

# Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023

Language teaching in primary  
and post-primary schools

# Survey report

by Dr Ian Collen



Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023 was carried out by Dr Ian Collen (Director, NICILT) commissioned by British Council Northern Ireland.

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# Foreword from British Council Northern Ireland

**The British Council supports peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide through our work in arts and culture, education and the English language.**

Our work in education supports young people in the UK and other countries to gain the knowledge and skills to contribute effectively to life and work in a global society, while broadening their horizons and understanding of the world. We do this by supporting educators, leaders and policymakers by learning from effective systems across the world and supporting partnerships that provide international opportunities to connect and engage.

Advocating for language learning in UK schools and the provision of resources, activities and programmes supporting language teaching is an important part of our cultural relations work. We believe that languages play a vital role in giving young people the skills, intercultural understanding and confidence to support future employment and prosperity in an increasingly connected world, while enriching their lives through the enjoyment of languages.

**Jonathan Stewart**  
Director, British Council Northern Ireland

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**Languages play a vital role in giving young people the skills, intercultural understanding and confidence to support future employment and prosperity.**





# Introduction

## British Council Northern Ireland commissioned researchers at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) to conduct the third biennial Language Trends Northern Ireland survey report.

The last report in 2021 found, amongst other things, that:

- Language teaching in primary schools had all but collapsed during the Covid-19 pandemic;
- The majority of the then Year 9 pupils found language learning online harder than their other subjects;
- Although motivation for language learning in Year 9 was high, almost all pupils did not see the potential for languages to be a part of their future careers;
- Grammar schools devoted much more time to compulsory language learning than secondary schools.

**The aim of Language Trends Northern Ireland is to gather information about the current situation for language teaching and learning in primary and post-primary schools.** Language Trends Northern Ireland focuses on the curricular languages of French, German, Irish and Spanish (as these are the most frequently taught languages in Northern Ireland’s schools). British Council and QUB researchers recognise that more than ninety languages are spoken daily in the Northern Ireland school system (NISRA, 2023: 13). This linguistic diversity enriches the experiences of all young people. This report shows trends in language learning at the descriptive level and provides a springboard from which to consider various avenues; often, much more research is needed to draw causal conclusions.

# Headline findings

## The headline findings for Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023 are:

- Languages in primary schools are recovering following the Covid-19 pandemic.
- One in five Year 9 pupils has told us that they would like to learn Italian in addition to the language(s) which they already learn at school.
- Young people often do not see the value of languages for their future career, or the importance of languages in the global workplace.
- French is the most widely taught language at Key Stage 3, however its popularity is decreasing in later Key Stages.
- Spanish now has the highest enrolment figures across languages at both GCSE and A-level.
- Irish has overtaken French to have the second highest enrolment figures amongst A-level languages in Northern Ireland.
- German figures continue to decline, offered only in 17 per cent of responding schools at Key Stage 3.

# Policy background and context

## Economic case for languages

British Council (2017) cited Spanish, Mandarin, French, Arabic, and German as the most important languages to learn for economic prosperity, with Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Japanese, and Russian also seen as important. A recent study (Ayres-Bennett et al., 2022) found that languages play a significant role in international trade and that not sharing a common language acts as a non-tariff trade barrier. Another key finding of the study is that investing in languages education in the United Kingdom (UK) will, most likely, return more than the investment cost, even under conservative assumptions. For example, the benefit-to-cost ratios are estimated to be at least 2:1 for promoting Arabic, French, Mandarin, or Spanish language education, meaning that spending £1 could return approximately £2. It is thus more important than ever that Northern Ireland has a workforce skilled in communicating in a wide range of languages.

| Stage                       | Age     | School Years          |
|-----------------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| Pre-School (not compulsory) | 3 - 4   |                       |
| Foundation                  | 4 - 6   | Primary 1 & Primary 2 |
| Key Stage 1                 | 6 - 8   | Primary 3 & Primary 4 |
| Key Stage 2                 | 8 - 11  | Primary 5 – Primary 7 |
| Key Stage 3                 | 11 - 14 | Year 8 – Year 10      |
| Key Stage 4                 | 14 - 16 | Year 11 & Year 12     |
| Post-16 (not compulsory)    | 16 - 18 | Year 13 & Year 14     |

**Table 1** The stages of the Northern Ireland Curriculum

## Language learning: Northern Ireland in the British Isles context

Northern Ireland is home to 794 primary schools and 192 post-primary schools (of which 66 are grammar and 126 are non-grammar / secondary schools)<sup>1</sup>.

Education in the UK is a devolved matter. The current Northern Ireland Curriculum was introduced in 2007 and places an emphasis on developing knowledge, understanding and skills in young people as individuals, as contributors to society, and contributors to the environment and economy. It sets out minimum requirements with flexibility of interpretation in a local context. After 2007, education was arranged into the following Key Stages:

<sup>1</sup> Terminology used for post-primary schools: The terms “selective” or “grammar” schools refer to 66 schools which are either controlled (16) or voluntary grammar schools (50). The terms “secondary” or “non-selective” schools refer to 126 schools which are controlled (47), controlled Maintained (56), other maintained – Irish-medium (2), controlled integrated (6) or grant maintained integrated (15).

Language learning in Northern Ireland is compulsory at Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14), however the flexibility of interpretation means it is not compulsory in every year group of the Key Stage. Northern Ireland thus has the shortest time for compulsory language learning of any country in the continent of Europe, despite its neighbours in Great Britain and Ireland making languages in primary schools a priority.<sup>2</sup> Further, there is no government guidance on how much time should be spent on language learning; again, the flexibility of interpretation affords individual school principals autonomy to decide how much time is allocated for language learning. The author is not aware of any plans to revise the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

The government's ambition in England is for 90 per cent of 16-year-olds to be taking a language for GCSE by 2023. To date, this figure has not been realised (Language Trends England, 2022). The Department for Education in England has invested £16.4 million into the existing Mandarin Excellence Programme, which now has over 6,500 pupils from 75 schools. A similar £4 million programme is running for Latin in state schools, delivered by Future Academies. In early 2023, University College London, the British Council and the Goethe-Institut were awarded £14.9 million to establish a Consortium of Hub Schools to increase uptake of languages qualifications in Key Stage 4 and 5 in English state-funded schools. The new centre will incorporate a ring-fenced German Promotion Project (GPP) to increase the number of German teachers and learners in English schools and raise awareness of the benefits of studying both German language and culture. From September 2024, linguistic content for GCSEs in French, German, and Spanish from awarding bodies in England will focus largely, but not exclusively, on the most commonly occurring vocabulary of each language. Vocabulary and grammatical requirements for each tier will be clearly defined in the specification, a marked departure from current GCSEs. Pupils will be expected to know and use the linguistic content specified receptively and productively, in the oral and written modalities, with an approximately equal emphasis on each. Pupils will be expected to know 1,200 lexical items for foundation tier, and a further 500 lexical items for higher tier. Subject content for

languages other than French, German and Spanish in England is not affected.

In 2012, the Scottish Government introduced the 1+2 Language Strategy, which has refocused attention on: language policy in education and the provision for language learning in Scottish schools; the further development of links and rapport with 'language communities'; and the ambition to 'derive maximum benefit from foreign language communities in Scotland' (Scottish Government, 2012: 24). The aim of every Scottish school is to offer children the opportunity to learn a first additional language from Primary 1 (ages 4-5) and a second additional language by Primary 5 (ages 8-9). This 1+2 provision continues until pupils reach the end of Secondary 3 (ages 13-14). Since 2013, the Scottish Government has spent more than £45million on increasing foreign language learning in schools (Petrie, 2021).

The recently introduced Curriculum for Wales establishes shared expectations as to how schools should develop their curriculum. It sees a renaming of 'Modern Foreign Languages' to 'International Languages'. As in times gone by, it is the linguists who have socially constructed languages and given them names and labels; it is hoped that this new label will also signal a transformation in outcomes for the discipline. International Languages in Wales are now defined as 'home and community languages, Modern Languages, classical languages and British Sign Language'.

In Ireland, Irish and English are core subjects at primary and post-primary level, with syllabi offered for both Irish L1 and L2. Post-primary schools are obliged to provide Modern Foreign Language courses, but pupils are not compelled to study them. Although certification in English, Irish and other languages is not compulsory at any level, all degree courses at a National University of Ireland institution require a Leaving Certificate or equivalent in English and Irish. A third language is also required for many degree programmes, and this is thus an extrinsic motivator for young people to keep learning a language. Languages Connect is Ireland's strategy for foreign languages in education (2017-2026). With four key goals, its targets include:

increasing language proficiency through improved learning environments; diversification of the uptake of languages learned; heightened awareness of the importance of languages, and enhanced employer engagement in language learning and the use of trade languages. Most recently, Ireland has added Ukrainian as an option on the Leaving Certificate examination, in addition to options in Ancient Greek, Arabic, French, German, Hebrew Studies, Japanese, Italian, Lithuanian, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish and Russian.

In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education commissioned CCEA<sup>3</sup> Regulation in late autumn 2019 to carry out a review of grading in French, German, Irish and Spanish at GCSE and A-level. As part of the review, CCEA Regulation designed a student survey to gather views on GCSE and A-level languages and their grading. They also invited individuals and organisations who have an interest in languages to submit their views. The GCSE review has been carried out; however, at the time of writing, the results of CCEA's 2019 research are yet to be made publicly available. The CCEA review of grading in A-level French, German, Irish and Spanish has yet to commence; understandably, this may be due in part to the Covid-19 pandemic. While a review of GCSE French, German and Spanish content in England has taken place and concluded (see above), there is no sign of a revision to GCSE subject content in Northern Ireland. In autumn 2021, CCEA inaugurated a Modern Languages Programme Board (MLPB) with representatives from business, HEIs, primary and post-primary schools. The MLPB currently has four key streams of work: (i) primary languages; (ii) languages at Key Stage 3; (iii) Qualifications; and (iv) an exploratory group specifically for Irish. It is planned that the ideas of this group will help to shape future directions for language learning policy in Northern Ireland.

At public examination level, an outworking of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that examinations in summer 2021 were based on Centre Determined Grades (CDGs), submitted by schools to CCEA. In summer 2022 CCEA ensured that examiner judgement was at the centre of the awarding process and took account of the significant disruption that young people encountered and allowed for optional omission of the Speaking

exam. For awarding in summer 2023, CCEA has released Advance Information for most subjects, including Modern Languages, to give learners an indication of broad areas of the specification which will be assessed.

The Department of Education Northern Ireland has included Modern Languages as a priority curriculum area (together with digital technology, relationships and sexuality education, and green growth) in its 2022/2023 Business Plan<sup>4</sup>.

Census 2021 revealed that 4.6 per cent (85,100 people) of Northern Ireland's population aged 3 and over had a main language other than English (up from 54,500 people in Census 2011). The most prevalent main languages other than English were Polish (20,100 people), Lithuanian (9,000), Irish (6,000), Romanian (5,600) and Portuguese (5,000). Census 2021 showed that 12.4 per cent of the Northern Ireland population aged 3 and over have some ability in Irish language and 10.4 per cent have some ability in Ulster Scots.

Languages taught in schools do not reflect this makeup of the current Northern Ireland population. In 2021, Language Trends Northern Ireland found that German provision was low in non-Grammar schools. Curricular languages in schools are focussed on French and Spanish and, in most Maintained schools and a very small number of the integrated schools, Irish. The lack of progression pathways to local universities in languages other than these three, coupled with the dearth of language provision in Further Education (see Collen et al., 2023), make diversification of languages for certification in the school system a challenge.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy have recently funded and launched The Languages Gateway, a one-stop online portal for all things languages in the UK, facilitating links between all those interested in languages: learners, families, community groups, teachers, school leaders, academics, policymakers, subject associations. The funders intend the site to be open and inclusive, a tool for everyone to use and contribute to, building a collective sense of ownership and partnership.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See the following for context: Holmes, B. and Myles, F. (2019) White Paper: Primary Languages Policy in England – The Way Forward. RiPL. [Online] Available at: [www.ripl.uk/policy](http://www.ripl.uk/policy); Languages Connect (2017), Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education, 2017-2026. [Online] Available at <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/79116/5a5cb48b-09e1-464e-9a2e-4ff231cb090b.pdf#page=null>.

<sup>3</sup> CCEA: Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, a non-departmental public body funded by and responsible to the Department of Education.

<sup>4</sup> See page 15 of <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/DE%202022-23%20Business%20Plan.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.thelanguagesgateway.uk/>

Research outline

The research question guiding the study is ‘**What is the current state of language teaching in primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland?**’.

To answer the research question, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach. There were three surveys: one for each of primary school principals, Heads of Department (HoD) in post-primary schools and Year 9 pupils (age 12-13). Survey questions were drafted in February 2023 and received feedback from an advisory panel convened by British Council Northern Ireland comprising academics from Queen’s University Belfast, Stranmillis University College, St. Mary’s University College, Ulster University, professionals from CCEA, Department of Education, Foras na Gaeilge and teachers. A qualitative strand focussing on motivation and uptake for GCSE languages involved interviewing four professionals. Three of the four interviewees are in-service school teachers and hold posts of Head of Department or Head of Subject. The fourth interviewee works in the broader field of Language Education.

The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen’s University Belfast. All participants, including Year 9 pupils, gave voluntary and informed consent to take part.

Permission was sought from post-primary school principals for the Year 9 pupils’ survey and 27 principals opted in. Teachers in these schools shared the link with their Year 9 pupils by email or in an online classroom.

After data sets had been cleaned and duplications removed, the following response rates were achieved:

|                                        | Base | Achieved | % Response |
|----------------------------------------|------|----------|------------|
| Primary principals’ survey             | 794  | 82       | 10.3%      |
| Post-primary Head of Department survey | 192  | 97       | 50.5%      |

Table 2 Response rates

The response rate from primary principals has decreased, compared with 25 per cent in 2019 and 15 per cent in 2021. Over half of the responding schools in the post-primary survey had taken part in the British Council Language Trends 2021 survey and it was pleasing to see more than 40 schools which had not participated before taking part.

A total of 1,158 young people from 27 schools in Northern Ireland completed the Year 9 pupil survey. Girls accounted for 59.8 per cent of respondents, boys 36.4 per cent of respondents, 1.5 per cent of pupils identified as other and 2.3 per cent of pupils preferred not to reveal their gender. Of the 1,158 young people, almost two thirds attend grammar schools, an increasing number of which do not select pupils on the basis of academic ability. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, most grammar schools did not require the current Year 9 cohort (specific to this study) across Northern Ireland to complete an entrance exam, allowing for the collection of data from a broad range of abilities in post-primary education.

