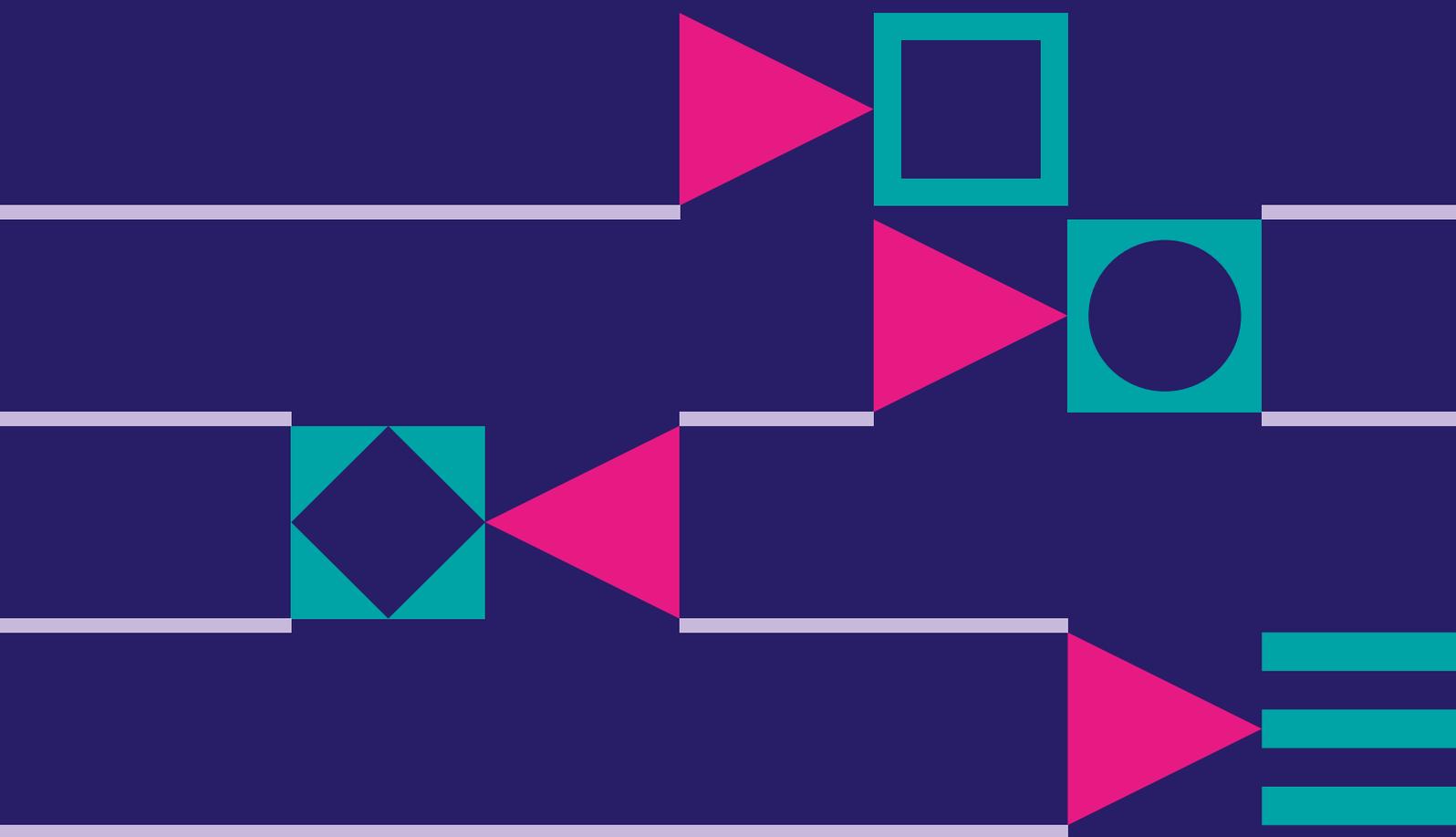


Language Trends Northern Ireland 2019

Findings from surveys of primary
and post-primary schools



Earlier this year, a cross-party group of MPs and Peers called for a UK-wide National Recovery Programme for Languages.¹ It noted that the UK has a growing deficit in language skills, which is holding us back economically, socially and culturally. The report argued that the languages ‘supply chain’ through schools is drying up, creating a crisis that the UK can no longer ignore, and called on government, civil society and all stakeholders to join in a concerted effort to reverse the decline.

While the curriculum and assessment systems in Northern Ireland have been steadily diverging from those in England and Wales since devolution, there has been longstanding concern about the fragility of language study here too, and the general thrust of the parliamentary report rings true.² However, the solutions and the detail of any National Recovery Programme must clearly respond to our specific educational and sociolinguistic context here in Northern Ireland.

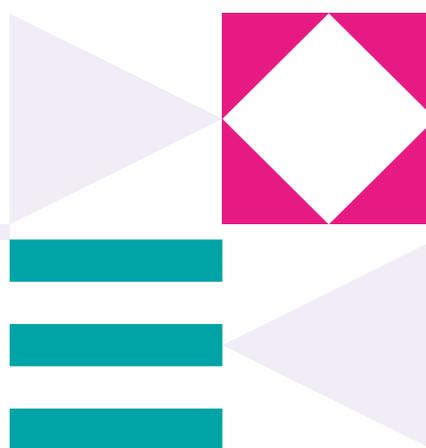
This first edition of the Language Trends survey for Northern Ireland therefore comes at a crucial time, providing an up-to-date and independent picture of how language teaching is faring in both primary and post-primary schools and what issues are affecting provision and take-up.

1 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (2019) *A National Recovery Programme for Languages*.

2 Ayres-Bennett, W and Carruthers, J (2019) *Policy Briefing on Modern Languages Educational Policy in the UK*. Available online at: <https://www.modernlanguagesleadershipfellow.com/app/uploads/2019/01/Policy-Briefing-on-Modern-Languages-Educational-Policy-in-the-UK.pdf>

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Key findings

Primary

- Fifty-five per cent of responding primary schools offer some form of language teaching.
- Excluding voluntary and after-school provision, this figure drops to 33 per cent.
- Fourteen per cent offer systematic language teaching in a scheme of work which relates to the Northern Ireland curriculum.
- Spanish is the language most frequently taught, followed by French, and then Irish.
- Schools see cultural awareness as the most important benefit; however, the benefits of language-learning for literacy are not being fully exploited.
- Those schools with the most structured and consistent provision are most likely to be prep schools or schools located in urban areas.³
- Many schools lament the discontinuation of the Primary Modern Languages Programme⁴ and would like to be able to employ specialist teachers in order to develop the subject.

Post-primary

- There is wide variation in practice between schools. The most favourable arrangements for language learning are to be found in selective schools and in schools which have the lowest Free School Meal figures.⁵
- A longer time set aside for language learning in Key Stage 3 and encouragement to take a language in Key Stage 4 are associated with selective status and low proportions of pupils eligible for Free School Meals, while the likelihood of classes not running through lack of numbers is associated with schools where there are high levels of Free School Meal eligibility.
- Provision for languages post-16 is becoming increasingly vulnerable as a result of very small class sizes, funding pressures on schools and inefficacious arrangements between schools for joint delivery of the curriculum.
- The nature and grading of GCSE and A-level language exams are considered a disincentive for pupils and the major barrier to improving take-up.
- Respondents would welcome action to improve the status of languages generally and to embed more positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures.

3 The analysis is based on the definitions provided by the Department of Education and refers to the location of the school, not the home location of the pupils within it. The Department of Education has based its classification on the following source: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/review-of-the-statistical-classification-and-delineation-of-settlements-march-2015.pdf>

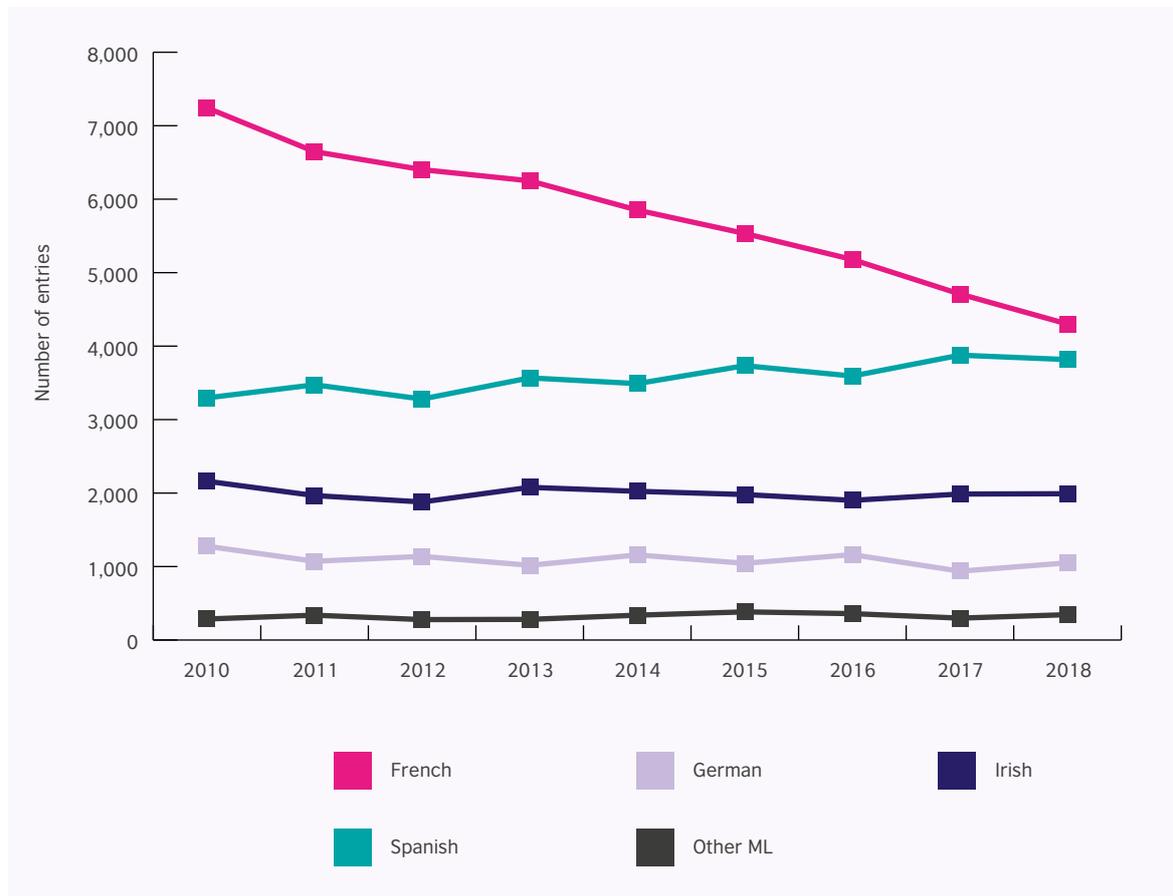
4 Jones, S Greenwood, R, Purdy, N and McGuckian, E (2017) *Review of Current Primary Languages in Northern Ireland*. Stranmillis University College.

5 Free School Meal entitlement is the main measure used to indicate socio-economic deprivation.

The study of modern languages in Northern Ireland

Between 2010 and 2018, entries for GCSE modern languages in Northern Ireland declined by 19 per cent, with increases in Spanish (+16 per cent) and the group of other languages not generally taught in schools⁶ (+21 per cent) disguising significant falls in German (-18 per cent) and French (-41 per cent). Entries for Irish declined by eight per cent over the period.

Figure 1: GCSE entries in Northern Ireland, 2010–18



6 These include Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), Italian, Polish and Russian, though we have no breakdown specific to Northern Ireland.

Table 1: GCSE entries in Northern Ireland, 2010–18

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
French	7,243	6,647	6,402	6,250	5,852	5,533	5,179	4,709	4,301
German	1,276	1,072	1,138	1,017	1,158	1,044	1,162	937	1,050
Irish	2,161	1,966	1,879	2,078	2,024	1,980	1,901	1,987	1,991
Spanish	3,296	3,474	3,280	3,568	3,490	3,734	3,593	3,877	3,817
Other ML	286	338	278	281	338	383	359	298	345

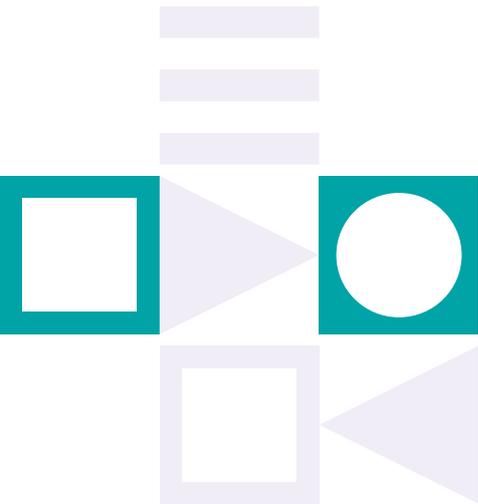
Source: www.jcq.org.uk

The most recent Chief Inspector's Report noted that:

The cultural and commercial importance of language learning cannot be overestimated, given the changing profile of our society and the unpredictable economic future. Yet the uptake for modern languages at post-16 and KS4 continues to be disappointing.⁷

Despite this, it noted that most of the language lessons observed by inspectors were good or better.

