April 2014

Why is the take-up of Modern Foreign Language A levels in decline?

A report for the Joint Council for Qualifications

Ipsos MORI
Why is the uptake of Modern Foreign Language A levels in decline?

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Executive Summary
Executive Summary

Ipsos MORI was commissioned in February 2014 by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) to investigate the factors underlying a long-term decline in the uptake of Modern Foreign Language (MFL) qualifications at A level. Ipsos MORI carried out qualitative research among a range of stakeholder groups, including: face-to-face focus groups with students aged 16-18 and undergraduate language students; in-depth telephone interviews with employers of foreign language speakers; in-depth telephone interviews with MFL teachers and university lecturers; and in-depth telephone interviews with other stakeholders with an interest in languages. In parallel, Ipsos MORI developed and conducted an online survey of 453 teachers of MFL GCSEs and A levels. All data collection took place from 26 February to 27 March 2014.

Key findings

The research involved wide-ranging discussions about the value of learning languages; views of GCSE, A level and university language courses; opinions about proposed reforms to GCSEs and A levels; and the perceived employment opportunities for language students. The following summary does not attempt to summarise all areas of these discussions, but instead focuses on the key factors which emerged as being important in the declining uptake of MFL.

It is worth noting that the research focused largely on individuals with a particular interest in languages, and the views of teachers and lecturers of subjects other than MFL were not covered. As such we are unable to conclude whether some findings are specific to MFL, or would apply equally to other subjects. That said, the views of MFL students – who are in a position to compare MFL with their experiences of other subjects – are drawn on where possible to place the findings in context.

British society and its education system undervalues language skills

Stakeholders assert that most members of the British public feel that, as English dominates as a global language, learning a foreign language is unnecessary. Stakeholders participating in the research promoted an alternative view: in an increasingly globalised world the cultural understanding one gains through learning a language is becoming more, not less, important. They feel that most of the public is unaware of the increased personal, social, and career opportunities that are available to those learning another language. Although the current research did not attempt to analyse the relative opportunities for MFL students and students of other subjects in depth, recent
research has highlighted the demand among both private sector employers and Government departments for language skills at all levels.¹

Most feel the school system undermines the value of languages. Historically languages were not introduced until Key Stage 3 in most cases, and are no longer compulsory at Key Stage 4. This reinforces a view of MFL as a second-tier subject.

Students are unaware of the value of MFL qualifications

Students who have chosen not to continue studying MFL beyond GCSE lacked awareness of the economic benefits of studying a language. Students’ degree choices, and to a fair extent their A level subject selections, are guided by their career aspirations or what they believe employers will consider valuable. Students were well aware of the economic value of STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) but many were unsure what career paths were associated with broader subjects such as humanities or MFL. Many feared that a language qualification held no value if they were not directly using the target language in their career. Furthermore, most failed to see the benefit of the wider range of skills an MFL qualification could showcase, such as analytical, debating, and oral and written communications skills. In general, students not studying MFLs believed that MFL would be considered secondary in value to vocational subjects or STEM subjects in the jobs market. With students limited to a small number of subject choices at A level, those subjects whose value is less clear will fail to earn a place in their selection. Several stakeholders drew a comparison between the degree of specialisation in the English education system and other countries’ at this level, and felt this acted to the detriment of subjects such as MFL that do not offer a clear career path.

Languages are difficult subjects

When teachers surveyed were asked about the reasons students do not study MFL at A level, 92% cited that ‘languages are perceived as ‘hard’ subjects at A level’. Almost all teachers (97%) reported that their students consider languages more difficult than other subjects at A level. When prompted about specific factors that might deter students from learning a language, 83% of teachers considered that students’ belief that gaining proficiency in a language is impossible without a special aptitude for languages acted as a deterrent.

GCSE courses can deter language learners

Even those students that continued to study MFL at A level and university said this was despite, rather than because of, their experience of GCSE MFL. The findings from the survey of teachers suggest that language staff have particular concerns about GCSEs: half disagree that GCSEs measure an appropriate breadth of skills and only 18% feel that GCSEs result in a fair evaluation of pupils’ performance. Controlled assessments, and the restrictions they impose on teaching, are seen to have a particularly negative impact at this level.

Students and teachers perceive there is a disproportionate jump in difficulty from GCSE to A level

At A level concerns about difficulty are compounded by a significant jump in requirements from MFL GCSE to AS level. Students and teachers felt that students can gain high marks in MFL GCSEs by memorising information, without necessarily needing to fully understand vocabulary and grammar, and without needing to be original in their use of language. In contrast, teachers and students considered that A level requires students to manipulate language in much more sophisticated ways. As a result, students who have gained high marks at GCSE in MFL often struggle to do well at A level. Students felt that the increase in difficulty from GCSE to A level was much greater for MFL than other subjects they had studied.

The difficulty and grading of A levels makes them a riskier choice than other A levels

MFL A levels are a risky choice for students who select their A level subjects with an eye on the grades they require for university entry. A level grading is seen as harsh and unpredictable, and students and teachers alike perceive that it is almost impossible to gain high grades. Several students and teachers cited examples of native speakers failing to attain the top grades at A level, for example. MFL students draw a contrast between MFL and other subjects: they feel MFL involves much more work for lower grades than other subjects, and hard work will not guarantee good grades. Teachers are open about their students’ prospects when they are selecting A levels, and several students reported that their teachers had deterred them from studying languages by telling them they stood a greater chance of gaining high grades in other subjects.

Future reforms are expected either to have no impact, or a negative impact, on the uptake of MFL at A level

Across the teachers surveyed, only a minority felt that the proposed reforms to the A level system would increase uptake of A levels. Most felt the reforms would either have no impact or discourage students.

A level can feel like a lottery to many kids and it is soul destroying if they’ve worked hard. We need to make studying MFL feel worth it. From the kids’ point of view they think ‘if I was putting this much effort in to my English, I’d be doing great’

Teacher
A move to linear assessment was welcomed by some as more appropriate for languages than other subjects: language skills are built up cumulatively and students will be in a better position to showcase their skills at the end of a course: for example, vocabulary and grammatical structures learnt in one area can be applied to other topic areas. Some felt that linear assessment might be more daunting to students, however, and others felt there are advantages in the regular feedback that modular assessment provides.

While teachers and university representatives saw the advantages of increasing the emphasis on writing skills, they were emphatic that this should not be at the expense of oral skills. It was also clear that students themselves are particularly motivated to study languages by the idea of speaking and conversing in another language, and a greater focus on writing might dampen the appeal of MFL qualifications.

Decoupling AS and A levels was expected to have little impact on ‘hardcore language fans’ who would continue to study to A level. However, many felt that decoupling would increase the risk of selecting MFL at A level, and add pressure on initial A level selections.

Teachers emphasise that reforms should consider all ability levels

When teachers surveyed were asked about the reforms they would like to see made, the most commonly given answer was language courses that cater for all ability levels. Teachers highlighted that middle-ability students who are capable of learning another language to a decent level of competence are unable to gain high marks in GCSE MFLs. A few teachers surveyed speculated about the value of schools being able to offer one of the GCSE/A level alternative qualifications that exist for pupils who want to learn the practical skills of a language, but are not capable of or interested in an academic qualification.

Why is MFL uptake in decline at A level?

Based on the consultations carried out as part of this research, we have identified four major factors behind the decline:

- **GCSE and A level courses fail to capitalise on the facets of language learning that most appeal to students.** Students are inspired to learn a language by the idea of speaking, and an academic focus on writing and assessments is off-putting. The topics covered at both GCSE and A level could also be more appealing. Courses should be reviewed to ensure the balance of skills and the content are more engaging.
• **GCSEs do not act as a good introduction to A levels.** Many students are put off language qualifications by their experience of studying at GCSE. GCSEs are regarded as a test of memory that do not help to develop true language skills. Most teachers feel that the focus on teaching to the test appears to restrict teachers’ ability to deliver inspiring lessons. A level MFL students and teachers felt that the course content, requirements and standards at GCSE do not prepare students well academically for the transition to A level. Any review of the decline in uptake at A level needs to consider the experiences of students and teachers at GCSE, and how effectively the course both prepares students academically and inspires them to want to continue to study MFL. While the current research focused on MFL teachers only, previous research carried out by Ipsos MORI for Ofqual highlighted that negative perceptions of GCSE assessments are more widespread among MFL teachers than other subject teachers.2

• **MFL is a risky choice at A level.** MFLs are considered to be more difficult than other A levels: students work harder to attain lower grades than in other subjects. It is a relatively risky choice at A level, where students’ selections are guided by the grades they need for university entry. University representatives feel that standards at A level are declining, and the implications of relaxing grade boundaries across the board would be unwelcome at higher levels. However, gaining the top grades at A level is perceived by students and teachers as being ‘almost impossible’, even for very proficient students, and reviewing the grading at this level will be important.

• **Students do not appreciate the value of MFL qualifications.** Most did not perceive there to be much value in gaining language qualifications, and were unaware of the career options open to those with languages. Students contrasted how STEM subjects had been promoted to them during their school years, while other subjects had received much less attention. As a result, languages were considered secondary in value to many other subjects. If language uptake is to be increased, more work to promote languages, both within and beyond the education system, is needed to reinforce their value and highlight the opportunities opened up through languages.

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Background and methodology
2 Background and methodology

2.1 Background

The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) commissioned Ipsos MORI to investigate the factors underlying the declining uptake of modern foreign languages (MFL) A Levels.

Languages as a whole have seen a decline over the past decade, with numbers of French and particularly German entries falling. Spanish has seen a slight increase in popularity. The take-up at A level has had a knock-on impact at university level, where the intake of language entrants has fallen.

A number of changes to A levels have been proposed, which will impact on MFL in the future. Key changes are:

- **Linear Assessment:** modular assessments would be replaced by a single examination(s) at the end of the two year A level course.
- **More emphasis on written examinations:** written examinations would be externally assessed and there would be less focus on oral exams.
- **Decoupling of AS and A2 level qualifications to form two stand-alone qualifications.** The two-year A2 level will be more challenging than the AS. Students will need to decide at the start of their sixth form years whether they want to take an AS or A2 level. Under present arrangements, students can decide at the end of their AS year if they would like to continue to A2.