Data were analysed using univariate and, where appropriate, some multivariate analysis to identify trends in the data sets. Qualitative data are presented verbatim and no analysis, except for simple content analysis unless otherwise stated, has been performed.

Report structure

The report first considers language learning at Key Stage 3, drawing on data from the Head of Department survey, the Year 9 pupil survey and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. It then considers language learning at GCSE and A-level, followed by wider questions around the international dimension of schools. The report concludes with a look at language learning in primary schools, drawing mainly on data from the primary school principals’ survey.

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**1,158 young people from 27 schools in Northern Ireland completed the Year 9 pupil survey.**





# Language learning in post-primary schools

## Profile of responding schools

Ninety-seven out of a possible 192 post-primary schools responded to the Head of Department Survey (response rate 50.5 per cent), of which 35 were grammar schools and 62 were non-selective secondary schools.

In total 154,312 pupils are enrolled in post-primary schools, an increase of nearly 2,500 pupils from 2021/2022. There are approximately twenty-nine thousand pupils in sixth-forms in schools, accounting for 61 per cent of all 16-17 year olds in Northern Ireland. Almost three in ten young people (27.7 per cent) are entitled to free school meals. Free school meal entitlement differs significantly by school type. Grammar schools have the lowest proportion of free school meal entitled (FSME) pupils (12.7 per cent), whereas this figure in non-grammar schools is comparably much higher (34.9 per cent). The average free school meals statistic for all schools responding to the Language Trends NI 2023 survey was 24.4 per cent, which suggests that the overall profile of the dataset is slightly more favourable than the Northern Ireland FSME average of 27.7 per cent. This should be taken into consideration when reading the report.

|                             | Grammar 2021 | Grammar 2023 | Secondary 2021 | Secondary 2023 |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| Less than one hour per week | 0            | 0            | 5.8%           | 6.5%           |
| 1 – 2 hours                 | 34.1%        | 51.5%        | 80.1%          | 61.2%          |
| 2 – 3 hours                 | 43.9%        | 30.3%        | 5.9%           | 19.4%          |
| 3 – 4 hours                 | 12.2%        | 15.1%        | 8.2%           | 11.3%          |
| 4 hours or more             | 9.8%         | 3.1%         | 0              | 1.6%           |

Table 3 Contact time for language learning by sector

## Language learning at Key Stage 3

### Time for languages

Curriculum time and exposure to high quality language teaching is arguably the key variable in ensuring that young people have the opportunity to progress towards independence (see Milton, 2022). In terms of time for languages at Key Stage 3, there continues to be great variation between schools across Northern Ireland. The time spent on language classes is largely the same between Years 8, 9 and 10. The following table depicts contact time for language learning in Year 8 according to school sector:

The data show that there is a notable decrease in the grammar sector in the number of schools offering languages for more than two hours per week, but there is a welcome increase in time in some secondary schools. More research would need to be done to understand this shift.

The Head of Department survey reveals that French continues to be the most widely taught language at Key Stage 3. This is followed by Spanish, Irish and then German; as we will see later in the report this pattern is not replicated in GCSE and A-level, where Spanish is clearly the leading choice. The survey asked which

languages were either compulsory for all pupils or available to all pupils; when we combine these responses, we can see that French is offered at Key Stage 3 in 90 per cent of responding schools (the same as in 2021), Spanish in 80 per cent (up from 75 per cent in 2021), Irish in 35 per cent of schools (the same as in 2021) and German in 17 per cent of schools (slightly down from 20 per cent in 2021).

The survey asked Year 9 pupils which language they would like to learn (which they do not currently learn at school). They provided a huge array of responses, summarised in figure 1.

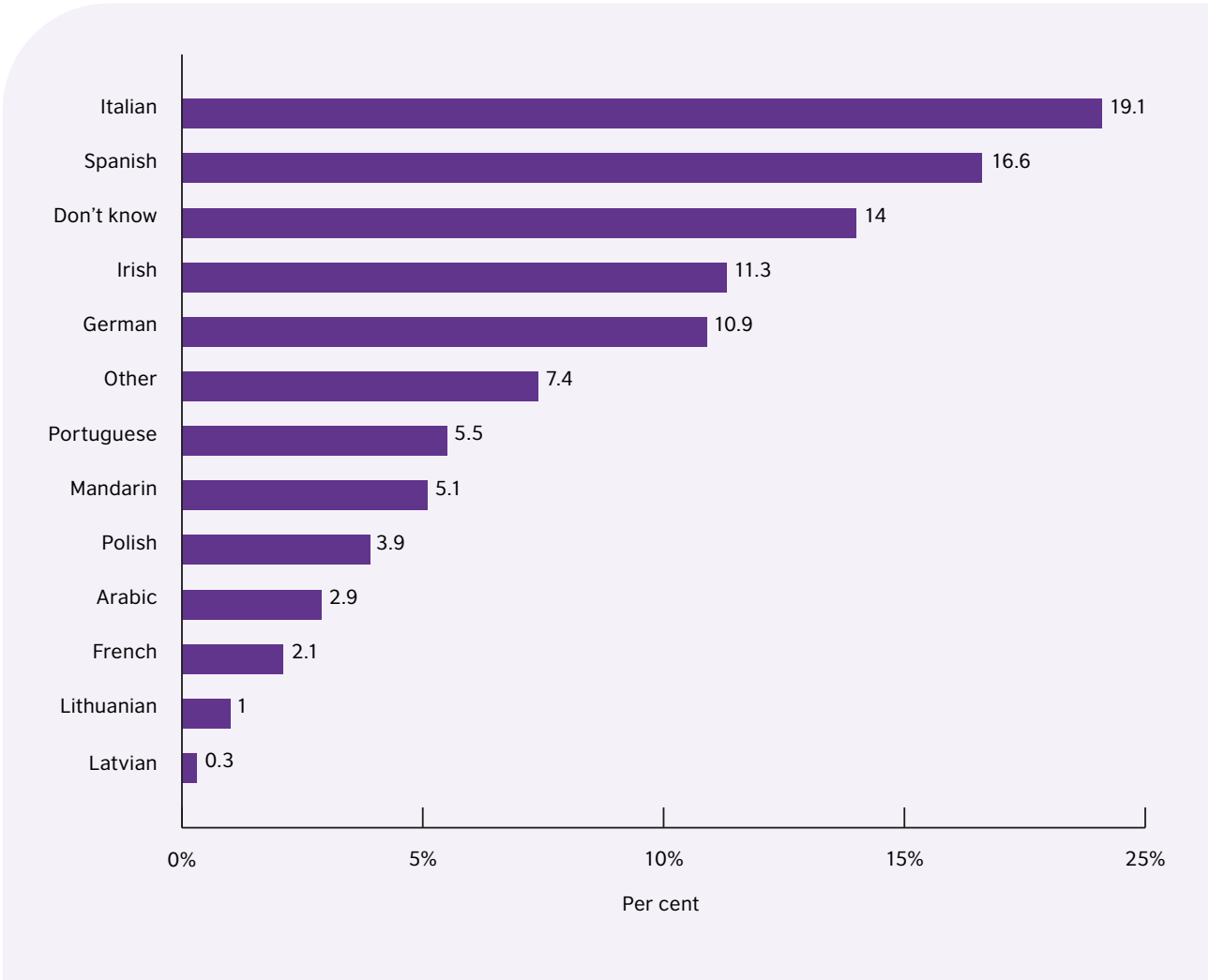
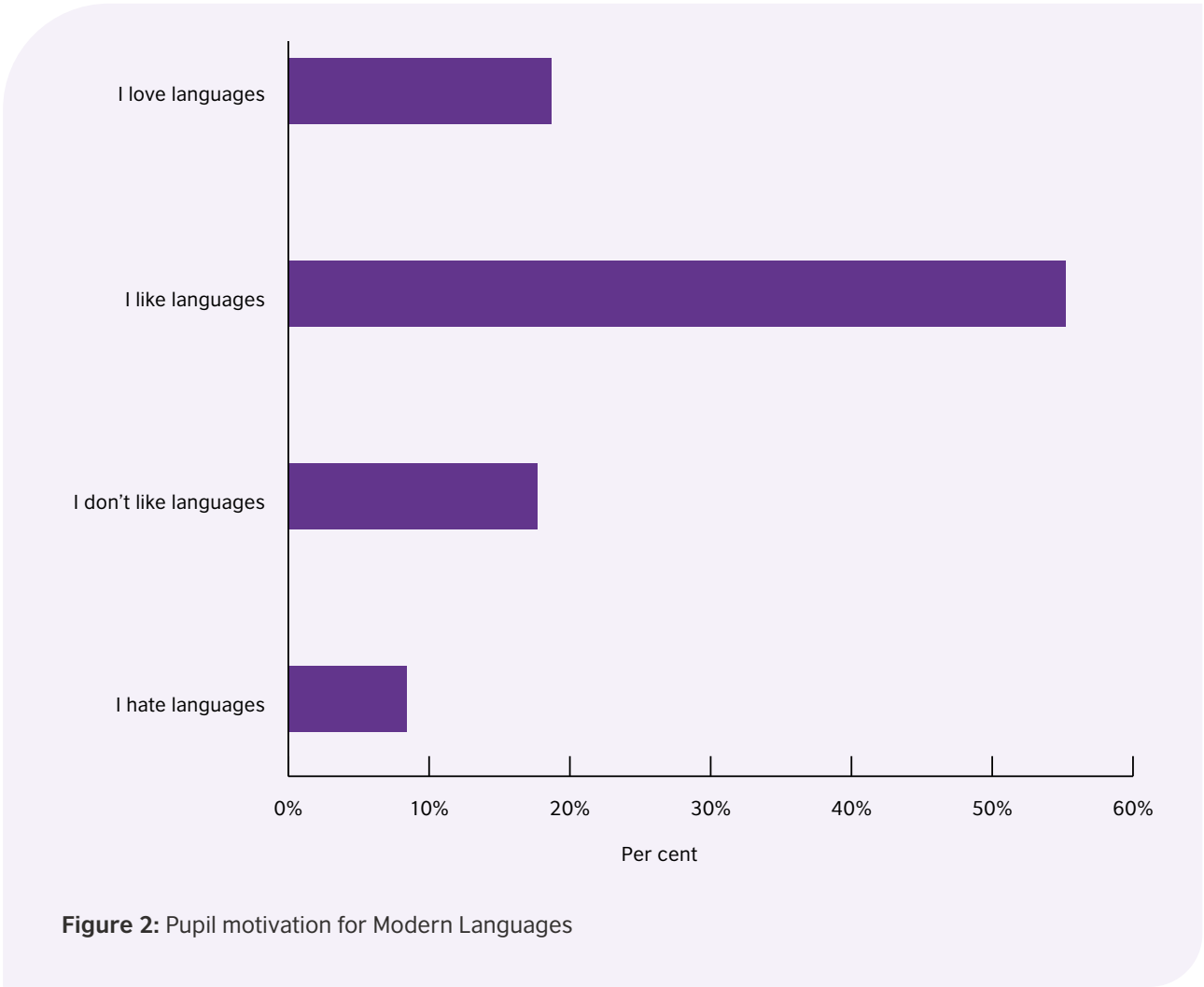


Figure 1 Languages Year 9 pupils would like to learn

The most popular language was Italian, which was taught in some schools in Northern Ireland until the early 2000s, followed by Spanish (for pupils who do not currently learn Spanish). In addition, the ‘other’ column attracted British Sign Language, Bulgarian, Filipino, Greek, Hindi and Tagalog. Although the New Decade New Approach deal of 2020 committed to introducing a Sign Language Bill, this has not yet materialised and sign language is not a mandatory part of the school curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

Pupils continue to be motivated by language learning. Figure 2 shows that three out of four pupils either like or love languages.



6 See <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/languages/sign-language> for further information.

We gave pupils ten choices about how they feel about their language classes. The top three feelings were:

|                     |                                   |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Main feeling        | Language classes are ‘fun’        |
| Second main feeling | I like speaking the language      |
| Third main feeling  | There are too many words to learn |

**Table 4:** Pupils’ main feelings about language learning

It is appreciated that the word ‘fun’ is not the purpose of education, nor are teachers expected to entertain. Nevertheless, it reveals that motivation is high and that Year 9 pupils enjoy speaking the language. The third main feeling of there being too many words to learn suggests that teachers need to plan for cognitive load and, like many in the resulting data set, consider the use of Extensive Processing Instruction (EPI) in the classroom. EPI hinges on the notion that teaching language through chunks (e.g. polywords, collocation, sentence heads and frames) is much more effective than the teaching of single words, arguing this is more economical in terms of cognitive load, particularly for beginner to intermediate learners in instructed settings with limited contact time. It is based on the work of teacher and applied linguist Dr Gianfranco Conti and is sometimes called the ‘Conti’ method (Conti and Smith, 2016).

As in 2021, three questions were included resulting in a Net Promoter Score to consider pupil loyalty to languages (as opposed to motivation in the here and now) and to nuance the argumentation. Net Promoter Score is often used in the commercial world to understand consumer loyalty to a particular brand. Pupils were invited to respond to three questions on an 11-point scale and were then divided by their answers into promoters (9,10), passives (7,8) and detractors (0-6). Promoters are very positive and likely to recommend languages to other children, whilst detractors have a negative opinion of the field. Passives could be swayed to become promoters.

Fifty-eight per cent of pupils were passives or promoters when asked how useful it was to be able to speak a language other than English. Forty per cent of

pupils believe that they can speak a language well after learning it for two years in school. However, when asked how likely it was that pupils would use a language in their future job, just 3.7 per cent of pupils were promoters and 10.5 per cent were passives. There appears to be much work to be done to help young people see the value of languages for their future careers.

Many young people stop learning languages at the end of Year 10. Five in ten responding teachers are in favour of an accreditation scheme for languages at Key Stage 3. Teachers commented:

- “Yes, I think an accreditation scheme would encourage more pupils to take an interest and continue with a language. I think something with doable units of work done throughout instead of one end of year exam.”
- “[...] if it involves providing extra-curricular opportunities for pupils to learn other languages or provide ways to engage learners with languages, I would be strongly in favour.”
- “We would like a qualification in the language or languages that pupils drop at the end of KS3 to consolidate what they have learned in 3 years into a recognised qualification.”
- “Yes, something equivalent to the Fáinne<sup>7</sup> in Irish would be great for French to keep them on track for the whole year even after subject choices are made.”

