Chapter 1
The Decline in Uptake of A-level Modern Foreign Languages: Literature Review

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade there has been a steady decline in the number of students studying A-level Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs). For example, in 1996 22,718 students sat A-level French. Ten years later the number had fallen to 12,190. The entry has continued to drop and in 2013 just 9,878 A-level students were entered for the subject. Meanwhile, the number of A-level entries overall has increased by almost 30%: from 323,992 in 1996 to 419,959 in 2013. This report aims to explore the reasons for the drop in A-level MFL entries by examining the overall trends, reviewing research on student motivation in non-native language learning, the difficulty of MFL learning relative to other subjects and the appropriateness of MFL A-level assessments.

1.1. Scope of the Review

The scope of the review is restricted to the situation in England. This is due to the implementation of different devolved education policies impacting on the teaching, learning and assessment of MFLs across the four home countries. For example, in England and Scotland, MFLs will be included in the national curriculum from Key Stage 2 from September 2014. However, in England, schools with Academy status are exempt from the National Curriculum and so are not obliged to offer MFLs. In Northern Ireland, MFLs are compulsory from 11-14 and in Wales, MFLs are compulsory in the 11-14 National Curriculum.

Currently in England, 19 MFL subjects are offered at A-level. The report focuses on three MFLs – French, German and Spanish – as they constitute over 70% of all MFL A-level entries. While making reference to GCSE, the review concentrates on uptake and performance at A-level due to the significant decline in entries. The low numbers of MFL A-level students has also led to a decline in the number of students opting for MFL higher education courses, leading to the closure of some university MFL departments. As the numbers of native speakers entered for A-level MFLs are very low in these three languages, the report does not consider the performance and impact on overall pass rates of native speakers.

1.2. A brief history of MFL policy in England

Key Stage 4 (14-16) has been the focus of most MFL policy changes. There have been few policy drivers implemented to increase post-16 MFL uptake. The Education Act of 1988 stipulated MFLs as a foundation subject, so from the early 1990s all pupils aged 11 to 16 studied a language. MFL study for Key Stages 3 and 4 became compulsory in 1996. Initially, the compulsory status of MFL increased the numbers of students taking non-native languages at GCSE. For example, in 1998 when the first cohort of pupils for whom MFL was compulsory sat their GCSEs, 77% of Year 11 pupils were entered for a GCSE MFL.

However, in 2002 the Labour Government wanted to reduce prescription in the curriculum. This was to allow pupils to study a wider range of qualifications and subjects, with the aim of increasing motivation and encouraging young people to continue in education post 16. One of the changes introduced was to remove the requirement to study an MFL at Key Stage 4. The National Languages Strategy was introduced and MFL entitlement was extended to Key Stage
2 to increase pupils’ aptitude for learning languages by beginning earlier. Nevertheless, the removal of the requirement to study an MFL at Key Stage 4, combined with the fact that learning languages was perceived as unpopular and difficult, led to a major decline in GCSE MFL uptake, with 40% of Year 11 pupils in 2011 taking an MFL compared to 78% in 2001.

In 2010 the Coalition Government introduced the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). This is a measure for school performance tables: it is not a qualification. The aim was to encourage more students to study ‘traditional’ academic rather than vocational subjects to increase progression to Higher Education. The EBacc requires students to gain GCSE grades A*-C in English, maths, science, an MFL and history or geography. The implementation of this measure was in response to concerns about the decline of entries in ‘facilitating’ subjects, including MFLs. The first cohort of students for whom the EBacc applied throughout Key Stage 4 sat their GCSEs in 2013 and there has been an increase in entries across French, German and Spanish (see Figure 2.1). It is too early to determine whether this will also increase the number of students progressing to A-level MFLs. The introduction of accountability measures for post-16 performance from 2016 will pressure schools and colleges to improve their position in the league tables. Accountability measures are known to incentivise schools to enter students for subjects that are more likely to lead to higher grades. This could plausibly further reduce A-level MFL entries.

The Government is currently reforming both GCSE and GCE so that they become more demanding and rigorous in order to increase confidence and credibility in the exam system. New linear GCSEs and GCEs in MFLs will be introduced for first teaching in 2016. There are also plans to make the AS-level a stand-alone qualification separate from A-level.

