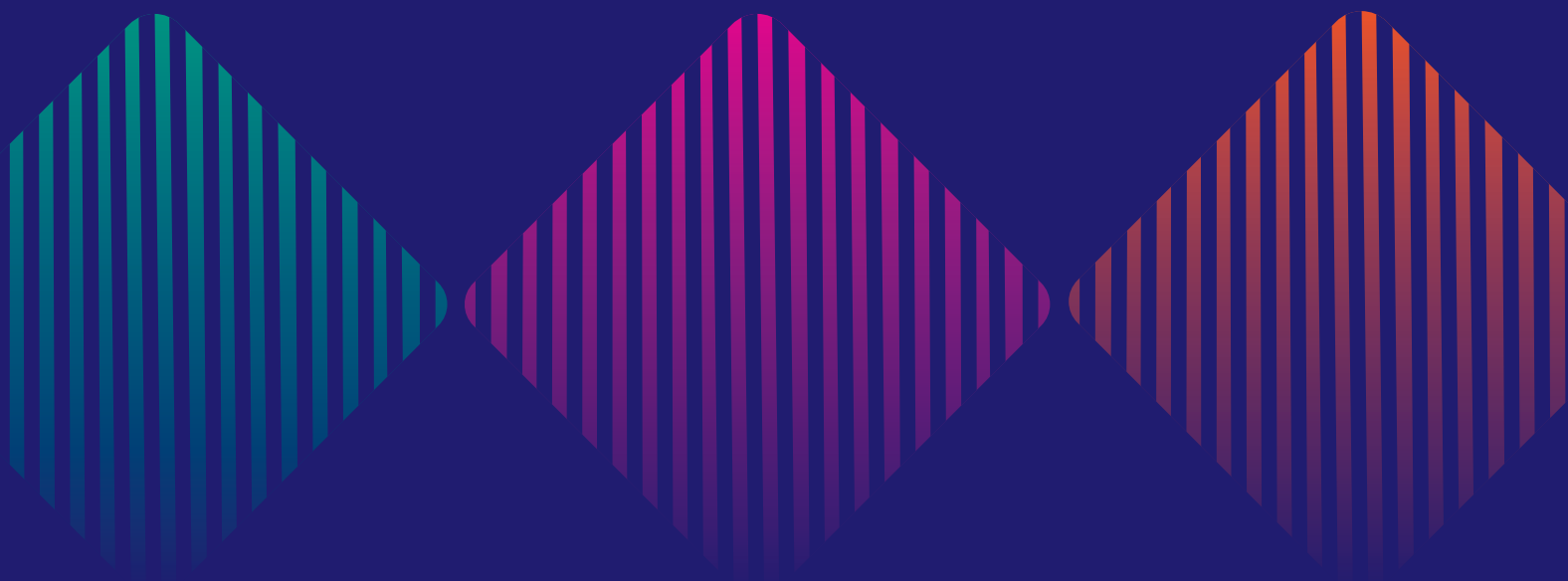


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# Language Trends Northern Ireland 2025