Two in ten responding teachers are on the fence and it is acknowledged that much more discussion would be required with CCEA before such a scheme would take root:

- “Would depend on content, assessment and costs involved. I would not welcome any new initiative requiring that schemes and assessments are all changed. We have established excellent courses at KS3 for our pupils and would not wish to change these.”

However, not everyone was in favour. Of the three in ten teachers who were not in agreement, comments such as the following are noted:

7 ‘An Fáinne’ was started over 100 years ago on 17 February 1916, a special sign that a person was willing to speak Irish. There are three levels; ‘Tá Cúpla Focal Agam’ (I have a few words), Fáinne Airgid (Silver) and Fáinne Óir (Gold). Many schools which teach Irish offer the Fáinne to their pupils.



“No, in my opinion, there should be no recognition for having studied languages at KS3 as this could deter pupils from choosing languages at GCSE.”

“We teach more pupils with less staff and less time allocated. Time not sufficient to run extra schemes.”

A further area for development relates to how any new Key Stage 3 accreditation would be aligned to international benchmarks such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is important in terms of lifelong language learning.

## Efforts to encourage uptake from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4

Language Trends Northern Ireland research has consistently shown that a majority of young people enjoy learning languages at Key Stage 3. We are keen to understand how uptake from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 can be assured in schools where languages are not compulsory beyond age 14. We interviewed four stakeholders from education and analysed qualitative comments from Head of Departments in response to the question, ‘what is working well in language education in your school in the current school year?’.

In its simplest form, motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is driven by positive attributes and is considered to be more impactful in sustaining effort than extrinsic motivation, which is created by external, instrumental rewards such as the need to pass an examination (Bower, 2019).

Through interviews, teachers have told us that they have been able to increase uptake by revamping their Key Stage 3 Scheme of Work.

“In our school, we are focussing on the Conti approach and pupils are enjoying languages. They are getting experience of two languages in Year 8 and getting a choice in Year 9 to continue with just one language - this gives them ownership of the language and makes them more motivated.”

“The pupils sitting in front of us are different to when I trained to be a teacher twenty years ago. Especially with the outworking of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have now had to redo our Key Stage 3 schemes of work. We have put an emphasis on culture, teach grammar through lexicogrammar rather than deductively, have stripped out a whole unit on direct

and indirect object pronouns – which whilst important, switched off 90 per cent of our Year 10 pupils to be blunt – and now focus on high frequency vocabulary and interleaving material. We focus too on European Day of Languages, have visiting speakers, have organised a trip to Spain and entered both Francofest and Hispanofest at Queen’s. It has been a game changer and the pupils’ enthusiasm and my own enthusiasm have been refreshed!”

Recent policy changes in England have focussed on intrinsic motivation and trying to ensure that pupils receive high quality language teaching, including the revision of GCSE subject content in French, German and Spanish from 2024 (Long and Danechi, 2022: 10-11). The same drive to focus on language teachers’ pedagogy has not been as focussed in Northern Ireland, but it is clear from the qualitative data collected that teachers are continually reflecting on their practice and trying to make improvements to the pupil learning experience.

## NICILT Ambassadors Programme

In 2019/2020, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) ran an ‘Ambassadors’ scheme in five regions of the UK, bringing together school pupils and university students with the goal of promoting languages and motivating young people to opt into languages at A-level. In light of the success of the AHRC pilot, the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching (NICILT), based at QUB and funded by the Department of Education, adapted the scheme for Key Stage 3 with the aim of increasing the number of pupils wanting to take languages at GCSE level in non-selective schools in Northern Ireland. Twenty-eight non-selective schools applied to take part, reflecting the appetite within the school community for curriculum support in Modern Languages. After a robust selection process, five schools were selected to take part in 2021/2022 and a further four schools were selected to take part in 2022/2023, in addition to two returning schools who re-applied to the scheme. Selected schools were allocated four Ambassadors who were recruited from a cohort of QUB final year languages students in French, Irish and Spanish. Ambassadors worked in pairs to deliver the project, with each pair assigned to one Year 10 class. Student Ambassadors delivered a total of five activities in their allocated schools which included:

- A whole class presentation on the value of learning a language.
- Mentoring session A: ‘GCSE in a Nutshell’; this session focuses on what is involved in a GCSE language.
- Mentoring session B: ‘Year Abroad or in the Gaeltacht’; undergraduate students speak from their personal experience and demystify the year abroad.
- Mentoring session C: ‘Future Me’; this session focuses on the findings of Language Trends NI 2021 (where almost all young people told us they don’t see languages playing a role in their future career).
- Mentoring session D: ‘Challenging Conceptions on Culture’; this session demystifies stereotypes.

To deliver these sessions, Student Ambassadors were provided with a suite of materials developed by NICILT which included a PowerPoint presentation, worksheets and audio files for the listening activities. In total, 425 pupils across ten schools have to date benefitted from the class presentation and/or mentoring sessions. Feedback from teachers suggest that uptake from Year 10 to Year 11 has been positively impacted by the scheme.

## Travel outside of Northern Ireland

In terms of travel outside Northern Ireland, 95.3 per cent of responding pupils (down from 96.8 per cent in 2021) have travelled outside of Northern Ireland. The most popular destination was Spain, but there are notable decreases in travel to Great Britain and Ireland. Italy has increased in popularity, and this may corroborate the desire of many Year 9 pupils to learn Italian:



“  
**Language Trends Northern Ireland research has consistently shown that a majority of young people enjoy learning languages at Key Stage 3.**

Almost all pupils said that they travelled with their parents/carers, and 13 per cent of pupils reported having been on a school trip (down from 25 per cent in 2021). The evident decrease in pupils who have taken part in a school trip, together with a decrease in travel to Great Britain and Ireland, is perhaps due to a direct outworking of the Covid-19 restrictions on travel.

**Languages at Key Stage 4**

Until 2004 the study of a Modern Language to age 16 was compulsory; the only exception being a small number of pupils who were disapplied on grounds of ability. The current Northern Ireland Curriculum provides pupils with the *opportunity* to continue with a language beyond age 14. A minority of schools (11.5%) retain compulsion as part of their school’s curriculum policy, though this practice is now the exception and is difficult to retain when faced with pupil and parent/ carer choice.

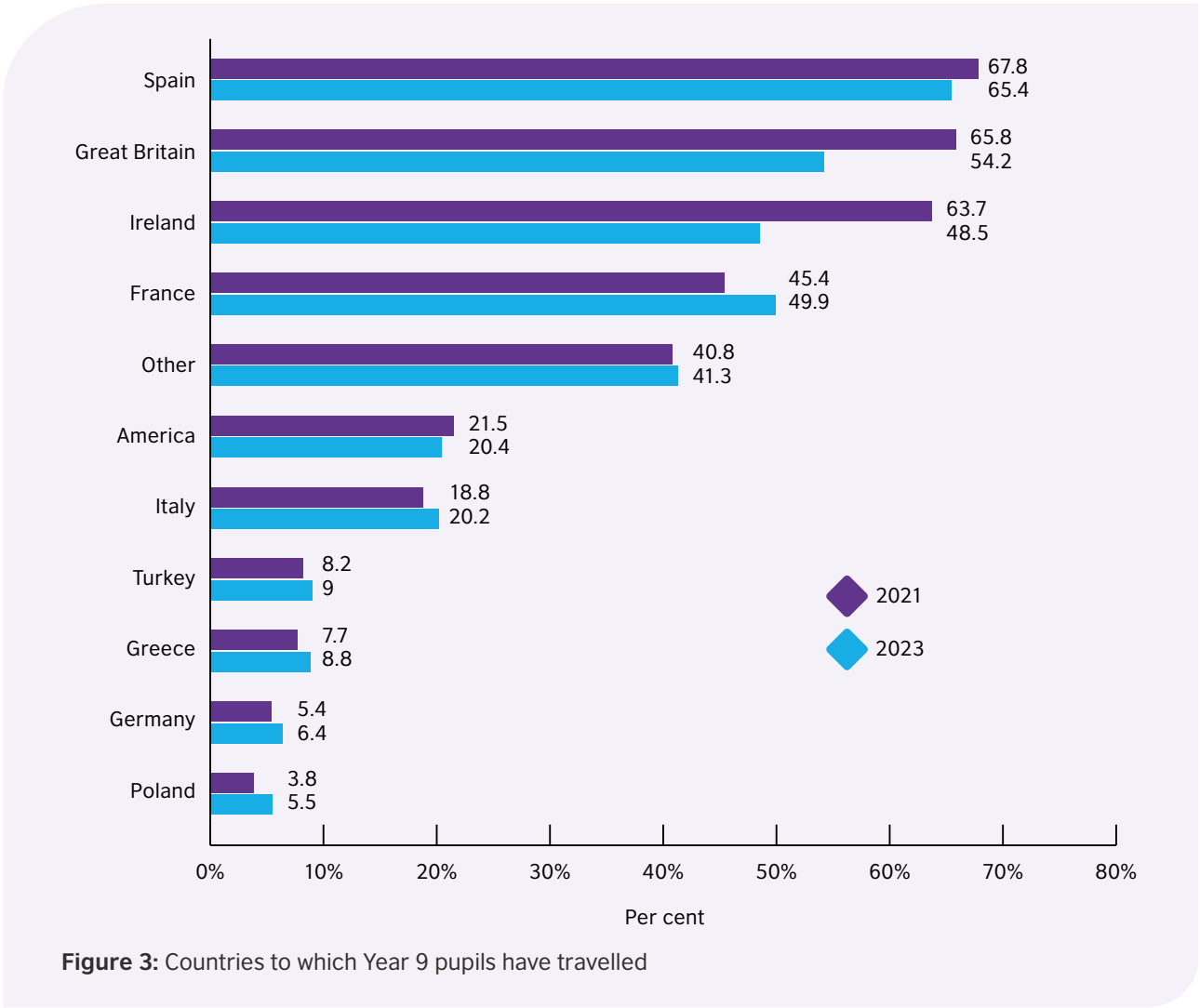
We asked teachers what percentage of their current Year 11 are learning a language for GCSE or alternative Level 2 qualification (e.g. OCN Level 2 in Modern

Languages). On average, 36 per cent of young people in Year 11 in Northern Ireland are learning a language. In the grammar sector, teachers estimate 75 per cent of their Year 11s are learning a language (up from 65 per cent in Language Trends NI 2021), whereas in secondary schools the figure is 16 per cent (down from 23 per cent in 2021); further, 11 responding secondary schools reported having no pupils in Year 11 Modern Languages (compared to four schools with no Year 11 language classes in 2021).

Grammar schools continue to be most likely to report stable numbers for GCSE languages, whereas non-grammar schools are most likely to report declining numbers, but data suggest that the divide is widening. More nuanced statistical modelling based on the latest School Census, similar to the approach taken by Henderson and Carruthers (2021) with the 2018 School Census, would be required to corroborate this finding.

In both Language Trends Northern Ireland 2021 and 2023, teachers were asked to think about the uptake of a language at Key Stage 4 over the past three years:

“**In the grammar sector, teachers estimate 75 per cent of their Year 11s are learning a language (up from 65 per cent in Language Trends NI 2021).**”

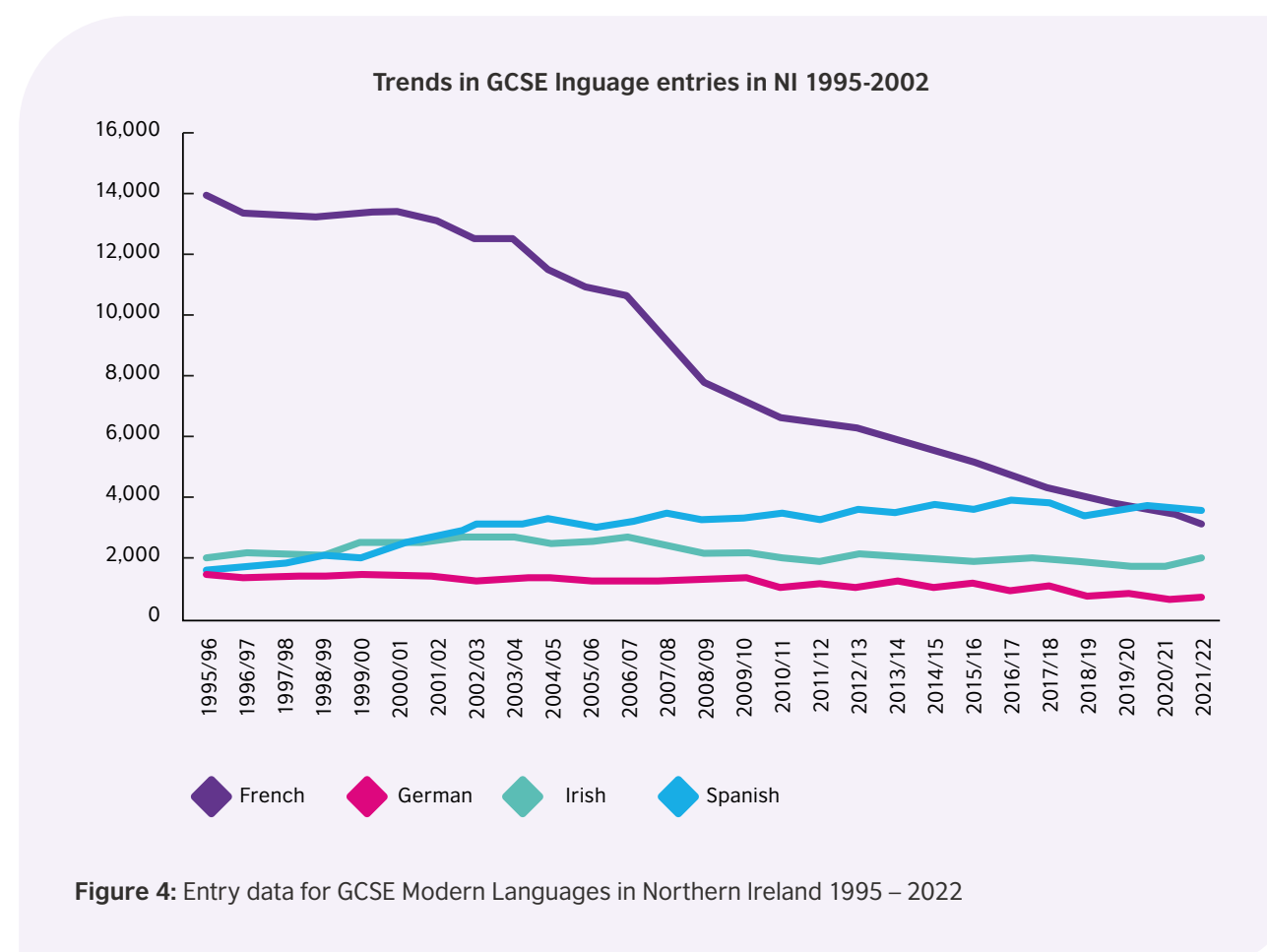


|                                                              | 2018-2021 (109 responses) | 2020-2023 (97 responses) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Fewer pupils now take a language at Key Stage 4              | 45%                       | 40%                      |
| Similar numbers to before                                    | 21%                       | 25%                      |
| No clear trend: numbers fluctuate                            | 12%                       | 11%                      |
| More pupils now take a language at Key Stage 4               | 8%                        | 9%                       |
| Languages are still compulsory for all pupils at Key Stage 4 | 8%                        | 9%                       |
| Other                                                        | 6%                        | 6%                       |

**Table 5:** Teachers’ perceptions of KS4 uptake over the period 2018-2021 and 2020-2023

The data demonstrate a positive change in language trends which suggests that the decline in language learning seems to be plateauing.