1.3. The importance of learning other languages

There are many benefits to the individual and society of increased linguistic diversity. These include improved international relations and trade, cultural enrichment, increased social inclusion, and linguistic and educational advantage. As the labour market becomes increasingly international, the impact of poor language skills on ‘UK PLC’ has been highlighted by governments, economists, employers and educationalists. As increasing numbers of the global workforce become competent in English, there remain few advantages of being a monolingual native English speaker. In a recent survey, 70% of a sample of UK employers said that they value MFL skills, particularly in building relations with clients, customers and suppliers. However, 64% of employers were not satisfied with the MFL skills of school and college leavers.

The UK workforce’s lack of MFL skills has been described as a form of ‘tax on trade’ as it is a barrier to exporting to non-English speaking economies. As almost half of the UK’s trade is within Europe, the cost to the economy in lost trade with European markets is estimated to be between £7bn and £17bn.

Young people in Britain may be disadvantaged in the future job market as their foreign language skills are much lower than their contemporaries in mainland Europe. The European Commission’s Survey on language competencies across Europe found that only 9% of 15 year
olds in the UK were competent beyond a basic level in their first foreign language (French). This was compared to 42% of their peers in other European countries.

The importance of language learning stretches beyond economic competitiveness. Learning another language can be intellectually and culturally beneficial both at home and overseas and it provides a means of accessing knowledge from other cultures. There is also growing scientific evidence that understanding more than one language provides many cognitive benefits. Improved attentional control, working memory, problem solving and even delayed onset of dementia have all been associated with bilingualism.

**1.4. Are we teaching the most useful languages?**

The British Council conducted a review of the UK’s long-term language needs required for prosperity, security and global influence. The top five languages identified as crucial for the UK’s future are (in descending order): Spanish, Arabic, French, Mandarin Chinese and German. The report concluded that the most useful languages are being taught in the UK but a wider range of MFLs needs to be offered to enable more people to develop MFL skills in more than one non-native language. As discussed in section 2, A-level Spanish entries are increasing and French and German are the most widely taught languages at A-level in England. French, German and Spanish are the languages most in demand by employers. These are the languages which are spoken by the UK’s main trade partners (after the USA) with the strongest economies (see Figure 1.2). However, the growth within the Chinese economy suggests that, in addition, Mandarin Chinese will become an increasingly important language for the UK’s future.

![Figure 1.2: Foreign languages that UK employers value as being useful to their organisation: 2010-2013. (Source: CBI Education and Skills Survey, 2013).](image-url)
2. Trends in MFL entries and performance

2.1. GCSE and GCE MFL entries and achievement

The following figures illustrate the pattern of entries in MFL subjects for students in England.

As can be seen in Figure 2.1, French remains the most popular language taught at 14-16. Between 2008 and 2011 there was a steady decline in entries for GCSE French and German, while GCSE Spanish entries were slightly increasing. 2012 saw a rise in entries across all three MFLs. This is most likely due to the inclusion of MFLs in the EBacc 14-16 performance measure (see section 1.2).

A comparison of Figure 2.2, showing the number of entries for AS-level MFLs, and Figure 2.3, illustrating the entries for A-level, demonstrates that all three MFLs have higher entries for AS than A-level. Relative to 2012 AS MFL entries, there were 33% fewer entries in 2013 for both A-level French and German and 25% fewer entries in A-level Spanish in 2013. The most recent Language Trends survey found that many students take an MFL at AS-level as a fourth ‘broadening’ subject and have no intention of continuing to A-level. Progression in MFLs is further discussed in section 2.2.
Figure 2.2: Number of entries for AS-level MFLs in England: 2001-2013 (Source: Department for Education, 2014b)

Figure 2.3: Number of entries for A-level MFLs in England: 2002-2013 (Source: Department for Education, 2014b)
The following tables show the percentage of students gaining each A-level grade from 2010 when the A* grade was first introduced at A-level. The number of students achieving an A* in all three MFLs has been decreasing over time. This issue is explored in more detail in Chapter 3. Students who do take A-level MFLs tend to perform well with almost two thirds of the cohort gaining a grade B or above (see tables 2.1 - 2.3).

