

Research Briefing

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# Language teaching in schools (England)



## Summary

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## 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.

Language learning in England is consistently poor when compared with foreign language learning in other countries. The [European Commission's Flash Barometer Report](#) found that in April 2018, 32% of UK 15-30 year olds felt confident reading and writing in two or more languages, compared to 79% in France, 91% in Germany, and 80% on average across EU member states (p.42). There have been regular calls from industry and educational bodies for the levels of attainment to be raised.

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. A [2016 report](#) by Ofsted also raised concerns on language teaching in primary schools.

Most 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.

[In academic year 2022/23 there were around 313,000 entries in modern language GCSEs in England.](#) This was around 47% of the number of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 across all types of schools (this is not the same as 47% of pupils taking a modern language because some pupils might take more than one modern language). This compares to around 86% in 1997/98. The decline over this period has been driven by fewer entries in French and German which have only been partially offset by increases in Spanish. [A-Level entries have followed similar trends.](#)

The Government has previously set out plans for most pupils to be required to take a GCSE in a modern language under plans for the English Baccalaureate ([EBacc](#)) to be taken by 75% of year 10 pupils by September 2022, and 90% of pupils by 2025.

Modern language teacher trainee recruitment for secondary schools as measured by [the 2023/24 Initial Teacher Training \(ITT\) census](#) was below the average for secondary school teachers. In 2023/24 there were 974 new postgraduate entrants to ITT for modern languages. This was 1,986 teachers

(or 67%) below the target. For all secondary subjects recruitment was 50% below target.

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

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# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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. It should enable pupils to understand and communicate ideas, facts and feelings in speech and writing, focused on familiar and routine matters, using their knowledge of phonology, grammatical structures and vocabulary.<sup>2</sup>

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. Teaching should focus on developing the breadth and depth of pupils’ competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing, based on a sound foundation of core grammar and vocabulary. It should enable pupils to understand and communicate personal and factual information that goes beyond their immediate needs and interests, developing and justifying points of view in speech and writing, with increased spontaneity, independence and accuracy. It should provide suitable preparation for further study.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, [National Curriculum framework document](#), December 2014, p8

<sup>2</sup> Department for Education, [National Curriculum framework document](#), December 2014, p253

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, [National Curriculum framework document](#), December 2014, p255

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](#) provides background.

## 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:

- listen attentively to spoken language and show understanding by joining in and responding
- explore the patterns and sounds of language through songs and rhymes and link the spelling, sound and meaning of words
- engage in conversations; ask and answer questions; express opinions and respond to those of others; seek clarification and help\*
- speak in sentences, using familiar vocabulary, phrases and basic language structures
- develop accurate pronunciation and intonation so that others understand when they are reading aloud or using familiar words and phrases\*
- present ideas and information orally to a range of audiences\*
- read carefully and show understanding of words, phrases and simple writing
- appreciate stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language
- broaden their vocabulary and develop their ability to understand new words that are introduced into familiar written material, including through using a dictionary
- write phrases from memory, and adapt these to create new sentences, to express ideas clearly
- describe people, places, things and actions orally\* and in writing
- 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

Pupils should be taught to:

Grammar and vocabulary

- identify and use tenses or other structures which convey the present, past, and future as appropriate to the language being studied
- use and manipulate a variety of key grammatical structures and patterns, including voices and moods, as appropriate
- 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
- use accurate grammar, spelling and punctuation

Linguistic competence

- listen to a variety of forms of spoken language to obtain information and respond appropriately
- transcribe words and short sentences that they hear with increasing accuracy
- initiate and develop conversations, coping with unfamiliar language and unexpected responses, making use of important social conventions such as formal modes of address
- express and develop ideas clearly and with increasing accuracy, both orally and in writing
- speak coherently and confidently, with increasingly accurate pronunciation and intonation
- 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
- 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

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

- 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 language<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 Academies and Free Schools

Academies and free schools are state-funded schools managed by trusts and outside of local authority control. They make up a majority of the secondary schools in England and 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

### Coalition Government reforms and current 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:

- [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](#)

Separate guidance has been published on subject content for [AS and A level languages with smaller cohorts](#).

### Further reforms: revised GCSEs from 2024

In 2021, the Government ran a [consultation on revised GCSE subject content](#) for French, German, and Spanish. The Government's response was published in January 2022. The response stated that the revised content aimed to clearly define GCSE content in these languages, to enable teachers to define

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

courses towards the related examinations. It aimed for the revised GCSEs to provide “strong foundations in the building blocks of language expertise, in particular vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling and grammar.”<sup>6</sup>

An [Ofqual consultation](#) on GCSE qualification changes ran at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

In a [blog on the changes](#), the Department for Education said that these reforms aimed to make the material pupils learn easier to apply in real-life situations.<sup>8</sup>

These changes will take effect from September 2024, with the first exams being held in summer 2026 – a delay of a year from the original proposals.