2.2 Rationale for the research

The research sought to explore the fall in the take-up of Modern Foreign Languages through investigating stakeholders’ experiences and perceptions of:

- The value and benefits of studying MFL;
- The factors which encourage or discourage students from studying MFL;
- Current GCSE and A level MFL courses; and,
- Proposed reforms to GCSE and A level courses, and their likely impact on standards and uptake.

2.3 Methodology
Ipsos MORI undertook a mixed methods study of attitudes to foreign languages. The research comprised a quantitative survey of teachers, and a range of qualitative work, specifically: focus groups with students aged 16-18 and undergraduate students; qualitative telephone in-depth interviews with employers of foreign language speakers; telephone in-depth interviews with teachers and staff in university language departments; and representatives from organisations with an interest in languages. All research took place between 26th February and 27th March 2014.

Table 2.1 – Overview of research design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Audience</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Number of participants or groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE and A Level students</td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>15 groups and one in-depth interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate MFL students</td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>3 groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language tutors at universities</td>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other stakeholders, such as representatives from the European Commission, foreign embassies, and specialist language groups</td>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3.1 Survey of MFL teachers

Ipsos MORI conducted an online survey of MFL teachers. The questionnaire was developed in consultation with the JCQ team, and scripted by Ipsos MORI’s online survey team.

Ipsos MORI liaised with four awarding organisations (AQA, Pearson, OCR and WJEC) to distribute open invitations to complete the online survey. AOs were asked to send the survey invitation email to all contacts listed on their database for AS/A2 MFL qualifications in England (although six teachers based outside England completed the survey). The invitation email acknowledged that teachers may have received the same invitation multiple times from different AOs (since...
we were unable to de-duplicate the contacts across AO lists) but explained that each contact should only complete the survey once.

The first questions on the survey ensured that teachers had responsibilities for teaching an AS/A2 level course: those who were did not were ineligible for the survey and were screened out. Invitation emails were sent by AOs between 26 February and 6 March. Data collection ended on 18 March. In total, 453 teachers completed online surveys.

Weights have been applied to the data where two or more teachers per school participated (calculated as 1/number of responses per school), so these schools are not over-represented in the findings. It is worth noting that the profile of schools responding to the survey contains more independent schools than a random sample of secondary/sixth form institutions would contain. However, as Ipsos MORI does not have profile information relating to those who were invited to complete the survey by AOs we have not applied corrective weights (as we do not have reliable data about the population surveyed). Where responses between independent and state schools are significantly different, however, we have highlighted this in our reporting.

2.3.2 Telephone interviews with MFL teachers

Teachers participating in the survey were asked whether they would be willing to take part in a follow-up telephone interview to explore their views in greater depth. Based on those who agreed and provided contact details, Ipsos MORI undertook 10 follow up depth telephone interviews with teachers to further explore:

- perceptions of the appeal of A level;
- the factors encouraging or discouraging students from studying languages;
- views of how fit for purpose GCSE and A level courses are; and,
- views on the likely impact of proposed changes to GCSE and A level qualifications.

2.3.3 Focus groups with students aged 16-18

Between 7th February and 27th February, researchers from Ipsos MORI carried out 16 focus groups across 8 schools with GCSE and A level students.

Focus groups comprised a mix of students who were:

- taking an A Level in a modern foreign language;
- taking an AS level in a modern foreign language and were planning to progress to A Level;
Why is the uptake of Modern Foreign Language A levels in decline?

- taking an AS level in a modern foreign language and were not planning to progress to A Level; and,
- taking a GCSE in a modern foreign language and were not planning on taking an AS or A Level.

The aims of the discussions were to understand the decision-making processes of those who do and do not study A level MFL; students’ experiences and enjoyment of GCSE and A level MFL courses; and the factors encouraging or discouraging the study of MFL.

A selection of schools was selected from Edubase, designed to give a spread of independent and maintained schools; 11-16 and 11-18 schools; and a mix of academies and non-academies; and regions. The breakdown of schools covered is shown in the table below.

Table 2.2 – Profile of schools in which focus groups were conducted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent/ maintained</th>
<th>Selective/ non-selective</th>
<th>Sixth form?</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Independent</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Maintained</td>
<td>Non-selective</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Maintained</td>
<td>Non-selective</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Maintained</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Independent</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Maintained</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Maintained</td>
<td>Non-selective</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Maintained academy</td>
<td>Non-selective</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within each of the participating schools, language teachers recruited students to take part in the groups. The research team asked teachers to recruit groups of 8 students. The majority of groups comprised between 6 and 10 students, although a small number were smaller or larger. Groups were recorded and detailed notes were taken.

2.3.4 Telephone interviews with MFL tutors at universities

For this part of the project Ipsos MORI conducted 15 telephone interviews with staff in universities connected with modern foreign languages. The research team spoke to language tutors (teaching French, German or Spanish), tutors who deal with admissions to
languages departments and heads of language departments. The research included universities in England and Scotland. The aim of the interviews was to explore views on the quality and content of A level education, and on the downward trend in the uptake of modern foreign languages at degree level.

Interviews were recorded and detailed notes were taken. Interviewers then recorded detailed findings from each interview into a standard template, to enable comparisons to be made between individual respondents and different types of stakeholders. Structured analysis sessions were held at regular intervals throughout fieldwork, during which the research team discussed key findings emerging from the interviews carried out to date. Detailed notes from each of these analysis sessions were collated.

2.3.5 Focus groups with undergraduate students taking modern foreign languages

Ipsos MORI conducted 3 focus group discussions with undergraduates studying a modern foreign language. Two discussions were held with students at Russell Group universities, and one discussion group at a non-Russell Group university. The aims of the discussions were to understand the perceived value of modern foreign languages and the factors motivating their decision to study to degree level.

Groups were recruited following interviews with university staff, who were asked to recruit students. Each group comprised 6-10 participants. Discussions lasted around 90 minutes. Groups were recorded and detailed notes were taken. The groups were conducted in England and Scotland.

2.3.6 Telephone interviews with employers

Ipsos MORI conducted 15 in-depth interviews with employers of MFL graduates and with MFL stakeholders. Stakeholders included representatives of bodies such as The British Council and foreign embassies. The aims of these discussions were to understand the value of MFL in the workplace and more generally in society, views of the standards of language learning in schools and colleges and opinions about proposed reforms to MFL qualifications.

Interviews were conducted over the phone in February 2014.

2.4 Scope and limitations of the research

Qualitative research is designed to be exploratory and provides insight into people’s perceptions, feelings and behaviours. The research is not designed to provide statistically reliable data, but to provide in-depth understanding of a particular topic.
Although this report includes some indications of how typical views or experiences were across the stakeholder groups covered, indicated through the use of words such as “most”, “many” and “few”, this should be considered indicative among those interviewed. Where possible, we triangulate views across the stakeholder groups interviewed to give a rounded view of the experiences of language-teaching and language-learning. This methodology does not give a measure of the prevalence of different views among the stakeholder groups we interviewed. The perceptions of participants make up a considerable proportion of the evidence in this study, and although such perceptions may not always be factually accurate, they represent the truth to those who relate them.

Verbatim quotations are used throughout the report to illustrate particular bodies of opinion, but these should not be taken to define the opinions of the population.

It is worth noting that the research focused largely on individuals with a particular interest in languages, and the views of teachers and lecturers of subjects other than MFL were not covered. As such we are unable to conclude whether some findings are specific to MFL, or would apply equally to other subjects. That said, the views of MFL students – who are in a position to compare MFL with their experiences of other subjects – are drawn on where possible to draw conclusions about the perceptions and experiences of learning MFL compared with other subjects.

2.5 This report

The report is formed of three main sections. In Section 3 we discuss the value of studying Modern Foreign Languages: here we draw on the opinions of the groups consulted to explore the perceived value of language skills in general, and MFL qualifications in particular. In Section 4 we examine learners’ journeys through GCSE and A level, exploring the factors which motivate and serve as barriers to continuing to study MFL. We discuss the progression from GCSE to A level and then look at teachers’ experiences of delivering MFL courses. In Section 5 we look to the future of MFL courses, exploring the views discussed around how the profile, teaching and assessment of MFL could be reshaped. We also examine the reactions of those we consulted to the proposed government reforms to GCSEs and A levels. The final section presents our conclusions and recommendations in relation to the question of why the uptake of MFL at A level is in decline.

2.6 Acknowledgements
During the course of this research, we have consulted with a large number of students, teachers, and staff at universities and other organisations. We would like to thank those who gave up their time to share their views and experiences with the research team.

Findings
3 The value of studying Modern Foreign Languages

Key findings

Stakeholders feel that British society undervalues the learning of modern foreign languages: they feel most of the public assumes that, since English is a global language, foreign language skills are unnecessary. By contrast, stakeholders highlight that learning other languages promotes a deeper understanding of other cultures, an understanding they feel is increasingly important in a globalised world.

Many students who have chosen not to continue studying MFL beyond GCSE lacked awareness of the economic benefits of studying a language. Most students felt that STEM or vocational subjects are more prestigious and offer greater advantages in the jobs market. There is evidence to suggest that students are receptive to economic arguments about the value of subjects, and increasingly so since the introduction of higher university tuition fees. While those who study MFL value the breadth of the qualification, other students feel the lack of specialisation limits the value of MFL qualifications.

3.1 Are languages valued?

Stakeholders felt that the majority of the British public place a low value on learning languages. The widespread use of English around the world prompts most to assume that foreign language skills are unnecessary. They feel the school system serves to reinforce this view, with MFL historically introduced only at Key Stage 3, and no longer a compulsory subject at Key Stage 4. Most students do not regard languages as a ‘core’ subject, and they are usually perceived as secondary in value to STEM subjects.