Table 2.1: Percentage of students achieving grades A*-E in A-level French 2010-2013 (Source: Department for Education, 2014b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A*</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>Number of entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>9,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>10,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>11,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>12,324</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2: Percentage of students achieving grades A*-E in A-level German 2010-2013 (Source: Department for Education, 2014b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A*</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>Number of entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3,774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4,554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5,055</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.3: Percentage of students achieving grades A*-E in A-level Spanish 2010-2013 (Source: Department for Education, 2014b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A*</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>Number of entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6,516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6,197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>6,564</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This indicates that A-level MFLs attract a high-attaining cohort and research examining the achievement of students taking A-levels in 2012 relative to their GCSE performance in 2010 supports this assumption. For example, Figure 2.4 shows the impact of GCSE grade on the corresponding A-level grade attained by students in 2012.

Figure 2.4: A-level grade attainment related to corresponding GCSE grade (Source: Sutch, 2013).

The MFLs show similar patterns with the largest difference being for A* GCSE pupils dropping to an A grade at A-level: approximately 50% in French and German and 45% in Spanish. However, around a third of students who gain a grade B at GCSE achieve a Grade D at A-level across the three languages.
### 2.2. Progression from GCSE to AS and A-level

Table 2.4 shows the rate at which students’ progress from a GCSE subject to the corresponding AS and A-level subject for MFLs and the other EBacc subjects, for comparison. The progression rates for all three MFLs are the lowest of all of the EBacc subjects for both AS and A-level despite higher percentages of GCSE MFL students gaining grade A*-C than in English, maths, geography and history. While GCSE French has a similar number of entries as GCSE Geography, the continuation rates to both AS and A-level are much lower for French. However, progression rates need to be interpreted within the context of schools’ and colleges’ policies, such as early entry. For example, some schools report that entering students for GCSE MFLs in Year 9 or 10 decreases progression to A-level MFLs. Students are entered early so that they may focus on ‘more important’ GCSE subjects in Year 11. Students were then reluctant to continue learning an MFL at A-level after a break of a year or more.34

Research shows that students achieving a grade B or above in GCSE MFLs tend to continue to study a language at AS and A-level. Virtually no students gaining GCSE grade C in an MFL progress to AS or A-level MFL (see Figure 2.5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Number taking GCSE</th>
<th>% A*-C at GCSE</th>
<th>% Progressing to AS-level</th>
<th>% Progressing to A-level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All students</td>
<td>A*-C GCSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>161,074</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>66,011</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>58,415</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>117,822</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>113,479</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>112,557</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>198,161</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>169,231</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>603,755</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>597,476</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It may be simplistic to interpret lower progression rates from AS to A-level as students ‘dropping out’. A more meaningful explanation would consider students’ original intentions. Some students may never have intended to progress to A-level and chose to study an AS MFL as a stand-alone qualification. The question of whether current progression rates are satisfactory depends on whether A-level MFLs are seen purely as a stepping stone to further study in those subjects or viewed as a broader preparation for a wider range of uses.

2.3. Characteristics of A-level MFL students

2.3.1. Gender

Girls are more likely than boys to study MFLs at A-level. The gender split is remarkably consistent over time. The percentage of male entries is very similar in French and Spanish with around one third of the entry being male in these languages at A-level. The gender split is slightly different in German with approximately 40% of the entry being male (see Fig 2.6).
Boys are now outperforming girls in all three main MFLs at grades A* and A (see Figure 2.7).

![Figure 2.7: Percentage of male and female students gaining each grade in A-level MFL subjects in England, 2013 (Source: Department for Education, 2014b).](image)

There are only a few small differences between the proportions of boys and girls achieving a given grade at GCSE who progress to A-level in the same subject (see Figure 2.8). Slightly more girls who gained grade A* in GCSE French and Spanish progressed to A-level.

![Figure 2.8: Percentage of male and female GCSE students progressing to A-level in 2012 by their 2010 GCSE grade. (Source: Sutch, 2013)](image)

2.3.2. Type of school or college and region

A higher proportion of A-level MFL entries are from independent schools than from other types of school or college. FE colleges have the lowest proportion of students taking A-level MFLs (see Figure 2.9). The difference in the uptake of languages is likely to be associated, to some extent, with the availability of languages in each school type. In turn, this is likely to be influenced by the availability of teachers with the appropriate subject expertise. For example, the range of languages available to students in the independent sector is greater than in state schools, as are the opportunities to study more than one language. 35

In terms of performance at A-level, as shown in Table 2.5, overall a higher percentage of students from independent schools achieve A* and A across the three main MFLs than students
for other types of school and college. When considering state-funded institutions, a higher percentage of students from FE colleges gained A* and A grades in German relative to state schools and sixth form colleges. In Spanish, a higher percentage of sixth form college students gained A* and A grades relative to state schools and FE colleges. The pattern of results for A* and A for French was similar across all three state funded institutions.