The reforms were questioned by some within the sector. Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said that a “curriculum which mainly focuses on memorising a long list of words will alienate pupils and prove counter-productive.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2022, the Department for Education ran a further consultation on the [permanent removal of the expectation that students engage with unfamiliar and abstract material in modern foreign language GCSEs](#). Following the consultation, the Government decided to proceed with the change.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Department for Education, [French, German and Spanish subject content review GCSE Government consultation response](#), January 2022, p3

<sup>7</sup> Ofqual, [Revised GCSE qualifications in modern foreign languages](#), 14 January 2022

<sup>8</sup> Department for Education, [How we’re making language lessons more accessible and relevant](#), 14 January 2022; see also Department for Education, [Reforms to encourage more students to take up language GCSEs](#), 14 January 2022

<sup>9</sup> Schools Week, [‘Risky’ MFL GCSE reforms get go ahead – but delayed for a year](#), 14 January 2022

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education, [Changes to the subject content for modern foreign language GCSEs](#), 5 December 2022

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## 2 Quality of provision, levels of attainment

### 2.1 Ofsted reports

#### 2021 Review of Languages

In June 2021, Ofsted published a [research review on languages](#) in schools. The report stressed the importance of languages, but identified several key obstacles to success in the system:

The proportion of boys, disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND engaging in languages after key stage 3 is low. Staff expertise, curriculum planning, time allocation and transition are barriers at key stage 2. Transition and staffing continue to be a challenge throughout the system. Yet, languages are the key to not only the government's EBacc ambition, but also to unlocking the world and its cultures to young people.<sup>11</sup>

#### 2015-16 reports

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 [Modern Foreign Languages], 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

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<sup>11</sup> Ofsted, [Research review series: languages](#), 7 June 2021

Stage 3 provision in these subjects will be crucial to raising the EBacc success rate in the coming years (p5).<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

## 2011 report on modern languages provision

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 (p6).

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

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<sup>12</sup> A summary of findings available at Ofsted, [Too many students let down in early stages of secondary school](#), 10 September 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Ofsted, [Foreign languages and science provision in primary schools](#), 19 May 2016

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 (pp6-7).

## 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.

[Bursaries](#) are also available for trainee language teachers. Languages trainees may receive a £25,000 bursary or a £27,000 scholarship, on a par with trainee teachers in biology, but slightly lower than some trainees – for example, trainee teachers in physics or chemistry may receive bursaries of £28,000 or scholarships of £30,000.<sup>14</sup> Bursary and scholarship levels vary year-to-year, depending on shortages in differing subjects.

[Early career payments](#) of £2,000 are also available for language teachers, uplifted to £3,000 in some areas.<sup>15</sup>

Broader background on support for trainee teachers is available in the Library briefing [Initial teacher training in England](#), SN06710.

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<sup>14</sup> Department for Education Get Into Teaching, [Bursaries and funding](#)

<sup>15</sup> Department for Education, [Early-career payments for teachers](#), 25 September 2023

## 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.3

## European survey on language competences (2013)

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."<sup>18</sup> 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%.<sup>19</sup>

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

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<sup>16</sup> Ofsted, [Modern languages: achievement and challenge 2007-10](#), January 2011

<sup>17</sup> Ofsted, [Key Stage 3: the wasted years?](#), September 2015, p5

<sup>18</sup> National Foundation for Educational Research, [European Survey on Language Competencies: Language Proficiency in England](#), February 2013, p18

<sup>19</sup> BBC News, [Pupils in England worst for using languages independently](#), 21 June 2012

We do feel that we need to redress the situation in languages. The European Survey on Language Competences in 2012 showed us that our 2011 GCSE students were the worst at languages across all the countries surveyed.<sup>20</sup>

A European-wide language survey from 2018 is discussed in section 5.1 of this briefing paper.

