

UCML Language Teaching Survey Report 2014

1. Introduction

In April 2014, the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML <http://www.ucml.ac.uk/>) instigated a national survey aimed at identifying key information related to language teaching practice across the Higher Education (HE) sector in the UK.

Data on language learning trends, institutions in which modern languages are taught, or reasons why languages should be an integral part of curricula have been made available through a number of channels in recent years, and yet no real information seems to exist on the practicalities of teaching foreign languages at university level, as part of language degree programmes.

The UCML language survey has been created to try and bridge this gap; overall some 50 institutions responded with data on four areas of interest in relation to core language modules.¹ The survey was created on the assumption that modules focussing on the development of language competencies are core elements on all language degree programmes, whether alongside, or integrated with, ‘content’ modules; only modules within this definition (i.e. non-IWLP modules) were surveyed.

The four areas of interest are:

- a) the number of contact hours taught per core language module per HE institution;
- b) the credit weighting assigned to each core language module;
- c) the number of students per core language class;
- d) the mapping of core language modules against the CEFR (Common European Framework for Languages: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp).

The survey has concentrated on the four most-widely taught languages delivered at degree level in the UK: French, German, Italian, and Spanish. It was distributed through the UCML language constituency channels and was open to all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in which these languages are taught.

Responses include a wide range of HEIs and are not indicative of the popularity of each language nationally; the Spanish survey, for instance, generated the lowest number of responses whereas the German one generated the most responses. Despite variations in the numbers of respondents, and the limitations this inevitably brings to the results of the survey, the survey provides an indicative sample of key practical details for the teaching of French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

2. Rationale of the survey

The decision to focus the survey initially on four languages was two-fold. The first reason is directly linked to the four languages that have been historically most-widely taught in primary, secondary, and tertiary education in the UK; the teaching of French, German, Italian, and Spanish in HE is a well-established and fairly consistent practice in most British HEIs.

The second reason is of a practical nature. The four languages surveyed share the same alphabet; they do not require extra reading or writing practice; and they can all be taken as Single or Joint Honours subjects in most HEIs in which they are taught. These shared features simplified the design

¹ The noun ‘module(s)’ has been used throughout the report for consistency purposes. Synonyms such as ‘course unit(s)’ or ‘course(s)’ have been purposefully avoided to avoid ambiguity.

of the survey so that a quick and reliable questionnaire could be created.

Purposefully, this initial questionnaire has sought to avoid surveying languages which would require a further degree of granularity in the formulation of questions, for example Middle Eastern languages, Russian and East European languages, Chinese and Japanese. It is recommended, however, that a survey which includes these languages should also be conducted in the future.

3. Design of the survey

The survey was devised using the Form tool within Google drive. It comprised simple questions with a 'tick the box' format whilst also allowing participants to add open-ended comments at the end of each section. The survey asked participants to disclose their HEI of provenance in order to avoid eschewed results (e.g. two or more colleagues answering for the same HEI). The final results have been anonymised.

The survey is based on a 4-year long period of study, in which year 2 or three is conventionally spent in the target language country (countries). Questions relating to the Year Abroad were not included in the survey.

4. Respondents

UCAS lists 71 HEIs in which French and Spanish are offered, 54 for German, and 40 for Italian. Based on these figures, the percentage of providers who have completed the survey is as follows:

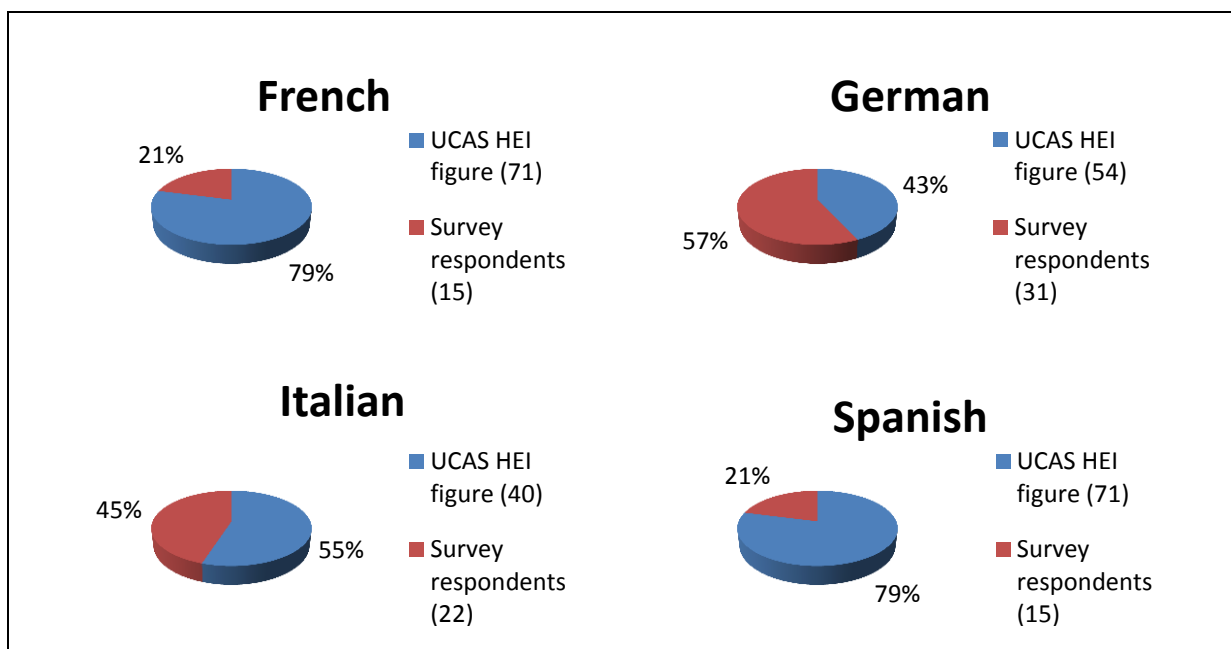


Figure 1

4.1.1 Russell Group providers

Overall, of the 24 HEIs in the Russell Group, 19 responded (79%). Within this grouping, most institutions responded for more than one language (58%), whereas 8 responded for one language only (42%). Results show a clear lack of pattern in terms of which language division responded in which HEI. Speculatively, this result may indicate that the survey was completed by individuals on a voluntary basis and without the coordination or intervention of a managerial figure (e.g. Director of Languages). This seems to be corroborated by the duplication of responses per language per institution (see Figure 2 below).

Responses were distributed fairly equally between the languages, with 8 for French, 11 for German, 8 for Italian, and 6 for Spanish.

4.1.2 Non-Russell Group providers

Outside the Russell Group, 30 HEIs completed the survey. Of these, 20 institutions (66.6%) provided details for only one language. The remaining 33.3% responded for two or three languages. As was the case for the Russell Group HEIs, responses show a clear lack of pattern with regard to which language division responded in which institution. No notable differences were observed between the two groupings.

Responses for the non-Russell Group providers were distributed more unevenly between the languages with 6 respondents for French, 16 for German, 10 for Italian and 8 for Spanish.

Some providers preferred to remain anonymous (11%). None of the universities surveyed responded for all four languages across both groupings. In some cases, language divisions completed the questionnaire twice; results indicate that different members of staff responded on each occasion as some comments have highlighted ('please note that if others also reply their answers may well be more accurate!'). In these instances, results were compared and, where deemed appropriate, merged or discarded. The number of duplicated answers is not directly proportional to the number of HEIs that responded per language.

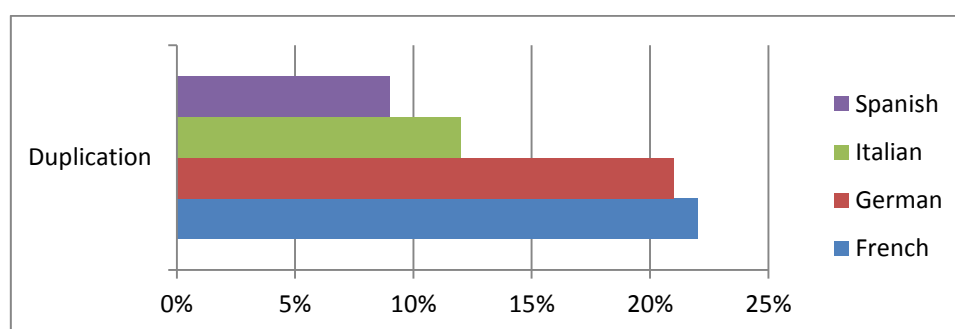


Figure 2

5. Results

5.1 Language teaching: how many contact hours per week?

Overall, the picture emerging from the first set of questions is a fairly consistent one. Question 1 elicited information on the number of contact hours provided each week for the different levels of study across the languages. On average, a representative core language module in any of the four disciplines examined offers 3.28 contact hours per week. The ab initio groups in year 1 are the ones with the most taught hours; these hours, however, tend to decrease incrementally by the time students have reached their final year of study, as the table below summarises:

Table A: Mean contact hours per level for each language

	French	German	Italian	Spanish
Yr 1 ab initio	3.75	4.5	4.2	4.1
Yr 1 post-A	3.3	3.3	3	3.1
Yr 2 post-ab initio	3.2	3.6	3.7	3.8
Yr 2 post-A	3.2	3.1	3	3
Final Yr	2	2.9	3.2	2.9
Final Yr ab initio	2.6	3.3	3.1	3
Average	3	3.45	3.36	3.31

A written summary of the hours for the surveyed HEIs is given in the section that follows; a visual breakdown is given in tables 1-8 in Appendix A. Each of the charts in Appendix A shows the number of hours taught by each institution over three years of study. The ab initio groups have been kept separate from the post-A level groups except for those providers who merge them at final year level. In this respect, it is possible to see how many providers keep a dedicated ab initio group separate for the duration of the degree course. The teaching hours for the merged ab initio / post-A group have been unified in the 'Post-A strand' chart (Final Yr) for the four languages.

5.1.2 Variables

Some institutions surveyed offer language degree courses with a duration of five years; some others do not attach language modules to years of study. In other HEIs, students are taught both in year 3 and 4.

Relevant data obtained from these institutions have been included in the overall results with some exceptions.

5.1.3 French

Of the 15 French HEI respondents, only 8 offer French at ab initio level. At this level, the number of hours taught weekly range from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 5, averaging 3.75 hours per week. The post-A level language modules in year 1 instead, average 3.3 hours per week with no provider offering less than 2 weekly contact hours.

