary schools and 15 per cent at independent schools reported a negative impact on pupils' motivation to learn a European language or languages in general, whilst a further third of teachers (36 per cent at state schools and 30 per cent at independent schools) reported that pupils had mixed attitudes towards languages as a result of Brexit
- Home-grown language teachers are in short supply and two thirds of state schools (67 per cent) and 79 per cent of independent schools employ one or more staff who are EU citizens. Around one quarter (24 per cent) of independent schools and one third (34 per cent) of state schools report difficulties recruiting language staff
- Levels of international engagement in primary and secondary schools are declining, with half of all primary schools offering pupils no international activity at all. The number of state secondary schools offering international experience has decreased by up to five per cent since last year, with just one quarter of state schools offering pupil exchanges abroad, compared to 48 per cent of independent schools
- Pupils at a third of primary schools that allocate a set time for languages each week are not receiving that time, with language teaching "often ad hoc and minimal," making it difficult for pupils to achieve the expected outcomes at the end of Year 6²¹

The report was raised by Baroness Coussins in a written question in the House of Lords. Lord Agnew, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Education, responded:

The department notes the British Council Language Trends 2019 Survey and wants to see more pupils take languages at GCSE and experience international opportunities, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We have included languages as a pillar within the English Baccalaureate school performance measure to address the sharp fall in take up following the decision to make the subject non-compulsory at key stage 4 in 2004. This has seen the proportion of pupils who take languages GCSE increase from 40% in 2010 to 46% last year, and we want to see these numbers increase.

In the department's £4.8 million Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Pedagogy pilot programme, one of the 9 lead schools is in an Opportunity Area and another is in the Opportunity North East area. We have launched a pilot project in MFL undergraduate mentoring for secondary school pupils. This project specifically targets areas of high disadvantage to extend access to languages for all pupils and focuses on areas of low uptake. We are also piloting a financial incentive to improve the retention of MFL teachers in 25 local authorities that are most in need.

²¹ British Council, [Tough new exams discouraging pupils in England from learning languages, say teachers](#), 3 July 2019

In partnership with the British Council, the department is offering thousands of young people the chance to take part in international exchanges and visits. Backed by £2.5 million, schools in England can apply for grants to take pupils aged 11 and above to visit partner schools around the world. The programme is principally focused on those from disadvantaged backgrounds and we want to encourage as many schools as possible to sign up for this opportunity.²²

2.6 CBI survey of employers' views

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has consistently raised concerns about levels of competence in foreign languages in the workforce. Its [2018 education and skills survey](#), published with Pearson, stated that the need for languages had been "heightened by the UK's departure from the European Union" and that businesses had identified European languages as most in demand, with French mentioned by 54% of businesses surveyed, ahead of German (51%), and Spanish (50%).²³

2.7 Cambridge University report: The value of languages

In May 2016, Cambridge University published [The Value of Languages](#), a report which put forward ideas for a cross-departmental UK strategy for languages, arguing that languages were key to a far wider range of UK interests than could solely be covered by the Department for Education.²⁴

The report set out what it saw as key concerns in UK language capability and the potential benefits of a cross-governmental strategy:

What concerns are there now?

- Decline of languages and language learning in the UK from schools through to higher education
- Business lost to UK companies through lack of language skills
- The UK's 'soft power' and effectiveness in conflict and matters of national security is limited by a shortage of speakers of strategically important languages
- The UK is under-represented internationally, for instance in the EU civil service or in the translating and interpreting departments of the UN
- The community and heritage languages spoken in the UK are at times undervalued

What are the benefits of a UK Strategy for Languages?