## 2.4 British Council report: Language Trends (2023)

The British Council publishes an annual [Language trends report](#) which looks at aspects of the language teaching landscape. In 2023 the report found that:

- Almost nine out of ten responding primary schools have some pupils for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL)
- The 2023 data reflect a positive increase in the number of primary schools in contact with secondary schools concerning language education
- French remains the most popular language at Key Stage 3, followed closely by Spanish in both state and independent sectors
- German is the third most popular curricular language, but entries are much higher in the independent sector
- For the fourth year running, Spanish continues to have the highest number of A-level entries
- Schools' international engagement is improving following the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> [HL Deb 26 Jan 2015 c9](#)

<sup>21</sup> British Council, [Language Trends 2023: Language teaching in primary and secondary schools in England](#), June 2023



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## 3 English Baccalaureate and Progress 8

### 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.”<sup>22</sup>

### 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.<sup>23</sup>

On 16 June 2015, the then Education Secretary Nicky Morgan made a [speech](#) outlining the new Government’s plans.<sup>24</sup> The accompanying DfE [press notice](#)

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<sup>22</sup> [HL Deb 26 Jan 2015 c8](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Conservative Party Manifesto 2015](#), p34

<sup>24</sup> Department for Education, [Preparing children for a successful future through the Ebacc](#), 16 June 2015

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

### 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.

Current study of languages remains well beneath these targets. In 2022/23 there were around 313,000 entries in modern language GCSEs in England.<sup>27</sup> This was around 47% of the number of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 across all types of schools (this is not the same as 47% of pupils taking a modern language because some pupils might take more than one modern language). Further information on entries is available in section 6 of this briefing.

## Supply of language teachers: concerns and consultation

Concerns were 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.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Department for Education, [New reforms to raise standards and improve behaviour](#), 16 June 2015

<sup>26</sup> [Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2017](#), p51

<sup>27</sup> Includes French, Spanish, German, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Dutch, Gujrati, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Turkish, Urdu, Welsh, and "other".

<sup>28</sup> 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

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.<sup>29</sup>

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 teachers<sup>30</sup>

Education Datalab [estimated](#) in March 2016 that 3,400 new language teachers would be required to deliver an “EBacc for all.”<sup>31</sup>

In January 2024, Education Datalab estimated that the [maximum number of children](#) who could have been entered for languages GCSEs in 2023 without adding extra classes (and therefore teachers) was 58%.<sup>32</sup>

## 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.

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

<sup>30</sup> Department for Education, [Implementing the English Baccalaureate Government consultation response](#), July 2017, p18-19

<sup>31</sup> Education Datalab, [Revisiting how many language teachers we need to deliver the EBacc](#), 11 March 2016

<sup>32</sup> Education Datalab, [Incentivising GCSE language take-up – what difference will it make?](#), 11 January 2024

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).<sup>33</sup>

## 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 measures 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](#) (PDF) 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](#) provides further information on Progress 8 (see section 3.2) and broader reforms.

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<sup>33</sup> Department for Education, [Consolidated annual report and accounts 2018/19](#), July 2019, p33

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## 4 Other issues

### 4.1 Ofqual review of Modern Foreign Language marking and Content

In November 2019, the exam regulator Ofqual [announced](#) that grading standards in French and German would be brought into line with other GCSE subjects, and would discuss with exam boards about how to implement this adjustment.

The decision to review grading standards was in response to concerns of teachers and others that fewer numbers of students were choosing to study modern foreign language (MFL) GCSEs because of a perception that they were more difficult than other subjects and that it was comparatively harder for students to achieve the highest grades. The Ofqual [investigation](#) into grading standards in GCSE French, German and Spanish concluded that whilst GCSE Spanish was graded in line with other GCSEs, German and French were found to be “consistently harder than other GCSE subjects” and were more “severely graded” compared to other GCSEs.<sup>34</sup>

In November 2018, Ofqual announced after a similar review process that there was not a compelling case for adjusting the grading standards of A-Level MFL subjects.<sup>35</sup>

### 4.2 National Centre for Excellence

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 following 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

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<sup>34</sup> Ofqual, [Inter-subject comparability in GCSE modern foreign languages](#), 5 November 2019; Ofqual, [Analysis and decisions document: Grading standards in GCSE French, German and Spanish](#) (November 2019)

<sup>35</sup> Ofqual, [Inter-subject comparability in A Level sciences and modern foreign languages](#) (November 2018), p5

schools and sharing best practice - to boost the teaching of Spanish, French and German.”<sup>36</sup>

The then Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, said that the modern foreign languages pedagogy pilot being run by centre through these hubs aimed “to improve uptake and attainment in languages at Key Stages 3 and 4, and to share best practice especially in disadvantaged areas.”<sup>37</sup>

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

In November 2022, the Government announced that leading schools in language teaching would form a [new Centre of Excellence](#), comprised of up to 25 schools, which will work with other schools to improve standards of language teaching across the country, building on the earlier programme.<sup>38</sup>