In year 2, the HEIs providing ab initio modules offer an average of 3.28 teaching hours per week, whereas the post-A modules average 3.26 hours per week. In final year, all institutions group the post-beginner and post-A students together bar three providers (HEI 1, 5 and 14, Table 1, Appendix A). All HEIs offer 2 contact hours per week at final year for the mixed post-A level / ab initio students, which is slightly under the number of hours the three providers teaching ab initio students separately specifically allocate their students (2.6) (Tables 1-2, App. A).

5.1.4 German

For German, 18 out of the 31 HEIs surveyed indicated that they offer the language at ab initio level. On average, students from these institutions are taught 4.5 hours per week in year 1. Three additional institutions offer over 5 contact hours per week (29-31): these HEIs have not been included in the average (the exact number was not specified). Post-A students average 3.3 hours of weekly contact instead in year 1 (one HEI only offers one module in year 1 for ab initio students, one other institution provides over 5 hours of contact per week, and one HEI only offers modules from year 2 onwards).

In year 2, ex-ab initio students are taught on average 3.6 hours per week (with only one institution offering more hours – this is not shown in Table 3 for the same reason given above). For post-A level modules, HEIs average 3.1 weekly teaching hours (two HEIs offer more).

At final-year level, provision varies from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 5 weekly hours, averaging 2.9 (one HEI only offers modules in year 2). Those institutions in which ab initio students continue to be taught separately from post-A students average 3.3 contact hours per week (Tables 3-4, App. A).

5.1.5 Italian

All the Italian institutions surveyed offer modules at ab initio level. The number of contact hours per week in year 1 ranges considerably, from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 9. Two HEIs (21-22) offer over five hours per week. On average, 4.2 teaching hours are offered at ab initio level. Of the 22 HEIs surveyed, 18 also offer Italian as a post-A level module. On average, these providers teach 3 language hours per week in the first year.

In year 2, the post-beginner groups average 3.7 teaching hours per week, whereas the post-A level groups average 3 hours per week. It is worth noting that three institutions only offer the ab initio module; one HEI only offers the ab initio module at level one and one other HEI provides both modules at level one and only the post-ab initio module at level two. It can be assumed that these anomalies only represent the varying trends in number of students who joined in one particular year.

At final year level, most HEIs tend to offer a similar number of teaching hours. The final year group

comprising the grouping of the post-ab initio and the post-A level students average 3.2 hours per week, whereas the dedicated post-ab initio modules average 3.1 weekly contact hours (Tables 5-6, App. A).

5.1.6 Spanish

Of the 15 HEIs surveyed, 13 offer Spanish ab initio modules. The hours taught range from 3 to 5 weekly in year 1, with one HEI (15) offering over 5 hours (average: 4.1). All institutions teach post-A level modules with an average of 3.1 contact time per week in the first year.

In year 2, the post-ab initio modules average 3.8 hours per week, whereas the post-A groups are taught for 3 hours per week.

In final year, those institutions in which post-beginners and post-A level students are taught in the same language groups average 2.9 weekly contact hours; the dedicated post-ab initio groups are instead taught for an average of 3 hours per week (Tables 7-8, App. A).

5.2 Language teaching and credit rating

The second section of the survey investigated the number of CATS (Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme) credits attached to core language modules. Results show that these tend to vary quite widely from institution to institution (from 10 to 60 credits). There seems to be, however, a certain degree of coherence within each HEI in terms of how many credits are assigned to each progressive level: mainly, credits tend to remain the same throughout the language degree pathway for students with a post-A level qualification in the target language. One notable exception is Year 1 for the ab initio strand, whose modules, in some cases, are worth more credits than at subsequent levels. A visual breakdown of the credits for each HEI is given in Appendix B, tables 9-16.

5.2.1 Variables

Some institutions partaking in the survey do not use the conventional UK CATS credit rating system; others opt instead for ECT (European Credit Transfer) credits.

For some providers, whose slot appears blank, the number of credits has not been specified. For those HEIs which provided the number of credits per semester, the sum for the whole year has been given in the chart.

Some providers noted that the number of credits attached to each core language module varies according to the course option selected (core language module studied in isolation or in combination with cultural elements). In these instances, only the data from the language modules studied without additional cultural aspects have been included in the survey results.

It is worth noting again that not all providers offer modules at each level.

5.3 Language teaching and group sizes

This area of the survey sought to find information on the average group size for core language modules. Results show that language classes are taught in fairly small groups compared to larger cohorts commonly found in other subjects both within the Humanities (e.g. History) and in the Sciences across HEIs in the UK.

However, the number of students per core language class varies with each institution. Classes in which reading, writing, and grammar are taught accommodate for larger numbers compared to classes dedicated to oral and aural skills. As several HEIs have indicated in the open comment box, the maximum number for oral and aural classes seems to be 10-12 students, with some institutions capping oral classes at 10 students each. Other institutions reported big variations in group sizes from year to year.

One particular case worth mentioning here is one institution in which as many as 100 students are taught in a ‘grammar’ hour. It is assumed that these students are taught frontally, in a lecture-style environment. It transpires that in this particular instance the decision of teaching such a high number of students in one sitting rests with higher-level management.

The results below show average figures for reading, writing, and grammar classes for the providers surveyed.

Q3. ‘What is the average group size for the core language modules listed?’

Table B: Mean group size for core language module - French

French	1-7	8-12	13-16	17-20	20+	Number of respondents
Ab initio Yr 1	12.5%	12.5%	75%	0%	0%	8
Post-A Yr 1	0%	36%	50%	7%	7%	14
Post-ab initio Yr 2	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%	8
Post-A Yr 2	0%	29%	64%	0%	7%	14
Final Year	0%	36%	43%	14%	7%	14
Final Year (post-ab initio)	0%	0%	67%	33%	0%	3

Table C: Mean group size for core language module - German

German	1-7	8-12	13-16	17-20	20+	Number of respondents
Ab initio Yr 1	43%	19%	19%	0%	19%	21
Post-A Yr 1	13%	23%	26%	19%	19%	31
Post-ab initio Yr 2	50%	5.5%	22.2%	11.1%	11.1%	18
Post-A Yr 2	13%	26%	29%	13%	19%	31
Final Year	10%	27%	23%	23%	17%	30
Final Year (post-ab initio)	33.3%	33.3%	0%	33.3%	0%	6

Table D: Mean group size for core language module - Italian

Italian	1-7	8-12	13-16	17-20	20+	Number of respondents
Ab initio Yr 1	0%	28.5%	52%	9.5%	9.5%	21
Post-A Yr 1	23.5%	47%	29%	0%	0%	17
Post-ab initio Yr 2	21%	26%	32%	10.5%	10.5%	19
Post-A Yr 2	19%	37.5%	37.5%	0%	6%	16
Final Year	5.5%	44%	28%	17%	5.5%	18
Final Year (post-ab initio)	20%	80%	0%	0%	0%	5

Table E: Mean group size for core language module - Spanish

Spanish	1-7	8-12	13-16	17-20	20+	Number of respondents
Ab initio Yr 1	16.6%	25%	25%	16.6%	16.6%	12
Post-A Yr 1	0%	21%	21%	36%	21%	14
Post-ab initio Yr 2	25%	17%	25%	25%	8%	12
Post-A Yr 2	0%	14%	21%	36%	28.5%	14
Final Year	0%	13%	27%	27%	33%	15
Final Year (post-ab initio)	25%	0%	0%	75%	0%	4

5.4 Language teaching and The Common European Framework for Languages

The last section of the survey elicited information on the exit level of core language modules delivered by the institutions surveyed against the Common European Framework for Languages. The CEFR allows comparisons of qualifications and language competence for users and, although its use is not compulsory in higher education, the CEFR is often included in language module descriptions to give an indication of the level students are expected to achieve after taking a given core language module.

The Languages Ladder aims to achieve a similar intent with a stronger focus on existing UK national qualifications

(http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/standards_and_qualifications/languages_ladder.aspx).

Of the HEIs surveyed, roughly half currently reference the outcomes of their core language modules to CEFR in their course description. A breakdown for the four languages is given below:

Q4. 'Are learning outcomes for your core language modules referenced to the CEFR in the module description?'

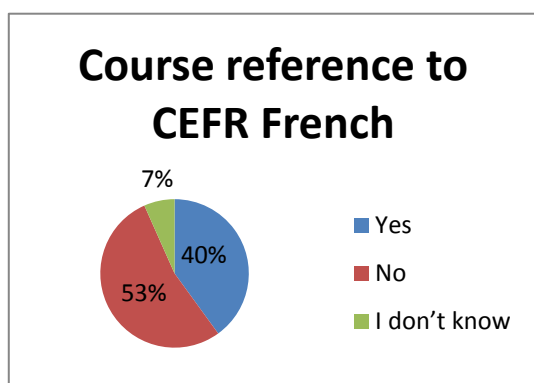


Figure 3

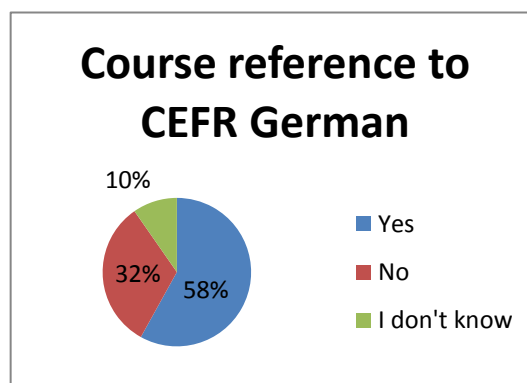


Figure 4

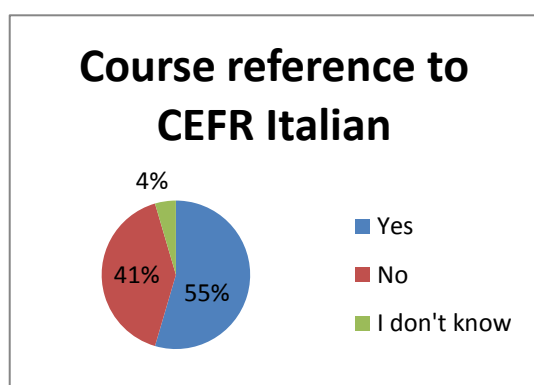


Figure 5

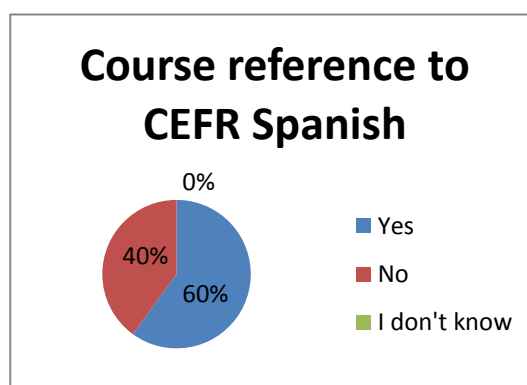


Figure 6

When asked whether External examiners of the institutions surveyed were familiar with CEFR, most HEIs answered positively or stated that they did not know (French: Y=40%, DN=60%; German: Y=58%, DN=42%; Italian: Y=36%, N=10%, DN=54%; Spanish: Y=60%, N=20%, DN=20%). It seems, however, that External Examiners overall tend not to be involved with the ratification of the mapping of the modules for the institutions they examine, as results below suggest:

Q4: ‘Does the CEFR mapping fall under the scrutiny of the External Examiner?’