### Official data on GCSE entries over time



**“The data demonstrate a positive change in language trends which suggests that the decline in language learning seems to be plateauing.”**

It must be borne in mind that figure 4 does not account for fluctuations in pupil enrolment and is a reflection of entries, not pupil numbers; consequently, dual or triple linguists are conflated in the data.

Figure 4 shows that Spanish overtook French as the most popular GCSE language in Northern Ireland in summer 2021. The gap has widened in summer 2022. This is particularly interesting as, up until 2021, French was always the most studied language at GCSE. French had 13,099 entries in 2002 and 3,151 in 2022; a decline of some 76 per cent. German had 1,390 entries in 2002 and 706 in 2022; a decline of almost 50 per cent. Attracting 1,980 entries in 2022, Irish has been relatively stable from a peak of 2,748 candidates in 2007. The growth in Spanish in no way compensates for the significant decline in French over the past twenty years. However, it is worthwhile noting that figures seem to be stabilising across the languages.

The resulting data set suggests that a handful of non-selective schools have recently stopped teaching French entirely in order to concentrate on Spanish. One teacher commented:

“Our school is phasing French out. All year 8 pupils have been learning Spanish instead of French since Sept 2022. Year 9 and 10 are continuing their studies in French. French will be offered at KS4 for these two year groups, but if there are less than 4 pupils opting for GCSE French it will not run. Presently there are no pupils studying GCSE French as only three pupils opted for French in year 11 in the past two years.”

Another teacher commented:

“Pupils choose whether to take on French for GCSE and it is not a popular subject as it is up against Home Economics and IT in the timetabling block.”

Thus, while pupils may be offered a choice of studying a language at GCSE, it is clear that this choice does not necessarily lead to delivery as barriers such as (i) low pupil numbers, and (ii) timetabling restrictions mean that GCSE languages may not run. The lack of clear progression pathways through the school system for language learners is a negative consequence of the flexible Northern Ireland Curriculum and associated Entitlement Framework.<sup>8</sup>

Twenty-six per cent of responding teachers told us that lower prior attaining pupils are actively discouraged from choosing a language for GCSE. One teacher from a non-selective school stated that:

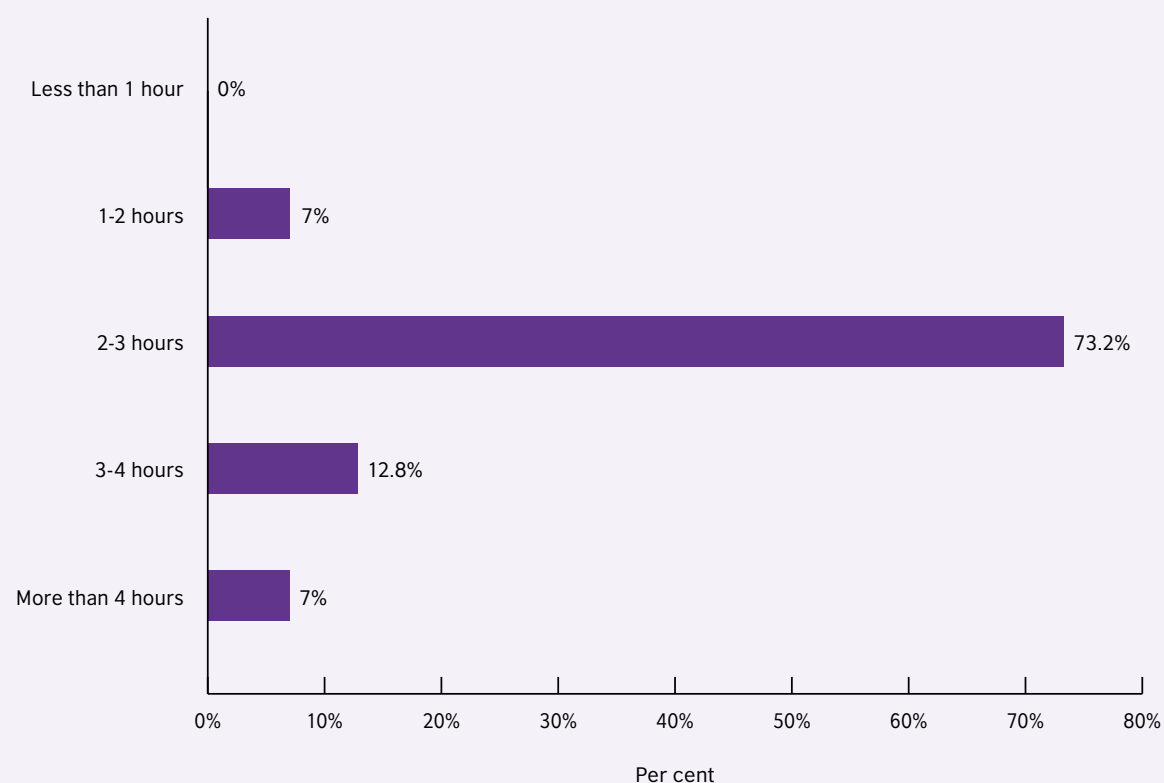
“Four exams at GCSE in a language is just off putting for our pupils. They find the content very heavy. If only the very capable choose GCSE language, our numbers are too small. If pupils choose it because they enjoy it, our results suffer.”



<sup>8</sup> The Entitlement Framework dictates the number and range of courses a school should offer at KS4 and Post-16. For further information, please follow the link: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/entitlement-framework>.



## Time for languages at Key Stage 4



**Figure 5:** Time for languages at Key Stage 4

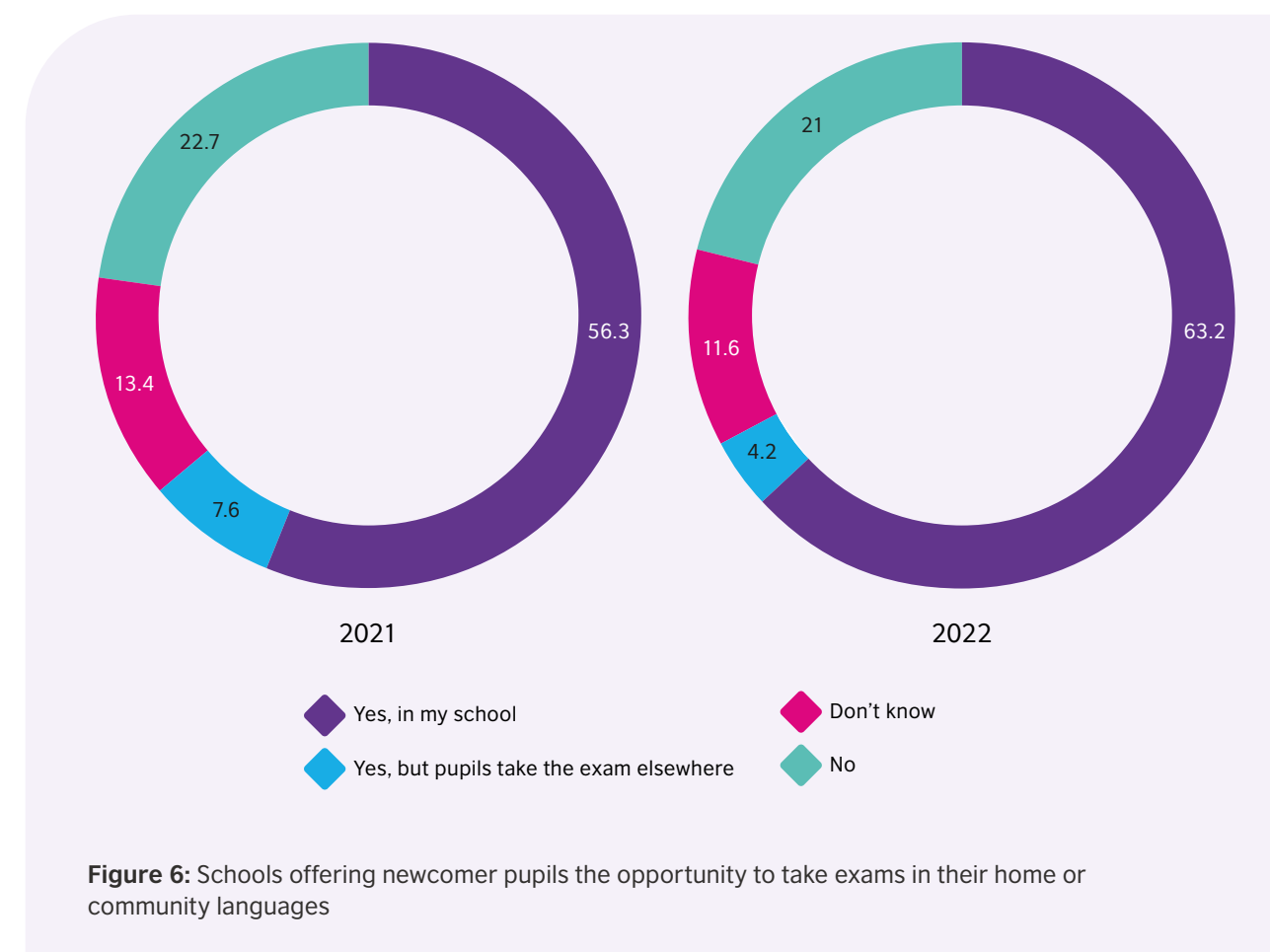
Teachers would welcome better resourcing to help them deliver GCSE specifications. One teacher commented:

“Streamlined resources which could be tailored to suit the individual needs of each school (e.g. time available to deliver the course content, resources available) would improve language learning. Access to pre-prepared, engaging KS3 and KS4 programmes with resources would be greatly beneficial. This would address the issue of teacher workload in relation to lesson planning and the delivery of content. [...] Greater KS3 and KS4 opportunities for pupils to take part in language-based extra-curricular activities would help to raise the profile of languages.”

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/newcomers>.

## Newcomer pupils at Key Stage 4

The term ‘newcomer’ is used to refer to a pupil who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher,<sup>9</sup> whether that is English or Irish. It does not refer to indigenous pupils who choose to attend an Irish medium school. All labels are of course unhelpful, and it is perhaps timely to consider changing how multilingual pupils are labelled. A growing number of schools offered newcomer pupils the option to take language qualifications at GCSE in their home / community language in 2023, reflecting a positive increase in the accreditation of plurilingual diversity. Publicly available data from the Joint Council for Qualifications



**Figure 6:** Schools offering newcomer pupils the opportunity to take exams in their home or community languages

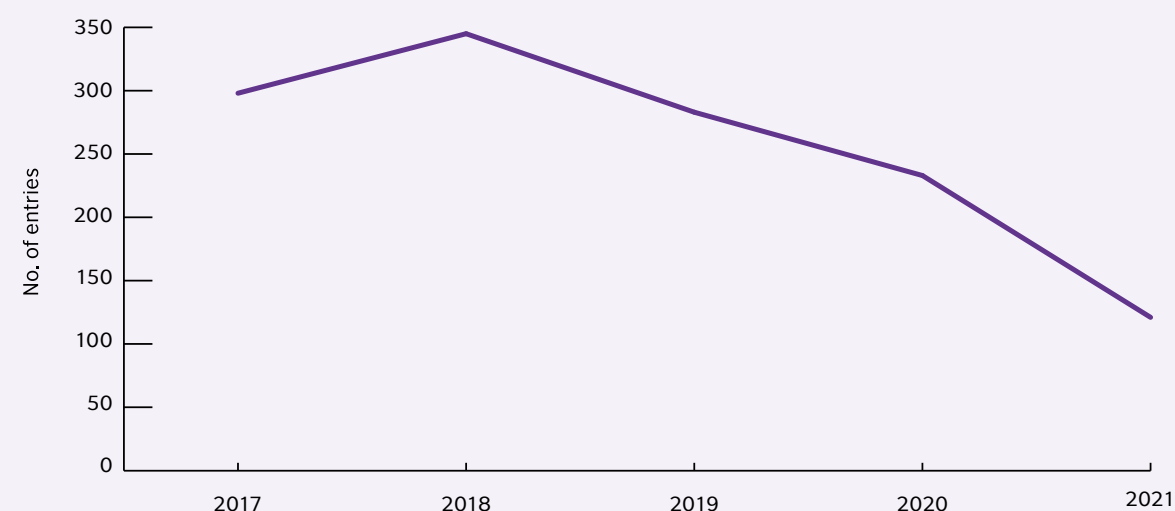
(JCQ) for languages other than the ‘big four’ of French, German, Irish and Spanish shows a sharp decline during the pandemic. Language Trends NI does not ascertain the extent of language learning in community settings or supplementary ‘Saturday’ schools; many families keep their home languages alive through such worthwhile initiatives. Despite the positive data that show an increasing number of schools offer newcomer pupils the option to take language qualifications at GCSE level in their home / community language in 2023, the data also reveal that many of these pupils have been unable to receive certification for their efforts during the pandemic. This sharp decline is shown in figure 7, but data for 2022 are unavailable due to changes in the way JCQ reports entry statistics.