## 4.3 Languages Hubs

Following the work done by the centre of excellence (see previous section), in March 2023, the Department for Education announced that the Institute of Education at the University of London had won a £14.9 million contract to run its [Language Hubs programme in primary and secondary schools](#) over the following three years.<sup>39</sup> ‘Hubs’ are a common means promoted by the Department for Education to develop expertise in several subjects, including English, maths, and computing.<sup>40</sup>

In September 2023, the Department for Education announced [that 15 schools had been selected](#) to lead on improving the teaching of modern foreign languages. A further 10 schools are also set to be selected in a second recruitment round in January 2024.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Department for Education, [New centre for excellence to boost modern foreign language skills](#), 10 January 2019

<sup>37</sup> [PQ 267221, 28 June 2019](#)

<sup>38</sup> Department for Education, [Millions invested in language lessons](#), 14 November 2022

<sup>39</sup> Department for Education, [German given boost as part of new schools language programme](#), 3 March 2023

<sup>40</sup> Department for Education, [Subject hubs](#), April 2023

<sup>41</sup> Department for Education, [More pupils of all ages to study languages](#), 14 September 2023

## 4.4

# Teaching community and less-commonly spoken languages

## Withdrawal of languages at GCSE level and Government action

In 2014, several exam boards decided to withdraw GCSE and A level qualifications in several less-commonly spoken languages. 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.<sup>42</sup>

In July 2015 the then 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.<sup>43</sup>

## 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

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<sup>42</sup> [HC Deb 24 March 2015 c1398-1412](#)

<sup>43</sup> Department for Education, [Future of community language qualifications secured](#), 22 July 2015

- Panjabi
- Polish
- Portuguese
- Turkish
- Urdu<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup>

## 4.5 Mandarin and Latin Excellence Programmes

### Mandarin 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.<sup>46</sup>

The subsequent [Mandarin Excellence Programme](#), introduced in September 2016, is delivered by the UCL Institute of Education in partnership with the British Council. The programme will continue to be run until 2024.

The programme offers £20,000 of funding to up to 75 secondary schools rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, who can ensure students study Mandarin for an average of 8 hours per week, with a minimum of 4 hours face to face teaching.<sup>47</sup>

In March 2023, the Government announced that the programme would be expanded, and recruit an additional 21 schools over the next two years to reach an expected 100 participating schools by September 2024.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Department for Education, [Community languages saved to ensure diverse curriculum continues](#), 22 April 2016

<sup>45</sup> Pearson, [A statement from Pearson on GCSE and A-level Persian](#), 18 May 2016

<sup>46</sup> BBC News, [Mandarin lessons to get £10m boost, says Chancellor](#), 22 September 2015

<sup>47</sup> Department for Education, [Join the Mandarin Excellence Programme](#), 26 May 2022

<sup>48</sup> Department for Education, [German given boost as part of new schools language programme](#), 3 March 2023



## Latin programme

In July 2021, the Government announced a £4million [Latin Excellence Programme](#), modelled on the Mandarin programme.<sup>49</sup> The programme is delivered by the [Centre for Latin Excellence](#).

General [information on the programme](#) is available from the Department for Education.

## 4.6

## British Sign Language (BSL)

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

A petition to the UK Parliament 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?

There have been campaigns 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 that Parliament, although it was open to a BSL GCSE in the longer term. The bar on new qualifications was intended to allow schools a period of stability, following wide-ranging reforms to GCSEs that have taken place in recent years.<sup>50</sup>

However, the Government [reversed this position](#) in August 2018. 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.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Department for Education, [Thousands more students to learn ancient and modern languages](#), 31 July 2021

<sup>50</sup> [HC Deb 5 March 2018 c19WH](#)

<sup>51</sup> BBC News, [British Sign Language: GCSE plan after boy's campaign](#), 2 August 2018

## 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, Lord Agnew, stated that the Department for Education and Ofqual had received a proposal for a BSL GCSE from the exam board Signature.<sup>52</sup>

In February 2022, the Government stated that it intended to introduce a BSL GCSE “as soon as possible” and that it was working with subject experts and Ofqual on draft subject content, with plans to consult on that content later in 2022.<sup>53</sup>

A [consultation on GCSE qualifications in British Sign Language](#) ran between June and September 2023.<sup>54</sup>

In December 2023, the DfE published its [decisions from the consultation](#), confirming the structure of assessment for the GCSE. It said that Ofqual would consult further on details of the qualification in 2024.<sup>55</sup>

[Subject content for the new British Sign Language GCSE](#) was published alongside the consultation response.