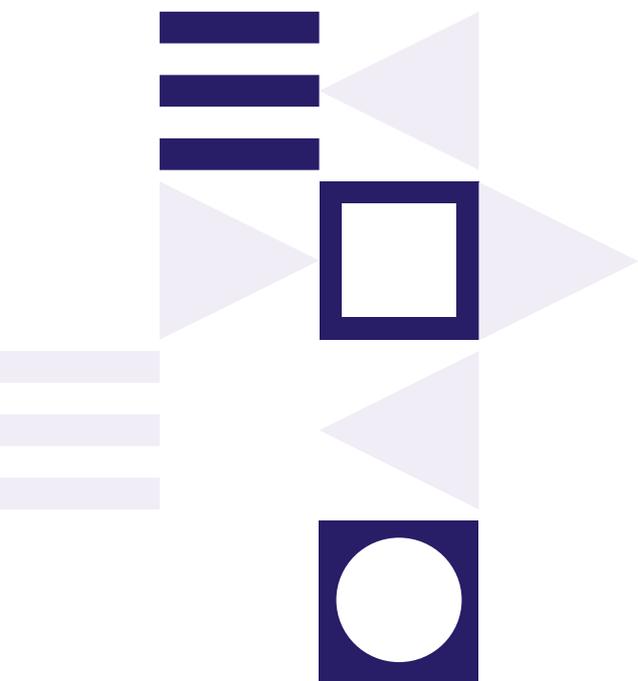
⁷ Education and Training Inspectorate (2018) *Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2018*. Available online at: https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/cir-2016-2018_1.pdf



About this survey

This report is based on responses to online surveys sent to primary school principals and post-primary heads of modern languages during February and March 2019. A total of 218 responses were received from primary schools and 100 from post-primary schools, representing response rates of 25 per cent and 51 per cent respectively. The response profile of primary schools matches the profile of all primary schools in Northern Ireland in terms of school management type, location (by county and whether urban or rural) and socio-economic circumstances as indicated by the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals. The post-primary survey received more responses proportionately from schools with very low numbers of pupils eligible for Free School Meals and more responses from selective schools than would have been expected as a proportion of all schools across Northern Ireland. This should be borne in mind when interpreting the survey findings, since it may be that they paint a slightly more positive picture of the situation for languages than is actually the case across Northern Ireland as a whole.

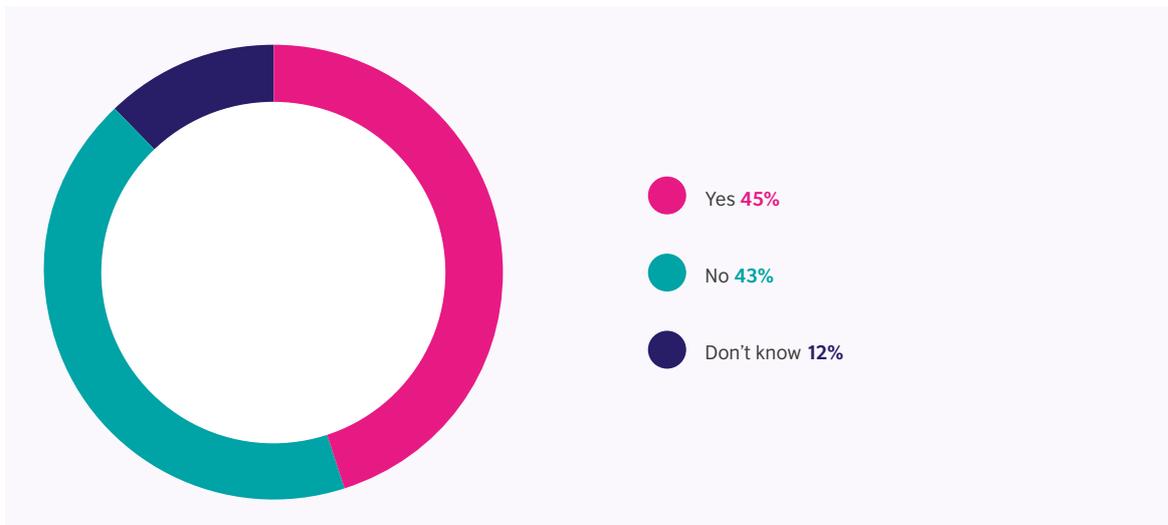
British Council Northern Ireland is very grateful to the Department of Education and to members of an advisory group drawing together representatives from university language departments, teacher training, NICILT and CCEA for their advice in devising and interpreting this research.



Language teaching in primary schools

More than half of responding schools (55 per cent) report that they provide some language teaching (other than English in an English-medium school and Irish in an Irish-medium school) to pupils. A smaller number of schools (45 per cent – but with considerable overlap) had previously taken part in the Primary Modern Languages Programme (PMLP), which ran from 2007 to 2015. There is no significant relationship between a school having taken part in the PMLP and reporting that they currently teach a language. The 2017 review of primary languages in Northern Ireland found that PMLP schools focused primarily on Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, while non-PMLP schools were more likely to focus on French and Key Stage 2.⁸

Figure 2: Whether respondents took part in the Primary Modern Languages Programme



Languages taught

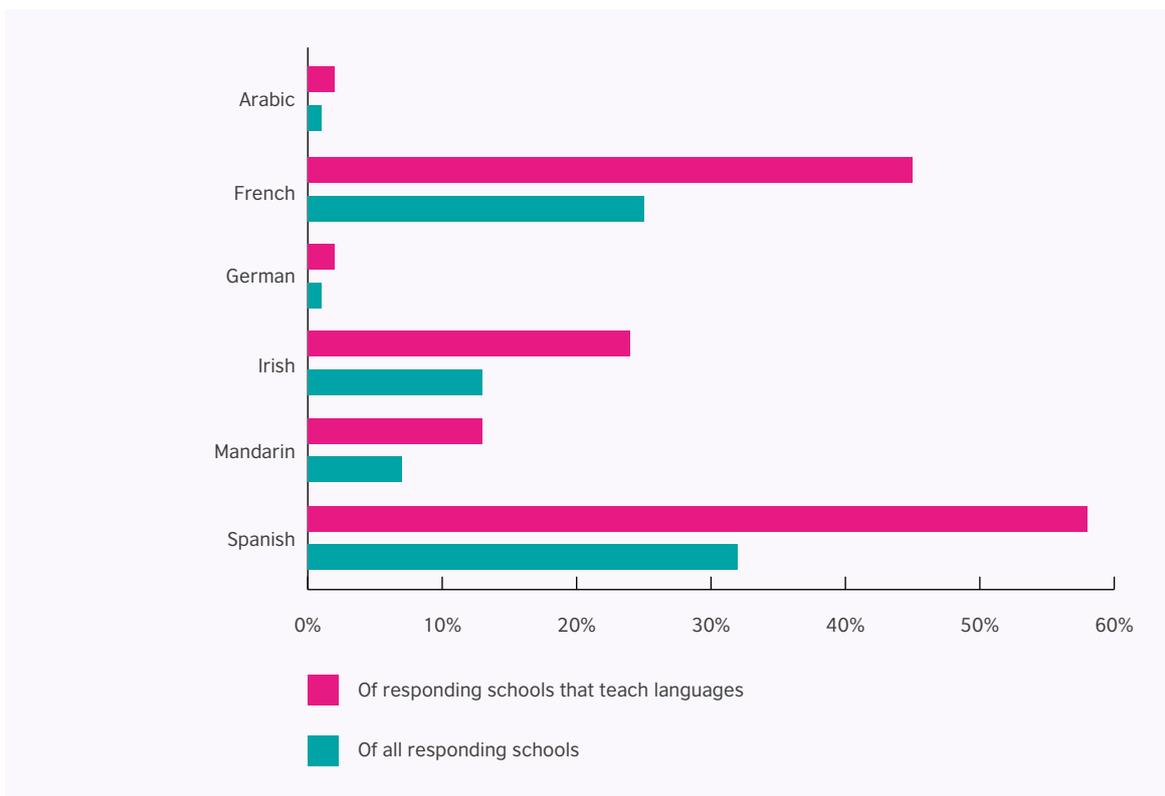
Spanish is the most popular language taught, followed by French. Spanish is taught by more than half (58 per cent) of schools which teach a language, and 45 per cent teach French. Very little German is taught, but 13 per cent of those schools teaching a language teach Mandarin. Other languages mentioned – each by one school – were Italian and Sign Language.



Spanish is the most popular language taught, followed by French.

⁸ See Jones, S, Greenwood, R, Purdy, N and McGuckian, E (2017) *Review of Current Primary Languages in Northern Ireland*. Stranmillis University College.

Figure 3: Languages taught by primary schools



At which Key Stages are children being taught a language?

Nine out of ten primary schools that teach a language do so in Key Stage 2. However, nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) teach one in Key Stage 1 and more than half (52 per cent) do so at Foundation Stage. As proportions of all responding primary schools, these percentages equate to 50 per cent, 40 per cent and 28 per cent respectively.

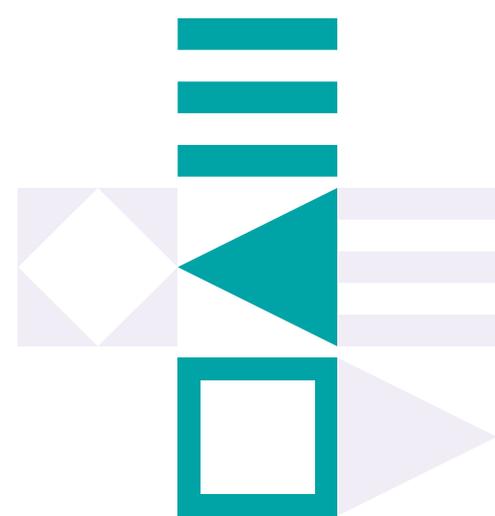
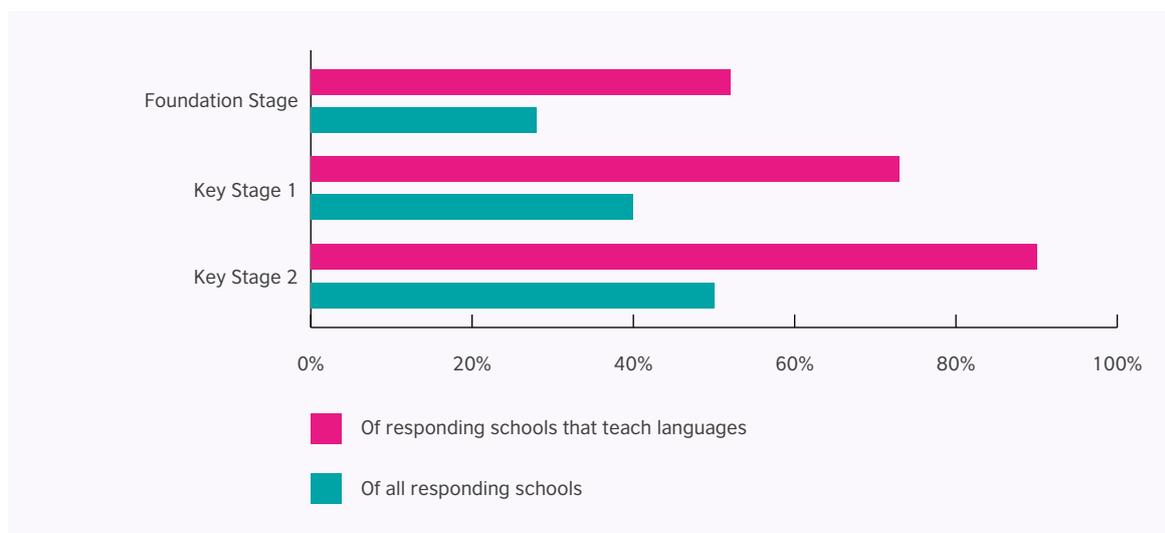


Figure 4: Languages taught by primary schools



How long have primary schools been teaching modern languages?

In nearly half (48 per cent) of the schools teaching languages, the subject has been established for some considerable time – more than five years. At the same time, responses show that more than a quarter of the rest (27 per cent) have only just started in the last year or so:

Table 2: How long have schools been teaching languages?