Table F: Percentage of CEFR mapping scrutinised by External Examiners

	Yes	No	I don’t know
French	3 (20%)	9 (60%)	3 (20%)
German	4 (13%)	18 (58%)	9 (29%)
Italian	4 (18%)	13 (59%)	5 (22%)
Spanish	1 (7%)	8 (53%)	6 (40%)

When asked how the learning outcomes of core language modules compare and map against the CEFR, some degree of uniformity has largely been shown: in the first year, the ab initio modules are normally mapped between A2 and B1 and the post-A modules between B1 and B2. In year 2, the post-ab initio are mapped at B1 or B2, whereas the post-A strand tends to achieve between B2 and C1. In the final year, both cohorts straddle between C1 and C2 with a minority of post-ab initio at a lower B2.

The charts in Appendix C (17-24) illustrate progression, year on year, for the ab initio and the post-A level cohorts separately. Those providers whose result appears blank do not offer modules at that particular level or are unsure about the CEFR mapping within their division.

Finally, when asked how confident respondents were on the CEFR mapping for their language within their institution, all HEIs surveyed showed a similar degree of confidence, as the averages for each language below suggest (1 = not at all confident, 10 = very confident):

Table G: Confidence in CEFR mapping within own HE

	Average
French	5.6
German	5.7
Italian	5.9
Spanish	6.4

This area of the survey generated the most comments from participants.

Some HEIs highlighted that the CEFR descriptors are often too vague (especially at the higher levels) and do not offer a sufficient degree of granularity for the specifications and learning outcomes of core language modules taught at HE level. One respondent noted that the application of CEFR when working with ‘relatively small year-cohorts is unsatisfactory and it blurs mapping’ in those cases in which student performances within the same language group vary greatly.

Additionally, the CEFR does not take the Year Abroad experience into account with some providers suggesting that the framework ‘moves at a different pace’ and is ‘open to interpretation with higher levels’. One particular institution, however, seems to have overcome this issue by offering a further division within each categorisation (i.e. B1.1, B1.2).

Several universities reported a degree of managerial resistance to using the CEFR, and in some

extreme cases the framework has been flatly rejected. Others suggested that a lack of national guidelines on the use of the CEFR limits its consistent application across the board.

Other providers at the other end of the spectrum have offered positive comments on the use of the CEFR: in these cases the framework ‘helped incredibly in giving consistency to the language modules’; in those HEIs in which the framework has not yet been centrally adopted, course convenors reported using CEFR ‘internally informally’.

6. Concluding remarks and recommendations

The overall picture emerging from this first language teaching questionnaire is that HEIs in which one or more of the four surveyed languages are taught seem to have a similar approach to certain administrative aspects of language teaching.

The most striking similarities lie in the nominal number of weekly contact hours offered with each level of language (higher in year 1 and lower in final year for all providers) and in the size of language groups taught (consistently small across the sector).

The number of credits attached to core language modules varies within each institution; HEIs, however, seem to offer a coherent *modus operandi* in the distribution of credits within a given language degree programme.

The most problematic area of the survey regarded the application of the CEFR to existing language modules. Half of the providers surveyed currently map their language modules against the CEFR. Despite the limitations of the common framework, its application on a larger scale is envisaged to allow both for exit level comparisons and course progression comparisons between similar HEIs.

It is hoped that the results of this survey will be of use to the HE sector at large and provide a useful point of reference for professionals working in the field.

It is recommended that similar surveys be taken at regular intervals of three years and that data is circulated widely. A more robust response is sought particularly from the French and Hispanic disciplines in order to achieve more comprehensive and representative data in the future.

It is also recommended that non-European languages (Middle Eastern, Russian, East European, Chinese, and Japanese) be included in future surveys in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the whole sector.

Finally, further fine-tuning of the question set is advised: additional areas that might be included in future versions of the survey are, for instance, the proportion of students achieving levels B2, C1, and C2 of the CEFR at graduation; the number of HEIs which make reference to language proficiency levels on the degree certificate / transcript; the proportion of teaching staff who are professionally trained (e.g. PGCE [Postgraduate Certificate in Education] v GTA [Graduate Teaching Assistantships]).

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This survey was carried out on behalf of UCML by Dr Elena Polisca (UCML) with the assistance of Dr John Morley (UCML, AULC).
The author wishes to thank all participating institutions.

Appendix A

Q1: 'How many contact hours are taught per week at the following levels for core language modules?'