- UK businesses can participate fully in the global market place using the language and communication skills of their workforce

²² [PO HL17079, 22 July 2019](#)

²³ CBI and Pearson, [Educating for the Modern World: CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Annual Report](#), November 2018, p31

²⁴ University of Cambridge, [The Value of Languages](#), May 2016, p23

- The UK is able to maximize its role and authority in foreign policy through language and diplomacy
- Educational attainment in a wide range of languages brings with it personal cognitive benefits as well as the 'cultural agility' vital to international relations and development
- Languages enhance the cultural capital and social cohesion of the different communities of the UK²⁵

2.8 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages

Manifesto for Languages (2014)

The APPG on Modern Languages published its [manifesto for languages](#) in July 2014. The manifesto argued that knowledge of other languages and cultures is important for education and skills, the economy, international engagement, defence and security and community relations; it stated that "in the 21st century, speaking only English is as much of a disadvantage as speaking no English."²⁶ It called for political parties to support a Framework for National Recovery in Language Learning in their 2015 General Election manifestos, advocating:

1. A long term commitment to transforming the reputation of UK citizens as poor linguists, reluctant to value languages other than English. Languages are as important for our future as STEM subjects. Leadership is needed to ensure they are given similar recognition.
2. High quality language learning for all children throughout the UK from age 7. Support for teachers and trainers to develop their linguistic and professional skills and lead the recovery.
3. A goal for every child to have a high quality language qualification by the end of secondary education. The reform of GCSEs and A-levels must encourage and reward progression to higher levels.
4. Active encouragement for business and employers to get involved in tackling the crisis. Support for schools and employers to work together. Tax breaks and other incentives for business to train and recruit home-grown linguists.
5. A commitment to maintaining and developing UK expertise in modern languages and cultures in university language departments. Maintain the status of languages as 'strategically important and vulnerable' subjects and continued support for the Year Abroad.²⁷

National Recovery Programme for Languages (2019)

In March 2019, the APPG published a '[framework proposal](#)' for languages in the UK to reverse the UK's poor performance, which drew particular attention to teacher supply and a problematic mindset in

²⁵ Ibid., p3

²⁶ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, [Manifesto for Languages](#), July 2014

²⁷ Ibid.

relation to languages – that languages are seen as difficult, and not given sufficient priority by employers or government.

The proposed programme covered further and higher education, business, government, and wider society. In schools, the APPG proposed:

- Statutory entitlement to languages education at all stages of the curriculum from 5-18
- Improved social equity in languages education, closing gaps in participation and attainment (irrespective of socio-economic or regional factors)
- Higher take-up of public examinations including a wider range of forms of accreditation
- In England, students should have a reasonable expectation that their GCSE grade in MFL will be similar to that in other subjects without any systematic variation
- Routine regular inspection of MFL in primary and secondary schools and colleges
- Adequate supply of properly trained languages teachers in the primary and secondary workforce
- Every child to have the opportunity for international experience at home or overseas
- Every language learner to have access to a language assistant
- Effective communication of MFL outcomes at the point of transfer from primary to secondary schools to ensure coherent and coordinated transition
- An increase in the range of languages taught in primary and secondary schools
- Stronger messages from government to schools, parents and students about the value of languages²⁸

²⁸ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, [National Recovery Programme for Languages](#), March 2019

3. A strengthened English Baccalaureate and Progress 8: potential impact on languages

3.1 Introduction: performance measure

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is a performance measure for schools in England, first applied in the 2010 school performance tables. It measures the achievement of pupils who have gained Key Stage 4 (GCSE level) qualifications in the following subjects:

- English
- mathematics
- history or geography
- the sciences; and
- a language

The Coalition Government stated that the principal purpose of the new measure was to increase the take-up of 'core' academic qualifications that best equipped a pupil for progression to further study and work.

During a [debate](#) on foreign languages held in the House of Lords in January 2015, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools, Lord Nash, stated that "the inclusion of a foreign language in the English baccalaureate measure has raised entries from pupils in England by 20% since 2012."²⁹

3.2 A strengthened EBacc: Since 2015

The [Conservative Party manifesto](#) for the 2015 General Election stated that:

We will require secondary school pupils to take GCSEs in English, maths, science, a language and history or geography, with Ofsted unable to award its highest ratings to schools that refuse to teach these core subjects.³⁰

On 16 June 2015, the then Education Secretary Nicky Morgan made a [speech](#) outlining the new Government's plans.³¹ The accompanying DfE [press notice](#) stated that the Government intended for pupils beginning Year 7 in September 2015 to study the EBacc at GCSE level, meaning they would take their GCSEs in those subjects in 2020. The announcement indicated that a consultation on the proposals would follow, and that it did expect that the EBacc would not be appropriate for a small number of pupils.³²