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<sup>52</sup> [PQ HL13975, 8 Mar 2019](#)

<sup>53</sup> [PQ 125139, 18 Feb 2022](#)

<sup>54</sup> Department for Education, [British Sign Language GCSE moves one step closer to the classroom](#), 15 June 2023

<sup>55</sup> Department for Education, [Decisions: GCSE qualifications in British Sign Language](#), 21 December 2023

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## 5 Reports and commentary

### 5.1 Higher Education Policy Institute, A languages crisis? (2020)

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) [Report](#) used EU survey data of the language skills of 15-30 years old to argue there was a strong case to “be made for the ‘crisis’ of languages to be treated with greater urgency” than many other humanities subjects.<sup>56</sup>

The [European Commission’s Flash Barometer Report](#) the HEPI referenced found that in April 2018 32% of UK 15-30 year olds felt confident reading and writing in two or more languages, compared to 79% in France, 91% in Germany, and 80% on average across EU member states.<sup>57</sup>

The HEPI’s key recommendations were that the UK Governments should strengthen the place of languages in the curriculum and how they were taught in schools:

- GCSE and A-Level courses should be more varied and appealing, featuring coursework as well as examination assessment
- Learning an ancient or modern foreign language should be made compulsory up to Key Stage 4 (KS4), with accreditation (either a GCSE / National, or alternative vocational or community language qualification) encouraged but optional
- Policymakers should introduce measures to increase teaching staff numbers, such as conditional financial incentives, and including all language teachers on the Shortage Occupations List
- Where tuition fees exist, they should be supplemented with additional government funding to safeguard provision of minority languages, and facilitate free additional language learning for any students and staff members.<sup>58</sup>

The report also briefly described the state of language teaching in the devolved school systems in the UK.<sup>59</sup> Based on this, the HEPI recommended that:

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<sup>56</sup> HEPI, [A languages crisis?, HEPI report 123](#), January 2020, p10

<sup>57</sup> [Ibid.](#), p42

<sup>58</sup> [Ibid.](#), p8

<sup>59</sup> [Ibid.](#), pp28-31

At Primary level, the rest of the UK should take note of Scottish and Welsh precedents. Northern Irish schools should also introduce language-learning as a compulsory activity, and a commitment and guidance scheme like Scotland's '1 + 2' should be applied in each part of the UK. UK primary schools should also apply the 'plurilingual' method Wales is preparing to introduce, integrating languages and cultures into usual classroom activities.<sup>60</sup>

Scotland's '1+2' system is a framework where a pupil learns English and 2 additional languages, the first additional language from the first year of primary school, and the second from the fifth year of primary. The policy is expected to be fully implemented across Scotland by August 2021.<sup>61</sup> The Welsh 'plurilingual' method means students and learners are encouraged to use both Welsh and English languages throughout the curriculum. Currently the study of Welsh is compulsory in all Welsh maintained schools, but from 2022 English and Welsh will no longer be treated as first and second languages. This is in addition to learning a foreign modern language.<sup>62</sup>

## 5.2 AHRC policy briefing (2019)

In January 2019, AHRC Modern Languages Leadership Fellow (Janice Carruthers) and the PI of the OWRI MEITS project (Wendy Ayres-Bennett) published a policy briefing on [Modern Languages Educational Policy across the UK](#).

The briefing made a number of short and medium term recommendations, including financial incentives for schools to offer languages at A level, a joined up strategy for retention and recruitment of language teachers across the UK, and for alternative qualifications to GCSE and A Level should be developed, to give a wider range of choice for language assessment.<sup>63</sup>

## 5.3 CBI survey of employers' views (2019)

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has consistently raised concerns about levels of competence in foreign languages in the workforce. Its [2019 education and skills survey](#), published with Pearson, stated foreign languages and cultural understanding "will be vital for 'Global Britain'". The major European languages continue to be in demand amongst employers

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<sup>60</sup> [Ibid](#), p49

<sup>61</sup> Scottish Government, [Language learning in Scotland A 1+2 approach](#), May 2012; Education Scotland, [A 1+2 approach to modern languages](#), July 2019

<sup>62</sup> Welsh Government, ['Learners to experience new languages at an earlier age- Kirsty Williams'](#), 18 January 2019

<sup>63</sup> AHRC, [Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, transforming society](#),

who need employees with languages other than English, led by German (37%), Spanish (35%) and French (32%).<sup>64</sup>

## 5.4

### Cambridge University report: The value of languages (2016)

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.<sup>65</sup>

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
- 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 UK<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> CBI/Pearson, [Education and learning for the modern world](#), November 2019, p26

<sup>65</sup> University of Cambridge, [The Value of Languages](#), May 2016, p23