Started in 2018–19	10%
Started in 2017–18	17%
Three to five years	25%
More than five years	48%

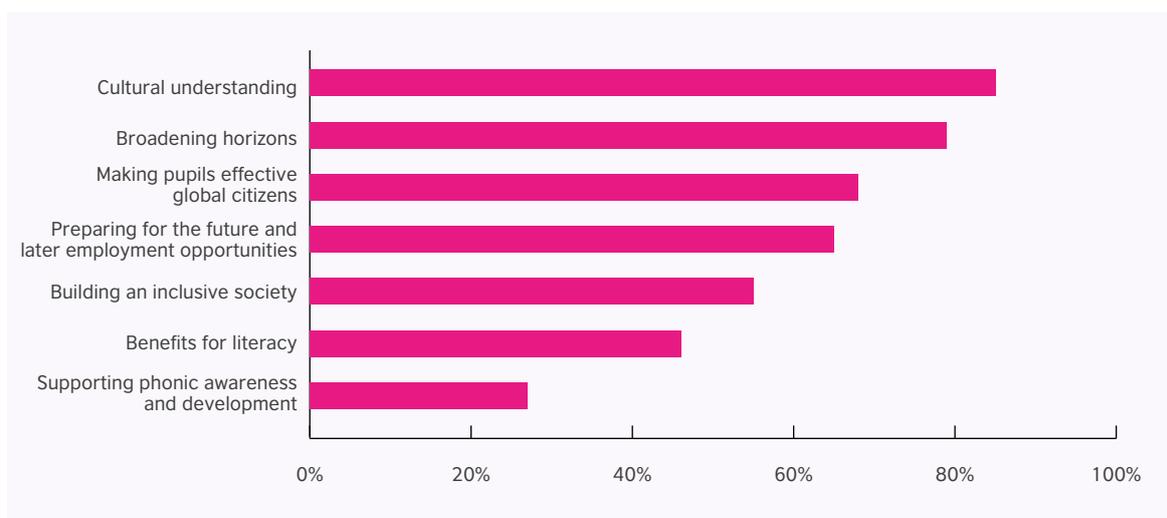


In nearly half of the schools teaching languages, the subject has been established for some considerable time.

What do schools see as the main advantages of teaching a language to pupils from a young age?

Schools highlight cultural understanding and the broadening of horizons as the most important benefits of language learning for young children:

Figure 5: Ranking of benefits of an early start to language learning by respondents



Respondents also comment on the cognitive benefits of learning a new language and the enjoyment younger children derive from it:

Pupils of a younger age are sometimes less inhibited about speaking in front of their peers in a different language. There are lots of appealing games, songs and group activities which can be used to teach a language at primary level. It also prepares the pupils for their future language learning.

Develops listening skills. Gives some less able pupils their chance to shine.

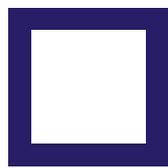
The lower importance respondents give to literacy benefits perhaps reflects the tendency for modern languages not to be included as part of schools' literacy planning: only 18 schools (15 per cent of those teaching languages, eight per cent of all responding schools) do this. Others say that they are delivered through after-school clubs or by external teachers. Teachers comment:

All languages are embedded within our literacy planning as well as our Personal Development, Mutual Understanding and The World Around Us Programmes.

We plan for Chinese Language teaching as part of our Literacy. We focus mainly on Talking and Listening and performance.



The lower importance respondents give to literacy benefits perhaps reflects the tendency for modern languages not to be included as part of schools' literacy planning.



Irish-medium teaching

Three of the primary school responses were from Irish-medium schools and a further two had an Irish-medium unit. A further nine schools reported teaching some aspects of the curriculum through Irish, sometimes for individual pupils or as an after-school club. Schools teaching through the medium of Irish reported benefits such as keeping the language alive and encouraging children to learn another language:

- | **Pupils gain a greater appreciation of their culture.**
- | **Pupils gain transferable skills for learning other languages.**

One integrated school reported also introducing children to elements of Ulster Scots.



Schools not teaching a modern language

Of the 45 per cent of schools not currently teaching a language, over half (55 per cent) said they had done so in the past.

More than half of the schools not currently teaching a language (55 per cent) said they had done so in the past. The main reason given, both by schools that had never taught a language and by those who had stopped doing so, was lack of funding, cited by 80 per cent of schools in these circumstances. Other important reasons were lack of expertise within the school and lack of external support.

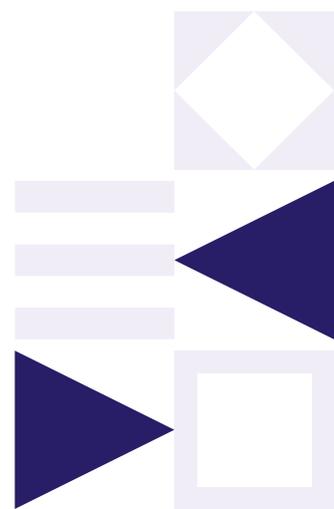
- | **When funding was cut, we continued to self-fund Spanish. Unfortunately, our tutor was unable to continue and we haven't found a replacement.**

Not a single school in either of these categories said that the reason was that they were unconvinced of the benefits, although several gave other reasons why they were not developing the teaching of a modern language:

- | **Large number of EAL pupils so school focus is on developing English.**
- | **Our school has 45 per cent Special Needs. To get them to learn another language apart from English is very difficult.**



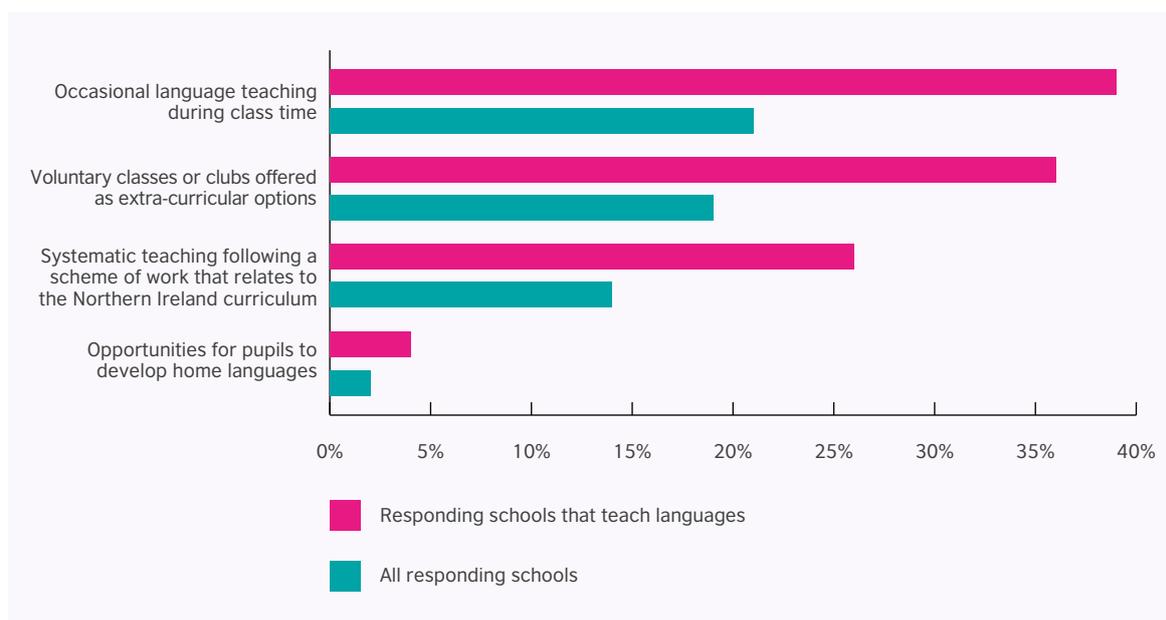
More than half of the schools not currently teaching a language said they had done so in the past.



Languages in primary schools – how it’s being done

Of the schools teaching languages, just over a quarter (26 per cent) do so systematically following a scheme of work that allows languages to be part of thematic planning in the primary school. These schools are more likely to be large urban schools or prep schools, although there was no evidence from the data available for a relationship between systematic language provision and the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals. A larger number of schools (39 per cent) teach languages on an occasional basis during class time.⁹ Some of these schools also offer opportunities for pupils to develop their home languages (they did not specify which languages). Other schools offer languages as extra-curricular options on a voluntary basis.

Figure 6: How language teaching is being delivered

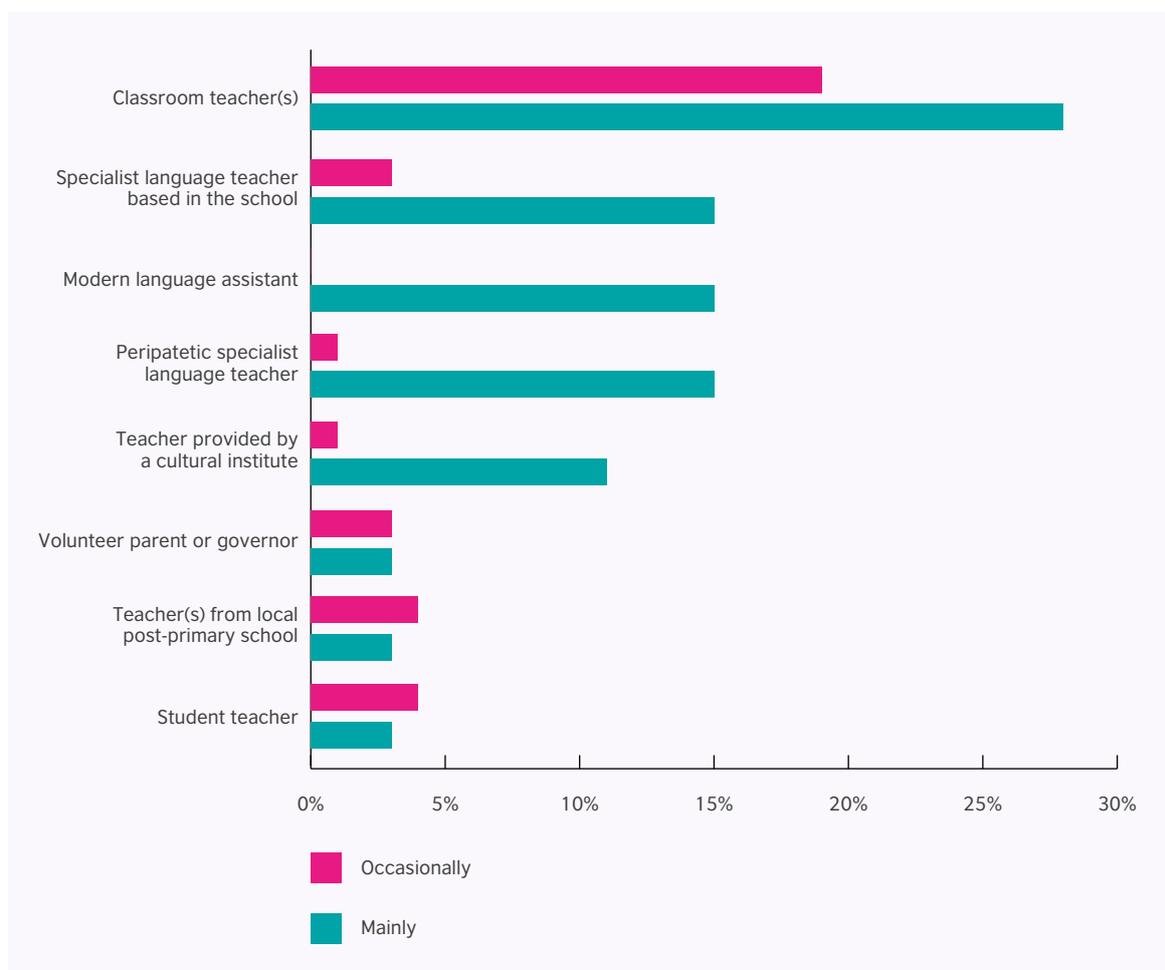


⁹ Four offer systematic teaching AND occasional teaching.

Who is providing the teaching?