²⁹ [HL Deb 26 Jan 2015 c8](#)

³⁰ [Conservative Party Manifesto 2015](#), p34

³¹ Department for Education, [Preparing children for a successful future through the Ebacc](#), 16 June 2015

³² Department for Education, [New reforms to raise standards and improve behaviour](#), 16 June 2015

The [Conservative Party Manifesto](#) for the 2017 General Election stated:

We will expect 75 per cent of pupils to have been entered for the EBacc combination of GCSEs by the end of the next parliament [in 2022], with 90 per cent of pupils studying this combination of academic GCSEs by 2025.³³

Government response to the consultation and next steps (July 2017)

On 19 July 2017, the Government published its response to a consultation on [Implementing the English Baccalaureate](#).

The response carried forward the proposals in the Conservative manifesto, and set out the Government's ambition that:

- 75% of year 10 pupils in state-funded mainstream schools will start to study GCSEs in the EBacc combination of subjects by September 2022
- 90% of year 10 pupils studying GCSEs in the EBacc subjects by September 2025.

These children would be taking their GCSEs in the EBacc subjects in 2024 and 2027 respectively.

The response set out the following reasons a child might not be entered for the EBacc:

The decision not to enter a pupil for the EBacc combination of subjects will need to be considered on a case by case basis by each school, and schools will need to take into account a range of factors particular to each pupil. These will include, for example, complex SEN; having spent significant amounts of time out of education; recently arriving in the country; and only being able to take a limited number of key stage 4 qualifications as significant additional time is needed in the curriculum for English and mathematics. We believe that no single factor should automatically exclude a pupil from entering the EBacc.³⁴

Supply of language teachers: concerns and consultation

Several concerns have been raised about the potential impact of the move to a strengthened EBacc, including the supply of language teachers if uptake of these subjects is expanded.³⁵

The issue was raised with the Government in the House of Lords in September 2015:

Baroness Coussins: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of how many additional Modern Languages teachers, if any, will be needed fully to implement the English Baccalaureate.

³³ [Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2017](#), pg 51

³⁴ Department for Education, [Implementing the English Baccalaureate Government consultation response](#), July 2017, p12

³⁵ Guardian, [There's nothing sadder than EBacc without teachers](#), 16 June 2015; Schools Week, [2,000 more MFL teachers needed for EBacc](#), 19 June 2015

Lord Nash: The Department for Education considers the resulting change to teacher demand carefully each time a teaching or curriculum-related policy change is announced.

The department does this by adding policy assumptions into the Teacher Supply Model (TSM), which informs the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) targets each year.

Further details as to how the policy assumption process is managed within the TSM itself can be found in both the 2015/16 TSM and the accompanying user guide, which have been published online at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-supply-model>

We will factor the Ebacc commitment into future TSMs as required, and publish online in keeping with our usual approach to forecasting teacher supply requirements. This will be informed by the Ebacc consultation that we are planning to run later on in the Autumn.³⁶

The Government's [Consultation on Implementing the English Baccalaureate](#) accepted that the EBacc reforms would require a particular increase in the number of language teachers. It asked for views on the training, recruitment and retention of teachers for EBacc subjects.³⁷

The July 2017 [Government response to the consultation](#) on the EBacc set out that the Government's plans on language teacher retention, including:

- Developing national initiatives to boost the skills of current language teachers, attract more language specialists to train to be teachers, and provide more targeted support to help returning teachers and career changers into the profession. This would include subject specialism training in languages for non-specialist teachers that may already have some language skills, and for former languages teachers returning to the subject
- An immediate increase in languages teachers that in a small part will be filled by recruiting from other countries. For example, the Department for Education was working with the Spanish Ministry of Education to recruit high quality teachers from Spain
- The Government also anticipated that over time, as the numbers of pupils studying languages at GCSE increases, there would be a corresponding increase in those studying languages degrees, increasing the domestic pool of potential teachers³⁸

Education Datalab [estimated](#) in March 2016 that 3,400 new language teachers would be required to deliver an "EBacc for all."³⁹

³⁶ [HL2320 \[Languages: Teachers\]](#), 28 September 2015

³⁷ Department for Education, [Consultation on Implementing the English Baccalaureate](#), November 2015, p28-29