French

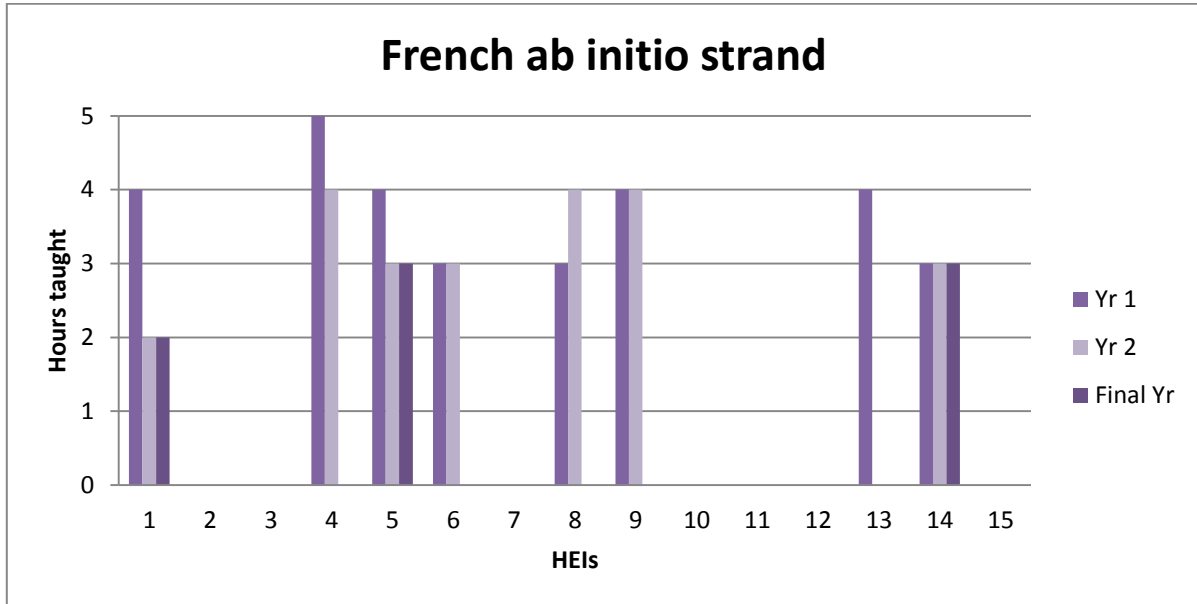


Figure A1

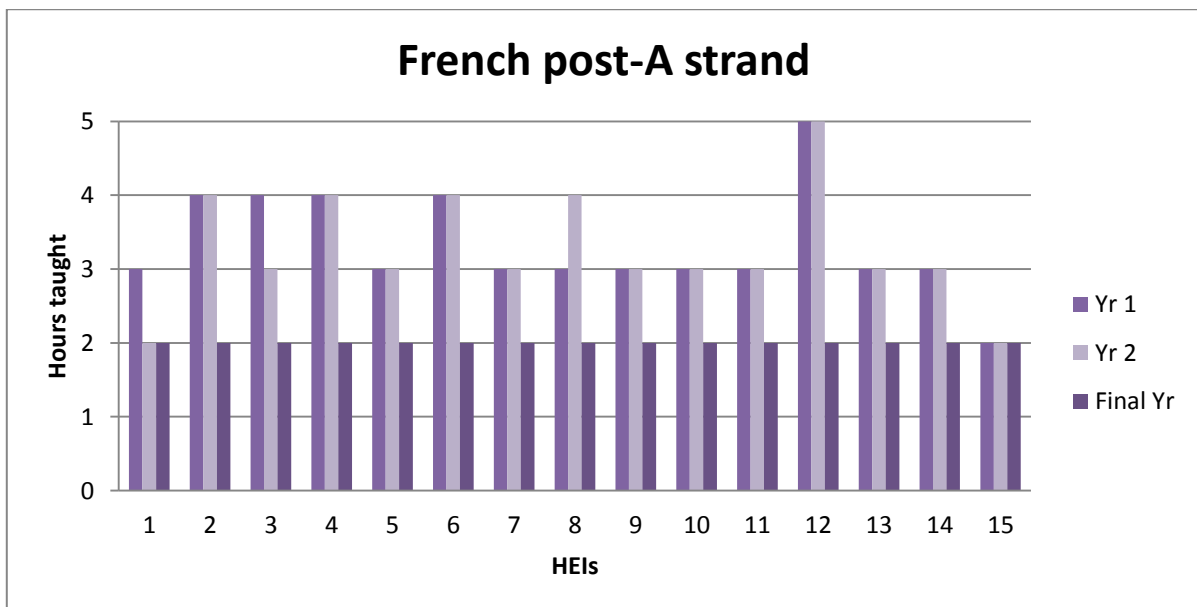


Figure A2

German

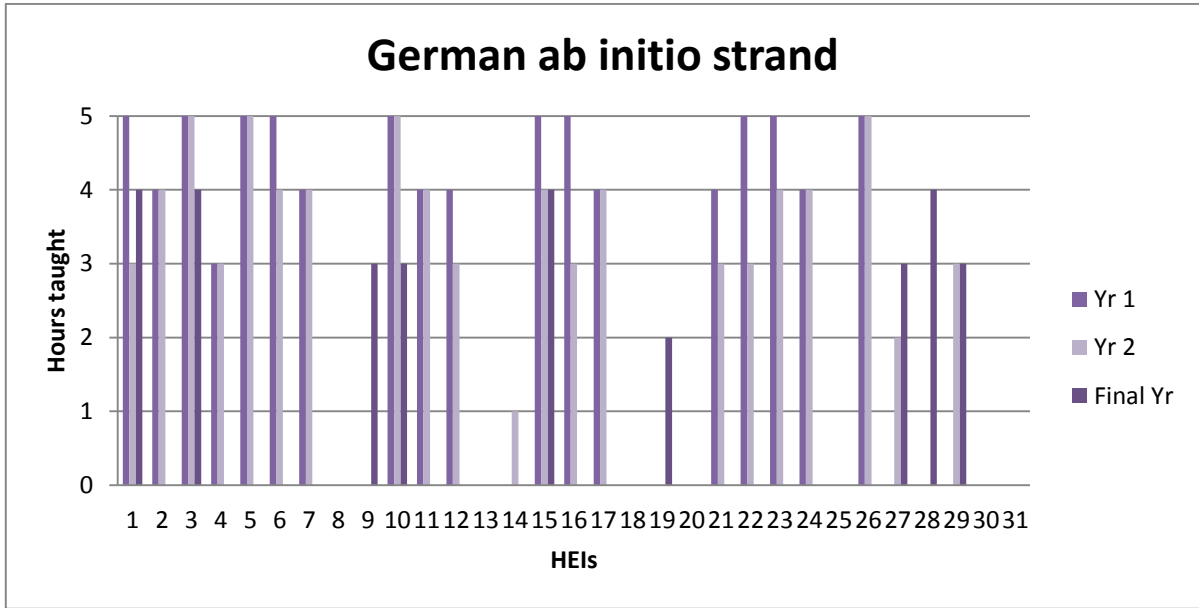


Figure A3

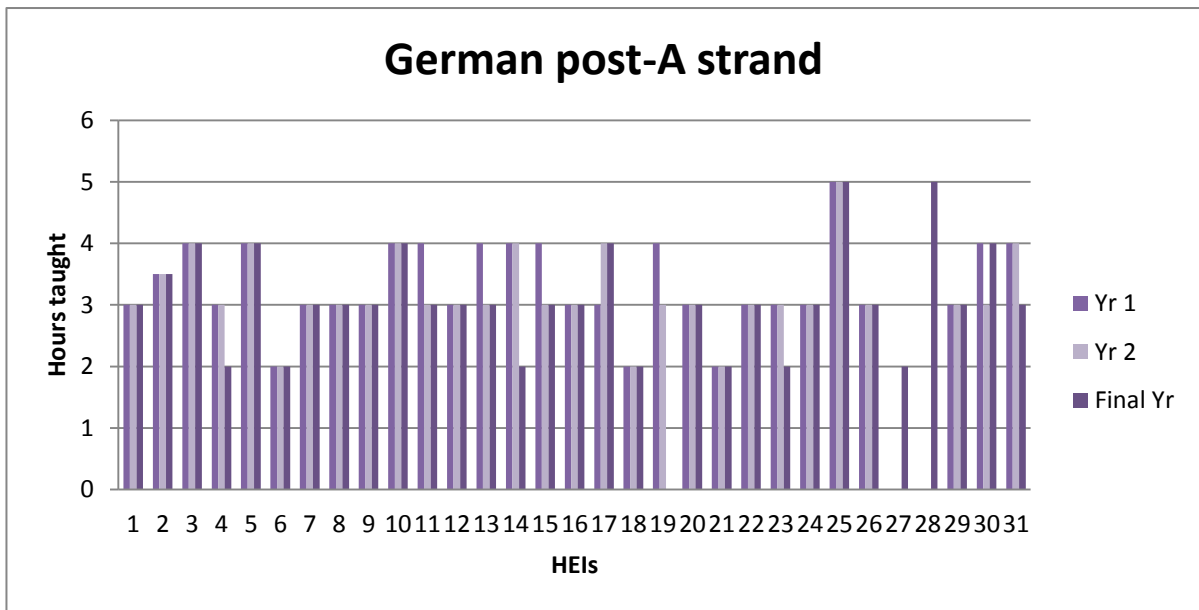


Figure A4

Italian

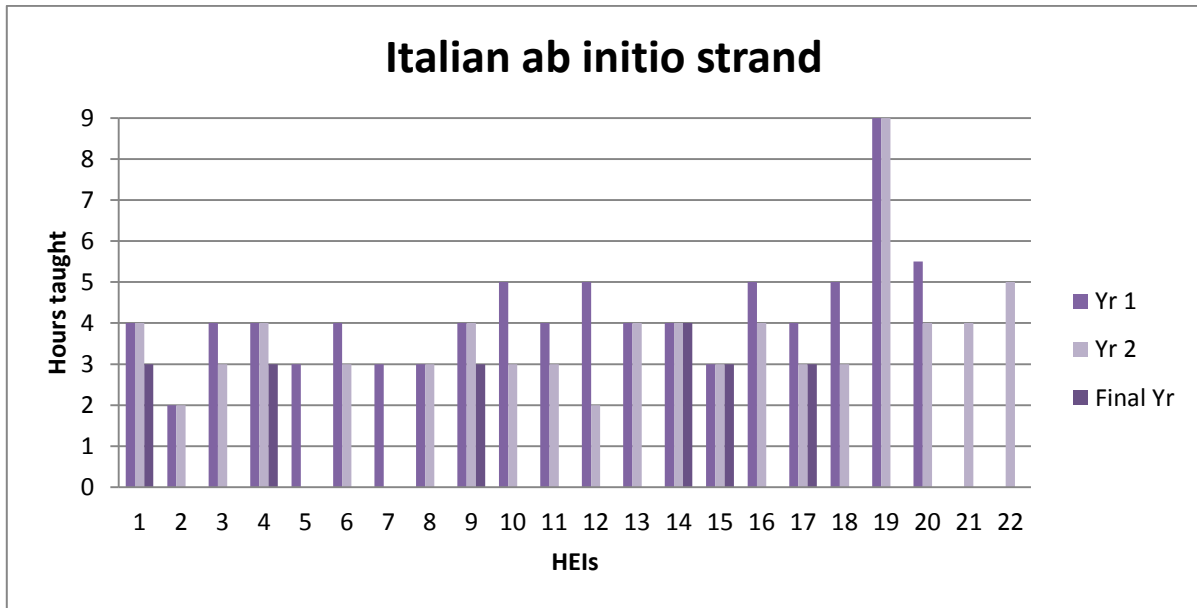