The teaching is being done by a diverse range of specialist and non-specialist staff from within schools and from outside agencies, as well as volunteers:

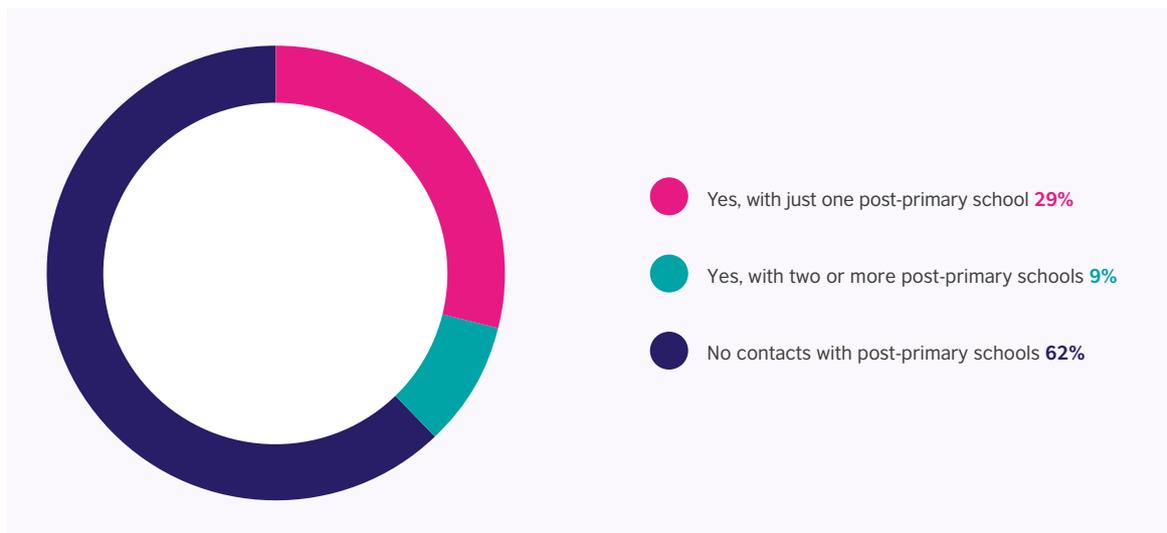
Figure 7: Staff mainly or occasionally providing language teaching (percentages of schools involved in teaching a language)



Links to post-primary schools and other organisations

Nearly two-thirds of schools teaching a language have no contacts with their local post-primary schools, although 29 per cent have contacts with one post-primary school and nine per cent have contacts with two or more.

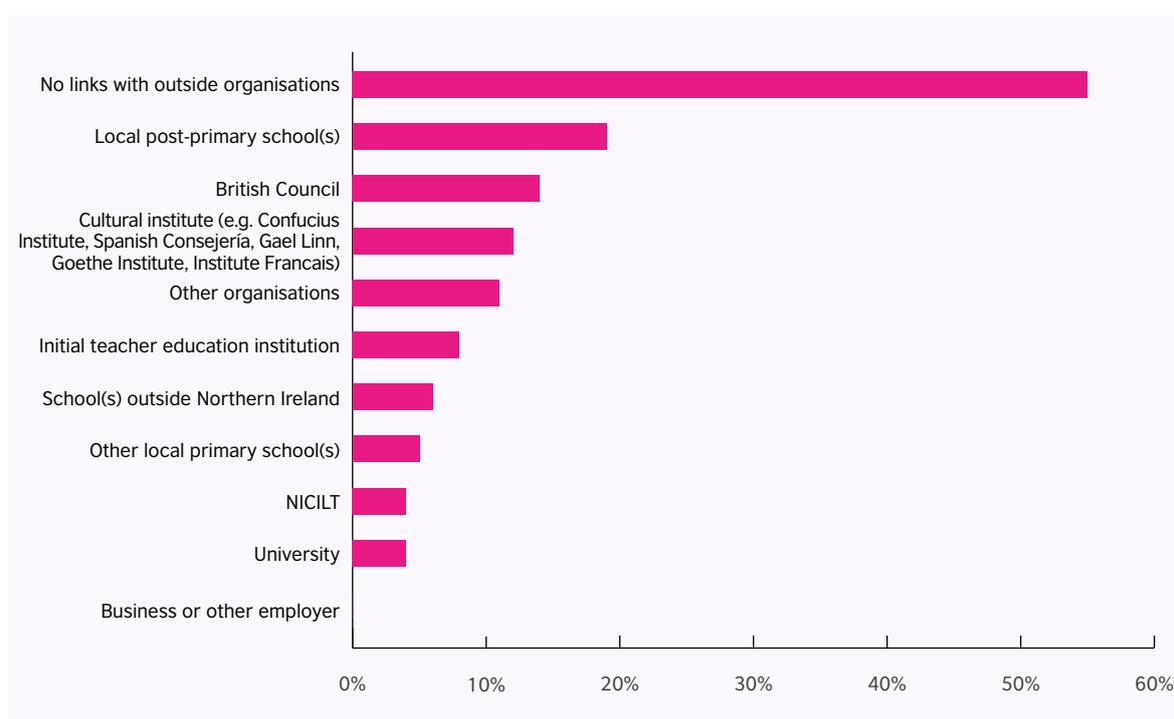
Figure 8: Whether primary schools have contacts with local post-primary schools in relation to language learning (percentages of all schools teaching a language)



The majority of primary schools have no links at all with outside organisations in relation to the delivery of modern languages, and none of the responding schools had business or employer links. However, the remainder reported a range of other links with outside organisations including the British Council, NICILT and cultural institutes. Other links mentioned were Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the local Gaelic Athletic Association, and links outside Northern Ireland through Erasmus+.

The majority of primary schools have no links at all with outside organisations.

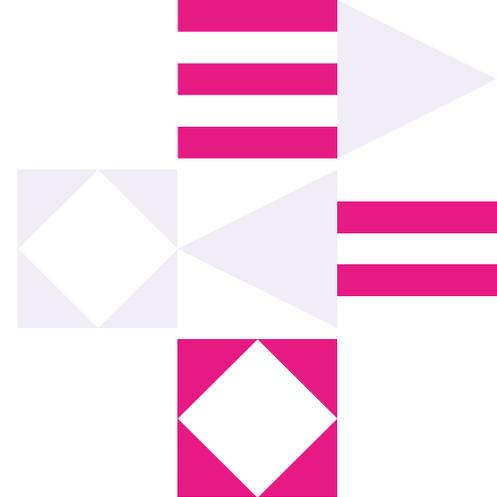
Figure 9: Primary schools' links with outside organisations (percentages of all responding schools)



What additional support would be welcomed?

This was an open question. The top three requests were a specialist teacher, tutors or assistants (51 per cent of comments), funding (33 per cent of comments) and more resources (20 per cent of comments). There was a high degree of overlap between the request for specialist teachers and the request for more funding: 59 per cent of the comments that mentioned funding also mentioned the need for specialist teaching, highlighting the need for the development of teacher education provision for primary languages. Many comments referred to the existence of previous programmes they would like reinstated, although only a small number explicitly named the Primary Modern Languages Programme. The following comments are illustrative of the types of support requested:

Support from a specialist. Development of a programme of how to teach it – step by step – what to teach first, how to teach it, where to go for resources to use to engage the children – as no knowledge within the staff.



I think, if DENI is serious about developing language teaching at primary level, it will be essential for teachers leaving teacher training institutions to be fluent in a second language so they can be recruited on that criterion. In the meantime, a specific language teacher would be required.

We would love the PMLP programme to return. As the co-ordinator of the programme, I benefited greatly from the lessons and training and pupils thoroughly enjoyed working in an engaging and fun way with our Spanish tutor.

What would facilitate the development of language learning in Northern Ireland primary schools?

This again was an open question, and there was considerable overlap in the responses to this and the previous question. The top three suggestions related to funding for language teaching (36 per cent of comments), a centralised approach/curriculum for primary schools (19.5 per cent of comments), and access to specialist teaching (17 per cent of comments).

Funding is the primary issue in Northern Ireland with schools here receiving substantially less than schools in Scotland, England and Wales. Stop introducing worthwhile programmes and then pulling the plug on them!

Highly skilled tutors who can engage the children through active teaching methods and following a progressive structured programme.

Another common theme related to the need for a national change of mindset acknowledging the positive value of languages in society:

We need to promote multilingualism and develop Irish medium in line with this to embrace languages of people living here, to promote industry and tourism, to break down linguistic and cultural barriers, and to stop allowing narrow political agendas to deflect from the truth behind multilingualism.

It would be good if the teaching of languages in primary schools was held in higher regard. It is a pity that our teacher training colleges no longer offer the opportunity for teachers to study a language as part of their BEd course.

Language teaching in post-primary schools

Which languages are taught?

Respondents were asked which languages their pupils were learning and asked to distinguish between extra-curricular/enrichment provision and fully timetabled curriculum subjects. Fully timetabled provision exists for French in more than nine out of ten post-primary schools, Spanish in nearly three-quarters and Irish in just over one-third of schools. This may be within the school itself or in the wider Area Learning Community.¹⁰ German is a timetabled option in just one-quarter of schools, and small numbers of schools offer Latin and other languages including Mandarin (two schools), Portuguese and Arabic (one school in each case).

Extra-curricular or enrichment provision is more varied, with around one-quarter of schools offering some Mandarin, one in ten offering Irish and smaller numbers offering a range of other languages including Arabic, Italian, Russian and Japanese. Four schools offer Polish as an extra-curricular option.

¹⁰ Every post-primary school in Northern Ireland is a member of an Area Learning Community. This is to enable schools to come together to plan a broad and balanced curriculum for the local area.

Fully timetabled provision exists for French in more than nine out of ten post-primary schools, Spanish in nearly three-quarters and Irish in just over one-third of schools.

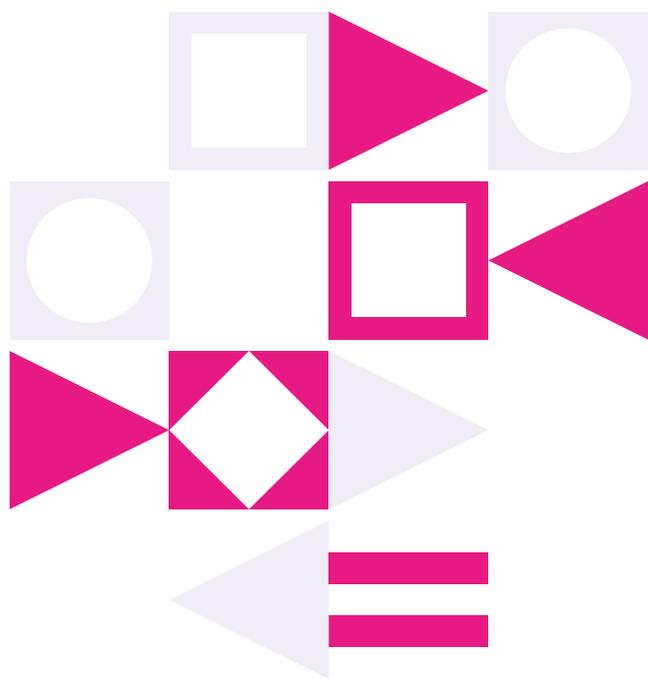
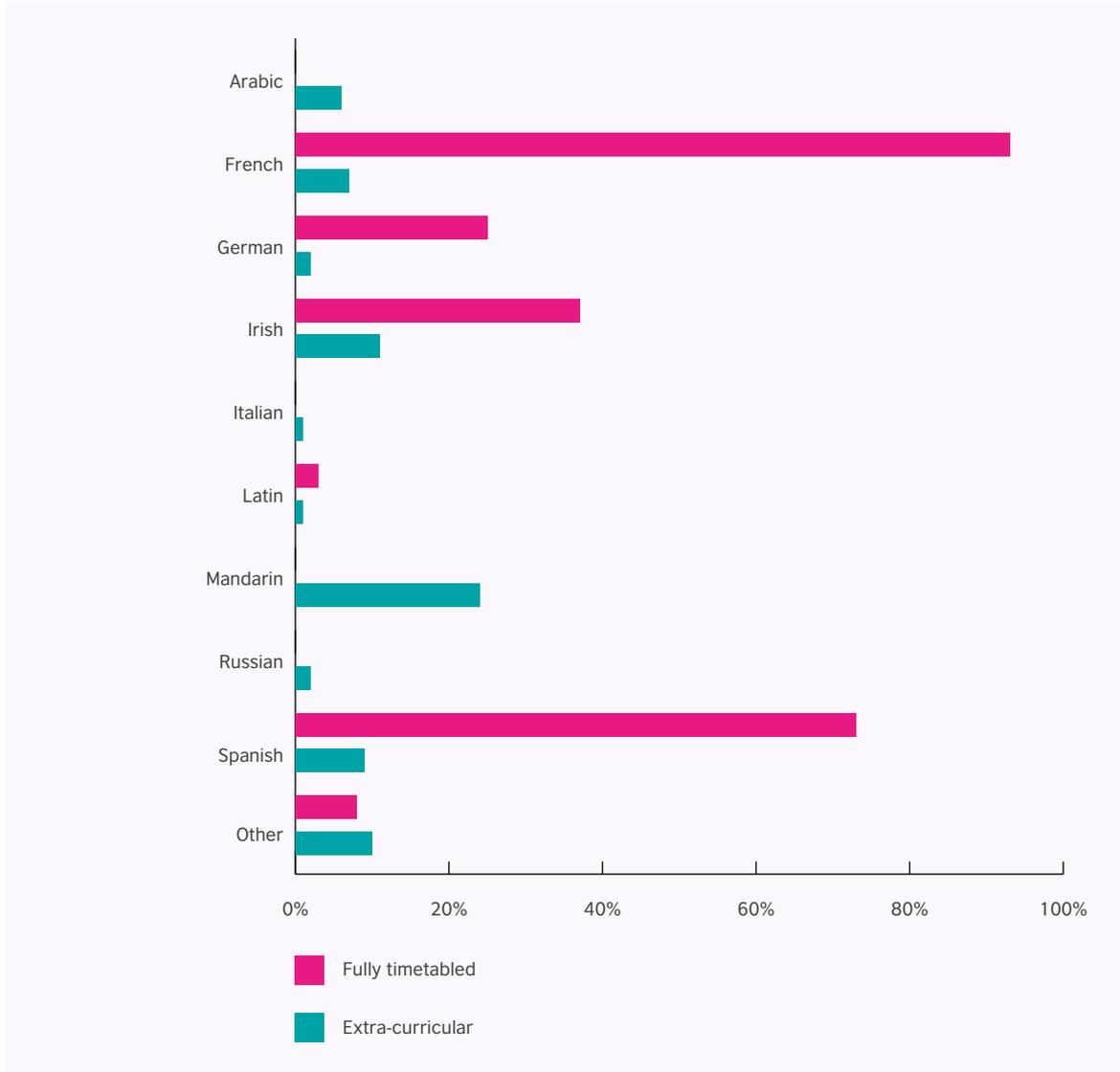
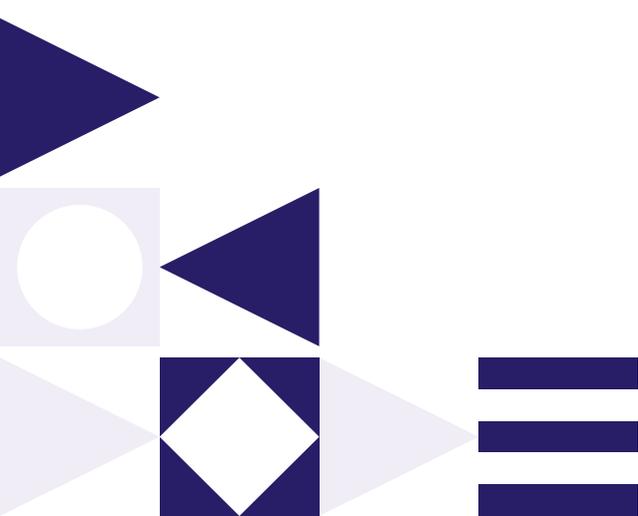