³⁸ Department for Education, [Implementing the English Baccalaureate Government consultation response](#), July 2017, p18-19

³⁹ Education Datalab, [Revisiting how many language teachers we need to deliver the EBacc](#), 11 March 2016

DfE Annual Report 2018/19: The language barrier to the EBacc

The Department for Education's [Consolidated annual report and accounts 2018/19](#) noted that the Department was not on track to meet its ambition for 75% of students to be studying the EBacc combination of subjects by 2022 – falling some way short, with 53% of pupils now expected to be studying the EBacc by this time.

The report noted that:

The main barrier to the EBacc ambition is languages take up (with over 80% of pupils who take four out of the five subjects missing out on a language).⁴⁰

Further information on the EBacc

A Library briefing on the [English Baccalaureate](#), SN 06045, provides broader information.

3.3 Progress 8

Progress 8 is a performance measure for schools, which measures pupils' academic progress, introduced for all schools in 2016.

The measure is based on students' progress measured across eight subjects:

- English
- Mathematics
- Three other English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects (sciences, computer science, geography, history and languages)
- Three further subjects, which can be from the range of EBacc subjects, or can be any other approved, high-value arts, academic, or vocational qualification.

English and mathematics are both double weighted. (For English, a pupil's higher score in English language or literature will be used if the pupil has taken both qualifications.) A Progress 8 score is calculated through dividing a pupil's combined grades by ten, with English and mathematics consequently forming 40% of the score, and each worth twice the value of another subject such as languages.

The Department for Education has published a variety of [information](#) on the measure, including a [factsheet](#) which provides a brief overview of the changes and their intentions.

The Library briefing [Changes to school accountability and 'league tables' in England in 2016](#), CBP 7846, provides further information on Progress 8 (see section 3.2) and broader reforms.

⁴⁰ Department for Education, [Consolidated annual report and accounts 2018/19](#), July 2019, p33

4. Other issues

4.1 National Centre for Excellence for Languages Pedagogy

In January 2019, the Government [announced](#) the establishment of the Centre for Excellence for Languages Pedagogy at the University of York. The centre would be funded with £4.8 million over the next four years.

The Government stated that the centre would “coordinate the work of nine modern foreign languages hubs – leading schools that are working with other schools and sharing best practice - to boost the teaching of Spanish, French and German.”⁴¹

The Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, has stated that the modern foreign languages pedagogy pilot being run by centre through these hubs aims “to improve uptake and attainment in languages at Key Stages 3 and 4, and to share best practice especially in disadvantaged areas.”⁴²

The [NCELP website](#) provides further information on the centre, including the [schools within the hub network](#).

4.2 Teaching community and less-commonly spoken languages

Withdrawal of languages at GCSE level and Government action

Concerns have been raised about the teaching of less widely spoken languages and the availability of qualifications for those who wish to learn them. An [adjournment debate](#) on lesser-taught languages, and the decision of several exam boards to withdraw GCSE and A level courses in languages such as Arabic, Japanese and Polish, was held in March 2015.⁴³

The issue was again raised, with specific reference to Turkish and modern Greek, in a [Written Question](#) in July 2015. The schools Minister, Nick Gibb, responded:

The Department for Education does not promote the teaching of one foreign language over another and has not made an assessment of the benefits of pupils learning Turkish, modern Greek or other community languages.

The department is currently working with awarding organisations and Ofqual to consider how best to enable as wide a range of languages as possible to be maintained at GCSE and A level. The government has been clear that it wants to see all pupils provided with the opportunity to take a core set of academic subjects, including modern foreign languages.