"Most British people see the world through the narrow prism of the English language"

3 Note, however, that from September 2014 languages are compulsory at Key Stage 2.


Recent surveys have also found that almost all primary schools are now teaching languages at Key Stage 2. For example, see:

Stakeholder

Family values, personal experience, and school ethos are all important in shaping students’ views of the value of learning languages. Those with direct experience and exposure to other cultures tend to place a much higher value on learning languages. As a result, students from more affluent families, where parents have typically had greater exposure to other cultures, are more likely to value language learning. The ethos and practices of independent schools reinforce the value of learning languages: the supply of university candidates for MFL is disproportionately drawn from private schools.

Most stakeholders endorsed the study of French, German and Spanish as valuable and popular language courses. In fact, stakeholders felt that learning any language is valuable because of the ancillary benefits it provides.

“In UK we sometimes blush when it comes to the subject of languages, we focus on the labour market and the languages like French/German/Russian/Mandarin that are relevant. There is little public discourse around the touchy feely stuff, the openness to others that learning any language brings… but there is real practical impact to be seen as a result of soft power.”

Stakeholder

Stakeholders highlighted the difficulties of predicting which languages might have greatest economic value in the future. Several pointed out the irony of declining rates of German study given the potential opportunities offered by the strength of the German economy.

3.2 Languages are the key to understanding other cultures

Stakeholders, teachers, and students of MFL were emphatic that it is impossible to gain a true understanding of a culture without speaking its language. Language learning was prized as offering a window into other cultures. According to this view, accessing a culture via its home language gives insight into its values and perspectives, as well as demonstrating respect among those you meet.

While the widespread use of English as a ‘global language’ is sometimes used as an argument against studying MFL, stakeholders stressed that the cultural understanding that studying languages brings is more important in an increasingly globalised world. They feel a range of personal, social and economic benefits accrue from better understanding of other cultures: it has the potential to promote a less insular conception of the world, gives scope for greater travel and social opportunities, and opens personal employment and business opportunities.

Despite the widespread use of English as a global language, stakeholders felt that the cultural understanding that studying languages brings becomes more important in an increasingly globalised world.
"You don’t get the culture at all when you visit a foreign country if you don’t speak the language - you get treated differently."

University student, South

Furthermore, some stakeholders and employers commented that the UK is in serious danger of being under-represented in important international arenas as a result of a lack of linguists. One employer quoted what he saw as the shamefully small proportion of UK nationals who currently hold senior level European jobs as one example of this.

"I think it is about 4.1% of the top Euro jobs are currently held by UK nationals. That’s lower than Finland! And many are in their 50s so it will probably drop to 1.4% soon."

Employer

3.3 Personal value

MFL students were able to cite a number of personal benefits of studying languages that extend beyond the benefits of achieving proficiency in another language. Most obvious is the enjoyment and deep satisfaction derived from using and manipulating a new language. Students felt that languages feel inherently ‘different’ to other subjects, and felt they were using another part of the brain. Students also stressed that learning a language helps to improve one’s communication skills in general: to a large degree this was because they had been taught more about English grammatical rules and structures than they had learnt during ordinary study of the English language. Meanwhile the nature of A level MFL courses promotes skills in discussing, debating and expressing their personal views. Undergraduates who participated in the research highlighted that their language departments were particularly sociable compared with other faculties.

Language students felt that, having learnt one language, they were confident about tackling others in the future. Where other students might be hesitant about trying other languages, they felt confident about branching out in the future as opportunities arose.

Language proficiency was also valued as a gateway to travelling and meeting people. As such, it had the potential to open up new opportunities, new places to visit, and more people to converse with. The year spent abroad was seen as a particular benefit of MFL courses, not just as providing an enjoyable experience, but as giving valuable life experience and confidence that equip MFL graduates with useful skills for their future lives.

“A year abroad at university can be one of the best years of your life...informs later stages of life...”
University representative

3.4 The economic argument

Some students felt that the status of English as a global language, and as the default language when speakers of multiple languages are brought together, meant that there was little need to study another language. However, other stakeholders and employers pointed to evidence that a lack of language skills have a significant detrimental impact on UK business, and that the assumption that ‘everyone speaks English’ is flawed.

“We have this misperception that the rest of the world is Anglophone. While it might be factually correct that more English is spoken than many other languages it misses the point that learning a language has immense value for individuals and society as a whole.”

Stakeholder

Analysis conducted elsewhere suggests that the increased cultural understanding provided by learning other languages could be as important as the direct communications themselves. Other recent research carried out by the Confederation of British Industry found that nearly three quarters of UK private sector employers see a need for, or a benefit in having, foreign language skills in their business. Meanwhile, research conducted by the British Academy found that language skills are important across Governmental roles at a variety of levels. More detailed investigation of the number and nature of employment opportunities open to MFL graduates, and the employment rates for graduates of different subjects, than has been possible during the present research would be necessary to draw conclusions about the strength of the economic argument for studying MFL rather than other subjects. Nevertheless, recent research by a number of bodies concludes that demand for these skills outstrips current supply.

“Someone who can command negotiation in more than one language is simply more effective at the art of negotiation; they engage in a global process in more than a monoglot way and they have more prospects as a result.”

Stakeholder

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4 For example, authors of ‘The Economic Case for Language Learning and the Role of Employer Engagement’ estimate that around £7.3 billion in trade is lost as a result of poor language skills. http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/14563/ll_report_1__for_website.pdf
5 http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/14563/ll_report_1__for_website.pdf
7 http://www.brit.ac.uk/policy/Lost_For_Words.cfm
The strength of the economic argument was not always clear to stakeholders. A few stakeholders considered that many UK employers under-value language skills, and recognised that in this context students are taking a risk by studying MFL. Several other stakeholders were wary of using the economic argument to persuade students to take MFL, querying how compelling it is to students. Instead, they felt students are more likely to be motivated by the day-to-day experience of learning other languages.

In contrast to stakeholder opinion, students’ views suggest that there is scope to promote the economic value of language learning more: students lack awareness about the roles that MFL may lead to. Many students felt that the career-enhancing value of STEM subjects had been promoted to a much greater degree than MFL. Perhaps reflecting this, school students usually perceived MFL as an addition to, or secondary to, qualifications in vocational or business-oriented subjects. For MFL undergraduates, the broad skills that an MFL qualification engenders beyond the language itself were part of its appeal and value: for many other students, the lack of specialisation – or the perception that an MFL qualification provides specialisation in a language they may not ultimately use – undermined the value of the qualification.

“Language graduates bring good negotiation skills and insight into discussions in the workplace.”

Employer

There was evidence that the introduction of higher university tuition fees has led to a change in the criteria students use to select degree subjects, away from decisions based on enjoyment and personal development, and in favour of those with a greater economic value. A few university representatives noted an increase in MFL as part of a joint honours degree with a more vocational subject such as business. There were also reports of greater numbers of undergraduate medics and engineers taking a language as an adjunct to their course, seeing it as offering them a unique selling point in an ever-competitive job market.

“The number of students taking languages as options within degrees is increasing. So more and more students at university do see the value of a language and it’s important to note that, because the specialists – the people ending up with a BA in French and German and so on – is only one small part of a much bigger picture.”

University representative, South

Employers and stakeholders who participated in the research often noted that a language A Level or degree was indicative of wider skills than just the ability to write and converse in a language. They felt that language graduates were:
better all-round communicators. This extended beyond conversing in another language to a better ability to converse and interact with people with different viewpoints and backgrounds regardless of language;

more open minded and had a greater ability to learn new ways of working and new concepts; and,

more global in their outlook and recognised that there was value in communicating with someone on their terms.

However, there was some evidence that the value of an MFL qualification – as distinct from language skills - varies by role. For some roles, such as direct sales, employers who participated in the research valued native speakers, or those who had lived in a country using the target language, above those who had formally studied MFL. Further exploration of this issue would be necessary to draw conclusions about the value of MFL qualifications in different roles.
4 The learner journey

Key findings

In most cases, the satisfaction and buzz students derive from speaking in another language is what motivates them to learn: the notion of reading and writing in other languages holds much less appeal. Other factors can serve to inspire students with a love of languages, including great teaching and foreign exchange trips, while parents and peers can play a role in communicating the value and challenges of studying MFL.

The main barrier to studying MFL at GCSE and A level is the perceived difficulty of learning a language. At A level concerns about difficulty are compounded by a significant jump in requirements from GCSE to AS level. MFLs are viewed as a risky A level choice: grading is seen as harsh and unpredictable, and hard work and natural talent do not necessarily translate into good grades.

MFL is often perceived as a non-core subject with less value in the employment market than STEM or business-related subjects. While some students value its breadth, many see MFL as secondary in value to more vocational subjects.

Teachers have more concerns about GCSE than A level courses, with speaking and writing seen as relatively difficult skills for students and given too much emphasis in assessments. Stakeholders and university representatives feel there is scope to use more engaging topics at GCSE to increase the appeal of MFL for students, and to promote the use of more creative self-expression at A level.

4.1 What factors influence the decision to study MFL?

A wide range of factors can affect a student's decision to study MFL at GCSE, AS or A2. In this section we explore the main factors highlighted by participants.

4.1.1 Parents, peers and teachers

Parents and peers play a key role in learner perceptions of studying MFL. These influences can act to encourage or discourage the study of MFL, sometimes in subtle ways. For example, parents with language skills can 'normalise' having a second language, while
parents who place a high value on languages often encourage language learning or endorse their children’s decisions to study MFL. Conversely, where less value is placed on the notion of MFL, family and peer influences may deter language learning. More directly, A level learners sometimes put off younger learners by recounting their experiences of the difficulty of learning MFL and the challenge of attaining the top grades at a higher level.

Students’ feelings about their language teachers are often a strong determinant of whether they continue to study MFL. Several undergraduates studying MFL recalled inspirational teaching earlier in their learning pathway that had promoted their interest and enjoyment in languages. One stakeholder felt that the significant amounts of teacher-student conversation and interaction explains the pivotal role played by MFL teachers in students’ enjoyment of the subject:

“There are high levels of interaction and, if those are positive, children tend to love it and feel particularly strongly and positively towards a subject, but if they’re not, then I think they haven’t got much else to hold on to.”

Stakeholder, South

Students we spoke to typically had good experiences of language teaching, and found their language lessons engaging. Any reservations they had about teaching approaches, such as teaching to the test or covering a limited range of material, were usually seen as reasonable responses to the assessment requirements and the importance of good grades for students.