Figure 2.9: Percentage of A-level MFL entries in England in 2013 by type of school or college (Source: Department for Education, 2014b).

Regarding differences in entry patterns across the regions of England, Inner London has the highest percentage of total A-level MFL entries (3.18%) and the West Midlands has the lowest (1.76%). This pattern is repeated for A-level French with 1.32% and 0.86% respectively. However, Inner London has the lowest percentage of entries (0.32%) and the South East has the highest percentage of entries (0.47%) for A-level German. Inner London also has the highest percentage of entries for A-level Spanish (1.54%) and the North East has the lowest percentage of entries (0.47%).

In summary, A-level MFL entries are in decline for French and German and rising for Spanish. However, there has been a slight increase in MFL entries at GCSE following the introduction of the EBacc performance measure. MFLs have the lowest GCSE to A-level progression rates of all of the EBacc subjects. The percentage of students gaining grade A* in A-level MFLs had been decreasing since its introduction in 2010. This is despite attracting a high-attaining cohort, as very few students gaining below a grade B in GCSE MFLs progress to A-level. While girls are more likely to study A-level MFLs, boys now outperform them at grades A* and A, although more girls gaining A* in GCSE MFLs continue to A-level. Higher proportions of students from independent schools take A-level MFLs and achieve higher grades relative to students in state-funded schools and colleges. The next section explores students’ attitudes and motivations towards MFLs that may explain the low uptake at A-level.
Table 2.5: Percentage of students achieving grades A*-E in A-level MFLs in England in 2013 by type of school or college (Source: Department for Education, 2014b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>A*</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>Number of Entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Schools</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>5,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2,169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3,179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>All Subjects</em></td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>440,601</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Schools</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2,750</td>
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<td>German</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>877</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
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<td>14.3</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>111,262</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FE College</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>4.6</td>
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<td>20.7</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1,918</td>
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<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>5.1</td>
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<td>29.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1,478</td>
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<td><em>All Subjects</em></td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>221,788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sixth Form Colleges</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1,494</td>
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<td>German</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1,103</td>
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<td><em>All Subjects</em></td>
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<td>26.0</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>156,907</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.6: Number of entries for A-level MFLs in 2013 by region in England (Source: Department for Education, 2014b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>All Subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North East</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>25,555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>736</td>
<td>93,579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire and the Humber</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>60,477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>54,635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>65,969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East of England</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>78,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>1,152</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>955</td>
<td>100,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner London</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>28,236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer London</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>72,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>1,478</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>120,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>62,663</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Students’ attitudes and motivations to MFL learning

When learning our native language we are continually exposed to high volumes of natural language use and are compelled to use the language to convey our basic needs. This provides us with a high level of motivation. In contrast, when learning an additional language in secondary school, the input is reduced and less authentic and there is no practical reason to use the non-native language to communicate. Outside of the classroom, there is little or no need for native English speakers to converse in other languages as their native tongue is the international language of business, tourism and popular culture.

3.1. Why don’t students like learning languages?

Research over the last thirty years has consistently found that UK students are reluctant to study another language. MFLs are perceived as irrelevant for future careers and more demanding, repetitive and boring compared to other subjects on the curriculum. Attempts to emphasize the beneficial impact of MFL study on future careers have been counterproductive and tend to lower the status of the subject to that of a ‘workplace’ skill. However, students that do continue to study an MFL at A-level cite their enjoyment of the subject and its relevance to their future life and career.
One of the most common complaints by students is that MFLs are too difficult. This might be due to students being more aware of their shortcomings when learning languages relative to other subjects. Even students who gain high grades in MFLs at GCSE, or are predicted to, feel that they are not doing well in the subject or feel that they are not good enough to study the subject at A-level. This is not surprising if students feel that they will achieve higher grades to aid their future progression in a less difficult subject that has more relevance to their career.