The Secretary of State wrote to exam boards in April 2015 to express her concern about awarding organisations’ decision to

⁴¹ Department for Education, [New centre for excellence to boost modern foreign language skills](#), 10 January 2019

⁴² [PQ 267221, 28 June 2019](#)

⁴³ [HC Deb 24 March 2015 c1398-1412](#)

stop awarding qualifications in some languages, and to ask those organisations to work with Ofqual on the future of these qualifications. We are actively exploring the best approach, in close discussion with those organisations, and in consultation with community representatives.⁴⁴

In July 2015 the schools Minister [announced](#) that the Department for Education was working with exam boards and Ofqual to “make sure as wide a range of language subjects as possible continue to be taught in the classroom” and would, “where necessary, extend the timetable for awarding organisations to continue with existing qualifications until September 2018.” The announcement stated that further information about the proposed approach would be provided later in the year.⁴⁵

A further statement was provided in response to a [Written Question](#) in September 2015:

Nick Gibb: The Department for Education is currently in discussion with awarding organisations, Ofqual and others, including foreign embassies, to consider how best to maintain as wide a range of languages as possible at GCSE and A level. We are continuing to develop proposals to achieve this and will hold a more formal, public consultation in due course. I announced on 22 July 2015 that to avoid any gap in provision in certain languages we will, where necessary, extend the timetable for awarding organisations to continue with existing qualifications until September 2018.⁴⁶

Announcement on the continuation of some languages (April 2016)

On 22 April 2016, the Government [announced](#) that “a range of community languages” would continue to be provided at GCSE and A level:

Pearson and AQA will continue to offer the languages they currently offer and will also take on most of the qualifications that are being withdrawn by OCR.

As a result of those discussions the following languages will continue at GCSE and A level:

- Arabic
- Modern Greek
- Gujarati
- Bengali
- Japanese
- Modern Hebrew
- Biblical Hebrew
- Panjabi
- Polish

⁴⁴ [PO 7419 \[Languages: education\], 23 July 2015](#)

⁴⁵ Department for Education, [Future of community language qualifications secured](#), 22 July 2015

⁴⁶ [PQ 8740 \[Languages\], 9 September 2015](#)

- Portuguese
- Turkish
- Urdu⁴⁷

This did not include all previously available languages.

It was subsequently [announced](#) by Pearson that it would be extending its offered languages to include GCSE and A level Persian, which had previously been planned to be discontinued as a result of the changes.⁴⁸

4.3 Mandarin Excellence Programme

In September 2015, the then Chancellor, George Osborne, announced during a visit to China that the teaching of Mandarin in English schools would receive £10m of additional funding, and that 5,000 more pupils will learn it by 2020.⁴⁹

The subsequent [Mandarin Excellence Programme](#), introduced in September 2016, is delivered by the UCL Institute of Education in partnership with the British Council. In December 2017, the Schools Minister praised the programme and stated that Mandarin speakers would have a “significant advantage when competing for jobs with their peers from around the world.”⁵⁰

4.4 British Sign Language

The prospect of placing BSL on the National Curriculum in England has repeatedly been raised in the Westminster Parliament.

Recently, a petition to [Make British Sign Language part of the National Curriculum](#) attracted more than 35,000 signatures, and was [debated in Parliament](#) in March 2018. The Government does not currently plan to introduce BSL to the curriculum, although schools may choose to offer it. Academy schools, which make up more than two thirds of secondary schools, are in any case not obliged to follow the National Curriculum.

A British Sign Language GCSE in England?

Campaigns are underway for the creation of a GCSE in British Sign Language in England, including from [Signature](#), an awarding body for deaf communication qualifications, which is proposing to develop a GCSE programme.

During a March 2018 [debate](#) in Parliament, the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, set out that the Government did not plan to introduce any new subjects at GCSE level during the current Parliament, although it was open to a BSL GCSE in the longer term. The bar on new qualifications

⁴⁷ Department for Education, [Community languages saved to ensure diverse curriculum continues](#), 22 April 2016

⁴⁸ Pearson, [A statement from Pearson on GCSE and A-level Persian](#), 18 May 2016

⁴⁹ BBC News, [Mandarin lessons to get £10m boost, says Chancellor](#), 22 September 2015

⁵⁰ Department for Education, [Pupils from across the country celebrate Mandarin success](#), 7 December 2017

was intended to allow schools a period of stability, following wide-ranging reforms to GCSEs that have taken place in recent years.⁵¹

However, the Government has recently [reversed this position](#). The Schools Minister stated that the Government was prepared to make an exception to the broader prohibition, and consider proposals for a GCSE in BSL more quickly than previously indicated, opening the door for a GCSE to be introduced ahead of 2022.⁵²

Next steps

The Government's change of position does not mean that a GCSE qualification will automatically be created or approved.