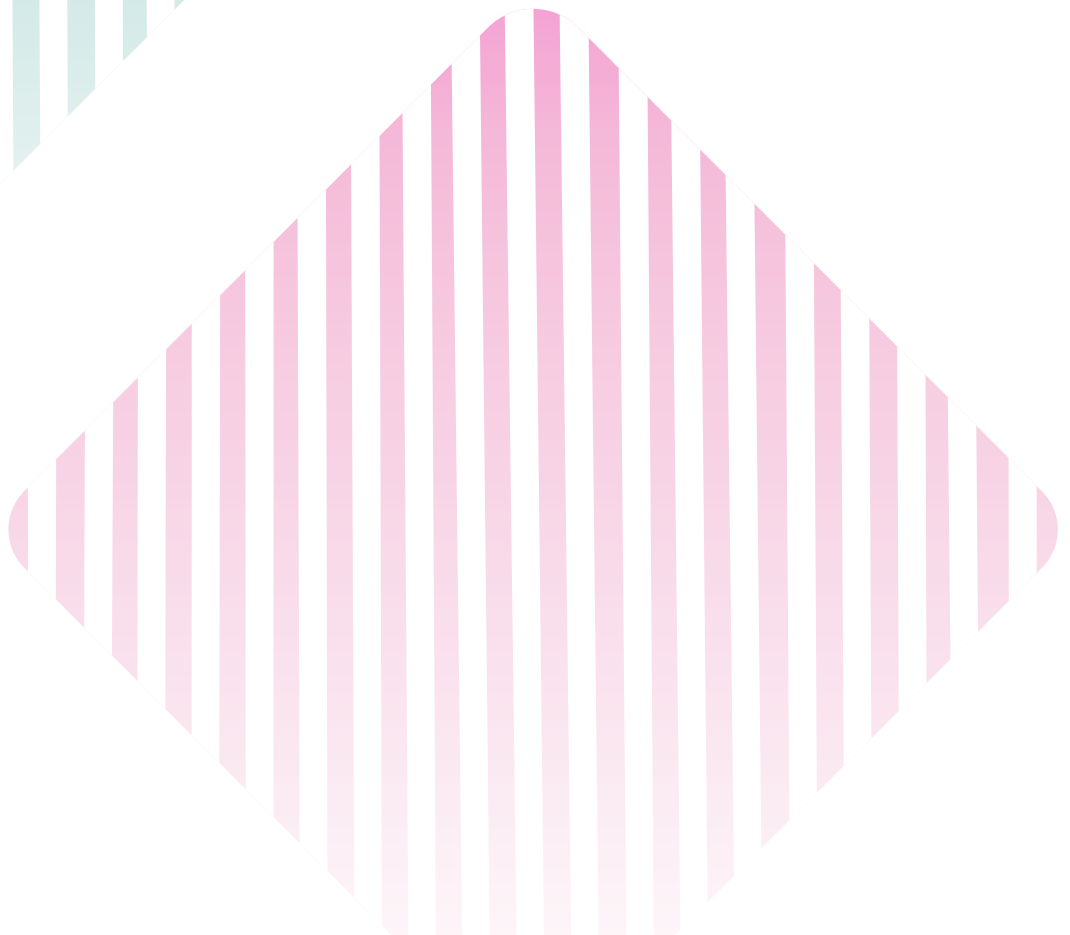
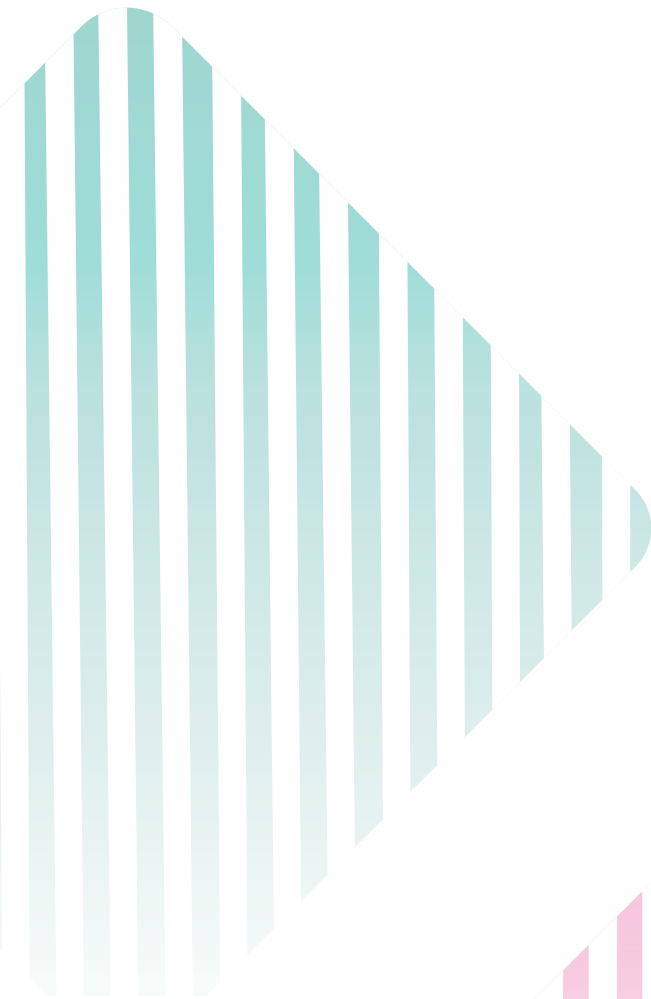
Survey report by Dr Jayne Duff and Dr Ian Collen



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
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CENTRE FOR  
LANGUAGE  
EDUCATION  
RESEARCH