In positive news, teachers commented that:

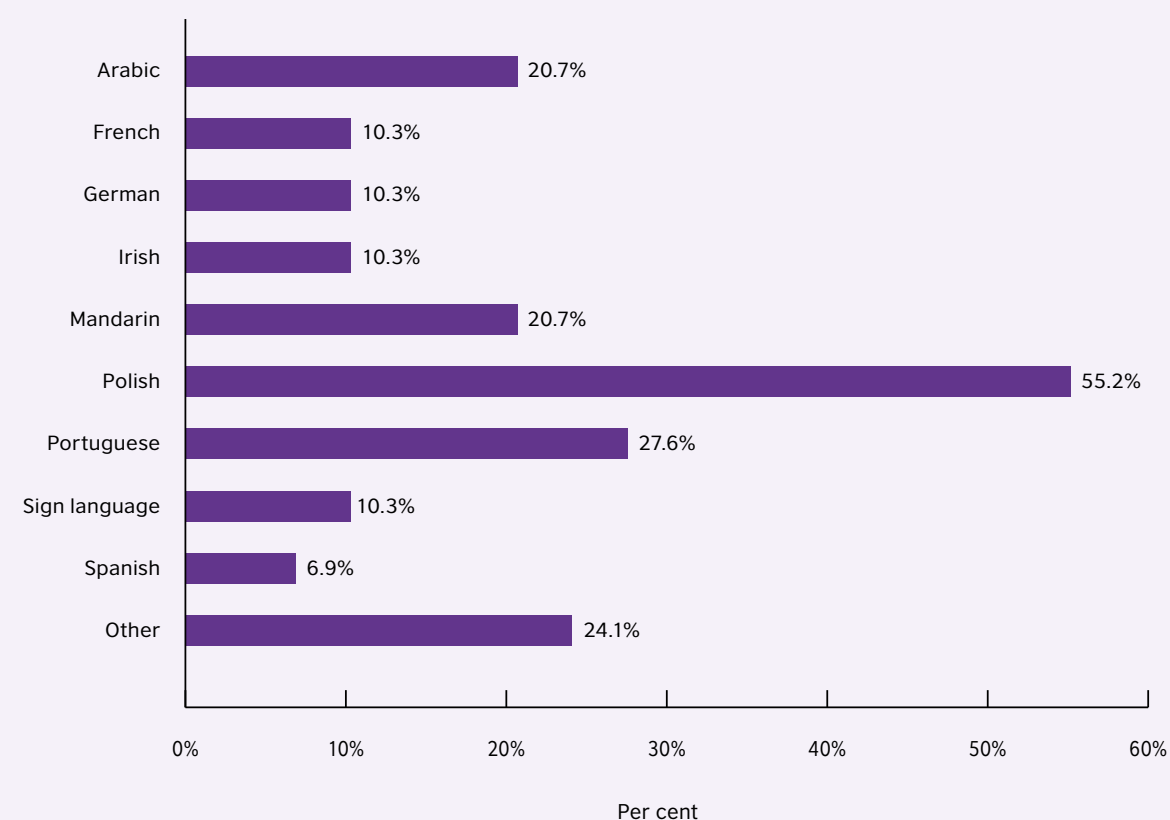
“Newcomers are given the opportunity to sit a GCSE in their home language - currently offering Polish, Portuguese and Russian. Cohort of 28 pupils studying Portuguese this year which is fantastic!”

“We have a high percentage of newcomers who benefit us as language teachers as there is an appreciation of the value of multilingualism across the school.”

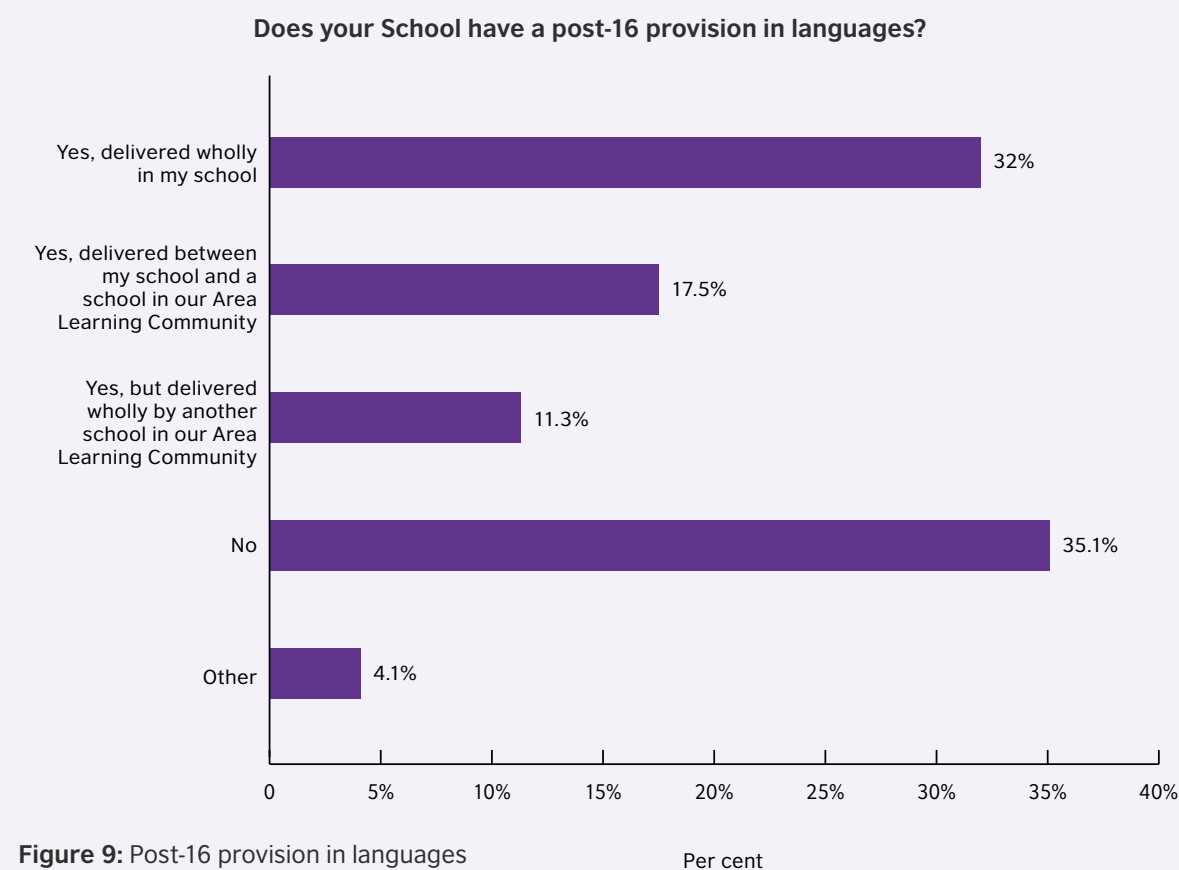
In 2021/2022, 18,400 newcomer pupils accounted for 5.2 per cent of the Northern Ireland school population. This figure has risen by over 4,400 pupils since 2016/2017. In 2021/2022, there were approximately 90 first languages spoken by pupils in schools. Polish and Lithuanian continue to be the most commonly spoken languages behind English; this has been the case for the last ten years. This rich tapestry of languages spoken in schools enriches all of our lives and should



**Figure 7:** Entries for Modern Languages other than French, German, Irish, Spanish and Welsh



**Figure 8:** Languages offered as extra-curricular or enrichment subjects in 29 responding schools



**Figure 9:** Post-16 provision in languages

be celebrated. There is a very strong case for the development of plurilingualism where we all use our linguistic knowledge to make connections within and between languages. In an increasingly multicultural society, a plurilingualistic approach to education better equips pupils for the global future of tomorrow by enhancing their communication and interpersonal skills, expanding their career pathways and enhancing their socio-cultural awareness.

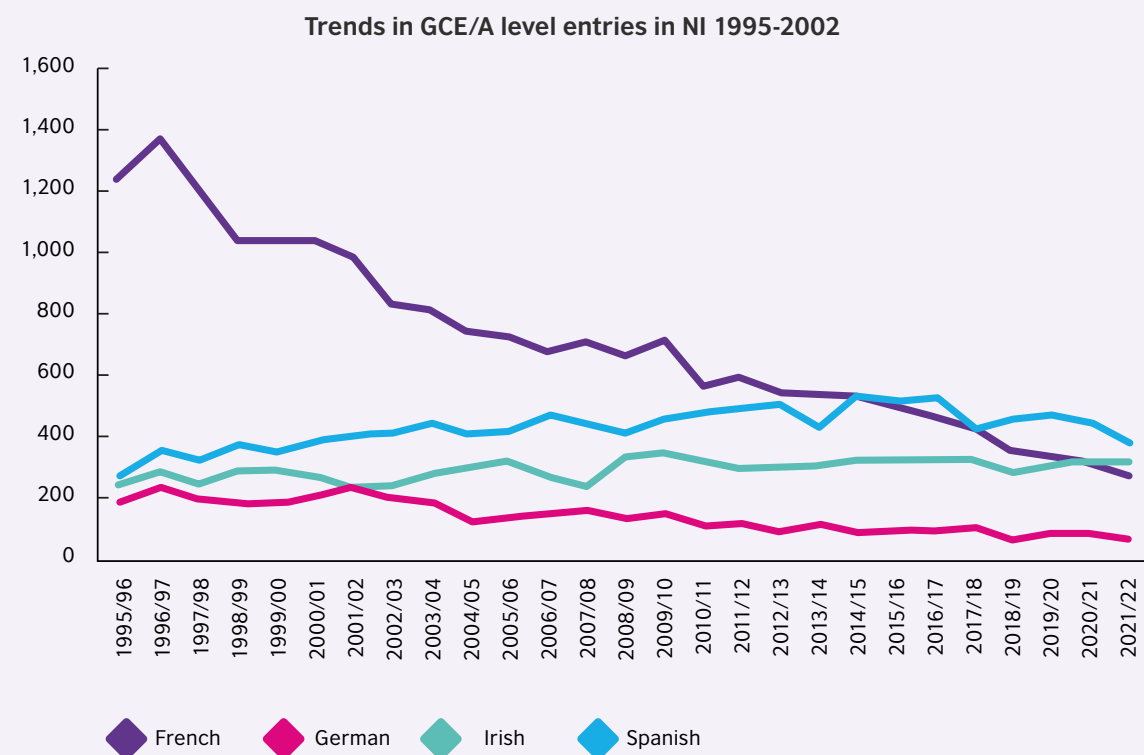
We also asked teachers if any of their Key Stage 4 pupils are currently learning any of the following languages as extra-curricular or enrichment subjects, either in their school or in their Area Learning Community (ALC):<sup>10</sup>

Although only 29 schools responded to this question, it is positive to see such a range of languages being taught and learned above and beyond the demands of the main curriculum.

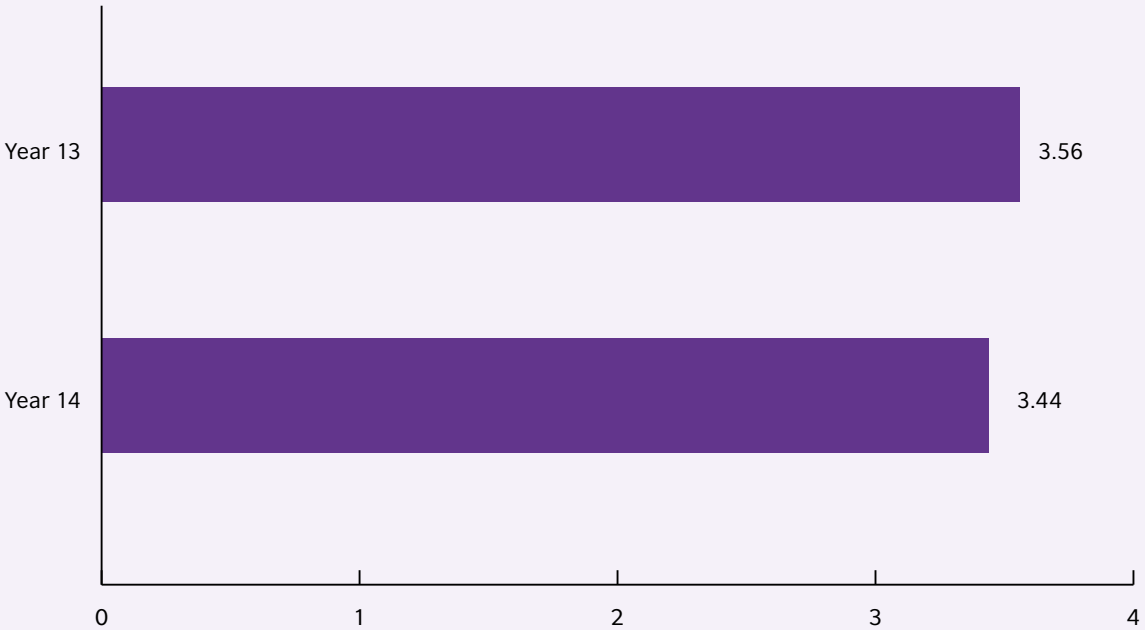
## Languages post-16

Figure 9 shows that A-level languages are available to pupils in 60.8 per cent of responding schools, either in-house or through co-operation on an ALC basis. Of those schools which do not offer access to A-level languages, the vast majority are 11-14<sup>11</sup> or 11-16 schools.

<sup>10</sup> Area Learning Communities provide a mechanism within which schools come together to plan the curriculum they offer on an area basis.  
<sup>11</sup> 11-14 schools make up part of the Dickson Plan which operates in some post primary schools within the Controlled Sector in the Craigavon Area. Children transfer at age 11 years from Primary School to a Controlled Junior High School. At the end of Key Stage 3 pupils then transfer to a Senior High School within the Craigavon Area or to another post primary school outside the Dickson Plan to complete their compulsory education in Key Stage 4.