GCSEs are created through accreditation by Ofqual. Independent exam boards submit prospective GCSEs to Ofqual for accreditation. Ofqual has published an overview of the [accreditation requirement](#) and [accreditation criterion](#).

During the March 2018 [debate](#) on BSL, the Schools Minister drew attention to difficulties that the Government has had in sustaining language provision at GCSE level, stating that the Government had a "huge battle" with the exam boards to retain GCSE provision in less-spoken languages such as Arabic, Japanese, and Polish.

To become a reality, a GCSE in BSL would need to be created by an independent provider and approved using these processes. Recent reforms to GCSEs have sought to create a demanding standard for approval, with several subjects discontinued. If a GCSE was established, it would be up to schools to decide whether they offer it to their pupils.

GCSE specification proposal

In March 2019, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education stated that the Department for Education and Ofqual had received a proposal for BSL GCSE from the exam board Signature.⁵³

⁵¹ [HC Deb 5 March 2018 c19WH](#)

⁵² BBC News, [British Sign Language: GCSE plan after boy's campaign](#), 2 August 2018

⁵³ [PQ HL13975, 8 Mar 2019](#)

5. Statistics: student and teacher numbers

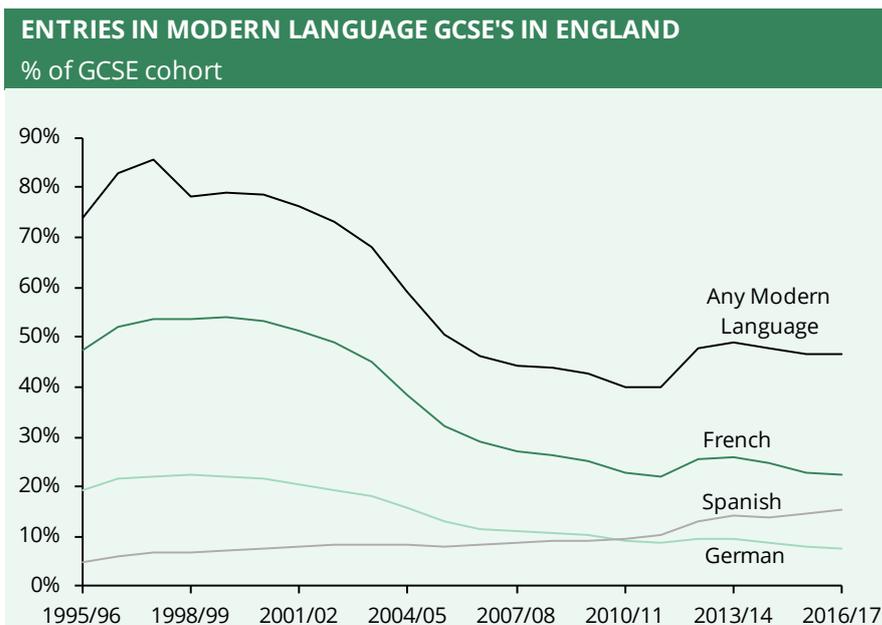
5.1 Student numbers

GCSE

In 2016/17 273,000 pupils in England entered one or more modern foreign language at GCSE. This was under half (46%) of all pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 across all types of schools. French is still the most popular language with 131,000 entries, followed by Spanish (91,000), and German (45,000).⁵⁴

Entry patterns over the past two decades are shown in the chart below and the first table at the end of this section. In the mid-1990s more than 80% of GCSE pupils took one or more modern language, more than half took French and more than 20% German. Since the turn of the century, entries have fallen with a particularly rapid decline between 2001/02 and 2006/07. This was driven by similar (proportionate) drops in entries for both French and German. The pace of decline slowed after 2006/07.

There was a clear jump in the entry rate in 2012/13. This was the first cohort which had a sufficient time to choose subjects that met the English Baccalaureate criteria,⁵⁵ which was introduced in late 2010 and included languages. The proportion of students who entered one or more modern language continued to increase and peaked at 49% in 2013/14. However, this was still well below rates seen in the early 2000's.