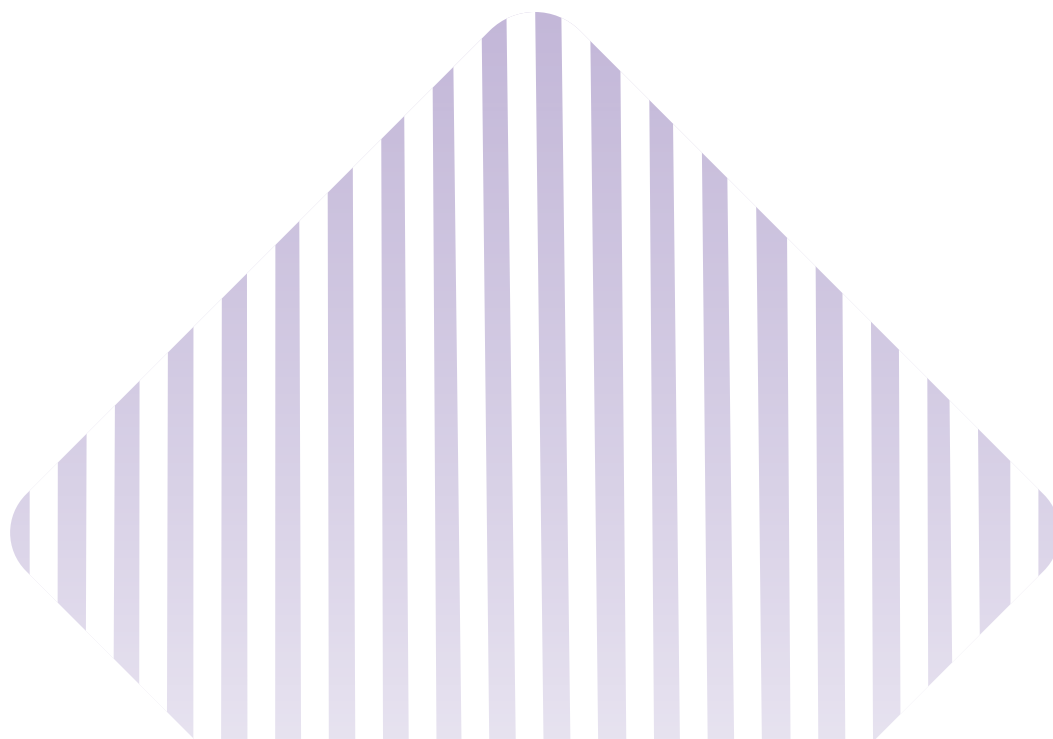
Language Trends Northern Ireland 2025 was carried out by Dr Jayne Duff (Research Fellow) and Dr Ian Collen (Reader in Modern Languages Education) commissioned by British Council Northern Ireland



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# Foreword 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.

We are committed to fostering global connections for Northern Ireland through collaboration and shared opportunities. In the education sector, we encourage students to explore other cultures and languages by offering teaching resources and creating opportunities for international school partnerships.

Our work in schools helps to bring an international dimension to the school curriculum and enriches students' learning experiences by broadening their horizons and understanding of the world. We actively support educators, leaders, and policymakers by drawing on insights from successful systems worldwide and nurturing partnerships that enable meaningful international engagement. Advocating for and supporting language learning in UK schools is a key aspect of our cultural relations work in schools.

By providing resources, activities, and programmes that empower language education, we emphasise the critical role languages play in equipping young people with the skills, intercultural awareness, and confidence needed for

future employability and prosperity in an increasingly interconnected world. At the same time, linguistic and cultural curiosity also enriches their personal lives with the joy of language and cultural exchange.

Through our biennial Language Trends survey, we collect valuable feedback from teachers, school leaders, and students across Northern Ireland. This survey offers current insights into trends in language education, helping schools, policymakers, and stakeholders stay informed. We extend our thanks to the dedicated teachers in Northern Ireland who contributed their perspectives and shared their experiences; to the students who responded to our survey providing valuable insights from a learner perspective; to our advisory committee for their guidance; and to the research team at Queen's University Belfast for their professionalism and expertise in conducting the study.