Figure 10: Languages taught as full timetabled subjects (at any level) and as extra-curricular or enrichment options



The vast majority of respondents say that at least some of their Year 8 pupils have had opportunities to learn a modern language in their primary school.



Community languages

Nearly three-quarters of schools offer newcomer pupils¹¹ the opportunity to take exams in their home or community languages. In the vast majority of cases, this is in the schools themselves. Polish is the language most frequently mentioned in this regard, with other languages specified as Russian, Urdu, Mandarin, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. Respondents comment:

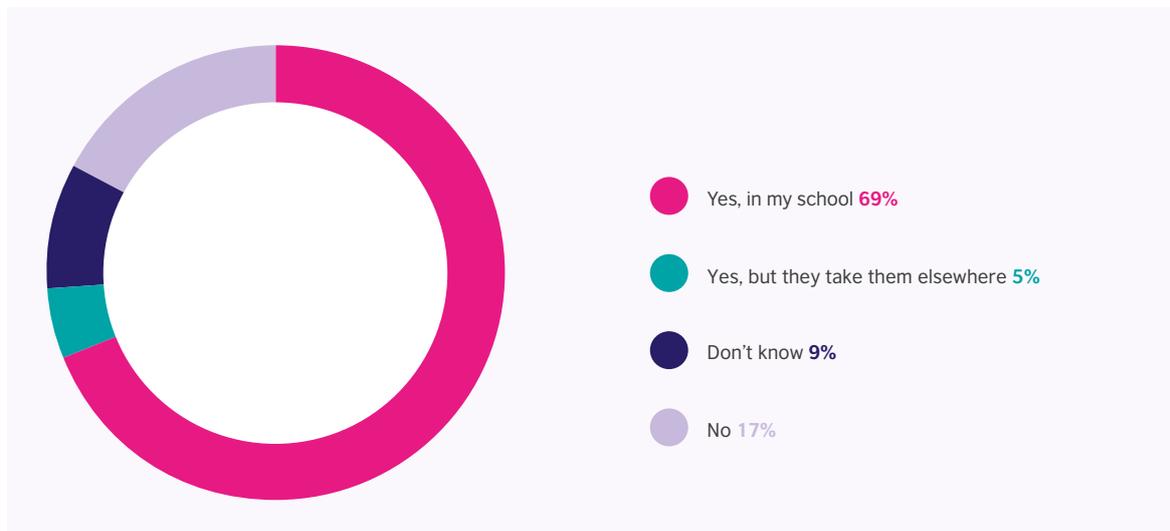
Polish is delivered by external teacher after school at Key Stage 4/Key Stage 5.

School has provided examiners for speaking tests and entered the candidates through the school for the exams.

If appropriate we will also make arrangements for them to sit the exams in other schools.

However, around half of respondents (51 per cent) do not know whether there are formal opportunities for their pupils to learn any of these languages outside school in their local area, and more than a third (37 per cent) say there are no such opportunities.

Figure 11: Schools offering newcomer pupils the opportunity to take exams in their home or community languages



Collaboration with primary schools

The vast majority of respondents (88 per cent) say that at least some of their Year 8 pupils have had opportunities to learn a modern language in their primary school. However, the proportion of pupils that this involves varies from just four per cent to 100 per cent, and the mean is over one-third (39 per cent). The most commonly mentioned language is Spanish (67 schools), followed by French (52 schools) and Irish (23 schools). Twelve schools say their pupils have learned some Mandarin, and three mention German.

¹¹ A newcomer pupil is defined as a pupil whose home language is not English or Irish and who may require support in school for this reason.

Respondents comment:

Very difficult to gauge. A lot have done Spanish Language Club in P5, some have done French again, in a club but I have no knowledge of any having been introduced to German. What they learn is minimal – numbers, greetings maybe colours.

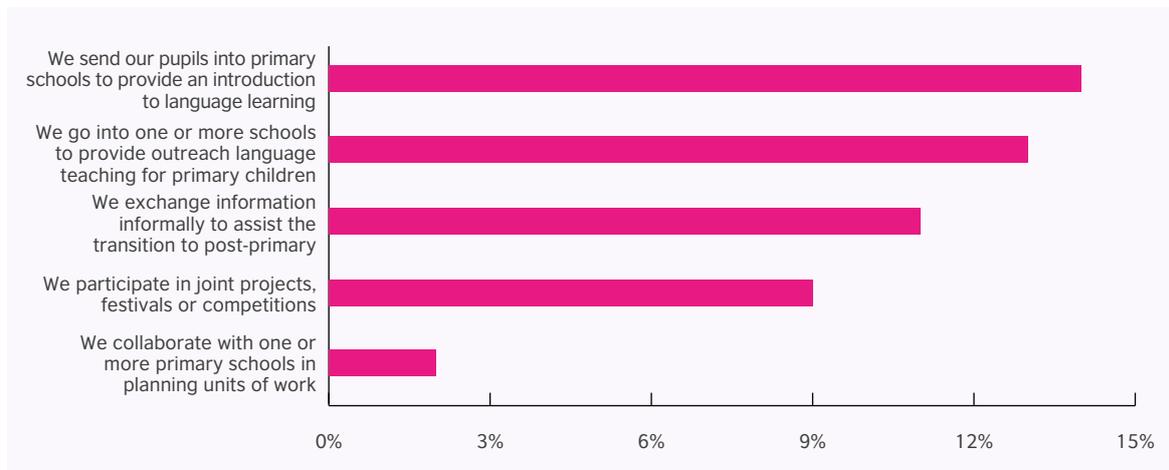
These language opportunities are on a very ad hoc basis and change year on year.

Some primary schools teach Irish informally or students had the opportunity to attend a summer scheme or after-school classes.

French, Spanish and some Mandarin. All said they had done languages until their P4 year but then they had to stop – parents told me that funding was cut so the school couldn't continue.

More than half (55 per cent) have no contacts with their local primary schools in relation to language learning. Others take part in a range of collaborative activities:

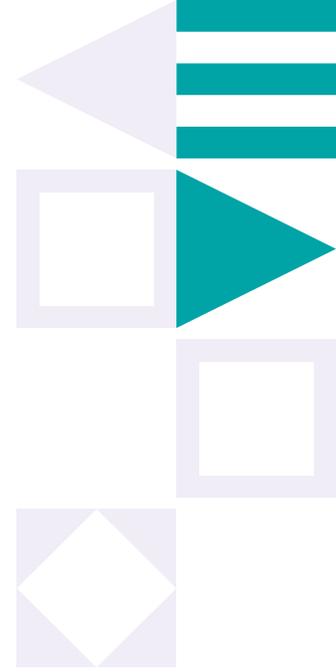
Figure 12: Types of collaboration between post-primary and primary schools involving languages



In addition to the activities listed above, 23 schools mentioned that they collaborate in other ways, with the annual European Day of Languages (26 September) providing a key focus:

We go to local primary schools and do a language taster session during European Day of Languages.

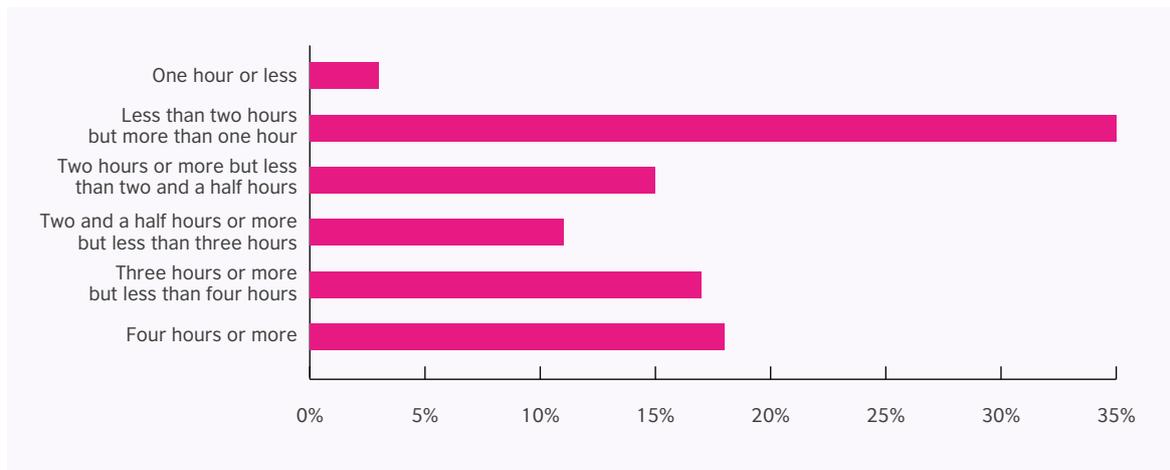
In September we invite Primary 6 pupils in from two local primary schools to do taster sessions of French, German, Spanish and Polish as part of our celebration of European Day of Languages.



Time for languages in Key Stage 3

There is a wide range of practice between schools in terms of number of hours allocated to language learning per week. More than a third of schools (38 per cent) allow a very small amount of time – less than two hours. However, at the other end of the spectrum, a similar proportion (35 per cent) dedicate more than three hours per week to the subject.

Figure 13: Time per week dedicated to language learning in Key Stage 3 (percentage of schools)

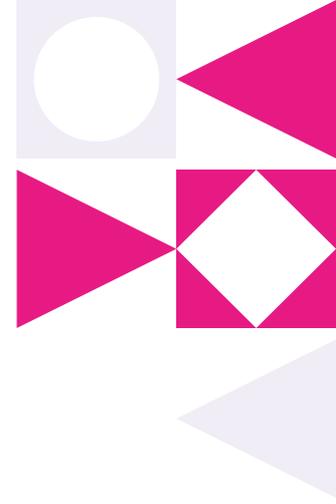


When the responses to this question were analysed by various school characteristics, the following associations emerged as statistically significant.

Selective schools are more likely to dedicate a longer amount of time to language learning, and non-selective schools more likely to set aside only a short number of hours per week: 17 per cent of selective schools but more than half of non-selective schools (53 per cent) have languages timetabled for less than two hours per week. This means that non-selective schools are three times more likely to teach languages for less than two hours per week than selective schools.