“They teach you to pass with the best grade, and I was able to retake 5 times. I spent two years just preparing for the result.”

School student, Midlands

Language learners sometimes recounted experiences of being discouraged from studying languages at a higher level by their teachers. This often stemmed from teachers’ concerns that students would be unable to attain the grades they might expect in languages at a higher level (see section 4.2 for more detail.)

4.1.2 Exchanges and contact with foreign cultures

Trips abroad and exchanges were usually formative in students’ desire to learn a foreign language, suggesting one area which may reliably inspire students to take up and continue to study MFL. Teachers were positive about the impact of exchanges on students’ motivation to learn, while some undergraduates spontaneously expressed the view that the best route into learning languages was to ‘make students love the country’ through this type of experience. Having lived abroad as a child and acquiring some skill in another language was
the impetus for students undertaking language studies in several instances.

“I had two weeks living with a family in Northern Spain. It gave me so much more confidence, and the way of life out there was so much better, it made me want to be able to live out there.”

University student, South

“Exchanges take language out of the classroom, and you get to see what ways languages are used, and to properly use a language makes you use it more. At school it’s all these weird phrases, rather than having a proper conversation.”

University student, South

Despite the positive experiences of those involved in exchanges, it may be worth noting a word of caution expressed by a small number of teachers. Teachers perceive that parents’ concerns about the costs of foreign exchange trips can in some instances lead to parents discouraging children from studying languages. Using foreign exchanges as a way of promoting greater uptake of languages would need to be balanced with reassurances (if appropriate) about the financial implications for learners and their families, as parents may instinctively have concerns about having to fund exchange trips.

4.1.3 The appeal of speaking another language

Personal enjoyment of using another language is of course a major determining factor in whether students choose to study a MFL. Students often choose to study modern languages with a vision of being able to speak the language foremost in their minds. For those studying a language, being able to converse in another language gave them particular satisfaction.

“It’s such a joy not being the one who can’t speak another language, who’s not dependent on others to communicate.”

University student, Scotland

If the learning experience itself does not allow students to speak, or they find that they can achieve good grades without being able to converse (a common criticism of GCSE qualification) they can be left feeling dispirited and confused, prompting some to drop MFL.

“At GCSE it felt like we were being taught to pass exams, not speak a language. So when we were preparing for a speaking exam, we’d learn set phrases. And we’re often learning how it sounds, rather than trying to understand it.”

School student, Midlands

“When they feel that they can communicate orally then they get more of a sense of achievement than in the other skills.”

School teacher, South
From the school student’s perspective, reading and writing were often seen as lower priorities than speaking and listening. In line with this, the survey of teachers highlighted concerns that writing is given undue emphasis in current specifications (see Table 4.3 later in this section for figures). Some commonly mentioned reasons for preferring speaking and listening rather than reading and writing were:

- the reading material was often seen as inappropriate and/or too advanced;
- reading and writing was seen to be less likely to be relevant to day-to-day needs if students were called upon to use a language later in life; and,
- the lack of an immediate ‘buzz’ factor, as compared with conversing in a language (speaking and listening to others speak).

Although students feel that speaking and listening are higher priorities, students do see the value in practising reading and writing skills as a useful vehicle for learning languages. For example, reading and writing helps learners build their language skills as they pick up useful vocabulary and see grammar used in practice. Reading and writing exercises often provide students with insight into wider culture (books, films, newspaper articles), in turn sparking interest in the culture and giving learners further motivation to learn the language. Finally, there is also some appeal among a small group of relatively ‘academic’ students who want to hone their reading schools in order to read literature in the native language, but this is the exception not the rule.

4.1.4 The classroom experience

A level students often cited the engaging learning environment at AS as a key factor in continuing on to A2, where smaller class sizes, and a more dedicated cohort make the experience more enjoyable.

“At GCSE you have such a broad level of abilities, and so you have to do the most basic stuff, whereas at A level you get people who are more into it, they’re there because they want to be, and it’s more of a level playing field. People are more there to learn the language.”

University Student, South

On the other hand, experiences of assessment can discourage students. The focus on exam results leads students away from broadening their experience of the language, and to focus on the limited set of tasks required for getting a good grade. A widespread view was that being taught with such a focus on results can drain the subject of any enjoyment at both GCSE and A level.

“By A level all pupils are thinking ahead to the grades they need to get for Uni; all of them are desperate for an A or A*. There’s so much time pressure. They get no breadth of learning, no time to think, and we’re just teaching to get the grade. Some
Why is the uptake of Modern Foreign Language A levels in decline?

of them are broken by it - there's no enjoyment - and it puts them off A2 level.”
Teacher, North

Whilst many students find the rote learning approach to assessment un-stimulating, some continue on to study languages despite the conditions imposed by assessments.

“I still went on to A level, because although the exam was a bit silly at GCSE, learning the language was still enjoyable.”
University Student, South

4.1.5 Availability of subjects

Often timetabling would present problems for students wanting to study a foreign language, particularly if they planned to study more than one language. Schools and colleges sometimes did not offer the language courses that students wanted to pursue and several students we spoke to had moved college for this reason. Language teachers sometimes expressed an interest in offering a broader range of languages, including Asian languages that they felt may be perceived as more valuable in the modern economy, but noted the difficulties in being responsive to demands for specific courses in relation to the language skills held within their department.

The greater variety of non-language subjects now available at A level was seen as partly responsible for the long-term trend of decreasing numbers of students taking MFL at A level.

4.1.6 MFL as part of future career and learning plans

A specific career plan will naturally affect a student’s subject choices at A level. MFL is an obvious choice where students’ career plans are directly related, such as translation or teaching MFL. Conversely, in other cases students’ career aspirations mandate the choice of non-MFL A levels, such as sciences for those considering medicine.

Where students do not have a specific career in mind, there are mixed views about the value of MFL. In some cases, MFL is prized as a humanity which can help both to develop and to demonstrate a broad range of skills, beyond the language itself. Broader life plans as well as career plans were also important and several school and university students intended to live abroad to experience a foreign culture. These views were often expressed by those studying languages at undergraduate level.

“At university you study culture and history, but also learn a language so the benefits are twofold. It also keeps your options broad, which is true of any humanity, but it also gives you the skill of language speaking, it also allows you to work abroad. You can start a new life there.”
University student, South

Languages are often considered a ‘nice to have’ or a ‘fourth’ subject at A level, a complement to STEM subjects... While school students see the value of MFL for enhancing their employability, its value is often viewed as secondary to qualifications in vocational or business-oriented subjects.
However, in the eyes of many students, languages were perceived as an additional subject that supports other, core, subjects. Languages were often considered a ‘nice to have’ or a ‘fourth’ subject at A level, and as a complement to STEM subjects. They were often seen as a good choice as an AS-only subject, or as part of a joint honours degree. The AS/A2 structure of the A level was seen as allowing flexibility in students’ learning:

"Language is a subject which benefits from the availability of an AS level in the school. So for example you've got a budding doctor who wants to take physics, chemistry and biology for A Level, at least they can take language as well at AS level."

University lecturer, South

Languages were not regarded as a viable ‘add-on’ subject at A level by all students, though: some felt there would be little point in taking a MFL A level or AS level if one did not plan to continue at university, partly because of the ‘sunk costs’ of the years spent learning the language, and partly because they saw MFLA levels as so hard and time-consuming that one would not want to invest in taking one ‘just for the sake of it’.

While school students see the value of a language for enhancing their employability, it is typically perceived as an addition to, or secondary to, qualifications in vocational or business-oriented subjects. Even where students do see value in studying MFL, it may nevertheless be crowded out by more directly vocational subjects. The situation is even more acute at university where greater specialisation is required.

"A language is an extra boost, but I can study mechanics and do an evening class in a language."

School student, Midlands

4.1.7 Content of courses

Enjoying the content of courses had a strong influence on students’ decisions to study MFL at A level. At GCSE some topics left students disengaged; for example some students found that topics like ‘the family’, ‘health and wellbeing’, or ‘friendship’ did not capture their imaginations, and the experience of learning the language became dull. At A level, topics were generally considered to be more engaging, although students ranged in their preferences. Generally topics where students could express their own thoughts and ideas were preferred to topics where they merely look up material and then assemble it. A2 was found to be the most engaging stage.

"At A level there is more flexibility, and teachers trust you more, and allow you to do more with the language. At AS, you're still doing set topics, like divorce, and it's a step up from GCSE, whereas A2 level you do more cultural topics, so that's like a bridge to what you'd be doing at university. At A2 you're really using a language..."
Why is the uptake of Modern Foreign Language A levels in decline?

There were complaints from those doing two languages with the same awarding body that there was too much overlap in the topics covered: some reported having to write about the family in both French and Spanish, for example. Students found it tedious to learn similar material – for example, arguments in favour of and against nuclear energy – in more than one subject.

There were mixed feelings from students about the ‘double-track’ of learning at A level which could involve learning a subject they know nothing about in their native tongue, and then debating it in a foreign language. Several stakeholders and university representatives echoed this view: they were keen to avoid tasks where students are required to look up topical material, already written in a foreign language, then simply assemble it – for example listing the arguments for and against bull-fighting – rather than expressing their own ideas in a foreign language. They felt that students should be encouraged to think for themselves, perhaps by analysing how an argument is made, or critiquing a film or poem.

“One of the great ways of engaging with pupils is to introduce them to modern French poetry, modern French songs, all sorts of things like that. There should be more engagement with these sorts of things that draw young people into the language itself.”

University lecturer, South

In this way it was felt that MFL could offer comparable intellectual challenge, and the chance for students to have original thoughts, to rival subjects such as philosophy or English literature, as opposed to offering only the chance to regurgitate received, and often simplified, ideas or phrases.

4.1.8 Compulsory MFL at GCSE

One stakeholder commented that removing MFL GCSE from compulsory curriculum had been a clear sign to students that MFL are not as valuable as some other subjects, leading to low uptake. There was however debate around whether returning to compulsory MFL at GCSE would be a good idea, although teachers and students generally agreed that more engaging content at GCSE would help to stimulate uptake in the future. The ‘nudge’ approach of the Ebacc had been recognised as helpful for uptake at GCSE, but did not address the fundamental issue of students’ interest and enjoyment.