Figure A5

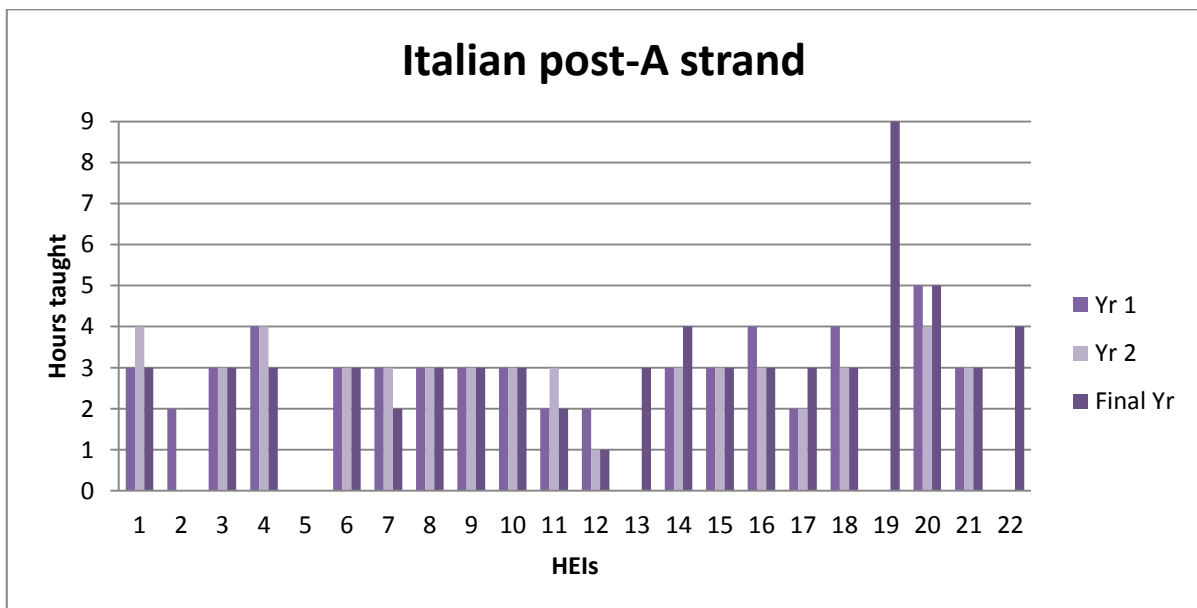


Figure A6

Spanish

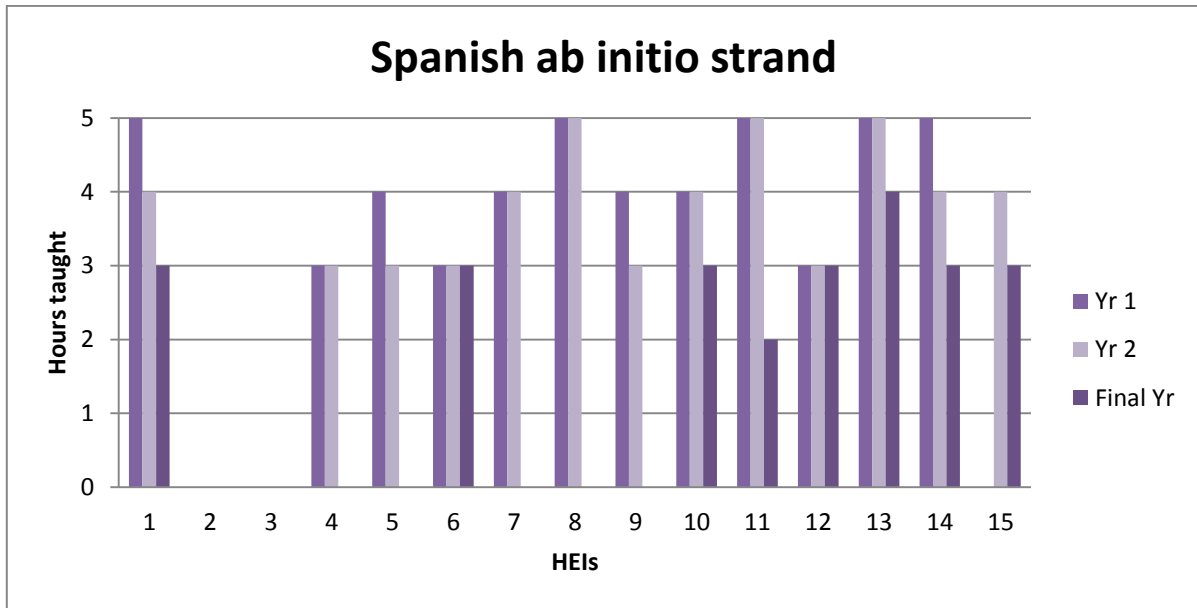


Figure A7

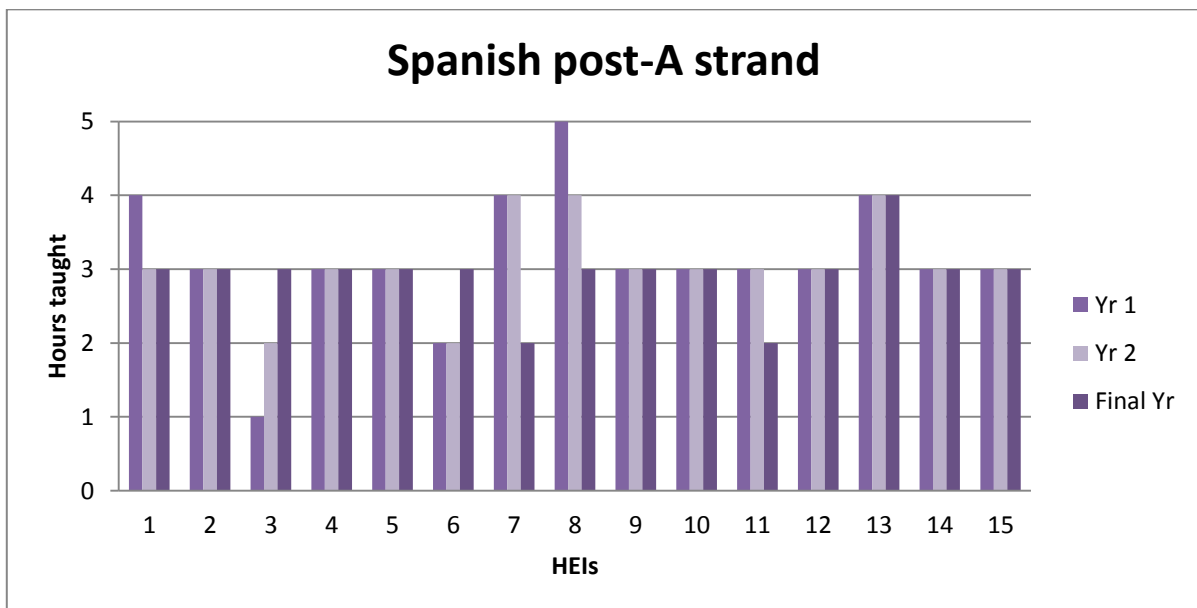


Figure A8

Appendix B

Q2: 'How many credits are the following core language modules worth?'