3.2. Attributions of success and failure in MFL study

Some research suggests that students believe that in order to succeed you need a special aptitude for language learning. Despite this, a study surveying a large sample of students found that success in MFLs was mainly attributed to effort, with a lack of effort cited as the foremost cause of poor achievement. Overall, students tend to attribute their success and failure in MFL study to internal factors such as effort, strategy and ability rather than to external factors such as teachers’ personality, task difficulty and poor teaching materials.

Expectations are closely linked to motivation and there is some evidence that students’ expectations of their performance in MFLs may be too high. Some GCSE MFL students expect to have near-native fluency after five years of study with little external contact with the language outside of the classroom. They are likely to become disheartened at their perceived lack of progress when compared to their native language ability.

3.3. Age and motivation

There is also evidence of a relationship between age and motivation to learn MFLs. Students beginning to study MFLs at age 11 tend to have greater motivation than those taking the subject at GCSE at 16. However, motivation to learn in general tends to decline during the later years of secondary school. The perceived difficulty of MFL learning combined with the perceived lack of progress in the subject and a general decline in overall academic motivation may explain the low uptake at A-level. It should also be noted that most research examining motivation for MFL study samples students at Key Stages 3 and 4 and examines their decision-making regarding studying GCSE MFLs. There is very little research exploring A-level students’ motivations for continuing to learn a language. Therefore the study conducted in Chapter 2 will make a valuable contribution to the lack of research in this area.

3.4. Gender differences in motivation

As noted in section 2.3.1, fewer boys than girls study MFLs at A-level. In terms of raw outcomes, girls tend to outperform boys; however, recent data shows that boys are now outperforming girls at grade A in the three main A-level MFLs (see Figure 2.7). Many studies, typically of students at Key Stages 3 and 4, have discovered gender differences in the motivation to learn MFLs. In general, boys report more negative attitudes towards languages than girls including having a lower perceived aptitude for language learning than girls. Girls also report more intrinsic motivation towards MFL study than boys. Thus, the higher performance of boys at
grade A in the three main MFLs is perhaps not surprising, since it seems likely that only the higher ability boys will be motivated to choose the subject.

Several reasons for boys’ lack of interest in MFLs have been suggested including the lack of male language teachers, gender differences in communication styles and peer pressure as it is ‘not cool’ for boys to be seen to enjoy language learning.\(^\text{52}\)

Studies suggest that boys feel disengaged from many MFL tasks as there is a perceived female bias in topics such as healthy lifestyle and family and relationships featured in the A-level specification.\(^\text{53}\)

Gender differences have been found in students’ attitudes towards different languages. Boys tend to have more interest in learning German than girls. The language is perceived to be more masculine and boys find guttural pronunciation more accessible than girls.\(^\text{54}\) German is also rated as being more useful by boys for careers in the stereotypically ‘masculine’ engineering industry.\(^\text{55}\) For example, the new University Technical Colleges that attract a predominately male intake describe teaching ‘German for engineering, not Goethe’.\(^\text{56}\)

### 3.5. What language learning skill do students find most difficult?

Very little research has explored whether students find any of the four main language skills more difficult than the others. Studies that have investigated this issue suggest that students find speaking to be the most challenging.\(^\text{57}\) Many students, particularly boys, report a lack of confidence in oral tasks, and are self-conscious and reluctant to make an effort with pronunciation.\(^\text{58}\) Research suggests that linguistic self-confidence and a willingness to communicate are two of the main predictors of MFL competence.\(^\text{59}\) As language learning is a social activity, the willingness to seek out opportunities to engage other speakers of the target language are crucial in developing proficiency. Reticence to engage in speaking tasks is a major barrier to gaining second language proficiency.\(^\text{60}\) This is in contrast to the findings in Chapter 2, as writing was identified by both students and teachers as the most challenging skill. For example, students felt that reading and writing were lower priorities than speaking and listening as the latter two skills were more relevant to the day to day needs of real-life MFL use. It is not clear whether the inconsistency in the previous research and the current findings is due to the lack of representative samples of students in previous studies or whether there are issues with the writing standards in the current A-level. This issue is explored further in Chapter 4.