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9 The EBacc was also cited by teachers surveyed for the current research as a reason for increased uptake at GCSE, where this had been observed. The EBacc had led to schools promoting languages to a greater degree, and to parents encouraging their children to take languages.
“Making languages compulsory is not the answer because people resent being made to learn them.”

University lecturer, South

“When you had to teach everyone up to GCSE and did almost destroy the whole modern languages teaching profession because you had mixed ability classes and it was just driving teachers out of language teaching. And when the syllabus was completely changed to accommodate foreign languages for all in Key Stage 3 and 4 a lot of the basic knowledge and skills training were watered down.”

University lecturer, South

“I think languages, some level of language learning, should be compulsory, certainly to GCSE and I think there’s an argument for going right up to A Level.”

University lecturer, South

4.1.9 Difficulty and grading at A level

Despite the many positive, and sometimes romantic, associations of learning MFL and a belief in its personal and social and cultural value, many students struggle to justify continuing with MFL subjects due to practical concerns about exam grades and university admissions.

School students often felt that seriously learning a foreign language in school was an intrinsically challenging thing to do, and this challenge was naturally off-putting for those who lacked the required commitment or aptitude. However, even capable students making good progress found their grades, particularly at A level, were weak. Given the importance of getting the right A level grades for university entry, the issue of harsh and/or unpredictable marking was highlighted as a key barrier to students taking MFL at A level.

Ultimately many students perceive MFL as difficult subjects, requiring lots of work for uncertain, and often low, rewards.

“I’m working harder than other subjects, and will probably get a worse grade.”

School student, South

“I found it too difficult; I preferred to work on other subjects to get them up to scratch, and it’s time consuming. I took five AS levels, and I got four As and a D in French, so I dropped it.”

School student, South

Below we examine the issues of difficulty and grading at A level in more detail.

Difficulty

MFL are typically perceived as ‘hard subjects’ by students, and as requiring more work than other A levels. Students, particularly those who had not continued beyond GCSE, often considered language learning a vast undertaking; they sometimes used imagery suggesting
an unconquerable edifice, a whole language which could never be grasped in its entirety.

When asked to rate the difficulty of MFL against other subjects, over nine in ten teachers surveyed report that their students find GCSEs and A levels in MFL more difficult than other subjects. When asked to give the main reasons why students do not want to study MFL at GCSE and A level, the perceived difficulty of the subject emerges as the key barrier to uptake. In a similar vein, teachers cited the main reasons why AS students do not progress to A2 is because they find the course too difficult (cited by 72% of teachers) or do not feel capable of attaining a good grade (cited by 71% of teachers).

Table 4.1 – Teachers’ views on the main reasons why students do not want to take modern foreign languages at GCSE and AS/A2 level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>GCSE</th>
<th>AS/ A2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Languages are perceived as hard subjects</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages are not perceived as important in comparison to other subjects on offer</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages are not perceived as relevant for future jobs/ career</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way languages are assessed [at GCSE/ AS/A2]</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetabling constraints/ [GCSE only:] option block constraints</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ipsos MORI survey of teachers  
Base: All teachers of GCSE (417), AS/A2 level (442)

Students were also conscious that studying a MFL at A level requires continual effort to avoid falling behind or forgetting material. The A level was also found to be demanding in terms of students being expected constantly to learn and memorise vocabulary and grammatical rules.

"The difference with languages is that it's constant learning... You can't just learn one bit and hope it comes up. Just to write a sentence you have to show you've learnt a whole array of things."

University student, South

Overall, the perception of MFL A levels as difficult feeds the image of MFL as a ‘risky’ subject choice that may lead to lower grades than needed for university.

Teachers perceive that many students feel a special aptitude is required in order to meet the challenges associated with studying a language. Over eight in ten teachers surveyed felt that this
(mis)conception among students – that one cannot succeed in learning a language through hard work, but only through an innate talent for language-learning – acted as a deterrent to uptake at GCSE and A level.

Grading does not reliably reflect language competency

At A level the problem of harsh and/or unpredictable marking was commonly cited. One explanation concerned grade descriptors, which are:

- too demanding, if taken literally, hence the harsh marking, and
- too vague, hence the unpredictability.

The over-demanding nature of the descriptors was also considered to contribute to the unpredictability of grading as examiners would either take the descriptors literally, and so mark lower, or dismiss them as over-demanding and so mark higher.

"I had my Spanish A2 remarked and it went up by 12 points: that shouldn't happen ... We had a girl in our year who grew up in Mexico and who was fluent in Spanish, and she did the oral and got a C. And everyone was like, 'What?'"

University student, South

The A* grade band seen as particularly unrealistic for languages where mistakes in writing and speaking are inevitable even among fluent speakers.

"It isn't possible to get near the 100% mark in language exams, students are bound to make some mistakes, even a native speaker, so the A* grade is practically impossible to get."

Teacher, South

In comparison, at GCSE it was felt that students could achieve the highest grades without having achieved any genuine competency in the language. For example, A* students may not be able to form an original sentence. This is because, as will be explored in section 4.2, the assessment was seen as testing memory rather than competence in the language.
4.2 The progression from GCSE to A level

4.2.1 Introduction

Participants frequently remarked upon the disparity in standards between GCSE and A level in MFL. They pointed to a very significant increase in workload from MFL GCSE to A level, and a ‘huge’ step-up in difficulty. Teachers and students alike felt that GCSE students are often taught to rely on rote learning to achieve high grades without developing the genuine competency in manipulating the language required for success at A level.

At AS and A2, there is a move away from rote learning, although many students continue to feel teaching focuses unduly on the exam at A level, and that A level exam grades in MFL are not very accurate reflections of actual proficiency in a language. University representatives could also readily identify weaknesses in undergraduate students' reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

4.2.2 How well does GCSE prepare students for AS?

There was a widespread view among participants that there is a disproportionate ‘jump’ from GCSE to AS; students have to move from knowing set phrases to expressing their own views, a transition requiring far greater language proficiency. Generally grades at GCSE were felt to be very weakly correlated with language proficiency, as it is possible to get the highest grades by relying largely on memorisation.

“I got an A at GCSE and I can say I didn’t know anything. Apart from vocab. But there’s no chance I could do the AS.”
School student, Midlands

“It’s so much harder at AS compared to GCSE, you can’t just parrot sentences. You can’t just memorise stuff.”
School student, South

“GCSE was more like a memory game. It’s not how good you are, it’s how much time you put in. If at GCSE you haven’t learnt the set phrase you can’t say anything.”
University student, South

Accordingly, a large drop out is seen at AS when, for example, students with the highest grades at GCSE found that they are receiving Ds at AS level. Students report finding A level courses ‘intense’ and some find the demands of the course put them off studying languages altogether.

“We had a booklet which said that basically if you haven’t got an A* at GCSE, you’re quite likely to fail at A level.”
University student, Scotland

“I realised for AS level, it was the biggest step up of all subjects.”
University student, South

Teachers surveyed echoed this view: 92% feel their students find the step from GCSE to AS level was more difficult for MFL than in other subjects. The step from AS to A2 (as described further in 4.2.3 below) is less problematic, although 45% still feel that it is greater than in other subjects.

Figure 4.1 – The progression from GCSE to AS, and AS to A2

Some students did not find such a significant jump between GCSE and A level, although this seems likely to be due to differences between exam boards. There is also evidence that some independent schools are teaching above GCSE level to avoid the ‘massive shock’ when students start A level.

4.2.3 How well does AS prepare students for A2?

Participants felt that there is another considerable step-up with higher expectations for learners’ language skills between AS and A2 levels, although the progression here is not regarded as being as great as the jump from GCSE to AS. AS is felt to cover a similar range of topics to GCSE although requiring greater descriptive abilities from students, whereas A2 is seen to require students to engage in greater levels of self-expression, for example being able to engage in debate on topical issues. The grammatical grounding provided at AS level is generally felt to prepare students well for A2.

Students who find that they are struggling at AS are often wary of continuing on to A2, and may well stop at this point. This is often because by A level students are typically focusing on the grades and the subjects they require for university.

“It’s a calculated decision not to take A2 in languages - many students don’t want to do languages at uni so why would they risk getting a low grade?”

Teacher, North
As noted, at GCSE, a core skill required for assessment is memory, whereas at A level a much broader range of skills is required; nevertheless, as several audiences note, learning to ‘play the game’ of assessment is a key skill students develop.

“Are A level grades a good guide to competency? I don’t know. It’s a test and so you are prepared to take that test. It’s a tactic, basically. And then depending on the school you have greater or lesser preparation.”

University lecturer, Midlands

4.2.4 How well does A level prepare students for MFL at university?

Whilst A level is seen as a much better predictor of language competency than GCSE, university representatives still find a great variance across students with high grades in MFL A level. Furthermore, university representatives often find that MFL levels are not preparing students adequately for studying a MFL at undergraduate level, and several noted that standards of school leavers have fallen significantly over the past 20 years.

Some specific areas cited where students are considered by university representatives to be unprepared for degree level are outlined in the remainder of this section.

Reading

There was felt to be a mismatch between A level and undergraduate; for example, students might be asked to read one book per year at A level, but one book per week at university. Furthermore, university representatives reported that often A level students had not read any books, just newspaper or magazine articles.

“If they’ve got A* [at A level] then they probably have a reading age of about 12, which is not bad. It means they could read Harry Potter in French. But what happens if they then get parachuted into university departments to do modern languages where they’re asked to read Proust?”

University lecturer, South

University students also highlighted the particular mismatch between reading requirements, and noted that they generally resorted to reading the set texts in English, and were then required to answer questions on them in English. This combined with the lack of speaking practice outside of the year abroad, lead many to feel their language skills were actually in decline at university, although their frustration tended to be with their current university course rather than with their prior language education.

Writing

It was typically felt by university representatives that accuracy in writing is not being developed to a sufficiently high standard.
"I was really shocked at the poor French that the students were writing. Now if teachers are tolerating this sort of inaccurate writing and thinking that their students aren’t going to be marked down severely for this work they are living in cloud cuckoo land. By the time you get to the end of A-level you should be writing good, accurate French."