French

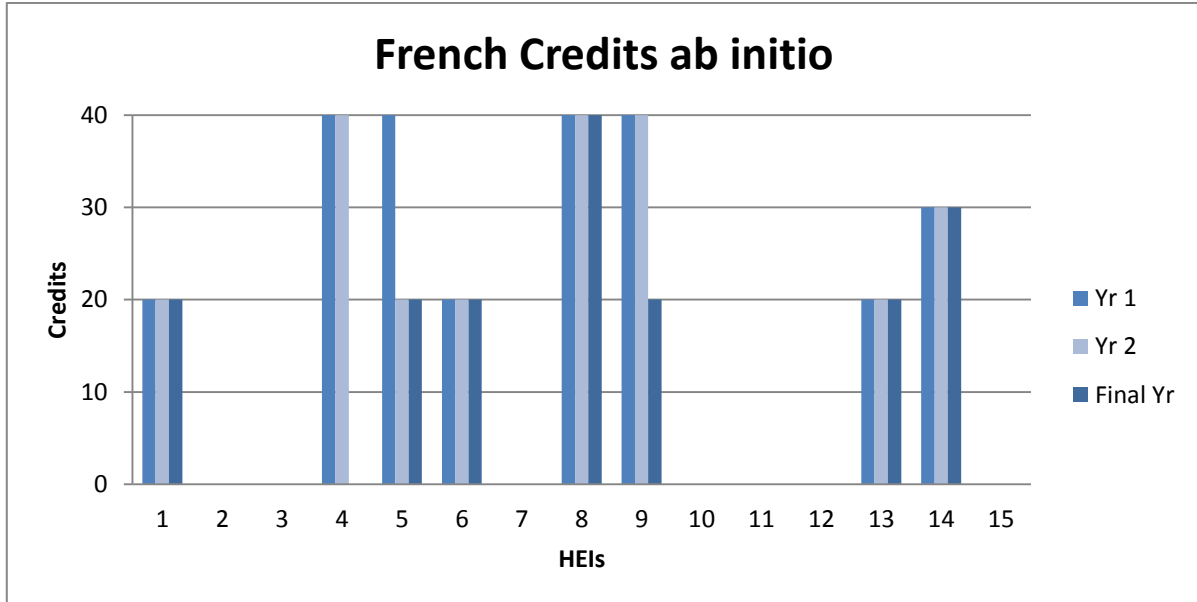


Figure B1

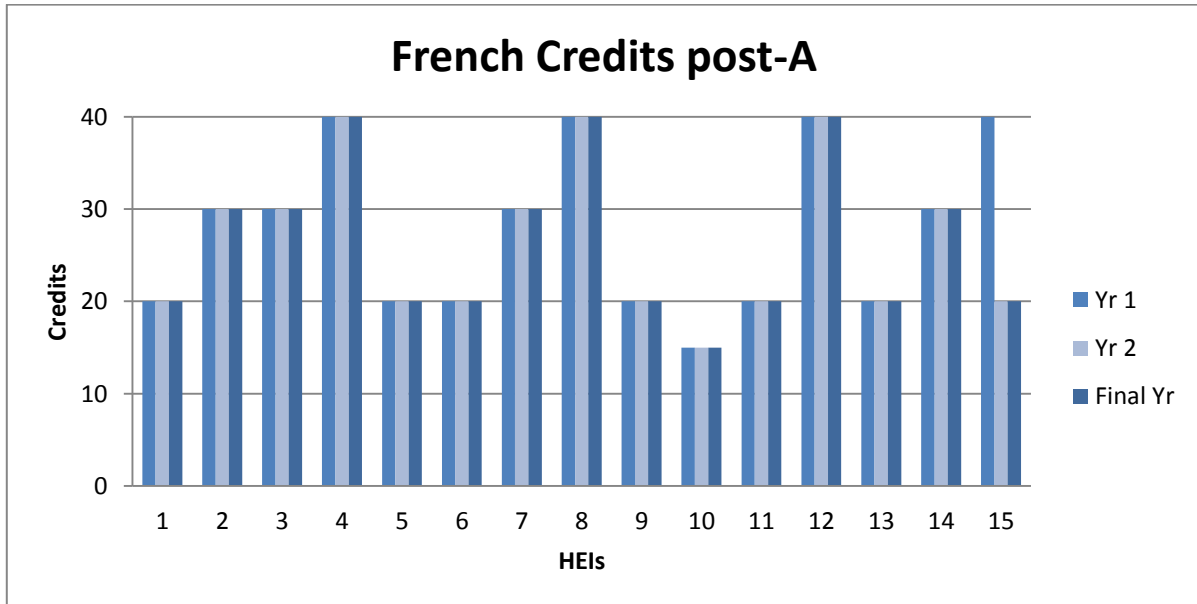


Figure B2

German

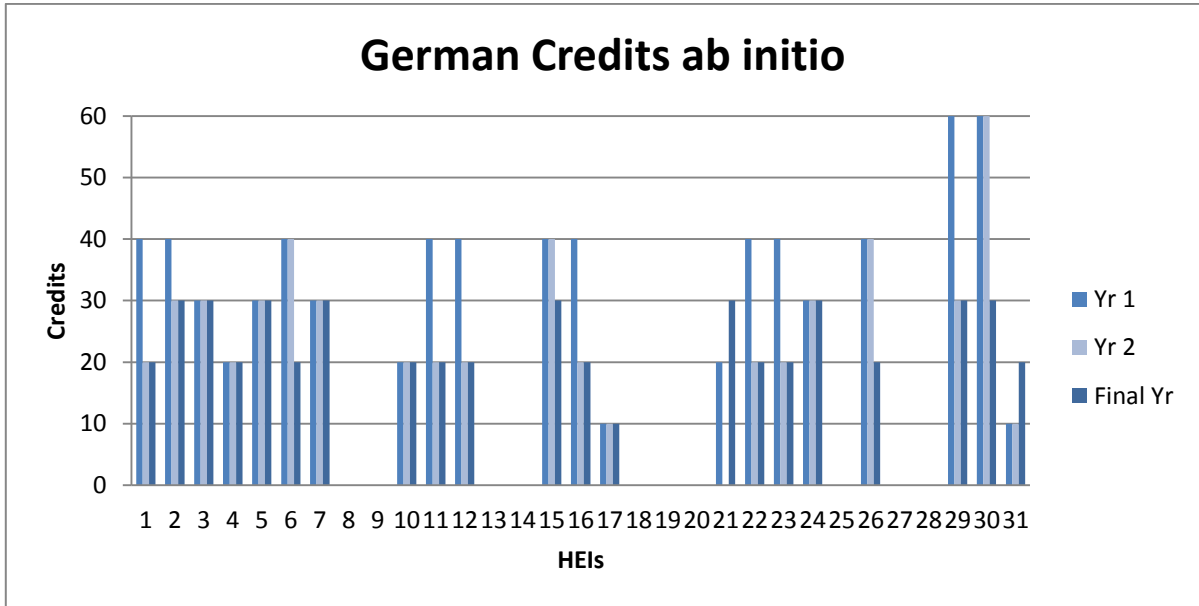


Figure B3

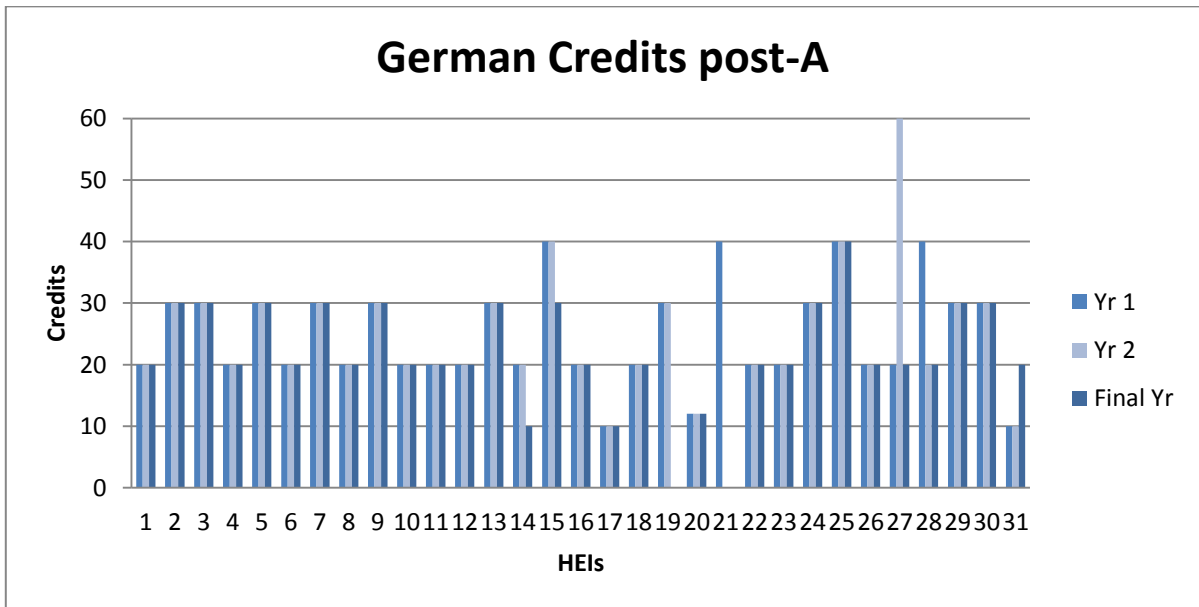


Figure B4

Italian

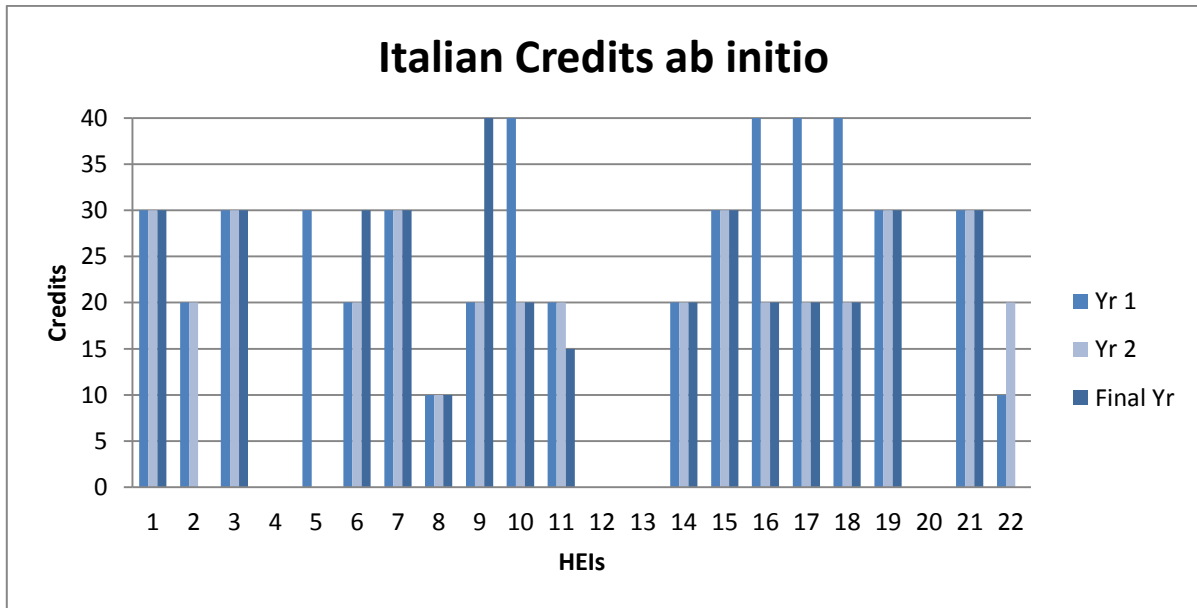


Figure B5