**Figure 10:** Entry data for A-level Modern Languages in Northern Ireland 1995 – 2022



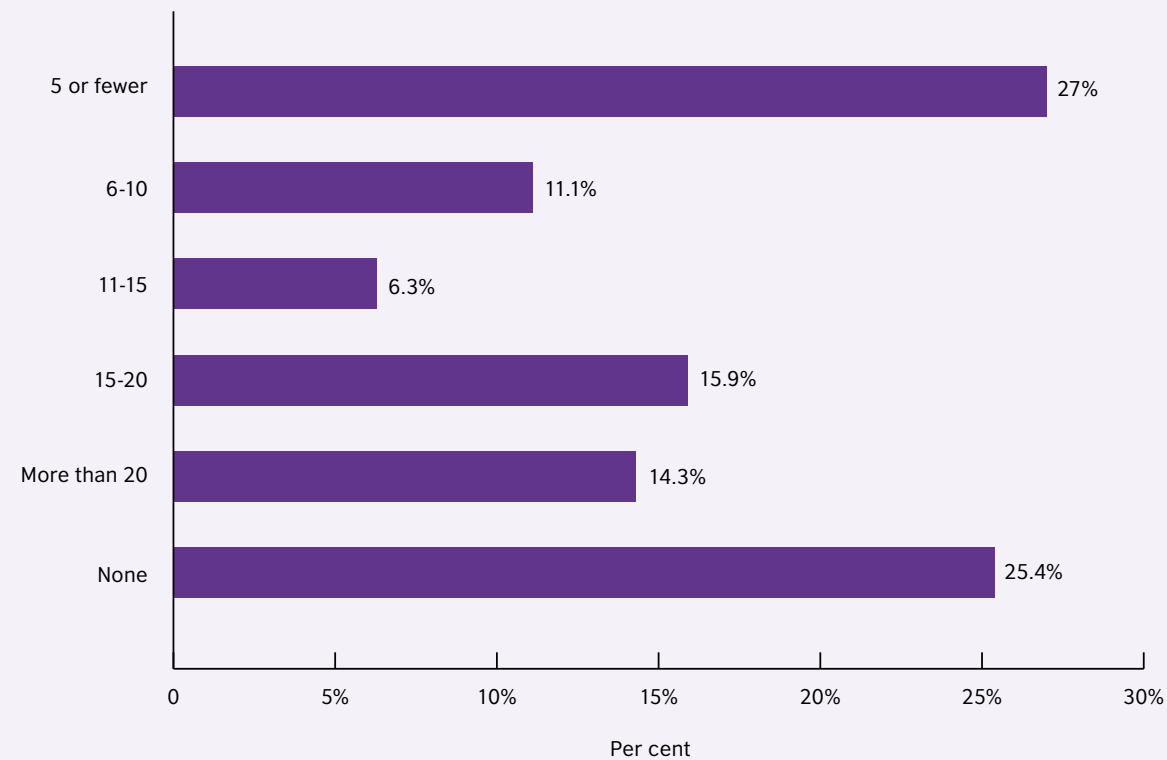
**Figure 11:** Average class sizes for A-level languages

Figure 10 shows that, as predicted in Language Trends NI 2021, Irish has overtaken French to be the second most popular A-level language in Northern Ireland. Spanish has had the highest number of pupil enrolments since Summer 2016, when it superseded French, which previously held the highest number of pupil enrolments since A-levels started in the 1950s. In Summer 2022, 72 pupils sat A-level German in Northern Ireland. However, in the year 2000, German attracted 190 pupils; the fall in entries may be more to do with the viability of small class sizes rather than any sudden disinterest in German speaking countries.



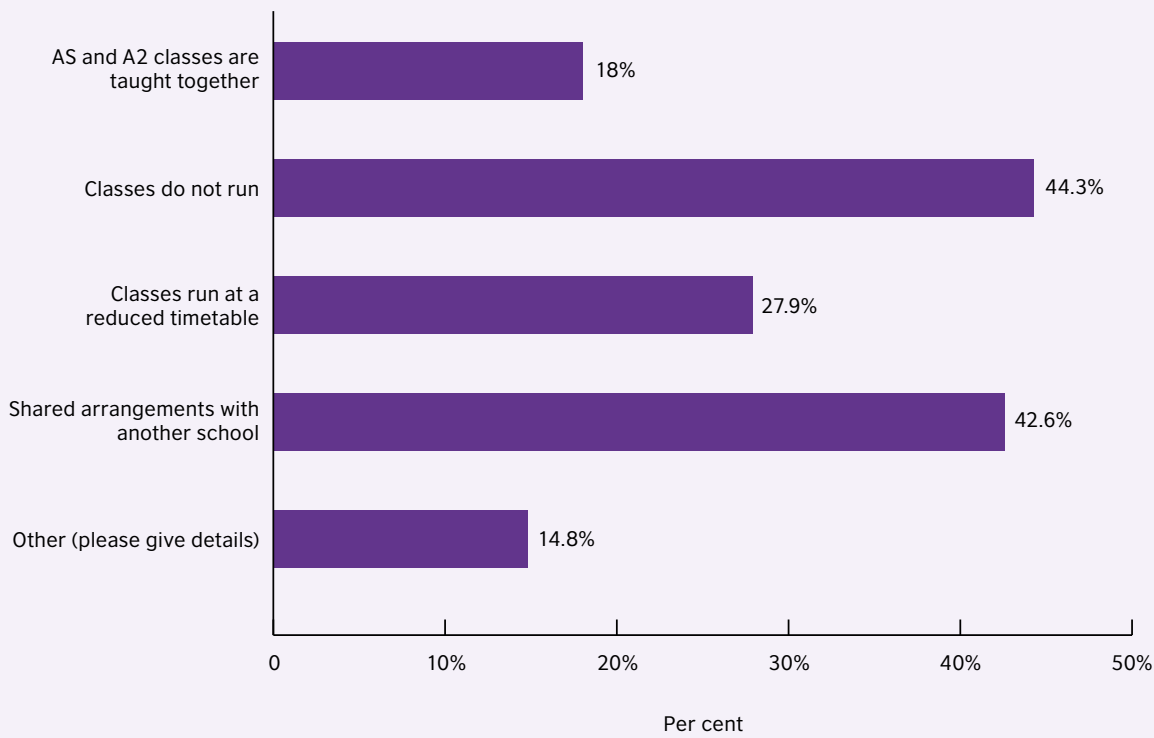
Figure 11 shows that A-level languages classes are on average very small with teachers reporting figures that amount to 4 pupils per class in Year 13 and 3 pupils per class in Year 14 (figures rounded). Figure 12 shows further detail on class sizes across NI. Twenty-five per cent of schools have no pupils in their A-level language classes.





**Figure 12:** Class sizes for A-level languages across Northern Ireland

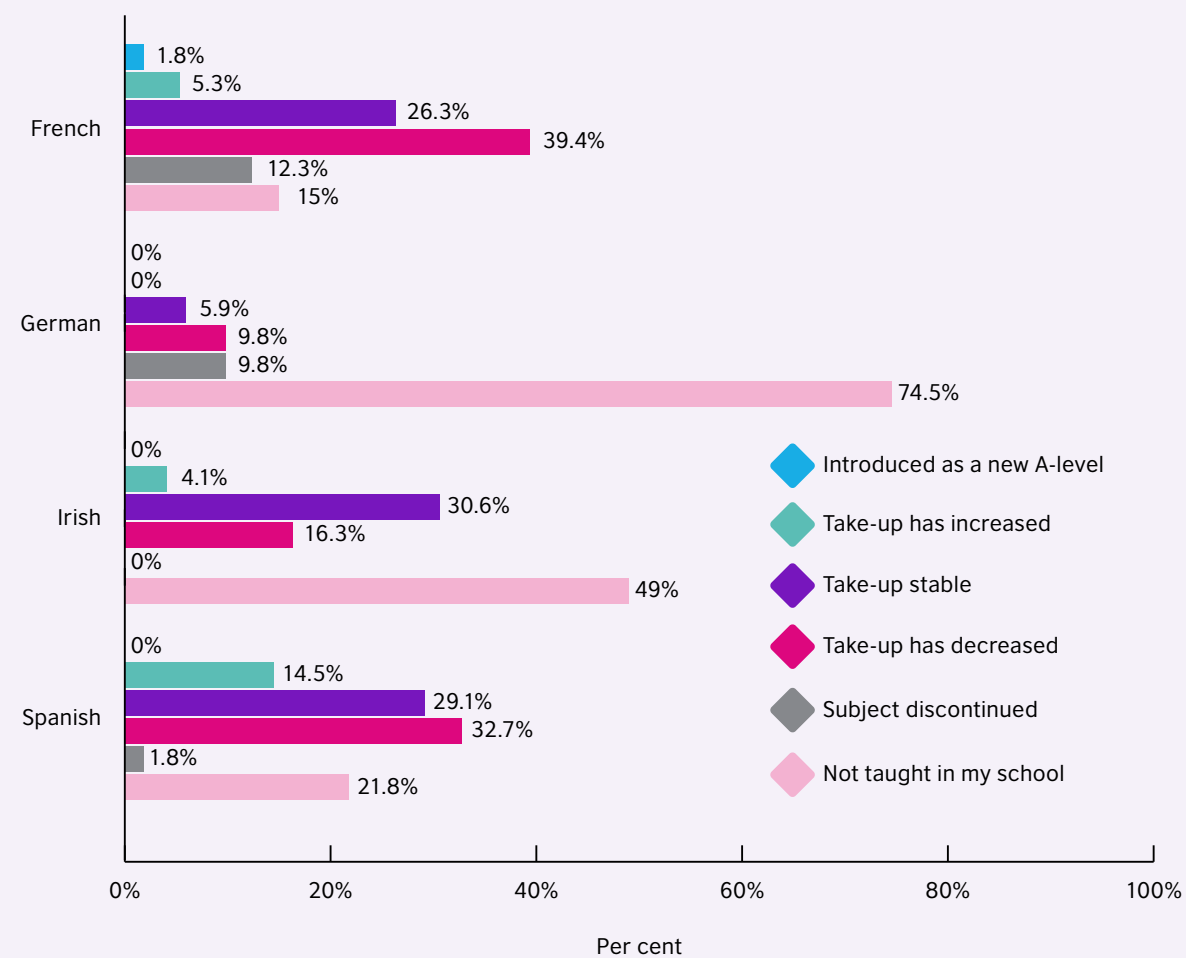
When a small number of pupils wish to study an A-level language, 18 per cent of schools (up from 13.3 per cent in 2021) report composite classes (i.e. teaching Year 13 [AS] and Year 14 [A2] classes together). This is something which the British Council does not see in Language Trends England and Wales data; while considerable research has been done on composite classes at primary level, there has been little empirical evidence of the negative or positive impacts of composite classes in A-level Modern Languages. Figure 13 also shows that A-level classes are not viable in 44.3 per cent of schools when not enough pupils select the respective subject. While this figure has increased from 2019, at which time 37 per cent of schools did not schedule classes, the data remain consistent with that of 2021 (43.4 per cent). Classes scheduled with a reduced timetable, and thus potentially not meeting the guided learning hours, is another line for future research enquiry.



**Figure 13:** Arrangements when only a few pupils wish to study a language post-16

The minimum number of pupils required for an A-level language class to be timetabled varies from school to school. The highest number in the resulting data set is ten pupils, but some schools report being allowed to teach A-level classes with two pupils. There is no consistent approach from school to school.

Of those schools which offer languages post-16, the following changes over the past three years are noted in Figure 14.



**Figure 14:** Head of Departments' views on changes in uptake and provision in A-level Modern Languages over the past three years

French and German have been discontinued in 12.3 per cent and 9.8 per cent of responding schools respectively, indicating a downward trend in languages offered at post-16 level; however, Spanish take-up is increasing in 14.5 per cent of responding schools which offer Spanish, reflecting the A-level data for England, Northern Ireland and Wales. One school reports introducing a new A-level language (French), while take-up for French, Irish and Spanish is stable in a third of schools.

In commenting on changes in take-up and provision at A-level, teachers noted that:

“Less numbers at GCSE means less at A-level. Covid really decreased numbers taking languages at GCSE as pupils just did not meet the required level of proficiency for A-level even having been successful at GCSE (e.g. oral component omitted in 2021).”

“The A-level Modern Languages exams are seen as very difficult. Promotion of STEM subjects is almost evangelical.”

“The Modern Languages A-Level specification with 24 topic areas is endless! AS pupils often begin with four subjects in order to decide a definite three to study. AS specification requires that a huge amount of grammar be covered, pupils are overwhelmed by this. My AS French class started with six pupils and four [pupils] dropped by end of October as they realised it was too much work compared to the specification of their other three subjects (ranging from Politics, History, English, Chemistry and RE). The current AS Pupils had limited oral practice throughout GCSE and massive gaps remain in grammar knowledge due to online teaching at GCSE and they are struggling!”

## Modern Language Assistants

Modern Language Assistants are speakers of French, German, Irish, Italian, Mandarin Chinese and Spanish who can help pupils in Northern Ireland build their cultural capital by developing their linguistic and cross-cultural skills. A real-life language speaker is an additional resource in the classroom who provides context to language learning, talks about their experiences in their home culture and inspires pupils to develop their ability to communicate their own world views.

We asked schools if they currently employ a language assistant, either through the British Council or directly. It is important to bear in mind that many schools will share a language assistant with another school, so the number of schools employing a language assistant does not necessarily equate to a headcount of language assistants in Northern Ireland. Thirteen responding schools told us that they employ their language assistant through the British Council, with the balance entering into private arrangements. Figures are broadly comparable with 2021 figures, with a notable decrease in the number of French and Irish language assistants:

|          | 2021                   | 2023    |
|----------|------------------------|---------|
| Arabic   | (n <sup>12</sup> =109) | (n=97)  |
| French   | *                      | Unknown |
| German   | 54                     | 40      |
| Irish    | 15                     | 11      |
| Mandarin | 22                     | 13      |
| Polish   | *                      | 8       |
| Spanish  | *                      | Unknown |
|          | 47                     | 40      |

**Table 6:** Number of schools in Language Trends NI 2023 survey employing language assistants (\*= fewer than five. Exact number hidden to protect participating schools' identities)

12 Here and throughout, “n=” refers to the number of responding schools.

Teachers commented:

“Having a language assistant is so important for all year groups and works well in our school.”

“The language assistant is a lifeline for me. The injection of fresh ideas and cultural insight in rural Northern Ireland is priceless.”

International dimension in schools

We know from the last iteration of Language Trends Northern Ireland that the Covid-19 pandemic had an adverse impact on the international dimension of many schools. Almost a quarter of teachers told us that they have been able to (re)start planning for international school visits and trips or work collaboratively with schools from other countries. Whilst most indicators have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, there has been an increase in schools that are availing of British Council international opportunities. A comparison of data from 2021 and 2023 is presented in figure 15.

In those schools where international trips have not (re) started since the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the biggest obstacles reported is teacher workload. Ten teachers commented on workload, while others highlighted the issue of economic costs. The following comments summarise these obstacles:

“Due to time constraints, cost of living crisis and the fact that the majority of pupils are not in a position to fund a trip abroad and many living in poverty, trips abroad are simply not possible. We are trying to maintain virtual links with schools in France and Spain as well as pen pal projects.”

“Our workload is too high. Plus, our Board of Governors want us to include cover costs for sub teacher into cost for parents.”