### 3.6. Effect of the international prominence of English on motivation

One of the major motivating factors associated with success in non-native language learning is ‘integrativeness’, the positive disposition towards the speakers of the target language. It involves the desire to interact or even identify with that language community and implies respect and openness to other cultural groups.\(^\text{61}\) Speakers of other languages are motivated to gain proficiency in English due to its international prominence and social prestige in business, academia, and popular culture. Indeed, there is considerable exposure to English internationally through a number of channels including film, television, the media and the internet. Thus, other languages could be considered at a disadvantage and are not considered to have a high status
in England. Furthermore, this perception of English as the international *lingua franca* means that students in England feel there is no need to gain competency in other languages as ‘everyone else speaks English’. 

The efforts by schools to encourage MFL study have to battle the prevailing political and public climate which is largely hostile to multilingualism. In recent years there has been an increase in ‘euroscepticism’ and disparaging stereotypical attitudes towards Europeans (e.g. ‘kraut-bashing’ Germans) remain a socially acceptable form of racism in the UK. This lack of ‘integrativeness’ is likely to be a barrier to young people’s motivation to learn the three main European languages or to see their relevance to their future.

To summarise, British students see little value in learning MFLs for their future careers as English is spoken so widely across the world. MFLs are perceived to be difficult and boring and only those students that enjoy the subject continue to A-level. Motivation for languages decreases over time from Year 7 onwards and girls are more motivated and hold more positive views of MFLs relative to boys. Speaking is perceived to be the most demanding skill and students tend to lack linguistic self-confidence and a willingness to communicate in the other language which creates a barrier to competency. The prevailing social climate of hostility towards Europe is also identified as a potential barrier to increasing MFL uptake of the three main European languages. The next section explores whether there is any evidence to support students’ perception that MFLs are more difficult than other subjects.

4. Are Modern Foreign Languages more difficult than other subjects?

Comparing the difficulty of subjects is fraught with problems. Different subjects attract cohorts of students with different abilities, so straightforward comparisons of the proportions of students achieving particular grades in two subjects can be highly misleading. As previously discussed in Section 2.2, A-level MFLs tend to attract high-achieving students. Therefore it is not helpful to compare MFLs with subjects that attract relatively low-achieving cohorts, such as media studies. Furthermore, the usefulness of comparing performances in different subjects when they share little common content and assess very different abilities, such as physics and art, is questionable. Nor do these studies consider differences in sub-group performance such as the gender differences noted in section 2.3.1.

4.1. Have A-level Modern Foreign Languages been graded too harshly?

It is difficult to discern whether a subject is intrinsically more demanding or whether it has been graded relatively more severely. Some research suggests that in the past A-level MFLs may have been more harshly graded than other subjects. In October 2008 Ofqual held a seminar with regard to inter-subject comparability, at which the grading of MFLs at both GCSE and GCE was discussed. The language community suggested that grading was harsh and that pass rates should be increased whilst maintaining performance standards. Awarding organisations presented evidence that grading standards had been maintained and subjects had been awarded according to the criteria. However, the wider issue of whether MFL subject grade standards are fit for purpose was not raised.
Awarding organisations and Ofqual approach inter-subject comparability by focusing on whether students have reached a particular standard of performance. This is known as attainment based standard setting. Since 2009 a comparable outcomes approach to standards setting has been used. This involves benchmarking results to the previous years’ results in a subject whilst taking into account candidates’ prior attainment. The benchmark is based upon the outcomes of attainment based standards setting. If these standards are not fit for purpose this could lead to a problem with standards and subsequent standard setting will merely maintain the status quo. A review of the first phase of A-levels to be reformed for first teaching in 2015 concluded that the current standards are appropriate.

4.2. Evidence from subject comparability studies

Subject comparability studies often use different research methods to determine the level of subject difficulty. One method may produce a very different outcome compared to another and there is disagreement between researchers about the most appropriate method to use. Statistical methods, although varying considerably in their sophistication, essentially compare the relative performance of students in one subject with their performance in one or more other subjects, or on another baseline measure of ability, such as a reference test.

Statistical methods are concerned with outcome values such as grades, not with the demand of the assessment, or indeed with other factors that may explain the different value added by different subjects. These might include, for example: the quality of teaching; the importance of the subject to the student (i.e. is it vital that they pass the subject to progress to the next stage of their education); the amount of exam preparation; and levels of test anxiety on the day of the exam.