<sup>66</sup> [Ibid.](#), p3

## 5.5

## All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (2014 & 2019)

### 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.”<sup>67</sup> It called for political parties to support a Framework for National Recovery in Language Learning in their 2015 General Election manifestos, advocating:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.<sup>68</sup>

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

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<sup>67</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, [Manifesto for Languages](#), July 2014

<sup>68</sup> [Ibid.](#)

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 languages.<sup>69</sup>

## 5.6

### British Council: Languages for the Future report (2013 & 2017)

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

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<sup>69</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, [National Recovery Programme for Languages](#), March 2019

capability in languages is incontestable,”<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup>

[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.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> British Council, [Languages for the Future: Which languages the UK needs most and why](#), November 2013, p6

<sup>71</sup> [Ibid.](#), p19

<sup>72</sup> British Council, [Languages for the Future: The foreign languages the United Kingdom needs to become a truly global nation](#), November 2017, p4



## 6 Statistics: modern language entries and teacher numbers

### 6.1 Entries

#### GCSE entries

The Department for Education has published provisional GCSE entry data for academic year 2022/23, this is subject to revision. In 2022/23 there were around 313,000 entries in modern language GCSEs in England.<sup>73</sup> This was around 47% of the number of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 across all types of schools (this is not the same as 47% of pupils taking a modern language because some pupils might take more than one modern language). All the subject level data below is also presented on this basis.

French is still the most popular language with around 125,000 entries (19% of all pupils at the end of Key Stage 4), followed closely by Spanish (120,000 entries or 18% of pupils), and the third most popular language is German (34,000 or 5% of pupils).<sup>74</sup>

Entry trends since the mid-1990s are shown in the chart below. The number of modern language GCSEs as a proportion of all pupils at the end of key stage 4 peaked in 1997/98 at 86%. At this time more than half of pupils took French and more than 20% took German. However, since the year 2000, entries have fallen with a particularly rapid decline between 2001/02 and 2006/07 (the entry rate for languages fell from 76% to 46%). This was driven by similar (proportionate) drops in entries for both French and German. Since 2006/07 the pace of decline has slowed.<sup>75</sup>

There was a clear jump in the entry rate in 2012/13 (although this only partially offset the declines recorded in previous years). One reason for this increase is likely because 2012/13 were the first cohort which had sufficient

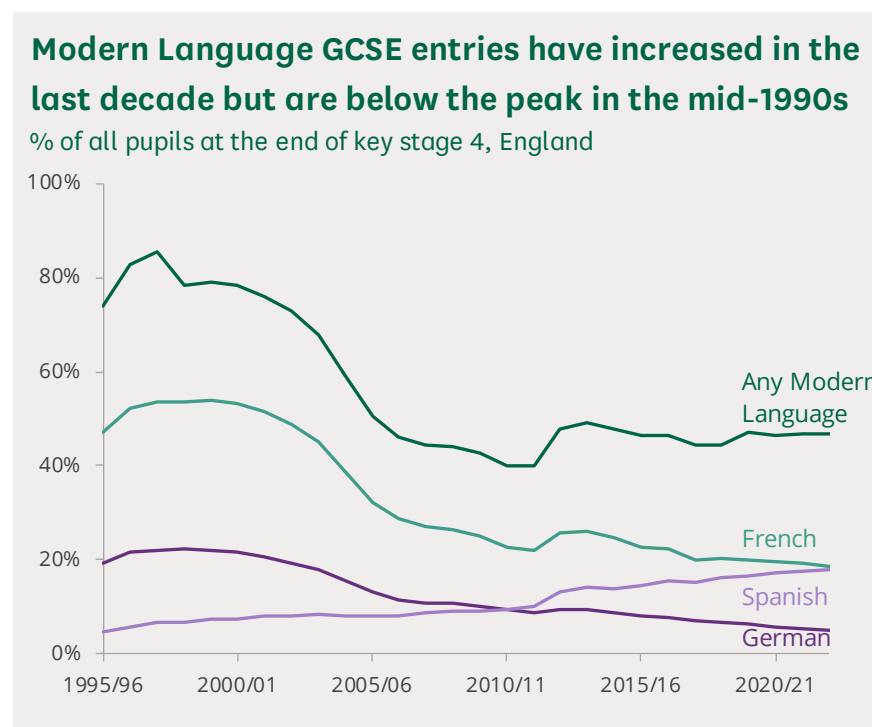
<sup>73</sup> Includes French, Spanish, German, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Dutch, Gujrati, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Turkish, Urdu, Welsh, and “other”.