Schools catering for pupils in the most advantaged economic circumstances allocate a greater amount of time to language learning: 62 per cent of schools in the lowest quintile for Free School Meals set aside more than two hours per week for language learning, whereas only 21 per cent provide less than two hours per week. Schools in the highest quintile for Free School Meals are two and a half times more likely to allow less time for language learning: 53 per cent set aside less than two hours per week and only six per cent offer three hours or more.

Schools with smaller numbers of pupils overall are also less likely to dedicate a longer time to languages.

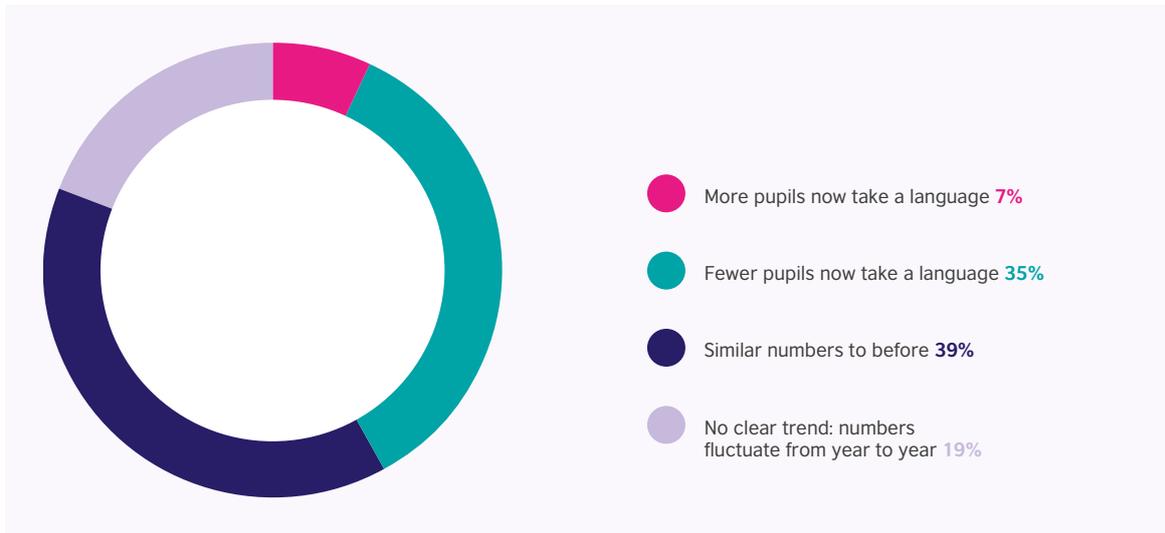


Languages in Key Stage 4

Trends in take-up

More than one-third of schools (35 per cent) say they have seen fewer pupils studying a language in Key Stage 4 over the last three years, while only seven per cent say they have more pupils doing so.

Figure 14: Changes in take-up for languages in Key Stage 4 over the last three years



Selective schools are most likely to report stable numbers for languages, whereas non-selective schools are most likely to report declining numbers. Seven schools reported pupil numbers having increased. Two of these reported that the reason for this was a change of staff, and two mentioned Spanish as a factor:

Spanish in particular has seen a huge increase. Perception of subject/pupils like learning Spanish.

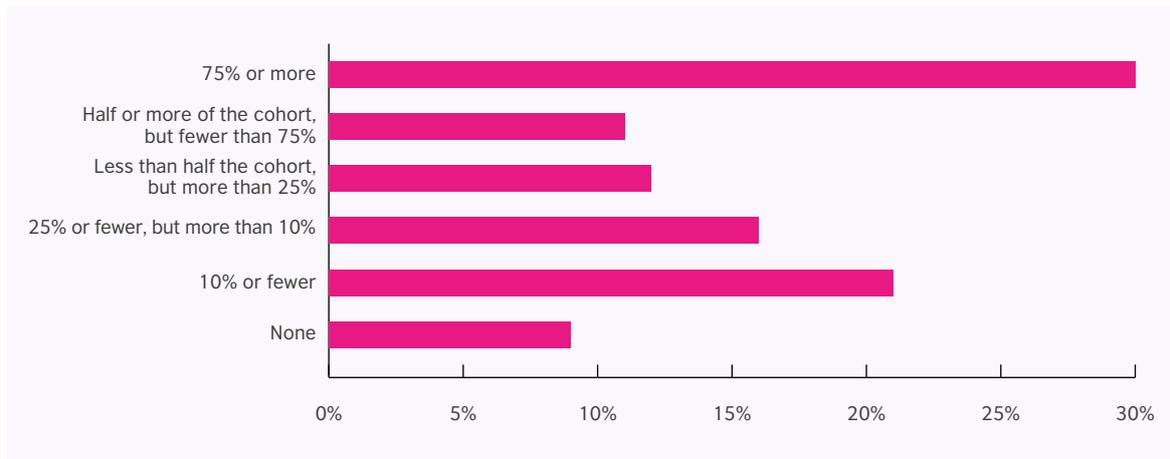
We are now offering both French and Spanish at GCSE so that gifted linguists can study both.

Schools have widely varying proportions of pupils taking a language in Key Stage 4. While in 30 per cent of schools, at least three-quarters are studying a language in Year 11, there are also 30 per cent of schools with less than ten per cent take-up, and nine per cent do not have any pupils at all.



Selective schools are most likely to report stable numbers for languages.

Figure 15: Schools with different proportions of pupils taking a language in Year 11 (figures for Year 12 are very similar)¹²



The correlations presented by these figures with urban/rural location, pupils' economic circumstances and selective status are all highly significant:

- Seventy per cent of rural schools have fewer than 25 per cent of pupils taking a language in Year 11, while the proportion for urban schools is 45 per cent. At the other end of the scale, only seven per cent of rural schools have more than half their Year 11 pupils taking a language, while the proportion for urban schools is 52 per cent.
- Schools with ten per cent or fewer pupils taking a language in Year 11 have, on average, 41 per cent of pupils eligible for Free School Meals, while schools with take-up of 75 per cent or more have on average 11 per cent Free School Meals. Eighty per cent of the schools in the most economically favourable band (the lowest quintile for Free School Meals) have take-up of 75 per cent or more in Year 11.
- High take-up for languages in Key Stage 4 is also strongly associated with selective rather than non-selective schools.
- These patterns are all replicated in the figures for Year 12 take-up.

¹² In Northern Ireland, post-primary education starts in Year 8, and GCSEs are taken in Year 12.



Reason for changing patterns of take-up

When schools were asked what the reasons were for any declines or increases in take-up, by far the most common answer was related to the subject’s status as compulsory. While, in several schools, languages are still required at Key Stage 4, in others the change to optional status has resulted in declining numbers taking the subject:

Compulsory status does protect it but as a school we feel that language learning should be part of an all-round curriculum experience for pupils.

Since languages have lost compulsory status numbers have been below ten per cent of the cohort as a general rule.

It is no longer a compulsory subject and pupils are put off by the level of difficulty, so they pick an easier alternative. Many pupils also have a very negative attitude to language learning.

Pupils’ reluctance to choose a language if it is optional is closely connected to the nature and perceived difficulty of the GCSE exam:

Perceptions of languages being difficult, higher grades in other subjects perceived as more accessible, competition from strongly promoted STEM subjects, languages no longer valued in Northern Ireland and the UK, high demands of a subject with four different skills and four exams, linear approach does not allow for taking modules throughout the two years which compares less favourably to other subjects.

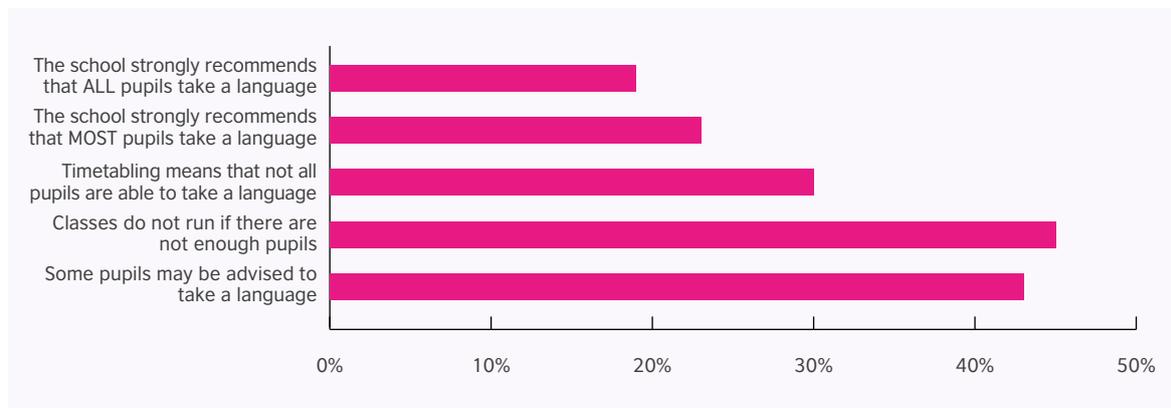
This was one of a number of comments which mentioned competition with other subjects, not only STEM, but vocational choices: Business Communication Systems, Child Development, ICT, and Motor Vehicle and Road User Studies were all mentioned in this regard. Several respondents also pointed to the status of languages generally and the lack of priority given to the subject lower down the education system. Clearly French, as the most commonly taught language in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, has been the subject most affected by these issues.



Pupils’ reluctance to choose a language if it is optional is closely connected to the nature and perceived difficulty of the GCSE exam.

Schools' approaches to languages in Key Stage 4

Figure 16: Schools' approaches to languages at Key Stage 4



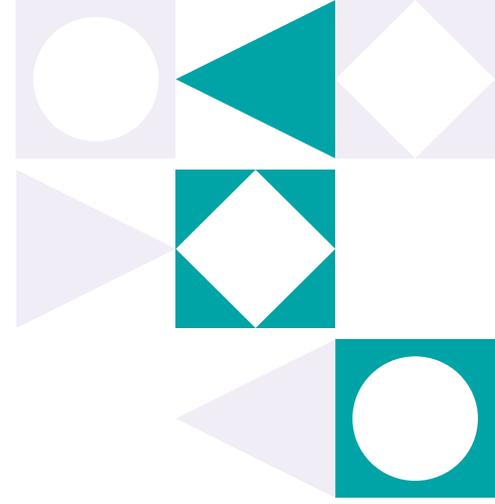
The phrasing of the survey question did not allow us to quantify schools where languages are still required by the school in Key Stage 4. However, about one in five schools (19 per cent) report that they 'strongly recommend' that all pupils take a language, while another 23 per cent recommend that most pupils do. However, there are significant numbers of schools where some pupils may be advised not to take a language (43 per cent) or they may be unable to do so, either because of timetabling constraints (30 per cent) or because there are insufficient numbers to make a class viable (45 per cent):

The school doesn't really advise or discourage as such, it is up to the department to encourage pupils to choose languages. We have recently been advised that if the current Y11 numbers do not improve, then classes may not run.

Selective schools and schools with low numbers of pupils eligible for Free School Meals are most likely to strongly recommend that pupils take a language, while non-selective schools and schools with high numbers of pupils in receipt of Free School Meals are least likely to take this approach. Schools with high numbers of pupils eligible for Free School Meals, non-selective schools and schools with smaller numbers of pupils on the roll are all statistically much more likely to say that classes do not run if there are insufficient numbers.