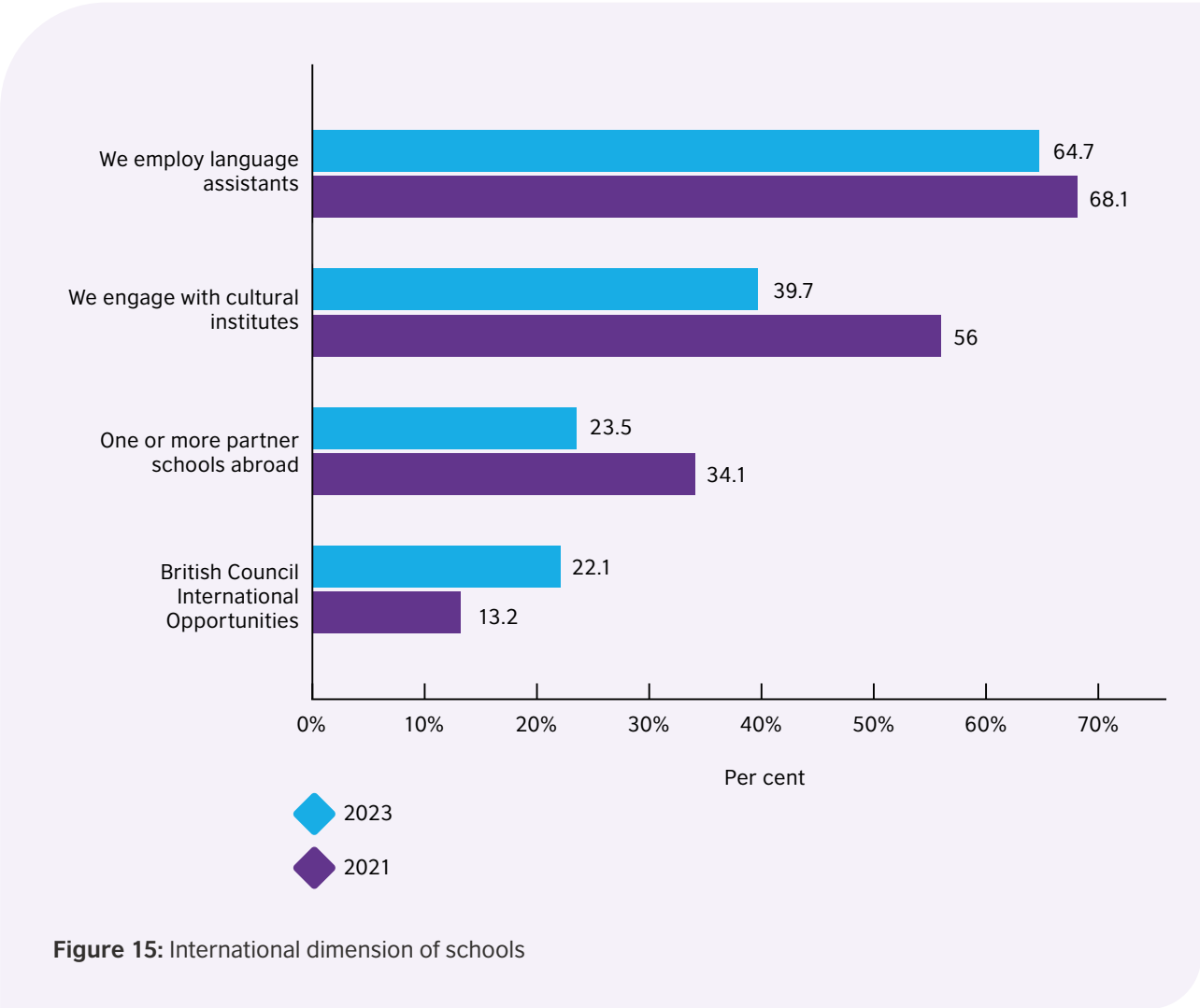
Barriers to uptake at all levels

When asked which challenges teachers see as most pressing to providing a high-quality language learning experience, teachers responded with the following top three:

- 1. The nature and content of external exams (38.5 per cent, up from 35.6 per cent in 2021)
- 2. The way external exams are marked and graded (27.1 per cent, up from 26.1 per cent in 2021)
- 3. Pupils do not see the relevance of languages for their future career (16.1 per cent)

*The nature and content of external exams has consistently been the biggest barrier to uptake reported in Language Trends NI 2019, 2021 and 2023.*

The majority of candidates sitting GCSE and A-level examinations in French, German and Spanish, and all candidates sitting Irish, do so with the local awarding body CCEA. In England from September 2024 for awarding in Summer 2026, the linguistic content of GCSEs in French, German and Spanish will focus on the most commonly occurring vocabulary of each language, with 1,700 words at Higher Tier and 1,200 words at Foundation Tier. Pupils will be expected to know and use the specified linguistic content (i.e., vocabulary and grammar) receptively and productively in the oral and written modalities. However, implementing this new approach, which uses vocabulary frequency to determine word lists, has been criticised from many subject associations, practising teachers, and academics such as Milton (2022) and Woore et al. (2022). There are currently no plans to adopt this approach in languages or levels other than GCSE French, German and Spanish in England. At the time of writing, the author is not aware of any plans for CCEA to revise their GCSEs in Modern Languages and it is certain that the linguistic content of a GCSE in French, German or Spanish from an awarding body in England in summer 2026 will be different to that awarded by CCEA.





# Languages in primary schools

Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland where pupils at primary school do not have an entitlement to learn a language as part of the curriculum. Northern Ireland currently has 794 primary schools (down through rural school mergers and closures from 803 in 2021). Twenty-five per cent of pupils in primary schools are entitled to free school meals (down from 29 per cent in 2021/2022).

“Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland where pupils at primary school do not have an entitlement to learn a language as part of the curriculum.

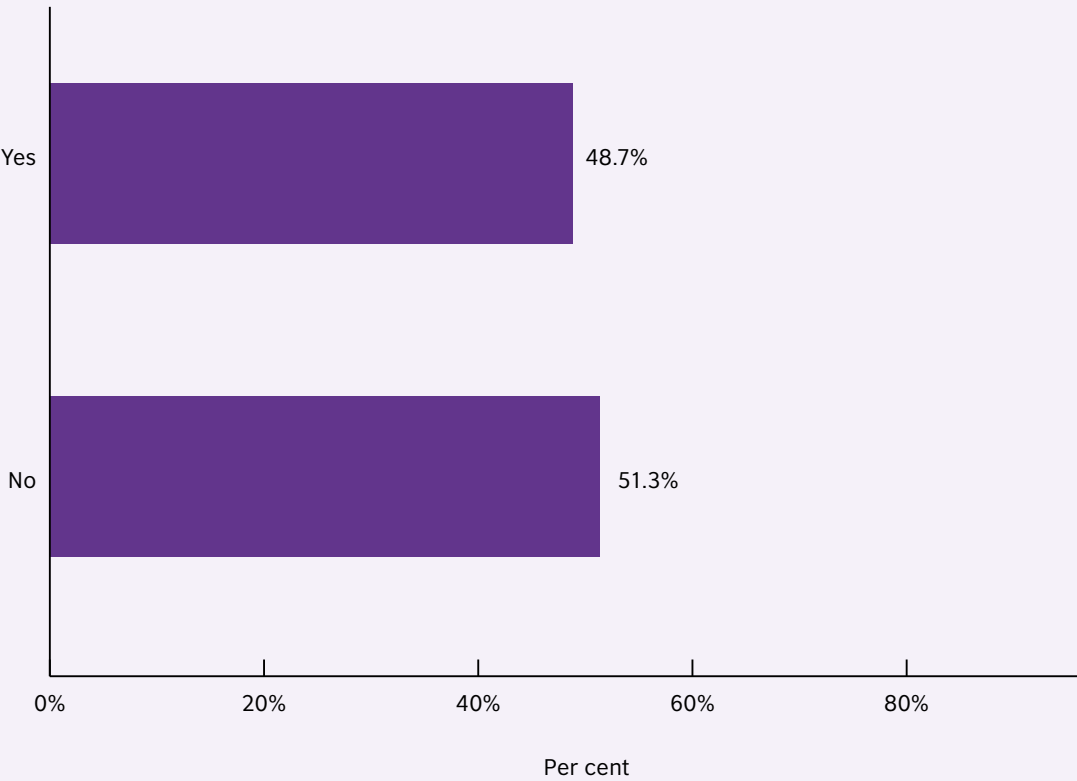
In the majority of schools, English is the medium of instruction, but the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement (1998) conferred a duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education. The Irish-medium education (IME) sector is growing: in the school year 2021/2022, there were 28 Irish-medium primary schools and seven primary schools with an Irish-medium unit, in which 4,661 pupils learned through Irish. By comparison, in 2018/2019, there were 4,351 pupils and in 2005/2006 there were just 2,365 pupils learning through Irish.

The primary school questionnaire was sent to all publicly available school email accounts, advertised on social media and addressed to the school principal. The response rate was low (10.3 per cent, n=82 schools) and the data suggest that it was largely schools with a positive disposition to primary languages which chose to respond. Therefore, the data on primary languages need to be interpreted with caution.

Eighty-four per cent of responding primary schools think that languages should be statutory on the Key Stage 2 primary curriculum. Of those schools which do not think that a language should be statutory (n=13), five schools thought that languages should not even be an option at Key Stage 2.

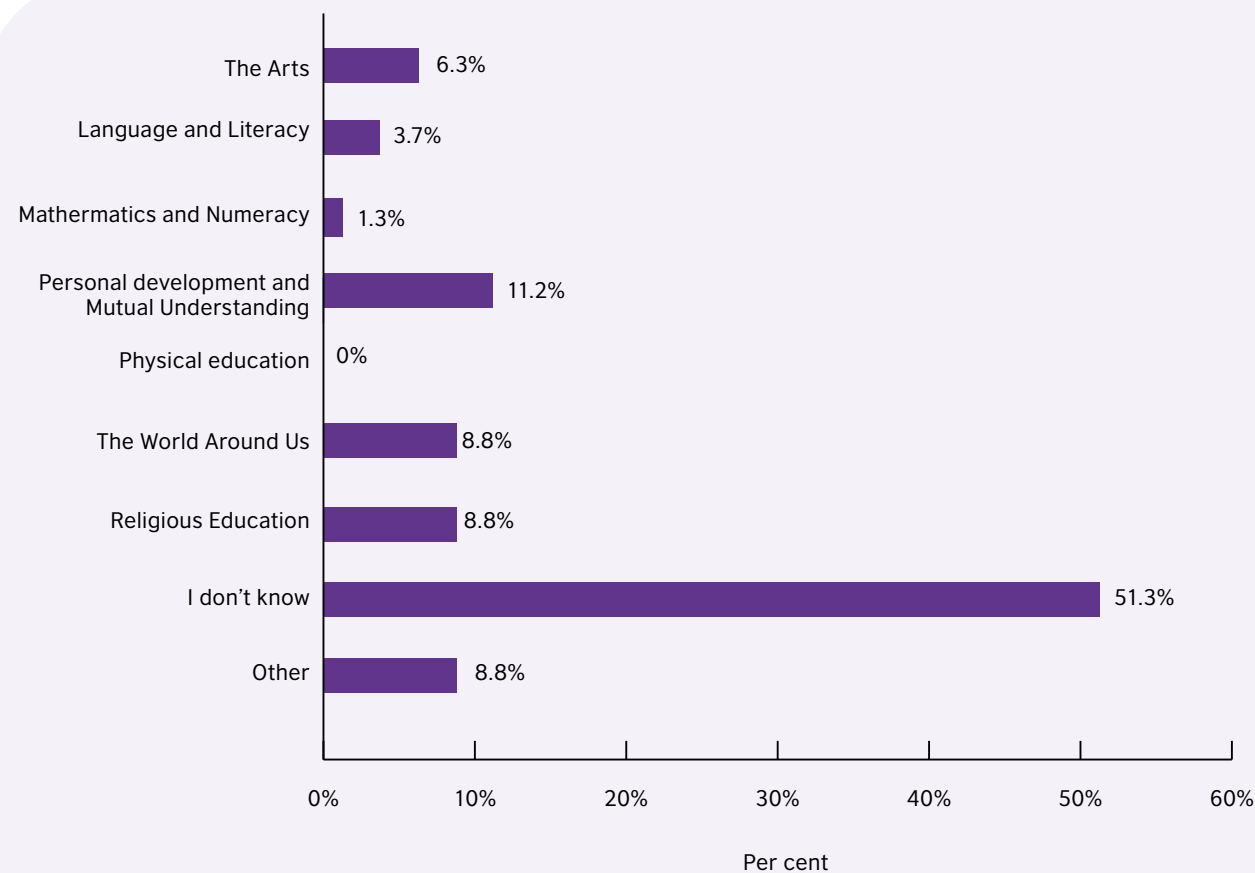
The positive wish of primary school principals for statutory primary languages provision contrasts with that of the 1,158 Year 9 pupils, 76 per cent of whom think languages should be offered at Key Stage 2, but not be statutory.

If languages were to become a statutory part of the Key Stage 2 curriculum the immediate questions are (i) who will teach languages in the primary school, and (ii) what area of the curriculum would have to be reduced to allow languages to come on to the curriculum? Figure 16 illustrates that just under half of responding schools have a member of staff with at least an A-level in a language and who could potentially coordinate language teaching in school:



**Figure 16:** Principals’ response to question ‘If language learning was to become a statutory part of the primary curriculum, do you currently have a member of teaching staff with appropriate language skills (e.g. A-level or above) to co-ordinate language teaching?’

In order to accommodate Modern Languages on the primary curriculum in Ireland, it is expected that time for religion will be cut from 2.5 hours per week to 2 hours (Government of Ireland, 2023), so that Modern Languages can be taught from the third class onwards (age 8-9). Primary principals were asked what area of the Northern Ireland Key Stage 2 curriculum could be cut to allow for the introduction of primary languages; figure 17 shows that many principals simply do not know where savings could be made.