<sup>74</sup> Department for Education, [GCSE Results in England \(subject tables\): various years](#)

<sup>75</sup> Department for Education, [GCSE Results in England \(subject tables\): various years. There have been changes to the way entries are reported over time which affects comparability. For example from 2014/15 GCSE entries were discounted for performance tables purposes.](#)

time to choose subjects that met the [English Baccalaureate criteria](#),<sup>76</sup> which was introduced in late 2010 and included languages.<sup>77</sup>

The exception to the overall downward trend among the main languages since the mid-1990s has been Spanish, which has increased from around 5% of pupils in 1995/96, to around 18% in 2020/21. It overtook German as the second most popular language in 2010/11 and is currently very close to converging with French.<sup>78</sup>



Note:

There have been changes to the way entries are reported over time which affects comparability. For example, between 2010/11 and 2014/15 GCSE the DfE introduced [discounting of GCSE entries](#) for performance tables purposes on a phased basis.

Source: Department for Education, [GCSE Results in England \(subject tables\): various years](#)

## A-Level entries

The Department for Education has published provisional A-Level entry data for academic year 2022/23, this is subject to revision. In academic year 2022/23 there were around 20,900 A-Level entries in modern languages.<sup>79</sup> This was 2.7% of all A-Level entries by 16-18 year olds in schools and colleges

<sup>76</sup> At that time passes at letter grade C or better in English, mathematics, sciences, a language (including Latin, classical Greek or ancient Hebrew) and a humanities subject (history or geography).

<sup>77</sup> Department for Education, [GCSE Results in England \(subject tables\): various years](#)

<sup>78</sup> Department for Education, [GCSE Results in England \(subject tables\): various years](#)

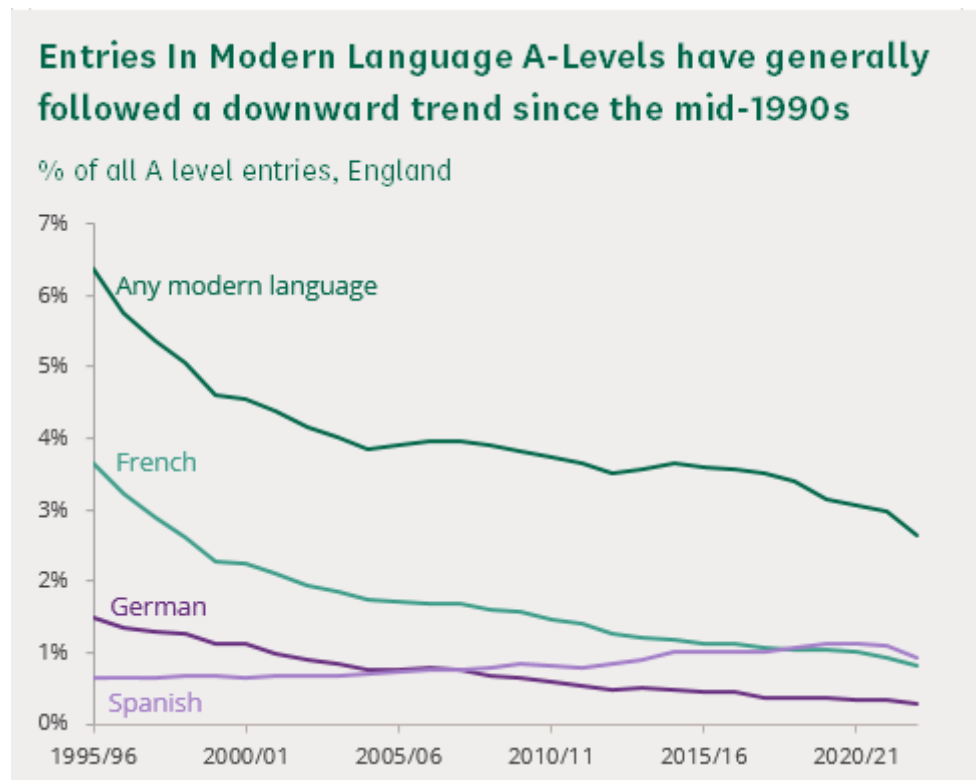
<sup>79</sup> Department for Education, [A level and other 16 to 18 results](#), 16 November 2023. Modern languages includes French, Spanish, German, and “other” (Dutch, Japanese, Gujrati, Arabic, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Turkish, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Portuguese, Persian, Irish, Italian, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Welsh (second language)).

in England. This rate is the proportion of all subject entries, not A-level entrants, so is not comparable to the GCSE figures in the previous section.