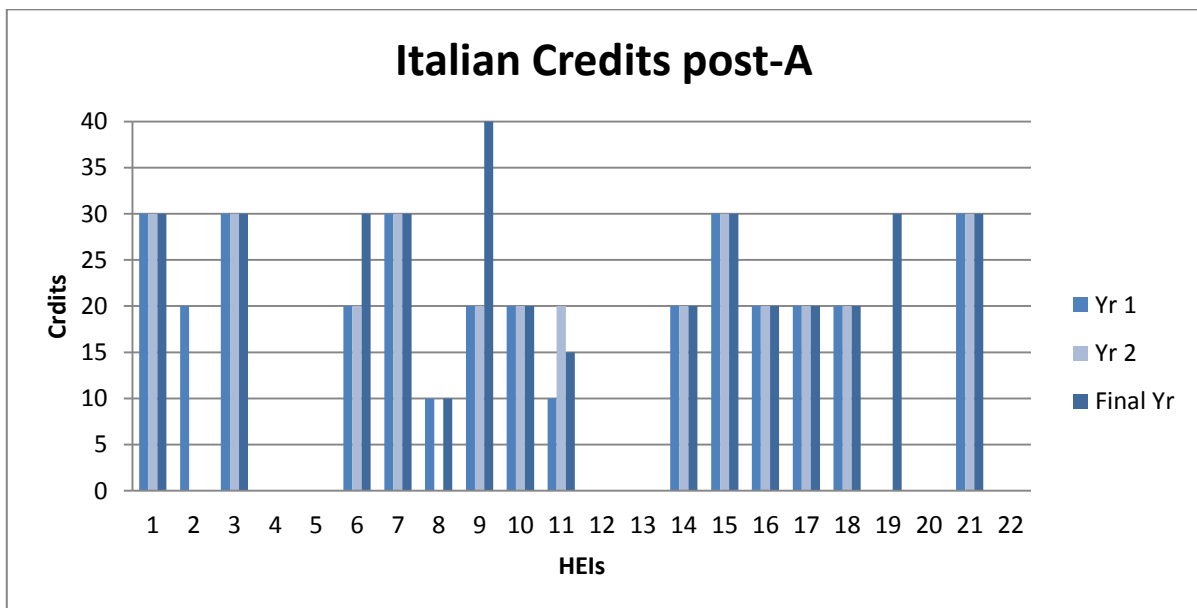


Figure B6

Spanish

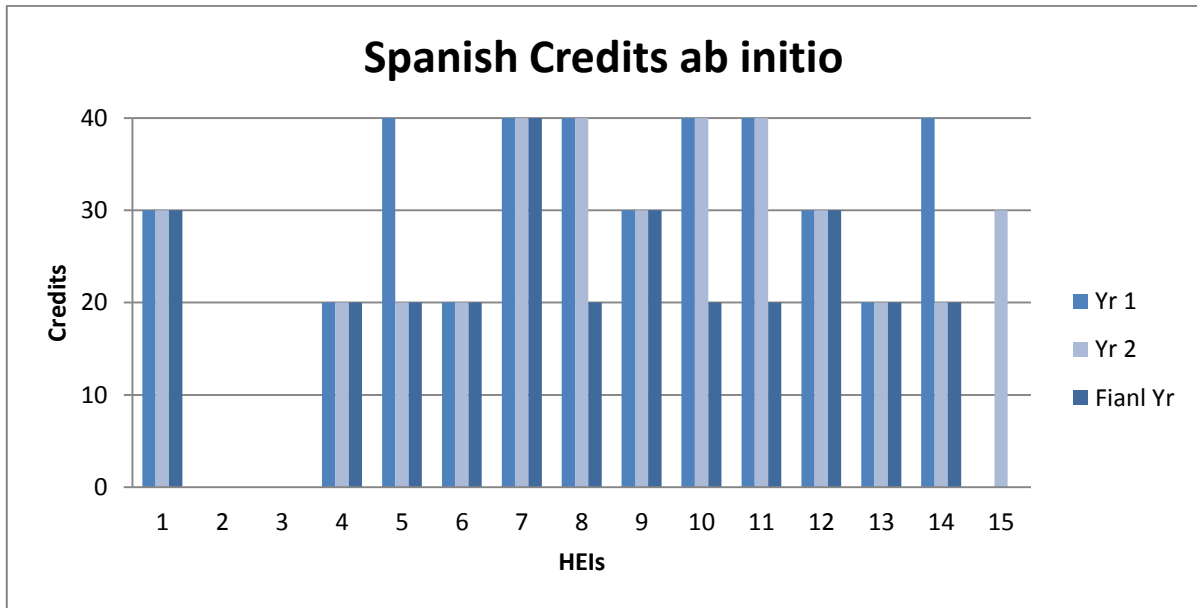


Figure B7

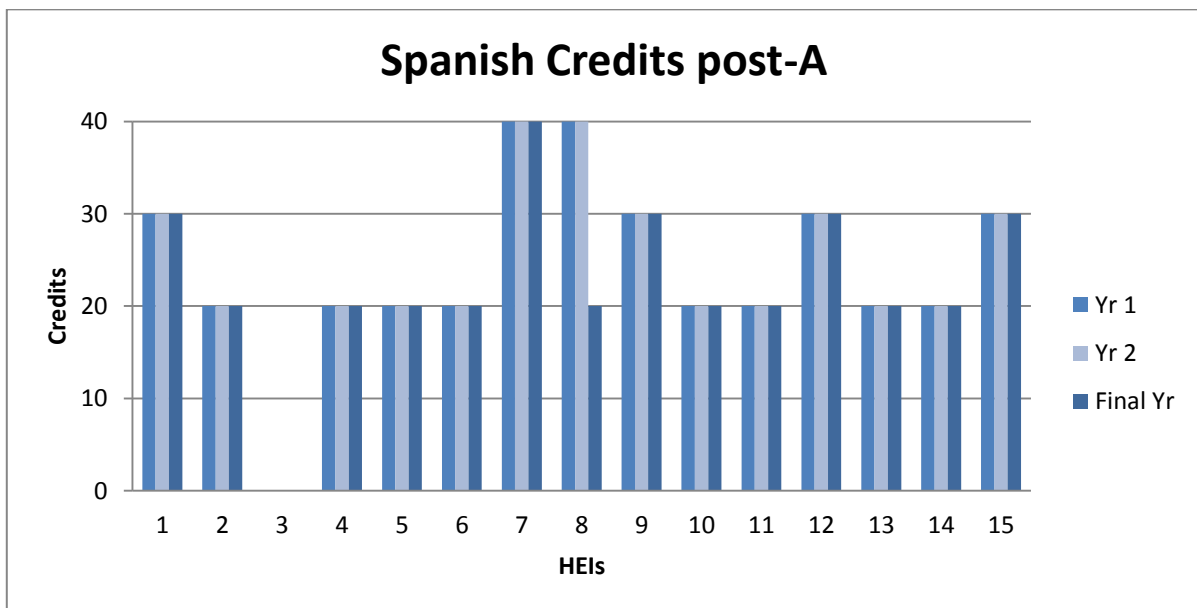


Figure B8

Appendix C

French

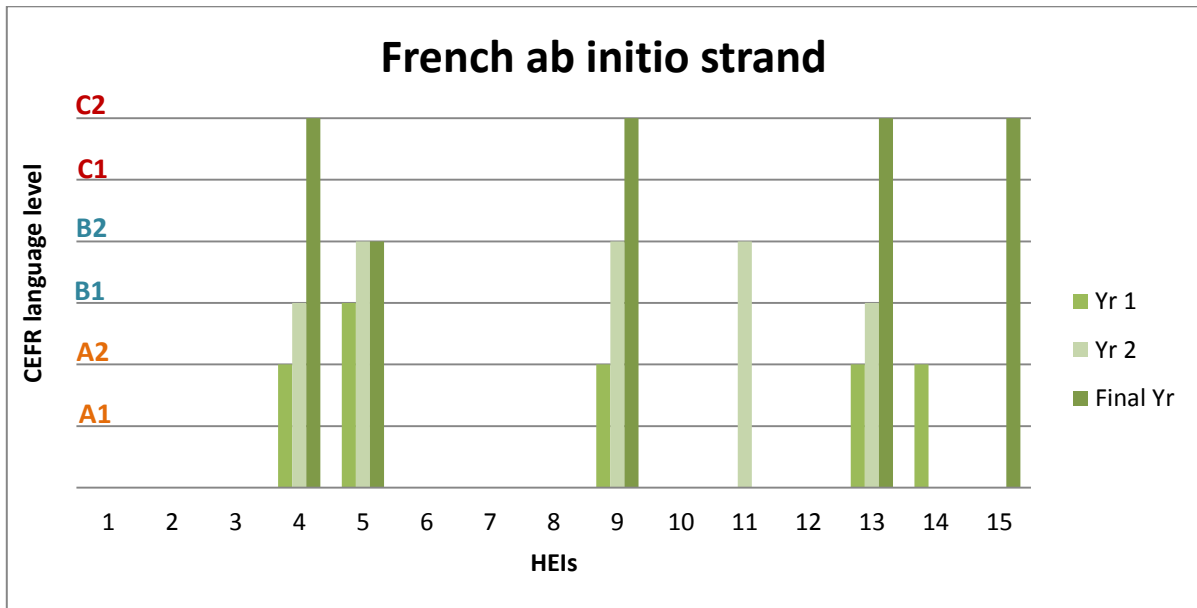


Figure C1

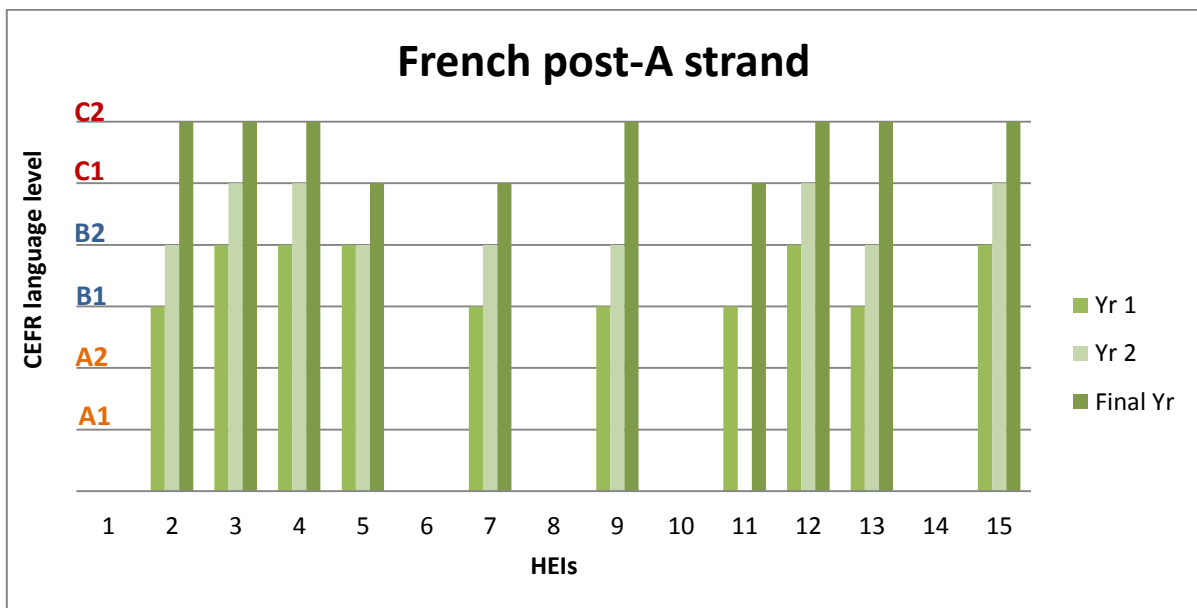


Figure C2

German

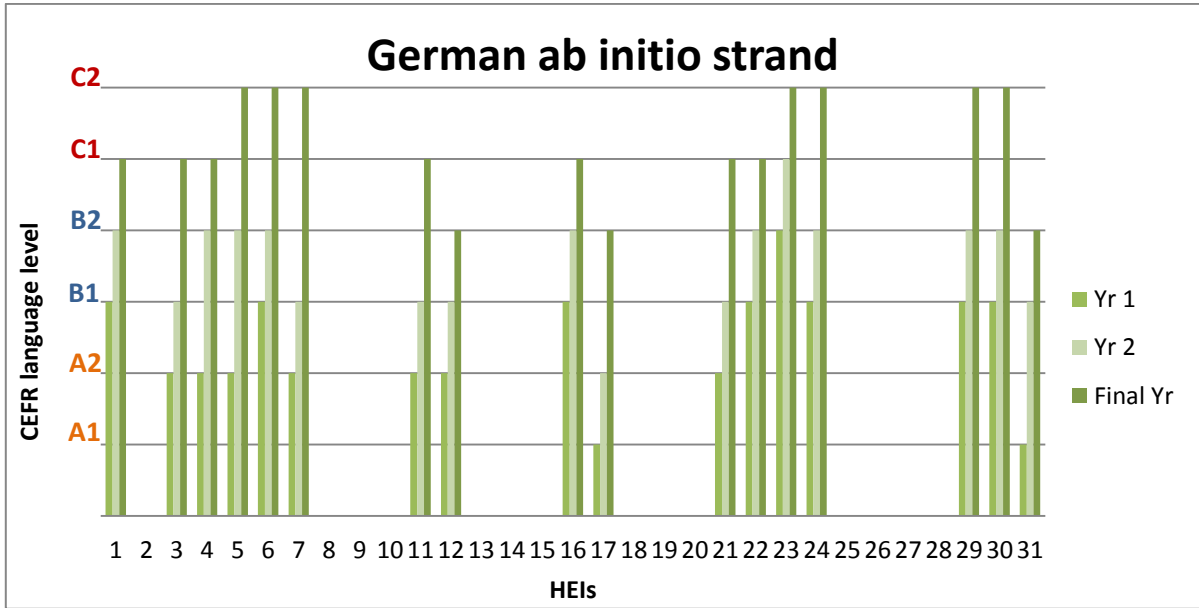