University lecturer, Midlands

Speaking

Confidence in speech can be an issue at Non-Russell institutions, whereas at Russell institutions the concerns are more about accuracy and authenticity of speech, suggesting lack of focus on these areas at A level.

"I think there is not enough emphasis put on the speaking. Students are definitely not confident speaking in front of the class; they can do it, but they are not comfortable speaking. There’s a sense of insecurity that sets in."

University lecturer, Midlands

Knowledge of country and culture

University representatives sometimes found that students lacked an awareness of the countries and cultures associated with the languages they had studied. Some representatives found students sometimes uninterested in, or even averse to, taking a year abroad which suggested to one university representative that their language-learning was driven by linguistic interests or perhaps career considerations rather than a genuine interest in foreign culture.

Structural knowledge

Typically university representatives found that grammar has been taught in piecemeal way at A level, and that remedial work is required in the first year of university. This leads to frustration for some undergraduates who can feel that they are going over lots of material that they already know. Other students, however, felt that their A level failed to provide a solid grounding in the language, whilst others appreciated a review of their A level learning because they had not been able to fully absorb the ‘huge’ amounts of content covered at A level.

“What I’ve done at A level isn’t that similar to what I’ve done at degree, it’s massively different actually. A level was a bit of a shambles, a bit of vocab, a bit of grammar, you don’t learn how to write essays. But maybe languages are just like that, reading a book is completely different to learning grammar; there’s so many different parts to learning a language.”

University student, Scotland
4.3 Experiences of teaching MFL

Teachers complain that the assessment process lets students down. Teachers feel that GCSEs assess memory rather than language skills: as a result, competent linguists gain marks that do not reflect their abilities, if they are unable to memorise large chunks of text. At A level teachers say many who they consider good students, with solid language skills, sometimes fail to achieve good grades because of stringent and/or unreliable marking of exam papers.

“Teachers of languages say ‘in good faith, I can’t really over promote my subject, I can’t really push it because I know that the students are right’ – that actually they’ve got a greater chance of getting an A in Geography than they have of getting a B in German.”

Stakeholder

Some teachers regarded grading as unpredictable.

“We teach in the same way each year, to the same standard, but the grades jump all over the place.”

Teacher, Midlands

Survey responses indicate that teachers have less faith in GCSE than in AS or A2 assessments (see table below). Less than one in five teachers (18%) feel that GCSEs result in a fair evaluation of pupil performance, and only a third (32%) consider that GCSEs assess an appropriate breadth of skills. These findings may link to teachers’ views that GCSE assessments test memory rather than language proficiency. While views about AS and A2 assessments are relatively positive, comparisons with other surveys indicate that there may be room for improvement\(^{10}\).
Why is the uptake of Modern Foreign Language A levels in decline?

Table 4.2 – Teachers’ views on the assessment of GCSE, AS and A2 levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GCSE % agree</th>
<th>AS % agree</th>
<th>A2 % agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The current method of assessment</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>results in a fair evaluation of pupil performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The current method of assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ensures that an appropriate breadth of skills are measured</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ipsos MORI survey of teachers
Base: All teachers of GCSE (417), AS level (445) and A2 level (422)

“At GCSEs there is too much assessment that depends on regurgitation of chunks of text, learnt in advance. And teachers will coach students in pronunciation, giving it to them written out phonetically. At that point the form of the assessment is actively impeding the learning of the language, which is crazy.”

University lecturer, South

The survey findings also demonstrate concerns about the balance of assessments across the four skills, particularly at GCSE. Just over half the teachers surveyed (53%) feel there is too much emphasis on writing at GCSE, and over a third (37%) feel there is too much emphasis on speaking. Teachers appear to be more content with the balance of assessment across the skills at A level, although a significant minority feel that writing attracts too much emphasis at AS and A2.
Why is the uptake of Modern Foreign Language A levels in decline?

Table 4.3 – The proportion of teachers feeling that ‘too much emphasis’ is given to each of the four skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GCSE % too much emphasis</th>
<th>AS % too much emphasis</th>
<th>A2 % too much emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ipsos MORI survey of teachers
Base: All teachers of GCSE (417), AS level (445) and A2 level (422)

Teachers’ levels of satisfaction with the way in which skills are assessed at each level broadly mirror the patterns noted earlier: at GCSE teachers express dissatisfaction with the assessment of the productive skills in particular; while dissatisfaction is lower at AS and A2 a significant minority of AS/A2 teachers are dissatisfied with these assessments. The perception that grading is harsh and unpredictable grading may explain these findings.

Table 4.4 – The proportion of teachers dissatisfied with the way in which each of the four skills are assessed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GCSE % dissatisfied</th>
<th>AS % dissatisfied</th>
<th>A2 % dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ipsos MORI survey of teachers
Base: All teachers of GCSE (417), AS level (445) and A2 level (422)

“The problem isn’t the syllabus or the content: it’s the controlled assessment. It’s a ridiculous way to assess language learners. Schools are constantly the focus of performance data but on the other hand we are virtually marking our own work when it comes to controlled assessments; how is that right?”

School teacher, Midlands
Generally it is recognised that teachers are not teaching languages the way they would like to and do not feel that they have the scope to innovate. A culture has developed where few are willing to risk missing the highest grades in return for learning something interesting but not relevant to the exam. The survey responses indicate that teachers feel more dissatisfaction with GCSEs than A levels: teachers were far more likely to say they enjoy teaching A levels as GCSEs (84% compared with 46%), and were more likely to say A level teaching gives them scope to innovate in delivering the course.  

“[At GCSE] if students don’t get the grade they want they are just retested and retested until they do. I am teaching constantly to the task until the child gets through. We are not teaching to manipulate the language.”

Teacher, Midlands

Figure 4.2 – Teachers’ enjoyment of delivering GCSE and A level specifications

Q31 To what extent, if at all, do you enjoy teaching the current specification for …

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GCSE</th>
<th>AS/A2 Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fair amount</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very much</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It varies too much to say</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All who teach GCSE MFL (417); All who teach AS/A2 level MFL (453)
Source: Ipsos MORI

11 In the survey, teachers were asked the extent to which current GCSE and A level courses allowed for teacher innovation in the delivery of the course. Forty-seven per cent of teachers surveyed said that GCSEs allow scope for innovative delivery, compared with 85 per cent who felt the A level course allows for innovation.
5 The future of Modern Foreign Languages

Key Findings

Stakeholders and employers see a need to dispel the myth that English is the only language school leavers need; they argue strongly for the personal and societal benefits and see government and those working in the education system as responsible for communicating these. Many stakeholder and employers support compulsory MFL from an early age, as do some students.

Across stakeholder groups, suggestions were made for capitalising on what motivates MFL learners more explicitly – namely a focus on practical skills (speaking and listening) and enjoyable online learning methods.

Teachers and students stressed the need for age-appropriate and relevant topics at GCSE and A Level. They felt MFL assessment should focus on language capability and not literary or political understanding. There should be far more opportunity for contact with native speakers and greater exposure to the culture via trips abroad or visits to relevant places in the UK (a Spanish restaurant or museum).

Means of assessment and grading scales should be reviewed to allow the best performing students the opportunity to attain the highest grades. Otherwise students will be attracted by subjects that they see as being easier to achieve high grades in.

The proposed reforms were met with ambivalence and support was limited. The exception to this is the change to linear assessment which many teachers and students thought better suited to MFL where learning is cumulative. The survey findings suggest few teachers foresee a positive impact on uptake at GCSE or A Level from the reforms. Some believe numbers continuing to A Level will decline.

5.1 Future priorities

This section sets out stakeholders’ views about the factors that it will be important to consider and change, if the uptake of MFL is to increase in the future.
5.1.1 Raising the profile of MFL in school and society as a whole

There was a widespread view among stakeholders, employers and university representatives that the value of MFL needs to be highlighted if uptake at secondary school level is to increase. But suggestions for raising the profile of MFL often extended beyond considerations of secondary school learners to include UK society as a whole and the beneficial impact that greater numbers of people speaking languages would bring.

Responsibility for raising the profile of MFL was placed both within and outside the education system. As one stakeholder put it, there is a lack of good ambassadors for MFL in the UK which feeds a message that languages are not an important skill that trickles down to young learners.

“We need better role models for language learners; if we believe foreign languages are important who are we saying young people should look up to? It’s not David Cameron for certain!”
Stakeholder

Others implied that responsibility sits at a higher level, across government education and business policy circles. They stressed that a concerted effort from key national figures is required to show MFL is a vital part of any learner’s education, regardless of their future plans.

“In the absence of a very strong push that languages are important to every and any future career option, they just won’t make the cut when it comes to A Level choices.”
Stakeholder

In terms of holding the education system itself to account, several stakeholders and employers with oversight of international comparators made the case for compulsory language learning from an early age. They believed this would boost the image of MFL reinforcing it as a core skill rather than a nice-to-have subject. Suggestions included making MFL learning more fun during younger years and showing learners both the short- and long-term rewards of learning a language.

“It’s important to look at the whole curriculum and how MFL could be positioned as tools early on during school...exposure to MFL in small chunks...show learners that speaking another language could mean opportunities for business or politics, tap into their aspirations early on...and show that it doesn’t all have to be heavy and academic. They need to see this before they get locked into the escalator of ever-narrowing choices.”
Stakeholder
Teachers, stakeholders, employers and students all highlighted missed opportunities within the current education system, which does not sufficiently capitalise on the excitement of conversing in a new language. Increased use of online learning tools and more contact with native speakers were two popular recommendations for how this could be done better in future. Teachers with greater awareness of modern approaches to teaching were encouraged by what they had seen so far.