Keeping in mind these caveats, research exploring the demand of both GCSE and A-level subjects using different methods has consistently found that MFLs are among the most demanding subjects. Research in the 1990s established that MFL subjects were at the more difficult end of the subject spectrum. French and German had similar difficulty to biology and Spanish was slightly less difficult but still among one of the more demanding subjects. Thus, it certainly isn’t a new phenomenon that A-level MFLs are relatively more demanding in terms of statistical measures.

Figure 4.1 shows the difficulty estimates for a variety of A-level subjects produced using five different statistical methods. MFLs are estimated to be among the most difficult subjects, along with maths, biology, chemistry and physics. A-level French and German were found to be around 0.5 grades more difficult than English. However, the fact that general studies tops the scale suggests that the importance of factors such as classroom time, teaching quality, as well as students’ motivation and preparation, should not be underestimated when evaluating the findings.
In Figure 4.2 a Rasch model has been used to give a sense of grade standards at different points in the grade range, in contrast to many approaches which simply measure overall subject difficulty. Unfortunately that study omits data at grade A for German. Nevertheless, for MFL subjects there is a fairly consistent pattern of relative harshness compared to other subjects at grades A to C. These patterns are similar to those in the sciences. However, at grades D and E the patterns are closer to those of humanities subjects. Thus, statistical severity seems most prevalent at the top end of the grade range. Although Spanish appears slightly less demanding than French and German, the difference is small. In sum, the evidence from subject comparability studies is unequivocal. Using a range of measures, at A-level MFL subjects are more difficult than most other subjects.

Research comparing scripts across several subjects from the current AS and A-level specifications concluded that the requirement to demonstrate some of the higher level skills in French is very demanding relative to a range of other subjects including geography, media studies, physics, English and psychology.
Figure 4.2: Rasch estimates of the relative difficulty of grades A-E in A-level subjects. (Source: Coe et al, 2007).

On the whole, the evidence supports students’ perceptions that MFLs are more difficult compared with many other subjects. In today’s competitive culture, students’ performance is vital not only for their own progression to university but also for their schools’ positions in the league tables. Therefore it is not surprising that students seek out and are encouraged to study subjects where they are more likely to gain higher grades, a relationship likely moderated by the availability of different subjects within schools.

Nevertheless, maths and the three main sciences tend to be more demanding than MFLs in subject comparability studies. These subjects have not seen a downturn in entries and remain popular choices at A-level. Their popularity can be explained by entry requirements for prestigious courses such as medicine. Also, studying maths and science subjects is associated with higher earnings later in life, while the evidence for increased income due to foreign language skills is mixed.75

In sum, regarding whether MFLs are more demanding than other subjects, there is some evidence that, in the past, A-level MFLs may have been graded more severely. Subject comparability studies consistently find A-level MFLs to be among the most demanding subjects. However, science and maths are also equally, if not more, demanding but do not share MFLs’ patterns of low uptake at A-level. This may be due to their perceived usefulness for a range of future careers and the prestige and higher earnings associated with many STEM careers. The final section of this review considers the current A-level MFL assessments to determine if they are appropriate and to identify any issues that may decrease uptake.
5. Are the A-level Modern Foreign Languages assessments appropriate?

The exam regulator, Ofqual, has identified problems with the GCSE MFL controlled assessments. Teachers felt that the MFL controlled assessments test memory rather than language skills and lead to students’ skills being biased towards speaking and writing, as these skills are tested by the controlled assessment at the expense of reading and listening. There were also concerns about the quality of marking, with many teachers saying they would prefer a return to awarding organisations marking orals and teachers marking written work. It could be argued that the formulaic approach to controlled assessment at GCSE, where students tend to learn the assessment by rote, may lead to a reduction in the number of students wishing to continue MFLs at A-level.