**Figure 17:** Primary Principals' views on which area of the curriculum could be reduced to make way for Modern Languages

This suggests that if Modern Languages were to become statutory, time would need to be shaved off a number of areas of learning to make way for meaningful language teaching. Although the questions of Language Trends 2023 focussed on Modern Languages at Key Stage 2, principals were also asked if Modern Languages should be taught in the Foundation Stage and/or Key Stage One. Four out of five principals were supportive, with comments such as:

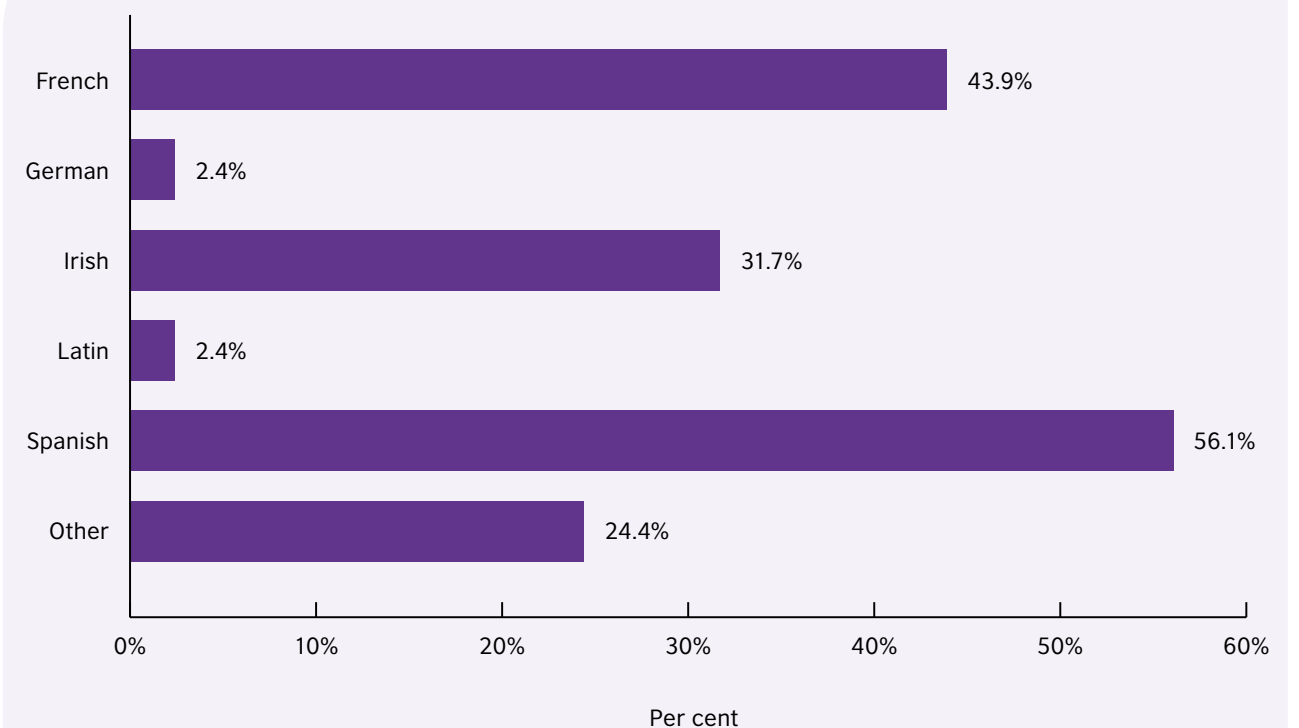
“Yes very much so. Having taught in Spain I have seen first-hand how young children can very easily pick up a second language. Teaching through songs and rhymes can be easily applied in the foundation stage.”

“Yes - the earlier the exposure to languages the better. Coming from a school with 22 languages and a third of pupils designated as newcomers this would show that we value language and culture.”

“Yes, there has to be some sort of progression from basic vocabulary in Foundation Stage /Key Stage 1 to more grammar/sentence based work in Key Stage 2 which could help prepare for post-primary transition. For too long, primary languages has been tokenistic vocabulary work in Key Stage 2.”

Those teachers who are not in favour of starting before Key Stage 2 commented:

“No, in our school we have a majority of pupils with a lower than average vocabulary in English. We put a



**Figure 18:** Languages taught in Key Stage 2

huge emphasis on Vocabulary and Speech development in our Foundation Stage and I'm not sure where the time would come from to introduce new languages.”

“No, I feel that upper key stage 2 would be more suited to adding an extra subject area into the curriculum. Children in this year group stay in class for an extra hour/day.”

## Positive trends – numbers are on the increase

Fifty-one per cent of primary schools who responded to the survey told us that they currently teach languages as part of the curriculum. A further 2.4 per cent of schools normally teach a language, but such classes are temporarily suspended due to Covid-19 related issues. This is a most welcome finding; the last iteration of Language Trends showed that languages had almost collapsed during the pandemic.

The main language taught in Key Stage 2 is Spanish, closely followed by French. Please note that some schools teach more than one language, so figure 18 does not add up to 100.

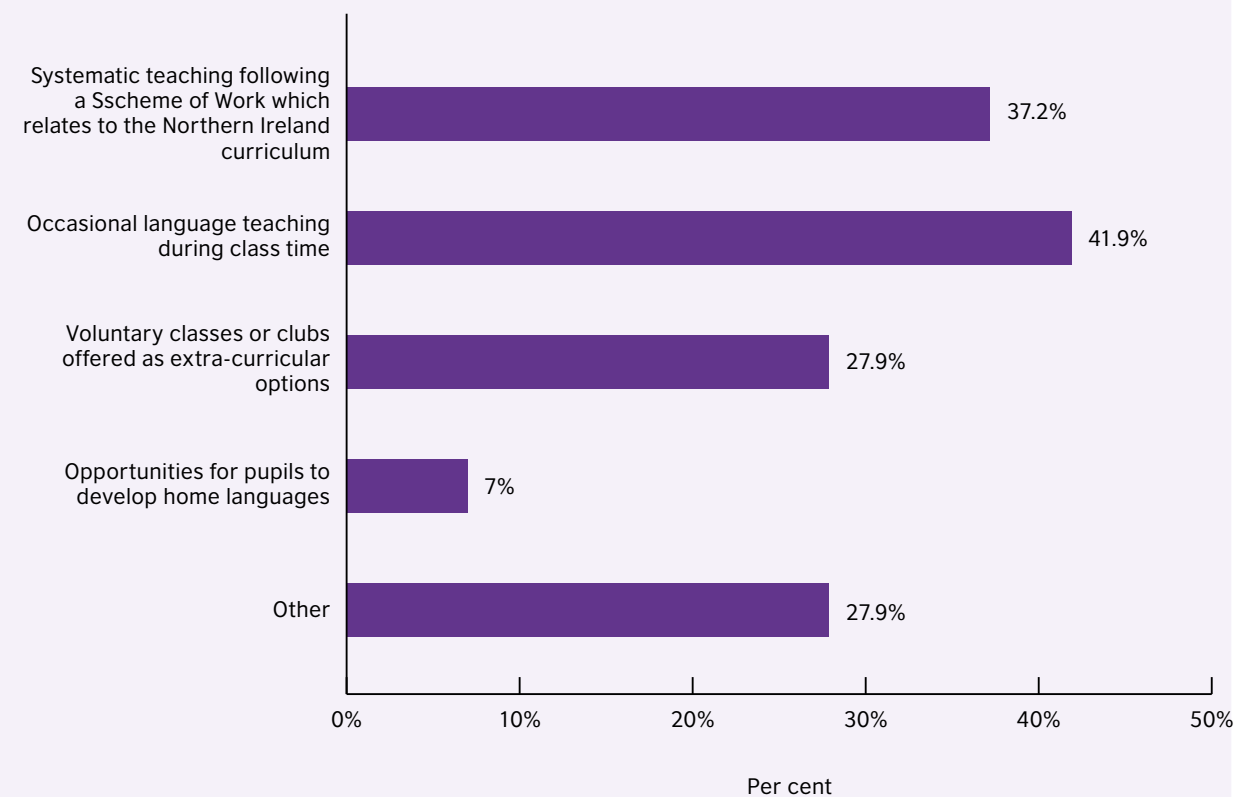


Figure 19: Language provision in primary schools

Over half of primary schools teaching languages which responded to the survey started over five years ago, with ten schools reporting that they started this year in 2022/2023. Opportunities for the development of pupils' home languages have marginally increased to 7%, up from 6.2% in the 2021 Language Trends NI survey (see figure 19). Any future primary strategy may wish to take account of the power of multi- and plurilingualism in order to shape provisions for inclusive language learning approaches that allow for the development of home languages.

Of those schools which do not currently teach primary languages, 20 have done so in the past five years. The three main reasons for ceasing to teach primary languages were: (i) lack of funding, (ii) lack of expertise within the school and (iii) lack of external support and/or teaching resources.

“**The main reasons for ceasing to teach primary languages were lack of funding, lack of expertise within the school and lack of external support and/or teaching resources.**”

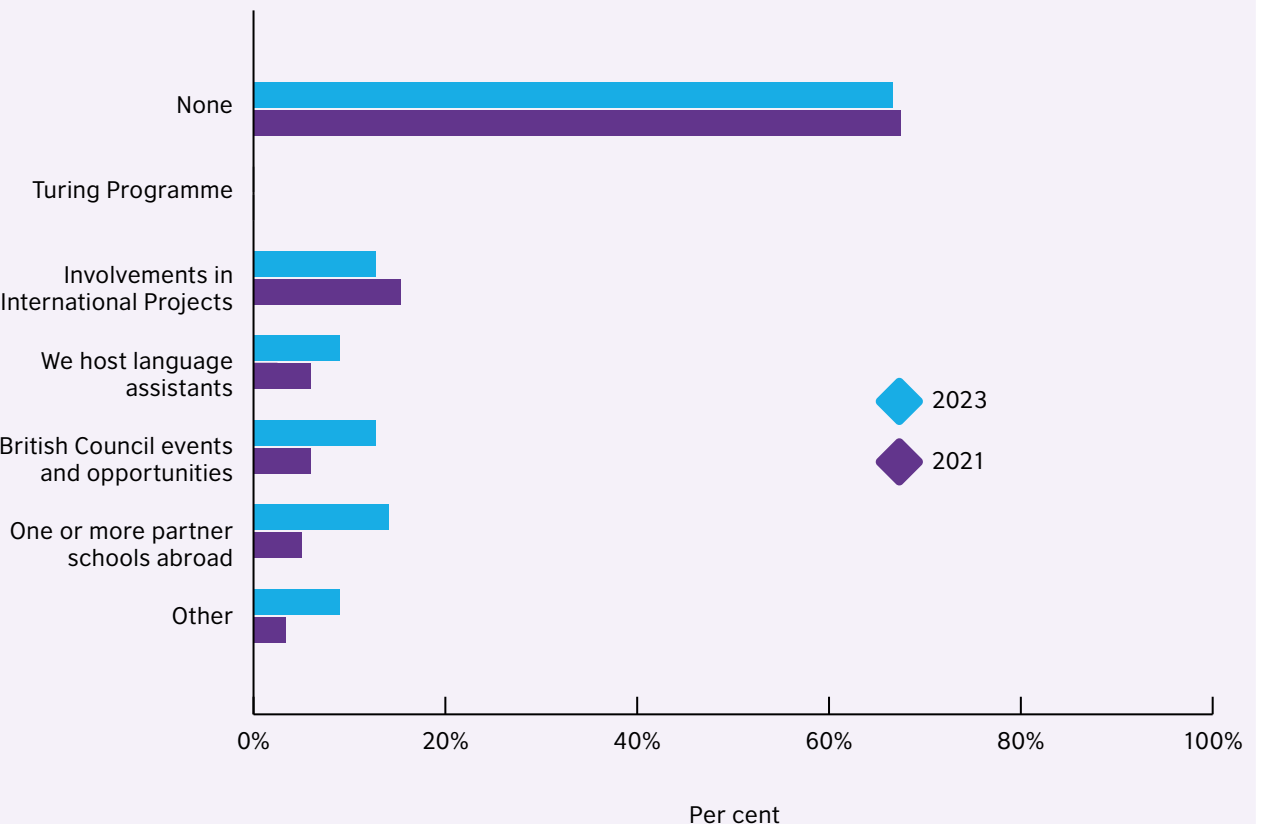


Figure 20: International engagement in primary schools

## International dimension

The international dimension refers to efforts to include international work as part of the curriculum and helping embed it within a school's culture. All 82 responding primary schools were asked about international engagement.

The overwhelming majority of primary schools continue to report that there are no opportunities for their staff and pupils to be involved in international activities. This is understandable given the Covid-19 pandemic, and it will be important that, as we grow back stronger, primary school children are afforded opportunities to consider the world beyond Northern Ireland. It is encouraging to see a growth in the percentage of responding primary schools hosting language assistants, engaging with British Council

events and opportunities and working with partner schools abroad. Of further note is that no primary school reported having accessed Turing funding, the UK government's programme to study and work abroad which replaced the Erasmus+ Scheme in the UK. This would seem to be a missed opportunity to avail of funding to develop international partnerships.

Teachers reported that their work in Modern Languages and the international dimension could be bolstered by funding and the following:

“The return of the primary languages programme would be a good starting point. This was a great opportunity and provide an excellent resource in schools. It gave the school the foundation to build on and helped build teachers confidence in teaching languages.”



“I am a relatively new Principal and, to my shame, I don’t have a second language. I would dearly love some advice on how I could go about providing these opportunities for my pupils and staff.”

“Resources, videos for pronunciation. We do ‘Language of the Month’ basic words/phrases in different languages through the year. We offer after school French and Spanish by teachers. All resources sourced by teachers which is time consuming. Children pick it up very quickly and enjoy it.”

The data collected evidence that there is much enthusiasm for primary languages and teachers, in general, would be willing to make way for it on the curriculum.





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# Conclusion

**Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023 confirms that young people are enthusiastic to learn languages in the early stages of post-primary education. Their enthusiasm tends to wane as they move through the Key Stages and invariably they cannot see the value of languages for their future career.**

The data collected and presented in this report reiterate the unique context of the Northern Ireland Curriculum in primary and post-primary languages education, shedding a light on potential areas of improvement in the education of young people. As a society, there is a need to start a serious conversation about languages in primary schools, the range of languages offered and time devoted to languages in post-primary schools, and how we ensure that assessment of languages is both appropriate and creative for young people in Northern Ireland today. The responses from teachers demonstrate that the current demands of language examinations continue to dissuade pupils from pursuing a Modern Language at GCSE and/or A-level.

The data identify a key gap in the branding of languages education, specifically at post-primary level, concerning future career and progression pathways with languages, as well as the degree of difficulty in achieving proficiency in a language under the current curriculum. There is a programme of work to be done in Careers Education, Information and Guidance to help young people see the value of languages for their future career and to make informed choices at key transition points.

The data show that 74 per cent of Year 9 pupils either love or like learning languages, but only 27.4 per cent consider speaking more than one language as useful. By fostering discussions on possible areas of development in languages education, it is of timely importance to highlight the economic, cultural and social value of language learning in an increasingly diverse and multi-cultural society.

By working together to build a more cohesive approach to languages education, there is an opportunity to improve language learning for all young people in the future: on y va! Auf geht's! Ar aghaidh linn! ¡Vamos!<sup>13</sup>

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