“I’ve been impressed by the investments in more techy approaches to language learning – online methods – it helps to engage students at school and that’s important.”
Teacher

“Using online tools is a really useful vehicle for learning. It makes MFL fun and interesting and kids can spend hours doing things online that they would never do offline, like grammar and vocab tests and ‘language perfect’ competitions. There are some very boring elements to language learning, it can be repetitive, and this can make it enjoyable.”
Teacher

Another key priority for MFL, highlighted across audiences, relates to a lack of breadth in the A Level system more generally as learners are seen as being forced to make hard choices about which subjects to pursue at a very early age. Participants felt that this has particularly harsh consequences for MFL subjects, as they are often not easy to achieve good grades in nor seen to offer a clear career path, and can therefore be an obvious option to drop. Again, early engagement was believed to be important for encouraging uptake later on at GCSE and A Level when students have to weigh up the worth of different subjects.

“I think we need to broaden the A level base to enable students to take languages to the next level so students do not feel they don’t have enough ‘space’ for languages. That’s particularly true for those taking STEM subjects where their choices are eaten up by sciences, maths etc. and languages are deprioritised. The same applies at university: we need to widen language opportunities for students, encourage language learning as a valuable add-on to an existing course.”
Stakeholder

Those who were more familiar with the education system, such as university representatives and teachers, expanded on this point and referenced the E-Bacc as a preferable design that encourages a wider subject base and would have a positive impact on language uptake.

“What we have now is a halfway house – ideally students should be taking 6 or 7 subjects to A level, like the E-Bacc, otherwise there will always be this
fear that you can’t take on too many subjects, you have to specialise early, which I think is a mistake. Look at Finland, they produce excellent engineers and scientists while 6th formers there all take Finnish, English and Swedish.”

University representative

5.1.2 Refining the current system: specific areas for improvement

Students and teachers tended to highlight specific gaps in current MFL learning and the priorities they saw for improving experience and standards of MFL in school. Many of their considerations reflect the views of stakeholder, employer and university audiences, with several students suggesting MFL should be compulsory to GCSE and many who had dropped, or were considering dropping, MFL expressing regret at their decision. MFL students clearly value subject(s) and their ideas for improvement suggest they think it is an important aspect of secondary education to get right.

Two priority areas from the perspective of students and teachers were keeping students engaged throughout their GCSE, AS and A Level study and better assessment of language skills.

Keeping students engaged throughout their GCSE, AS and A Level study

Given evidence from this research suggests that student enjoyment is one of the key drivers to MFL uptake, particularly at GCSE and AS, clearly ensuring students feel engaged in what they are learning is an important future priority.

Both students and teachers underlined the significance that ‘topics’ can have for sustaining student interest and facilitating learning. And while preferences for which topics are best can vary there is consensus that they need to be age-appropriate and relevant to the language / culture. Many teachers stressed that topics should be used to facilitate MFL learning and enable students to flex their language skills rather than being used as a test of subject knowledge or ability to debate; this missed the point and assessed the wrong thing.

“Native speakers in school…and exchanges are great and much better than getting the kids to talk about nuclear energy – one student said to me “I chatted to the French kids in French no problem and then when I tried to have a discussion with them about nuclear energy in French we were both stuck!’”

Teacher

Students echoed this plea and while many saw the value in using a topic or piece of literature as a vehicle for learning a language they did not feel it was fair to be assessed on the quality of their arguments
or views on a writer’s technique, as they expected from an English or Politics course.

“There is a risk sometimes that if you’re not interested in a certain book it will turn you off – it’s not language learning, it’s literature or film. You end up talking about camera angles and techniques instead of learning the language.”
Student

Building up the practical skills of speaking and listening was another priority for both students and teachers and it was believed that this was a better way to hook students into MFL and sustain their interest, increasing chances of continued learning. While teachers saw an important role for grammar and formal approaches to MFL learning, they were also sensitive to balance these with informal and interdisciplinary approaches that they felt were often more effective at motivating students.

“We need to look at what motivates language learners to learn...is it jobs? Speaking? We need to be careful not to scare students off with too much grammar. More focus on getting enough practice, for example, whether with writing or speaking so they get their confidence up. And an interdisciplinary approach to learning via politics and current European affairs.”
Teacher

There was overwhelming support from students for more opportunities to have contact with native speakers and relevant cultural experiences. Students suggested that this could take a range of forms from regular sessions with language assistants (natives and not UK undergraduates studying MFL) to foreign exchanges and day or weekend trips abroad and even visits to relevant cultural places in the UK. They emphasised the value that these trips would have beyond simply giving them the chance to practice speaking and listening in the language; activities like this affirmed their desires to continue with MFL and reminded them of its value.

“I want more opportunities for speaking and meeting people from France.”
Student

“Even just a weekend or a day trip to Paris or a trip to a Spanish restaurant in London. It’s not just about speaking...”
Student

Better assessment of language skills

As discussed earlier in this report, there was a pronounced feeling among teachers and students close to the experience of language learning that current assessment practices do not fairly reflect the skills and development of language students. Furthermore, many thought Activities like contact with language speakers who are native speakers, foreign trips, and even visits to relevant places in the UK affirm students’ desire to study MFL and remind them of its value.
this was likely to be having a detrimental effect on student motivations and be responsible for declining numbers continuing to A Level. Teachers felt that there should be less disparity between the grades learners feel they can achieve in other subjects compared with MFL. Without this, the MFL A level simply will not be a viable option for many.

“An A level can feel like a lottery to many kids and it is soul destroying if they've worked hard. We need to make studying MFL feel worth it. From the kids point of view they think 'if I was putting this much effort in to my English, I’d be doing great!’”
Teacher

A couple of specific suggestions were made for reforming approaches to MFL assessment and grading. One teacher questioned what she believed was a 90% A* threshold for MFL. Her comments echoed the views of other teachers who felt the A* boundaries were unattainably high.

“Maybe we need to look again at the 90% benchmark for an A* - it is setting the bar very high for MFL. It’s not like Maths where there’s a right and a wrong, the marking is more nuanced. Many native speakers can lose points through the current system so something is going wrong.”
Teacher
5.2 Responses to proposed reforms

Responses to the proposed reforms were mixed and it was hard for certain audiences, namely stakeholders and employers, to comment given their often limited understanding of the current A Level system.

Findings from the quantitative survey show that overall few teachers believe that the proposed reforms will increase take-up to GCSE or A Level. Moreover some say they believe the proposals could actively prompt a decrease in uptake. These views were echoed across other audiences.

5.2.1 Change to linear assessment

There was ambivalence towards a shift from modular to linear assessment for MFL and arguments were put forward for both. Indeed some participants could see advantages to modular and linear assessment believing that it depended on the learner and their personal language development.

The argument for modular assessment tended to come from those at more of a distance from A Level learning, such as stakeholders, employers and university representatives. They saw linear assessment as putting too much pressure on students. Some also expressed a belief that taking a modular approach helped to ensure that a student was receiving regular feedback on their progress and learning from their mistakes, seen as an inevitable and necessary part of language learning.

“Modular is better because language learning is a stepped process and I think it is good for learners to get feedback as they go otherwise you can get into bad habits and keep repeating the same mistakes. And I would worry that linear assessment might put even more pressure on language learners and put some off.”

University representative

Teachers and students tended to see more advantages to linear assessment for MFL and in this sense saw the proposed reform as sensible. Several students pointed out that although as a general rule modular assessment was preferable as it allowed them to break their revision up and removed pressure from final year examinations, linear suited MFL. Students felt that by the end of a year or two years their language skills were significantly better and they wanted that to be reflected in their final grade.

“Linear is far better suited to languages... Language learning is a very incremental process; you pick skills up all the time so testing students right at the end gives learners the best chance to prove themselves.”

Teacher
“Usually I would prefer modular assessment but for languages I think linear assessment is good – you learn a language differently, it’s a skill, not like history where there’s a body of knowledge and you can pick it up in stages.”

Student

Most teachers surveyed expected that linear assessment would have no impact on the take-up of modern foreign languages (58%). Among those who felt linear assessments would affect take-up, around twice as many thought that it would decrease as increase uptake.

Figure 5.1 – Teachers’ expectations of the effect that linear assessment would have on the take-up of modern foreign languages at A Level

5.2.2 Increased emphasis on written exams and external assessment

There were contrasting views across audiences towards an increased focus on written examinations. Many students saw a misfit between what was their key motivation for studying MFL – being able to converse with others in a foreign language – and what they would be tested on.

“We spend enough time on written as it is – it’s listening and speaking that are more important, they are the real skills. Writing and reading are more academic: when am I going to use them?”

Student

“I feel like I don’t do enough speaking. And it’s one of the most important bits! It’s the main reason I decided to learn Spanish but it’s the smallest percentage of the grade. It makes no sense!”

Student

Students who lacked confidence speaking and dreaded their oral exam were more reassured by the proposal, although many of them also lacked confidence writing so the perceived benefits were limited.
Employers and university representatives tended to be more positive, seeing writing in a foreign language as an important skill to hone. They believed that a shift in focus at A Level would better prepare school leavers for university and the workplace where grammar and confidence in writing were vital for progress.

“I would prefer them to come with better grammar skills, it is more of an issue now than 10 years ago. There’s more focus now on communications (oral and aural skills) which is good, that’s better than it used to be, but it means writing can go lacking and there is a gap in skills there.”

University representative

Some employers further felt that the increased emphasis on written language skills could place UK school leavers on more of a par with their international counterparts who come to the job market with good written skills. However, they also conceded that these were skills which could be picked up at university and therefore there may not be a need to change the A Level system.

Stakeholders and several teachers shared a concern that greater focus on writing risked deterring potential MFL learners who would see it as an archaic and academic discipline, removed from the value that they see in it and the aspects of learning they enjoy. So while these participants could appreciate the rationale behind the reform and the importance of written communication skills and grammar, they were wary of the negative impact it would have on the profile of MFL among potential learners.

“I’d worry this could kill languages off completely! If anything I think we could put a bit less focus on writing. How often will students need to write a letter to someone in the language compared with understanding and speaking it confidently? At the moment, students are asked to produce content in French that they wouldn’t be comfortable writing about in English!”

Teacher

Teachers surveyed also foresaw the potential risk of a greater emphasis on writing and external assessments on uptake at GCSE. Although almost a third (32%) felt it would have no impact, 43% felt it would actually decrease the take up of MFL at GCSE level.