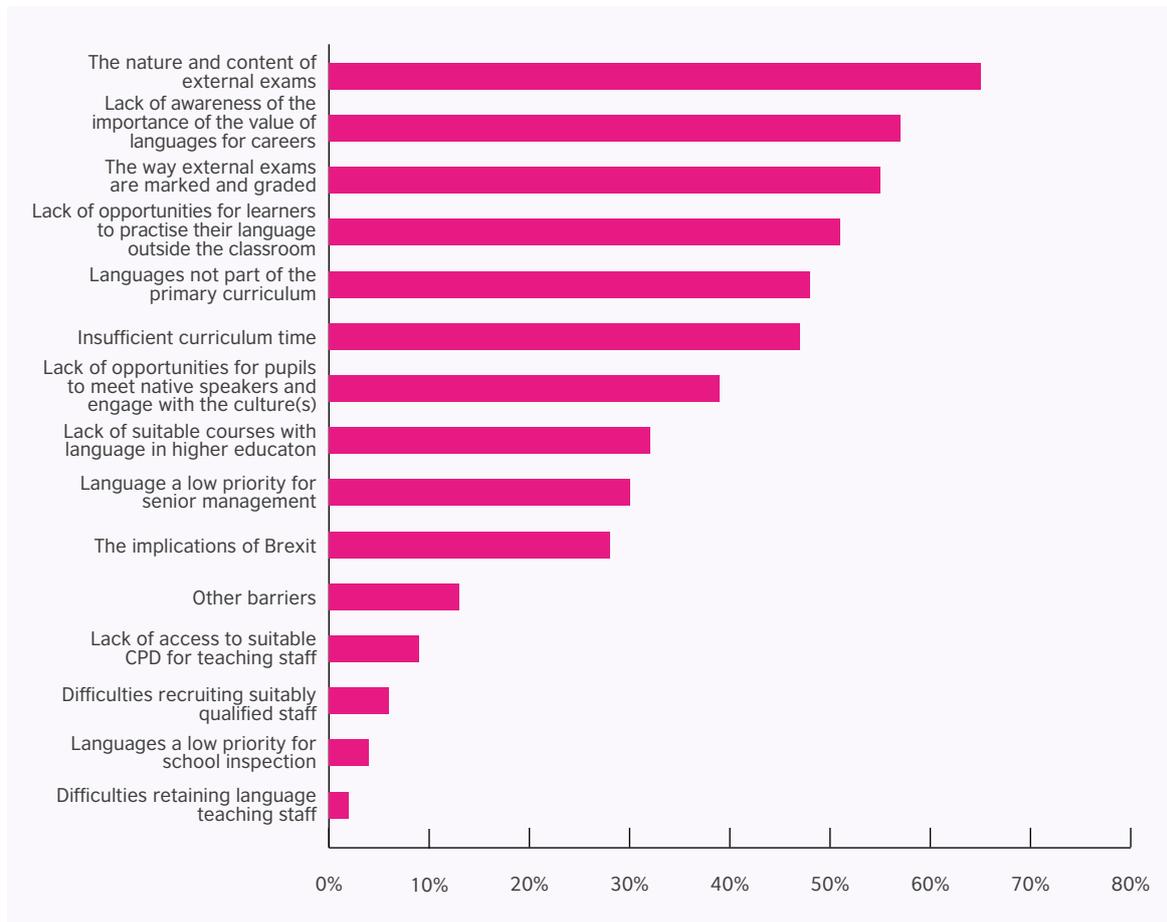
Selective schools and schools with low numbers of pupils eligible for Free School Meals are most likely to strongly recommend that pupils take a language.



Barriers to the development of languages

Respondents were asked to identify what they regarded as the main barriers to developing language teaching in their school. One in ten respondents said there were no particular barriers, but the responses from the remaining 90 per cent of schools emphasise the assessment regime and the way external exams are marked and graded as key issues. These two barriers were highlighted by 65 per cent and 55 per cent of respondents respectively. Two other barriers were identified by more than half of responding schools: lack of awareness of the importance of languages for career purposes, and lack of opportunities for learners to practise their languages outside the classroom and engage with the cultures of the languages they are learning.

Figure 17: Perceived barriers to the development of language teaching



Respondents commented on the difficulty of the GCSE specifications and off-putting grading which has an impact on both students who aspire to the top grades and those who simply want a pass:

The new GCSE exam is three hours of papers as well as a 20-minute oral. This is putting pupils off.

The content of languages is so detailed and extensive that it is viewed as a very difficult subject to obtain top grades in. It is almost impossible to get an A* in languages. In the past, our best students have failed to do so, yet have managed to get three A*s in their other subjects.

New GCSE spec make it harder for lower-ability students to achieve success.

The closure of university language courses, Brexit and a preference for more 'practical' subjects were also seen as having a negative impact:

Ulster dropping languages completely and Queen's dropping German have sent a signal that languages are NOT important in Northern Ireland.

General society feeling that everyone else speaks English anyway so why bother studying MFL when it is not essential ... Brexit not helping perspective on European inclusivity!

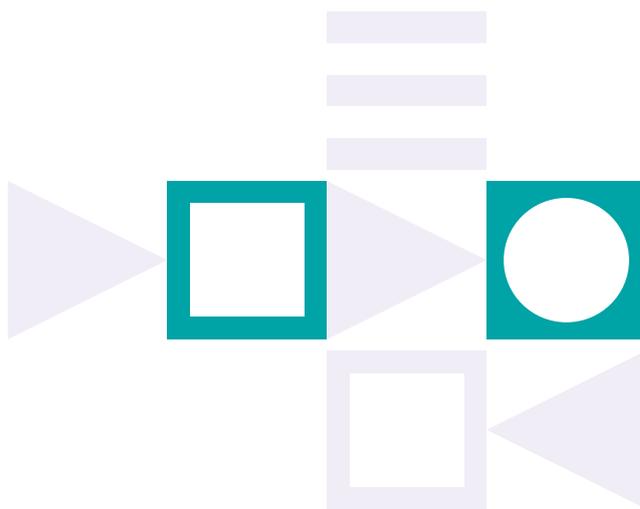
There are limited alternatives to GCSE languages. Pupils in this school favour more vocational and practical subjects.

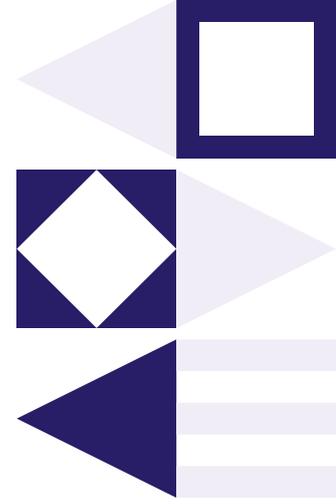
Too many vocational courses at GCSE on offer without appropriate careers guidance. Very able linguists being allowed to choose vocational courses instead of a language.

In contrast to the findings from primary schools, issues connected to staff recruitment, retention and training were only identified as barriers by relatively small numbers of post-primary schools.



The closure of university language courses, Brexit and a preference for more 'practical' subjects were also seen as having a negative impact.





Languages post-16

Of the 100 schools responding to the survey, 78 reported having post-16 provision and, of these, nearly one-third (25) reported having no pupils studying a modern language at this level. The responses in this section are therefore based on the 52 remaining schools and are therefore given as whole numbers rather than percentages.

Trends in A-level entries

Since 2010, entries for all the main modern languages have declined at A-level. French and German have fallen by -40 per cent and -29 per cent respectively. Entries for Spanish and Irish have fallen by six per cent, while other languages have seen numbers increase from 65 to 124. This is in a context in which A-level entries overall have declined by nine per cent.



Since 2010, entries in Northern Ireland for all the main modern languages have declined at A-level.

Figure 18: Entries for languages subjects at A-level in Northern Ireland, 2010–18

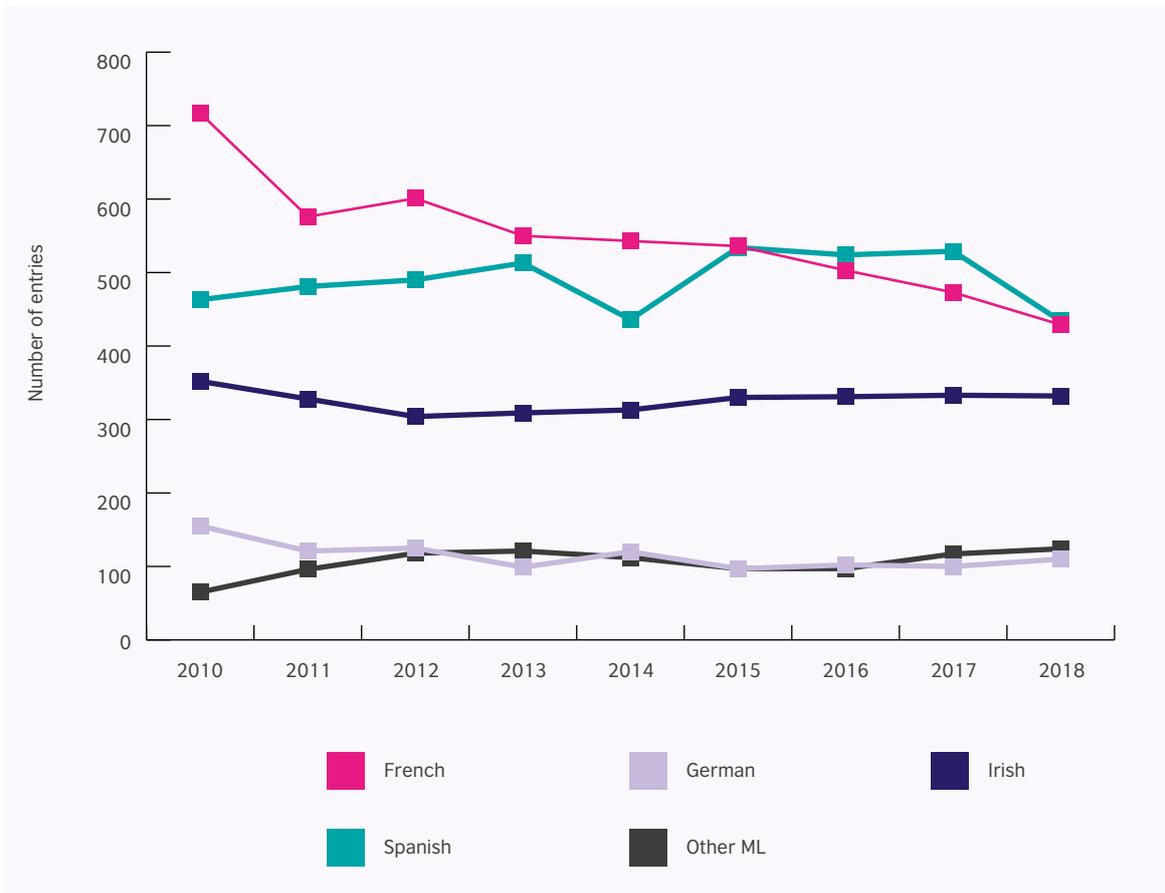


Table 3: Entries for languages subjects at A-level in Northern Ireland, 2010–18

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
French	717	576	601	550	543	536	503	473	429
German	155	121	125	99	120	97	102	100	110
Irish	352	328	304	309	313	330	331	333	332
Spanish	463	481	490	513	436	534	524	529	434
Other ML	65	96	118	121	112	97	92	117	124

Source: www.jcq.org.uk

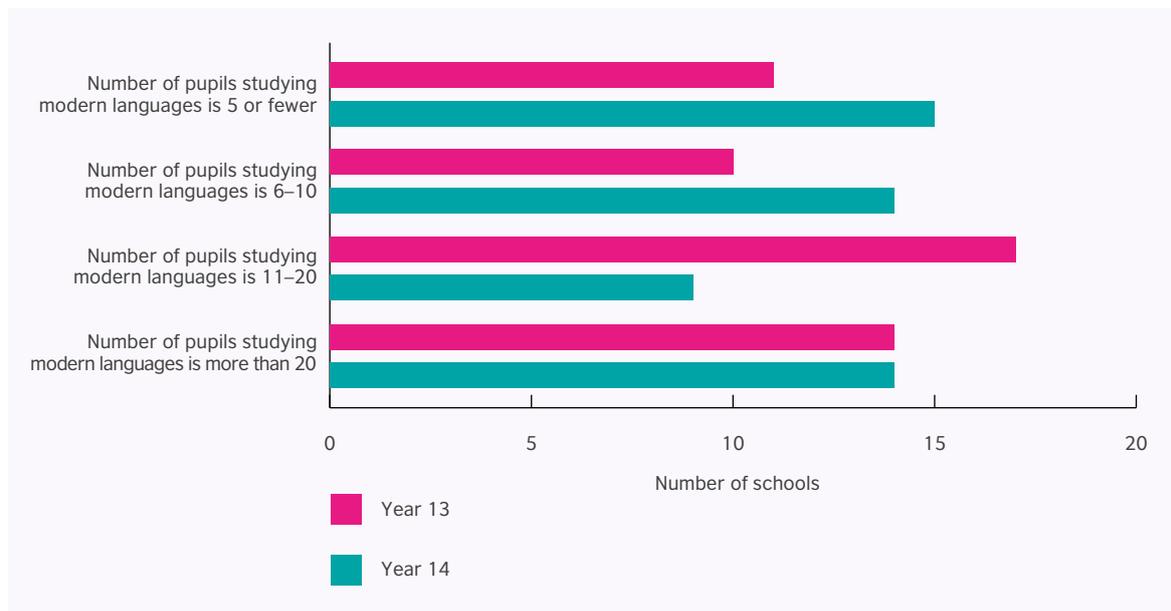
Size of AS- and A-level groups

Schools were asked to report the total number of pupils studying one or more modern languages in Year 13 and Year 14. Twenty-one schools had fewer than ten at AS-level and more than half (29) had fewer than ten at A-level. Where schools offer more than one language, these figures include both groups. We can therefore conclude that the size of AS- and A-level groups is very small and that provision in many schools is therefore very vulnerable in a context of very tight budget constraints. Around one-third of the 57 schools (17) said that the minimum number for classes to run was ten – this was the most commonly reported requirement. However, 12 (around one in five) said that classes would run with fewer than six pupils.