Source

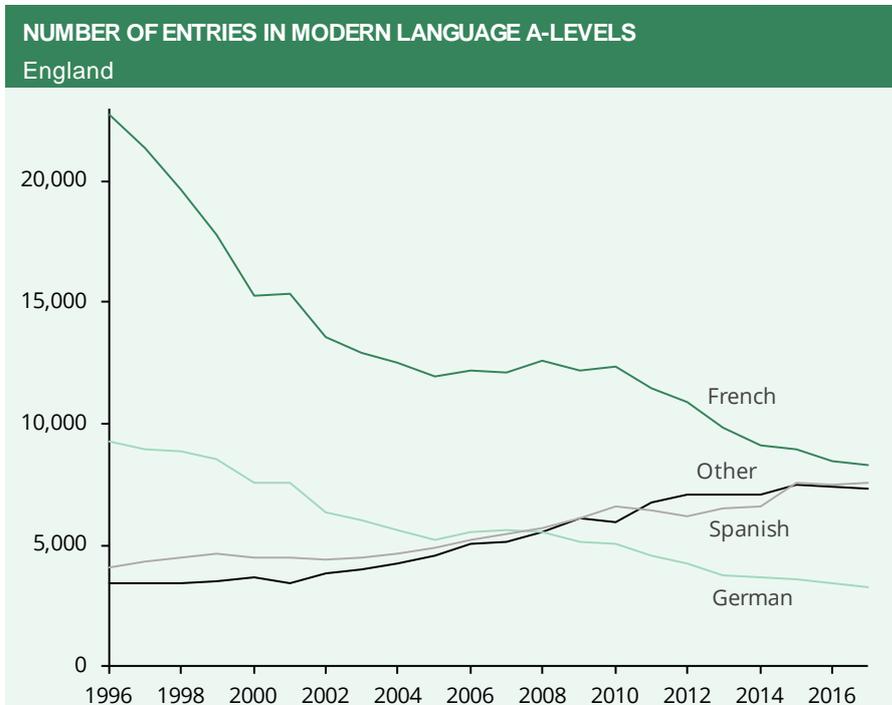
[GCSE Results in England \(subject tables\): various years, DfE](#)

⁵⁴ [GCSE Results in England \(subject tables\): 2016/17, DfE](#)

⁵⁵ Passes at C or better in English, mathematics, sciences, a language (including Latin, classical Greek or ancient Hebrew) and a humanities subject (history or geography).

The exception to the overall downward trend among the main languages was Spanish which has grown consistently from 5% of pupils in the mid-1990s, to 15% in 2016/17. It overtook German as the second largest language at GCSE in 2010/11.

A-Level



Source

[A-Level Results: various years, DfE](#)

Patterns in modern language entry at A-level are shown in the chart above and in the second table at the end of this section. The broad direction of trends are similar to GCSE's, with a long term drop in French and German entries, and an increase in Spanish and 'other'. The period of particularly rapid decline in French shown here, was during the late 1990s, where entries fell from almost 23,000 to just over 15,000. Spanish overtook German as the second most common modern language at A-level in 2008, and was only around 700 entries below French in 2017.

These figures cover a period where the total number of A-level entries generally increased. Please also note the rate given in the table below is the proportion of all *subject* entries, not all A-level *entrants*, so is not directly comparable to the GCSE figures in the previous section. If modern language entries are summed then they made up 6.4% total entries in 1996, 4.6% in 2000 and less than 4.0% from 2009 onwards.