There was consensus that, even if there was some merit to greater focus on written assessment it should not be at the expense of developing speaking and listening skills.
Across all audiences there was a strong consensus that even if there was some merit to greater focus on written assessment it should not be at the expense of developing speaking and listening skills, seen as vital and a major part of the attraction to taking an MFL qualification.

5.2.3 Decoupling of AS from A Level

Initial impressions towards the proposed decoupling of AS and A Level qualifications tended to be unfavourable across audiences. Many immediately said that it would compromise the ‘grace year’ of AS which they believed could be very valuable for allowing learners to find out if MFL is for them. It was felt that the current system was well suited to MFL as it acknowledged the fact some future MFL learners develop later than others and may therefore start their AS year undecided about whether to continue to A2.

“I like having the choice at the end of AS. You never know…”

Student

Many teachers worried that decoupling would put students under a good deal of pressure when making their AS choices.

“Wow that would make the decision over AS choices very hard – it’s a big pressure to decide that early.”

Student

Teachers were further concerned about the impact that decoupling would have on those students who are undecided, predicting that they would be likely to decide to only take the AS and thus A2 numbers could be even less. The survey responses corroborated this: 35% of teachers surveyed felt it could lead to a decrease in the take-up at A Level.
“And what happens to the kid who suddenly decides they want to carry on? We’ll lose even more students.”

Teacher

Figure 5.3 – Teachers’ expectations of the effect of decoupling AS from A level on the take-up of MFL at A level

Another worry, shared by stakeholders, teachers and students, was that students would feel trapped if they chose to take the A2 but during their first year found the course harder than expected and worried about the grades that they might get; under the new system they would have no room to change their mind.

“Laudable intention because it formally differentiates between a one and a two year qualification but it could end up trapping students [into their decision].”

Stakeholder
Conclusions and recommendations
6 Conclusions and recommendations

Although stakeholders, teachers, and students were consulted on wide-ranging issues relating to modern foreign languages, the research primarily aimed to explore why the uptake of languages at A level has declined. We set out the key reasons for the decline in this section. We also summarise views about the impact of proposed reforms, before setting out key recommendations about how to tackle the decline.

6.1 Why has the uptake of MFL at A level decreased?

GCSE and A level courses lack appeal

GCSE and A level courses do not capitalise on the facets of language learning that students find most appealing. Students are motivated by the idea of conversing and speaking in another language. Reading and writing hold much less appeal for them, and are seen as skills they are less likely to need. In line with this, over half the teachers surveyed considered there is too much emphasis on writing at GCSE level.

Covering more age-appropriate topics at GCSE and A level would help to increase the appeal of courses. The topics studied at GCSE are seen as somewhat childish: students do not like talking about themselves and their families at this age. At A level topics can be too advanced, requiring students to debate topics they know nothing about. Topics at A level often fail to offer the opportunity for creative self-expression that teachers and university representatives would prefer.

Teachers and students say the focus of the GCSE teaching is around memorising phrases for assessments, rather than fully understanding or learning to manipulate language, which can detract from the enjoyment of MFL. The assessment requirements have an impact on teaching practices, with teaching intensely focussed on assessments. Many teachers feel there is limited scope for innovative teaching, especially at GCSE.

GCSEs do not act as a good introduction to A levels

Many students find GCSEs off-putting because they feel they have been able to gain high marks without achieving any proficiency in the language. This devalues GCSEs and leads students to question the value of language qualifications altogether. Teachers explain that other students find GCSE off-putting because, despite having good
language skills, they are not able to memorise large chunks of text which is seen as necessary in gaining good marks in MFL controlled assessments.

Teachers appear to have serious reservations about the scope and nature of assessment at GCSE. The survey revealed much lower levels of confidence in the marking of GCSEs than A levels. Furthermore, half disagree that GCSEs measure an appropriate breadth of skills, and only 18% feel that GCSEs result in a fair evaluation of pupils’ performance. At least some of these concerns may be related to controlled assessments which teachers see as inappropriate and restrictive.

The course content, requirement and standards at GCSE do not resemble A level courses. This means that students are academically unprepared for A levels, where they are required to manipulate language rather than simply memorise text. It also means that GCSEs do not ‘sell’ the most engaging features of A level courses. Those who go on to A level feel it covers more interesting topics and the more advanced use of language is far more satisfying.

MFL is a risky choice at A level

Students and teachers alike consider A level MFL to be more difficult than other subjects. Nine in ten (92%) teachers cited the perception of MFL as a difficult subject as the reason why students do not progress to A level. This stems from a view that languages are, by their nature, difficult subjects, and a belief that the jump in difficulty between GCSE and A levels is much greater for MFL than for other subjects.

Grading at A level is seen as both harsh and unpredictable. Students and teachers feel it is virtually impossible to achieve the highest grades, and several cited examples of native speakers who are fluent in a language failing to attain top grades. Teachers are upfront with students about their concerns, and some students gave examples of teachers discouraging them from pursuing languages if they had not attained top grades at GCSE or AS level. A few stakeholders queried whether MFLs were increasingly risky for schools as well as students themselves.

As a consequence of the difficulty and grading of A levels, students feel MFLA levels involves more work for lower returns than other subjects. Students also highlight the uncertainty around grades: students felt that, unlike other subjects, natural talent and hard work will not guarantee a good grade in MFL. With most students selecting A levels with an eye on the grade requirements for university entry, MFL is simply too risky a choice for many.
The value of MFL qualifications is unclear to students

Stakeholders feel that language skills are undervalued in the UK generally. The dominance of English as a global language leads many to assume that learning another language is unnecessary. Stakeholders strongly challenge this view: languages promote a deeper understanding of other cultures and a ‘global mind-set’, which they feel is increasingly important in a globalised world.

Stakeholders and teachers suggested that the school system devalues languages. The fact that languages are not compulsory at Key Stage 4, and are not even introduced until Key Stage 3, feeds a perception of languages as a second-tier subject.

Students typically perceive that languages are less valuable than STEM or vocational subjects. They consider that the economic value of STEM subjects has been promoted much more effectively and many are unaware that MFL is a rigorous academic subject. Students select A level and degree subjects with a view to the employment prospects they offer, and there is a need to promote greater awareness of the economic value of MFL. While those who study MFL value the broad range of skills it helps to develop and demonstrate, the breadth is off-putting to other students who perceive that a lack of specialisation will be unappealing in the jobs market, and a language qualification irrelevant if they are not using the target language in their chosen career.

6.2 How will proposed reforms affect the take-up of MFL A levels?

There are mixed views about linear assessment

Stakeholders, teachers and students expressed mixed views about the relative advantages of linear and modular assessments. Some felt that a modular approach reflects how discrete topic areas are learnt in practice, and helpfully provides regular feedback to students that they can use to improve their future performance. Several were concerned that linear assessments might appear more daunting to students than modular exams.

On the other hand, teachers and students often felt that linear approaches are ideally suited to language learning. Unlike most other subjects, which may primarily be based on learning facts or techniques, language learning involves cumulatively building up a skill, and therefore an end-of-course assessment is more likely to allow students to showcase their true capabilities.

Written skills should not be emphasised at the expense of speaking

As noted above, students are drawn to study languages by the idea of speaking. While teachers, students, and stakeholders pointed to a
number of advantages in developing writing skills they were all emphatic that writing was not more important than oral skills. The survey findings demonstrate that a significant proportion of teachers feel there is already too much focus on writing at GCSE.
Decoupling has some advantages but may increase the perceived risk of selecting MFL at A level

While acknowledging the difficulty of predicting the impact of decoupling teachers and students in general felt that it would discourage language learning.

It was seen as unlikely that decoupling would affect ‘hard core language fans’ who would continue to study to A level. However, it might put off those who like to sample MFL at AS level before making a decision about progression to A level. Decoupling increases the risk, and puts additional pressure on making the right A level choices initially; in the context of a subject that is already regarded as a high-risk A level choice, decoupling was seen as likely to deter more students than it retains.

6.3 Recommendations

Promote the value of learning languages

To enhance the status and uptake of languages, stakeholders feel the value of foreign languages must be promoted across the UK. For this to be effective, responsibility for promoting languages should extend beyond the education system to government and business. A few suggested using high-profile role models – such as footballers or prominent celebrities – to inspire young people and to normalise the idea of speaking a second language. Within the education system, there was a consensus that language teaching should be introduced at primary level.

Students select A levels and, particularly, degrees with a view to the employment prospects associated with their subject choices. More should be done to promote awareness of both the specific career opportunities for those with language skills, and the value placed by employers on the wide range of skills developed through language courses. The EBacc has helped to promote the value of MFL at GCSE level as a core subject that universities and employers would consider highly, and a similar classification at A level could be helpful.

Consider the appeal of MFL, particularly at GCSE level

The content and assessment of GCSE courses appears to deter students, and to restrict the capacity of teachers to deliver inspirational and innovative lessons. The teacher-student relationship is of great significance in a subject based on communication, and teachers and students highlighted the benefits of small class groups, fun activities such as singing, and new online tools for language learning. Beyond the classroom, exchange trips and visits abroad have a huge value in motivating students. As noted above, a greater
emphasise on speaking rather than writing would capitalise on the features of language-learning that most appeal to students.

Minimise the risk at A level

Relaxing grade boundaries across the board is unlikely to be welcomed by universities, who feel that standards are slipping over time; however, students and teachers currently feel that the top grades at A level are unattainable. Students need to feel that they can achieve comparable grades in an A level MFL as they can in other subjects. Without confidence that achieving a high grade at A level is possible, MFL will not be a viable choice for most.

Develop qualifications for all ability levels

MFL courses are currently conceived of as highly academic but this approach risks excluding less academic students who are capable linguists. Teachers highlighted that middle-ability students who are capable of learning another language to a decent level of competence are unable to gain high marks in GCSE MFLs. When teachers surveyed were asked about the reforms they would like to see made, the most commonly given answer was language courses that cater for all ability levels. A few teachers surveyed speculated about the value of schools being able to offer one of the GCSE/A level alternative for those who want to learn the practical skills of speaking and conversing in a language, but are not capable of or interested in an academic qualification.
Why is the uptake of Modern Foreign Language A levels in decline?

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