We can conclude that the size of AS- and A-level groups is very small.

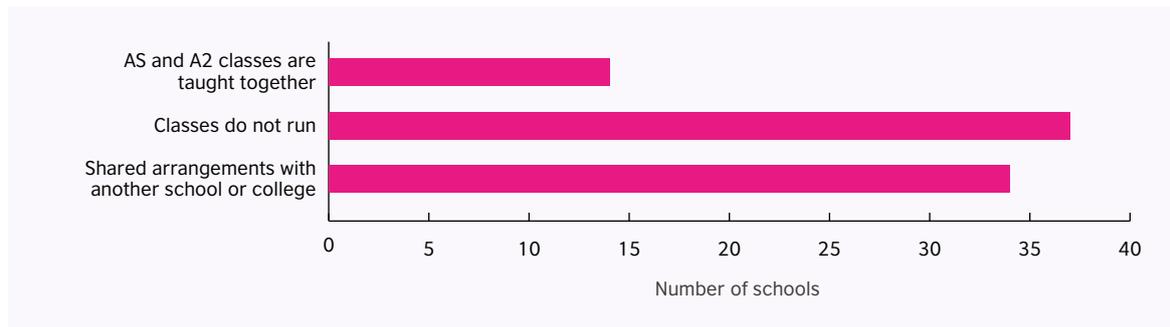
Figure 19: Schools with various numbers of pupils studying modern languages



Arrangements when numbers are small

Around half of responding schools that offer post-16 provision report that classes do not run if the number of students opting to take the subject is below the minimum. Others offer the subject through shared arrangements with another school or teach AS and A2 classes together.

Figure 20: Arrangements when only a few pupils wish to study a language post-16



This means that languages that already have lower take-up, like German, are particularly vulnerable:

So far, small classes have been allowed to run, even with two pupils (in German). But this will change next year with budget and timetabling constraints.

Up to now class for German has run regardless of size but this is harder and harder – inefficient way to run a school

Low numbers tend to be even more of a problem in A2, when pupils drop their fourth subject:

There is pressure from SMT to keep numbers above ten, so far we have managed to meet this goal with our Year 13 intake, although sometimes class sizes become smaller for A2, due to people dropping their fourth subject.

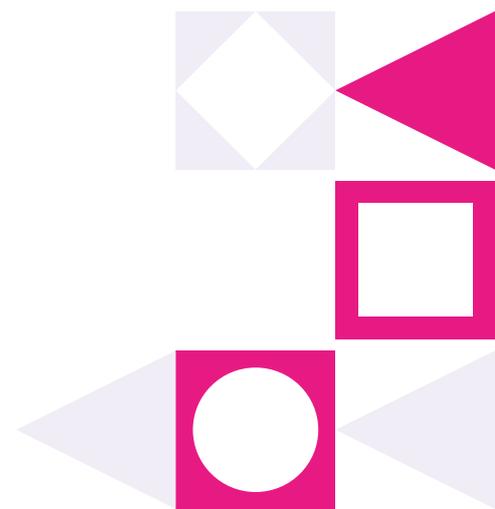


Low numbers tend to be even more of a problem in A2.

Respondents cite a number of measures that have been introduced to maintain language classes in difficult circumstances:

This is a fighting battle: staff have already taught AS-level languages twice a week after school in 2017–18 in order to keep momentum going.

If combined numbers of AS and A2 are under 20 then one hour a week is taught as a composite class. If two languages have very small numbers (under four/five) then only one language of these two runs.



Inter-school collaboration

Where there are relatively large numbers studying languages post-16, this seems to be a result of shared curriculum arrangements with other schools:

We have pupils from one other school in our learning community which bolsters our numbers.

However, schools indicated that shared arrangements presented significant challenges – particularly in relation to logistics, such as travel:

We have looked at shared arrangements but to be honest they are not successful: issues re access to staff, timetabling issues and time spent travelling between schools impacts upon other subjects often students drop out or choose more less stressful curriculum options.

Very difficult to inspire students when teacher only meets them for class, extra-curricular aspects lost.

Respondents report that shared arrangements are off-putting for pupils, and that the sending school is then dependent on the receiving school for maintaining provision:

Offered up not taken up by our pupils. They are not keen to go to another school, so end up choosing a different subject instead of their language.

The decline of German in neighbouring schools has made this option less likely now.

Irish only with local boys' school. They do not offer French any more.

We have collaborated with [local school] for many years for A-level German, very successfully and are very happy with this arrangement but collaboration is not currently available.

It is also reported that shared arrangements are not always beneficial to the receiving school:

French is in the shared education column when subject choices are given out to pupils. This means pupils from other schools can attend A-level classes at our school. Unfortunately, this means that due to many subjects being in this column, our own pupils [...] end up not being able to study French as it shares a column with other desired subjects.

However, shared arrangements may be useful as a short-term contingency:

Whilst our main teacher of Spanish was on a career break AS and A2 Spanish students were taught within the ALC. Similarly, when we were able to offer AS and A2 German a student from another ALC course joined us.



However, shared arrangements may be useful as a short-term contingency.

Changes in take-up for different languages

Half of schools teaching French post-16, and more than half of those teaching German at this level, report that take-up has declined over the last three years. In addition, eight schools have discontinued provision for German post-16. The picture for Spanish and Irish is more stable, with the number of schools reporting declines being more than offset by those reporting increases or having introduced the language as a new subject.

Table 4: Current status per language

	Introduced as a new subject	Take-up has increased	Take-up is stable	Take-up has declined	Subject discontinued
French	0	5	21	26	0
German	0	2	7	10	8
Irish	2	5	10	4	0
Spanish	6	10	23	12	0

Reasons for declining numbers post-16

As with GCSE, teachers attribute pupils’ reluctance to opt for a modern language as closely connected to the exam regime, the relative difficulty of languages compared to other subjects and the perception that it has lower value than other subjects:

We believe that the harsh examining of GCSE and A-level French over the recent years has contributed to its decline. Also, the rigours of learning a language including the amount of independent learning, skill development and practice puts pupils off. They are under more pressure than ever to achieve certain grades and want to be sure of getting these. With a language, it’s deemed very difficult to get the best grades. Only the best linguists can survive. The emphasis on STEM subjects has encouraged pupils and their parents to disregard languages as useful for employment. Brexit has made Europe and all it has to offer more distant and therefore its languages less necessary.

Difficulty of subject and difficulty in getting top grades, other new subjects given preference through talks in assembly, disinterest, seen as a subject that is inferior to sciences/STEM.

The perception that languages are difficult, time-consuming and low-scoring in terms of final grades.

The drive for all sixth form students to get three Grade C. (We always had students who gained a D or E grade but this was still considered a Pass at A-level. Now it is considered a failure in terms of school stats).



The perception that unless you want to specialise in a language career it is superfluous to study one at A-level (this colours the advice given by in-school careers advisers).

What would enhance language learning in the post-primary sector?

Concerns about the exam regime are very strongly featured in the responses to this question, as well as elsewhere in the survey responses.¹³ Related to this, the second most desired change was more time for pupils to take pleasure in their language learning through:

... film, music, arts, etc., rather than race through the course.

More time to engage in fun/cultural activities rather than feeling constantly under pressure to meet the demands of the rigorous GCSE, AS and A2 specifications.

Respondents would like more opportunities and funding for trips, events, exchanges, language assistants and extra-curricular activities.

When asked what would enhance language learning in Northern Ireland as a whole, the top four themes were:

1. wider promotion of languages in terms of their importance and career prospects (32 per cent of comments)
2. language reform at primary school level (19 per cent of comments)
3. exam and curriculum reform to make subject content and assessment methods more accessible (18 per cent of comments)
4. more outward-looking attitudes and cultural awareness in society (12 per cent of comments).

A significant number of respondents also mentioned the perceived preferential treatment of STEM subjects in comparison to modern languages, and the need for a centralised government strategy more generally:

Campaign by all interested parties in developing a language strategy from primary school through secondary and tertiary education to employment.

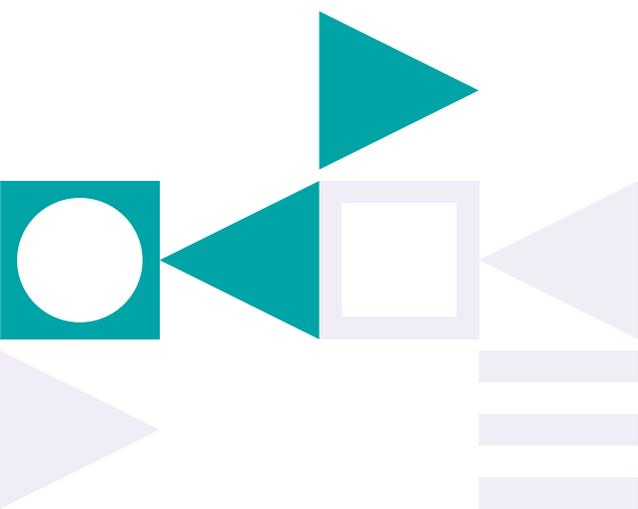


Concerns about the exam regime are very strongly featured in the responses to this question.



A significant number of respondents also mentioned the perceived preferential treatment of STEM subjects in comparison to modern languages.

¹³ Respondents were asked to comment separately on what would enhance language learning a) in their school and b) in Northern Ireland generally. There is significant overlap.



Conclusions

Primary

Although, unlike other parts of the UK, a modern language does not form part of the primary curriculum in Northern Ireland, this survey shows that 55 per cent of primary schools who responded already see significant benefits and are providing at least some language-learning activity for their pupils. Sometimes building on foundations established in the Primary Modern Languages Programme, schools are drawing on an impressively diverse range of resources in their schools and communities to deliver an offer whose value they see as primarily cultural. It is encouraging to see such a strong focus on Key Stage 2 given that the Primary Modern Languages Programme only targeted Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. A small but significant minority report that they are delivering a structured programme of language learning which links to the Northern Ireland curriculum. But while some schools are forging ahead, others offer their pupils little or no experience of language learning, opening up differences in languages provision between schools working in different circumstances.

Schools would welcome further resources for developing language teaching, in particular, a supply of specialist teachers – for which no provision currently exists. The challenge will be to continue to pull in all available resources and to spread them more widely across Northern Ireland in order to achieve greater consistency and quality in primary languages. There are also opportunities for an increased focus on the literacy value of language learning, alongside cultural understanding.

The findings show that very few primary schools have links with their local post-primary schools in relation to languages and suggest that improved primary provision should not overlook the need for smooth transition pathways for pupils from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3.¹⁴



There is a significant amount of language-learning activity taking place, involving 55 per cent of primary schools who responded.

¹⁴ See Collen, I, McKendry, E and Henderson, L (2017) *The Transition from Primary Languages Programmes to Post-Primary Languages Provision*. NICILT. Available online at: https://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/files/134302120/173113_NICLT_Report_Final.pdf

Post-primary

The most striking finding from the post-primary survey is the variation in provision that runs through the system. Starting with the time available for language learning in Key Stage 3 and feeding through into uptake at Key Stage 4 and beyond, pupils in non-selective schools and those with greater concentrations of social deprivation and rural areas are significantly more likely to receive only a rudimentary experience of language learning. In selective schools, the expectation that most pupils will take a language at GCSE means that there is an adequate amount of time set aside for the subject in Key Stage 3, which enables them to do so.

Teachers attribute the shrinkage of entries for languages at both GCSE and A-level to the nature and content of the exams, perceived severe grading in comparison to other subjects and the relatively low status of languages compared to STEM subjects. Smaller numbers at GCSE feed through into even smaller numbers at AS- and A-level and funding pressures on top of this have created a tipping point in some cases where the subject is no longer viable. German has already been particularly badly affected and is now quite seriously endangered. Respondents report that shared arrangements with other schools for languages post-16 are often problematic and not conducive to increasing take-up.

Respondents would welcome action to improve the status of languages generally and to embed more positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures. While the key issues for respondents from primary schools relate to resources and staffing, the concerns of post-primary respondents centre on the assessment regime and the need for a higher profile for their subject and its contribution to cultural and economic life. On the basis of these findings, the All-Party Parliamentary Group's recent call for a National Recovery Programme for Languages and the recent call by five UK organisations (including the British Council) look particularly relevant to Northern Ireland.

Language Trends Northern Ireland 2019 was carried out by Alcantara Communications LLP under commission from British Council Northern Ireland.



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