28 Language teaching in schools (England)

GCSE ENTRIES IN MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES								
England								
	Entries (thousands)				% of pupils in GCSE cohort			
	French	German	Spanish	Any	French	German	Spanish	Any
1995/96	281	115	29	439	47%	19%	5%	74%
1996/97	306	128	34	486	52%	22%	6%	83%
1997/98	307	127	39	492	53%	22%	7%	86%
1998/99	311	130	40	455	54%	22%	7%	78%
1999/00	313	127	42	459	54%	22%	7%	79%
2000/01	321	131	46	473	53%	22%	8%	78%
2001/02	312	125	48	462	51%	21%	8%	76%
2002/03	305	121	51	454	49%	19%	8%	73%
2003/04	290	116	54	437	45%	18%	8%	68%
2004/05	245	99	52	375	38%	16%	8%	59%
2005/06	210	85	52	327	32%	13%	8%	50%
2006/07	190	76	54	302	29%	12%	8%	46%
2007/08	176	71	57	289	27%	11%	9%	44%
2008/09	167	68	57	279	26%	11%	9%	44%
2009/10	161	66	58	273	25%	10%	9%	43%
2010/11	142	58	59	251	23%	9%	9%	40%
2011/12	136	55	63	249	22%	9%	10%	40%
2012/13	162	60	83	302	26%	10%	13%	48%
2013/14	161	58	87	304	26%	9%	14%	49%
2014/15	151	53	85	291	25%	9%	14%	48%
2015/16	137	48	88	279	23%	8%	15%	46%
2016/17	131	45	91	273	22%	8%	15%	46%

Source

[GCSE Results in England \(subject tables\): various years, DfE](#)

A-LEVEL ENTRIES IN MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES						
England, 16-18 year olds						
	French	German	Spanish	Other	as a % of all	
					All	entries
1996	22,718	9,306	4,095	3,435	39,554	6.4%
1997	21,364	8,984	4,328	3,473	38,149	5.8%
1998	19,629	8,903	4,499	3,457	36,488	5.4%
1999	17,774	8,527	4,640	3,499	34,440	5.1%
2000	15,240	7,581	4,516	3,660	30,997	4.6%
2001	15,393	7,607	4,501	3,409	30,910	4.5%
2002	13,599	6,367	4,430	3,860	28,256	4.4%
2003	12,904	6,068	4,504	3,999	27,475	4.1%
2004	12,480	5,643	4,650	4,279	27,052	4.0%
2005	11,963	5,238	4,930	4,534	26,665	3.9%
2006	12,190	5,534	5,202	5,084	28,010	3.9%
2007	12,152	5,615	5,491	5,119	28,377	3.9%
2008	12,605	5,560	5,728	5,530	29,423	4.0%
2009	12,231	5,119	6,089	6,090	29,529	3.9%
2010	12,324	5,055	6,564	5,912	29,855	3.8%
2011	11,490	4,554	6,398	6,799	29,241	3.7%
2012	10,871	4,208	6,198	7,099	28,376	3.6%
2013	9,878	3,774	6,516	7,084	27,252	3.5%
2014	9,078	3,716	6,617	7,066	26,477	3.6%
2015	8,991	3,624	7,607	7,510	27,732	3.7%
2016	8,459	3,446	7,455	7,436	26,796	3.6%
2017	8,306	3,281	7,566	7,359	26,512	3.6%

Source

[A-Level Results: various years, DfE](#)

5.2 Language teachers

In November 2017 there were 12,300 teachers in state funded secondary schools in England who taught some French lessons, 7,700 Spanish, 3,900 German and 2,000 other modern languages.⁵⁶ Teacher numbers have followed exam entry trends with a fall in French and German teachers (and the hours they teach) and an increase in Spanish teachers since 2010. The number of teachers in 'other' modern languages also fell despite the increase in exam entries.

The rates of language teachers without a 'relevant' post-A Level qualification in their subject, are higher than the secondary teachers in state schools average (around 34% compared to an average of around 25%). However, this average masks varying rates within the different languages. 23% of French teachers did not have a relevant post-A level qualification in the subject compared to 28% of German, 48% of Spanish, and 53% of other modern language teachers. These high rates are in very large part due to teachers who are native speakers in their subjects but do not hold a formal 'relevant' qualification in it.

In November 2017 there were 100 full-time vacancies or temporarily filled posts for secondary language teachers in state schools in England. This was a vacancy rate as a proportion of teachers in post of 1.0%. This is the highest rate recorded since 2010 (when the vacancy rate was 0.3%). The language teacher vacancy rate in 2017 is slightly below the rate for all secondary classroom teachers (1.1%), subjects with higher vacancy rates include maths (1.4%) and science (1.5%).⁵⁷

⁵⁶ These are headcounts and some teachers will be counted under more than one language category

⁵⁷ [School workforce in England: November 2017, DfE](#)

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