As has been the case in recent years, Spanish was the most popular single language with around 7,300 entries (0.9% of all A-Level entries), followed by French (around 6,400 entries or 0.8% of entries), and German (around 2,200 entries or 0.3% of entries).<sup>80</sup>

Entry trends over the past two decades are shown in the chart below. The broad direction of trends is similar to GCSEs, with a long-term decline in French and German entries, and an increase in Spanish. The period of particularly rapid decline in French was during the late 1990s, where entries fell from around 22,700 in 1995/96 (3.7% of entries) to around 15,400 in 2000/01 (2.3% of entries).

Spanish overtook German as the second most common modern language at A-level in 2007/08, and then overtook French to become the most common in 2018/19.<sup>81</sup>



Note:

Entry data for all pupils aged 16-18 in schools and colleges in England.

Source:

Department for Education, [A-Level and other 16 to 18 results: various years](#)

<sup>80</sup> Department for Education, [A-Level and other 16 to 18 results: various years](#)

<sup>81</sup> Department for Education, [A-Level and other 16 to 18 results: various years](#)

## 6.2

## Language teachers

In November 2022 there were around 17,500 teachers in state-funded secondary schools who taught some modern language lessons (7.6% of secondary school teachers). 11,800 were recorded as teaching some French lessons, 9,100 Spanish, 3,100 German, and 1,900 ‘other’ modern languages.<sup>82</sup>

Between November 2011 and 2022, teacher numbers have broadly followed exam entry trends with a fall in French and German teachers (a decline of 23% and 44% respectively), and an increase in Spanish teachers (a 34% increase). The number of teachers teaching ‘other’ modern language lessons also fell over this period (a decline of 42%) despite the increase in exam entries.<sup>83</sup>

In November 2021 there were 201 vacancies for modern language teachers in state-funded secondary schools. Of these 76 were for French (a vacancy rate of 0.7%), 49 were for Spanish (a vacancy rate of 0.6%), 3 were for German (a vacancy rate of 0.1%), and 73 were for “other” modern languages (a vacancy rate of 4.0%).<sup>84</sup>

In November 2021, the average classroom teacher vacancy rate across all secondary subjects in LA maintained secondary schools was 0.5%, and in academies it was 0.8%.<sup>85</sup>

A vacancy rate for all state-funded secondary school classroom teachers is not published but it appears that the vacancy rate for French and Spanish is roughly around the averages for local authority maintained secondary schools and for academies. The vacancy rate for German is below average, and the vacancy rate for “other” modern languages is much higher than the average.

### Initial teacher training census 2023/24

The DfE uses a statistical model (the Teacher Workforce Model) to estimate the number of postgraduate teacher trainees required in England in primary

<sup>82</sup> Department for Education, [School workforce in England: 2022](#), 8 June 2023 ([custom table](#) created 14 December 2023) These are headcounts and some teachers will be counted under more than one language category.

<sup>83</sup> Department for Education, [School workforce in England: 2022](#), 8 June 2023 ([custom table](#) created 14 December 2023) These are headcounts and some teachers will be counted under more than one language category.

<sup>84</sup> Department for Education, [School workforce in England: 2022](#), 8 June 2023 ([custom table](#) created 14 December 2023). Modern languages includes French, Spanish, German, and “other” (Dutch, Japanese, Gujrati, Arabic, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Turkish, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Portuguese, Persian, Irish, Italian, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, Welsh (second language)).

<sup>85</sup> Department for Education, [School workforce in England: 2022](#), 8 June 2023 ([custom table](#) created 14 December 2023)

and secondary schools. For secondary school teachers, estimates for each subject are also published.

Modern language teacher trainee recruitment for secondary schools as measured by the 2023/24 Initial Teacher Training (ITT) census was below the average across all secondary subjects.

In 2023/24 there were 974 new postgraduate entrants to ITT for modern languages. This was 1,986 teachers (or 67%) below the target. For all secondary subjects recruitment was 50% below target.<sup>86</sup>

For context, overall teacher recruitment (both primary and secondary schools) as measured by the ITT census was 38% below target. Since 2015/16 the overall target was only reached once. This was in 2020/21 when recruitment was 11% above target. Recruitment also remained relatively high in 2021/22 when it was only slightly below target (3% below target). The relatively high recruitment in these two years was likely due to temporary pandemic related factors.<sup>87</sup>

The House of Commons Library briefing [Teacher recruitment and retention in England](#) provides more detail.

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<sup>86</sup> Department for Education, [Initial teacher training census for the academic year 2015 to 2016](#), England, 19 November 2015, p3; Department for Education, [Initial teacher training: trainee number census 2021 to 2022](#), England, 2 December 2021

<sup>87</sup> Department for Education, [Initial teacher training census for the academic year 2023/24](#), 7 December 2023

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