There has been very little research examining the appropriateness and fitness for purpose of current A-level assessment materials. To date, one study asked subject experts to compare scripts from the two most recent (2000 & 2010) AS and A-level specifications in French with several other subjects. The study found that the leap in demand between AS and A-level has widened in French in the current specification relative to the previous one. This is due to several factors such as the inclusion of ‘stretch and challenge’. Also, the reduction of the number of units from six to four increased stretch and challenge, as many of the same skills are assessed in a reduced number of units. This means that the assessments have become more complex as students must demonstrate multiple skills within some exam questions. Like GCSE controlled assessment, A-level external assessment examines speaking skills. In contrast to the rote learning observed in GCSE, at A-level students are rewarded for their spontaneity. This was identified as being very difficult for middle and lower attainers as the task requires ‘thinking on your feet’ throughout. There are fewer opportunities for higher attaining students to demonstrate their receptive skills as there is no discrete assessment of responding to written or spoken language. Students are prevented from demonstrating higher order receptive skills such as drawing inferences and conclusions. The transfer of meaning task is now unseen and students have no support or reference to aid the translation task. This was judged to be significantly more challenging in the current specification than in the previous one.

While this study has identified several areas for further research, some caution needs to be applied to the results. Only one specification per awarding organisation was reviewed by three subject experts. Therefore, these findings may not apply across all awarding organisations and the judgements of so few subject experts may not be robust or reliable. Very few scripts were scrutinised at each grade and there was limited oral work available for A-level French. This work may not be representative and, with so few assessments, any atypicality would have a greater impact on subject experts’ judgements. Finally, comparisons were made on scripts from the old syllabus – when teachers had time to gain familiarity with the assessment – with scripts in the first series of the 2010 specification that contained unfamiliar tasks. Had the tasks from the two specifications been equally familiar to the examiners, the perceived differences in task demand might have been smaller.

In summary, there is a dearth of research examining the appropriateness of A-level assessment materials. The research conducted in Chapter 4 of this report across the main awarding
organisations for the main MFLs will greatly improve understanding of the current A-level assessment materials.

6. Summary

Despite the slight increase in MFL entries at GCSE following the introduction of the EBacc performance measure, A-level MFL entries are declining for French and German and rising slightly for Spanish. MFLs have the lowest GCSE to A-level progression rates of all of the EBacc subjects and the percentage of students gaining grade A* in A-level MFLs has been decreasing since the introduction of the grade in 2010. At Key Stages 3 and 4, girls tend to be more motivated to study languages than boys. While more girls go on to study A-level MFLs, their male peers now outperform them at grades A* and A. Higher proportions of students from independent schools take A-level MFLs and achieve higher grades relative to students in state-funded schools and colleges. In general, British students see little value in learning MFLs because English is the main international language. MFLs are perceived to be too demanding and boring and motivation for languages decreases from Year 7 onwards. Subject comparability studies consistently find that A-level MFLs are among the most difficult subjects. There is some evidence that the gap between AS and A-level has widened in French and the inclusion of ‘stretch and challenge’ in A-level assessments has led to the current specification being judged significantly more demanding relative to the previous syllabus. Clearly, there is an uphill struggle to increase the uptake of MFL subjects at A-Level. The recent rise in entries for GCSE French and German offers some hope and an indication that policy changes can lead to changes in the desired direction.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Stephen Saunders for his useful comments on progression to A-level and subject comparability studies.


Scottish Government (undated). *Curriculum for excellence.*
http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/all_experiences_outcomes_tcm4-539562.pdf


4 Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Panjabi, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish and Urdu.


6 In January 2007 at AS-level the number of entries who were native speakers was 1.3% for French, 19.8% for German and 7.1% for Spanish. There were no entries from native speakers to certificate at A-level for any of the three languages. Billington, L. (2007). *A comparison of the performance of native and non-native speakers in GCE French, German and Spanish in January 2007.* Internal Report (RPA_07_LB_TR_043), Guildford: AQA.


29 CBI/Pearson (2013).


Tinsley & Board (2013).


Driven by internal rewards such as inherent satisfaction.
51 Williams, et al. (2002).

52 Williams, et al. (2002).


55 Williams, et al. (2002).


58 Williams, et al. (2002).


68 Helen Myers’ 2008 paper from ALL, summarising the Ofqual event, observed that the AQA presentation suggested little change to standards would be required. www.all-london.org.uk/Resources/severe_grading/report%20hem%20for%20all.doc


Fitz-Gibbon & Vincent (1994).


The Coe et al (2007) study was conducted prior to the introduction of grade A* at A-level in 2010.


Smith, et al. (2012).

Stretch and challenge was applied to A2 units in 2009. Question papers would now include a wider range of question types and question stems, more synoptic assessment and extended writing.