Figure C3

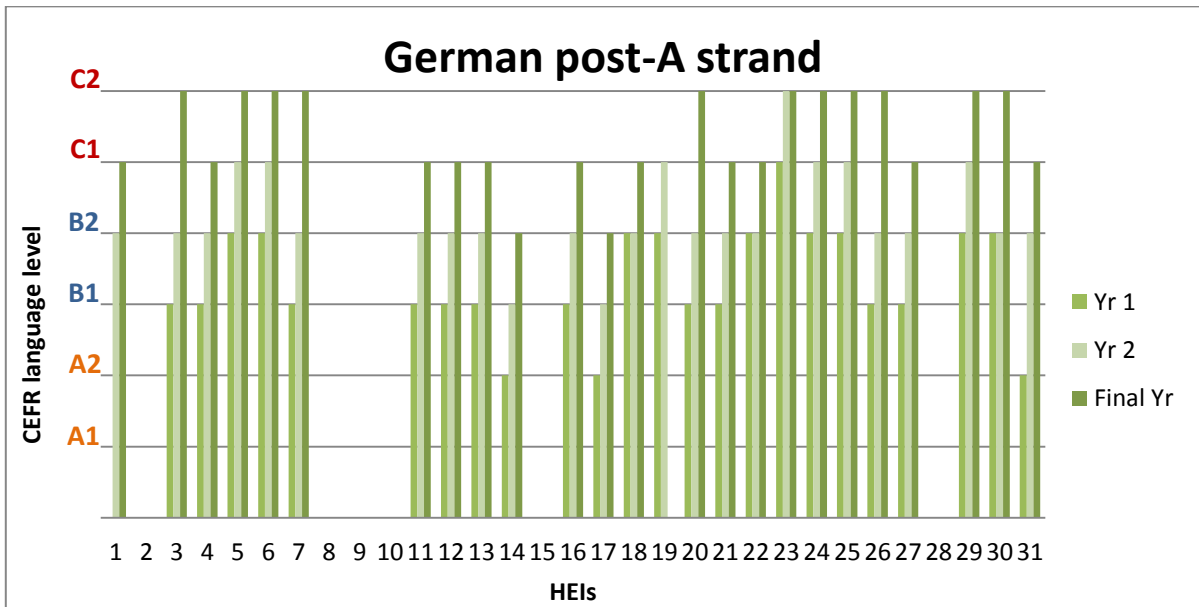


Figure C4

Italian

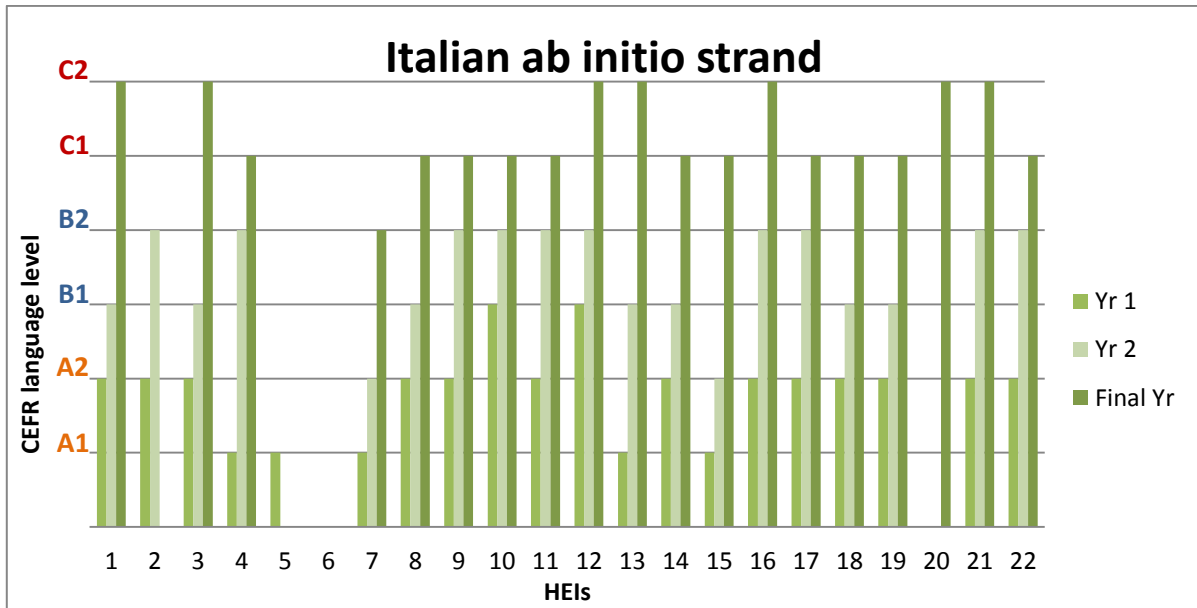


Figure C5

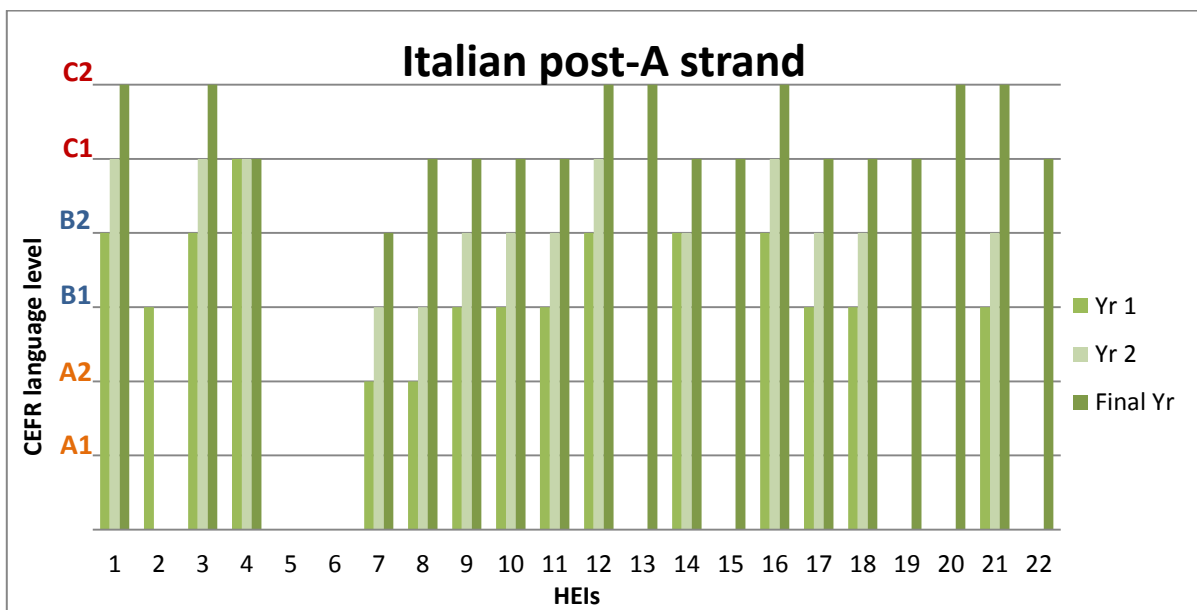


Figure C6

Spanish

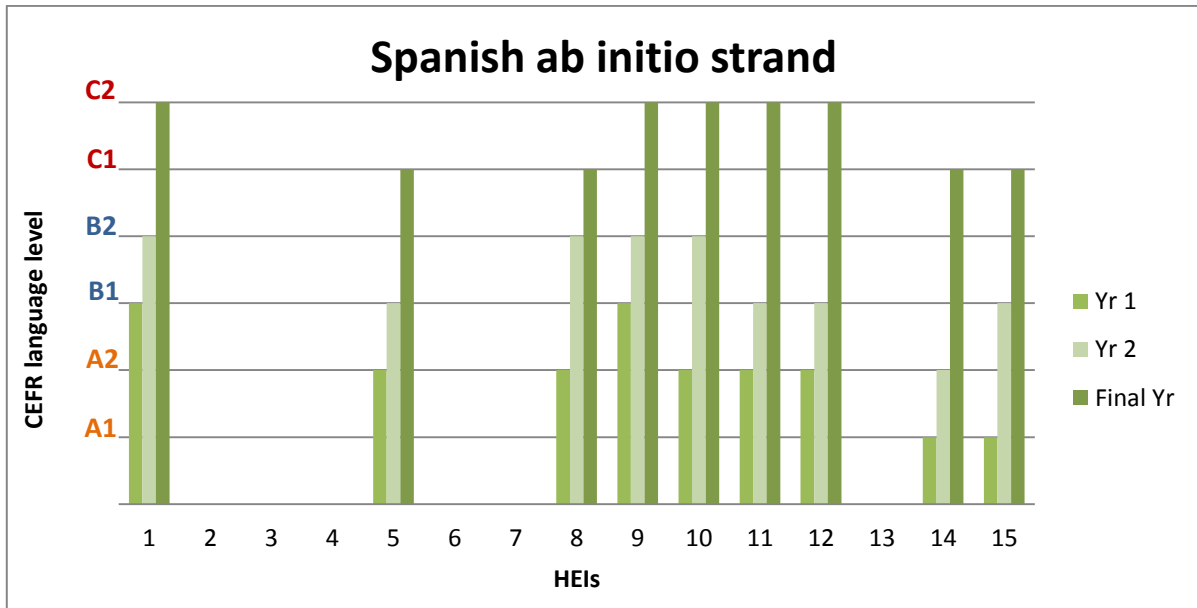


Figure C7

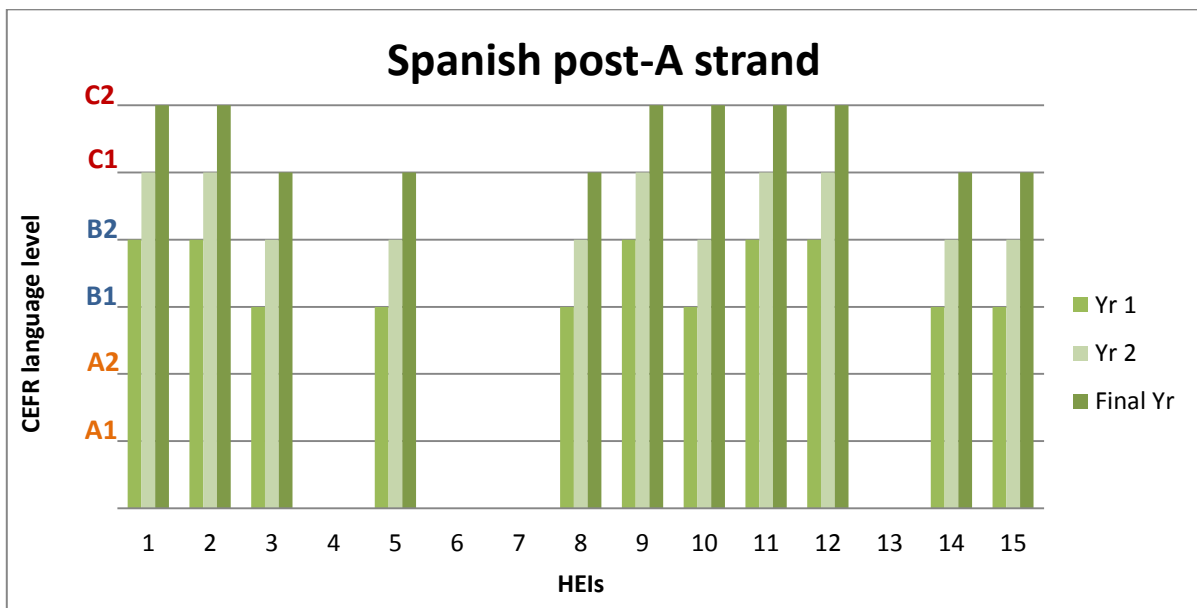


Figure C8