**Jonathan Stewart**

Director, British Council Northern Ireland

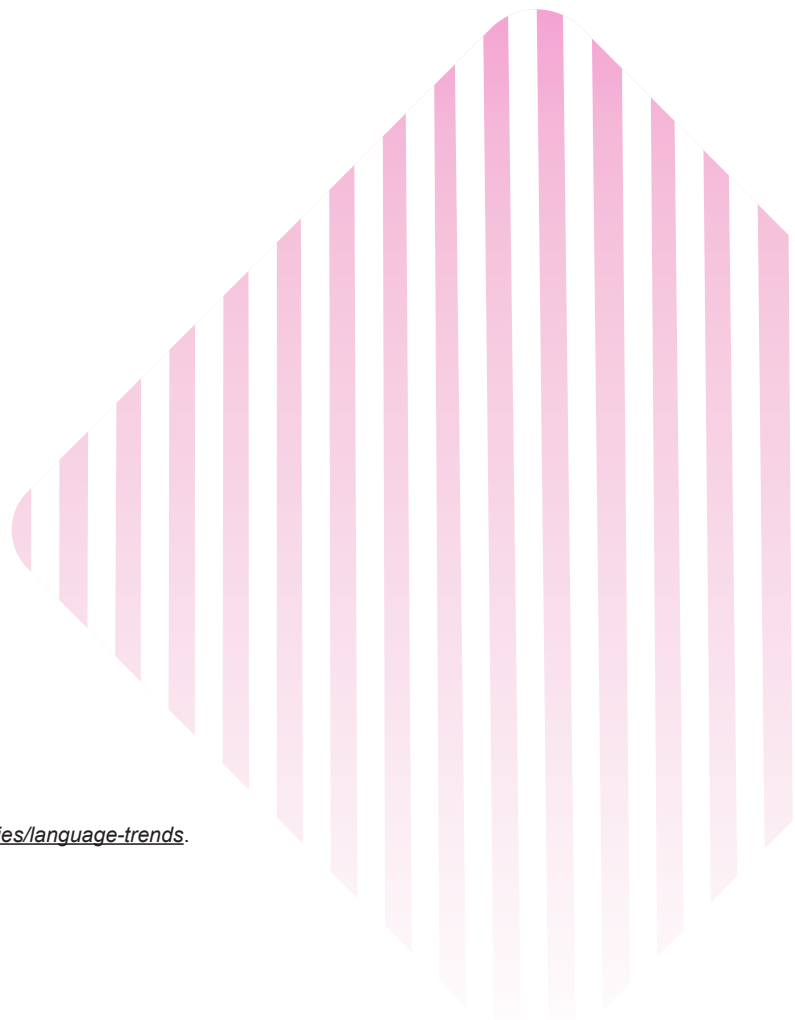
# Introduction

The fourth biennial *Language Trends Northern Ireland 2025* report surveyed primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI) about language teaching and learning, as well as Year 9 pupils on their attitudes to language learning. British Council Northern Ireland commissioned researchers at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) to conduct this year's iteration.

*Language Trends Northern Ireland* reports information about the current situation for language teaching and learning in primary and post-primary schools. In particular, the report focuses on the curricular languages of French, German, Irish and Spanish, the four most taught languages in the Northern Ireland Curriculum and offered locally at examination level by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

*Language Trends Northern Ireland* is part of a suite of Language Trends reports comprising surveys in England since 2002, in Wales since 2015 and in Scotland since 2024. The reports can be found on the British Council Language Trends website.<sup>1</sup> More widely, the Language Trends series shows general shifts in data and seeks to provide a springboard for teachers, school leaders, academics, inspectors, policy makers, pupils and the public to consider aspects of language learning more deeply. On behalf of British Council Northern Ireland and Queen's University Belfast, we would like to thank the teachers and pupils who participated in our research, without whom this report would not be possible.

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/research-series/language-trends>.



# Headline findings

The headline findings for *Language Trends Northern Ireland 2025* are:

- Primary languages are taught in almost two-thirds (64.7 per cent) of responding schools (compared to 51 per cent in 2023);
- Approximately three out of four primary schools (74.3 per cent) responding to the survey are in favour of statutory primary languages;
- Fewer than 30 per cent of responding primary schools currently have contact with a local post-primary in relation to language learning;
- More than 70 per cent of responding primary schools are in favour of a hub scheme with a local post-primary to deliver language learning;
- Almost 30 different languages are spoken at home by young people in post-primary schools;
- Eighty-nine per cent of pupils surveyed in 2025 do not see the relevance of languages for their future career;
- Spanish is now the most widely taught language at Key Stage 3, overtaking French for the first time;
- Language classes at Key Stage 4 will not run in 48.6 per cent of post-primary schools surveyed when there are too few learners, as is the case post-16 in 40 per cent of schools;
- More than 70 per cent of post-primary schools surveyed provide post-16 provision in languages;
- The number of schools that offer pupils the opportunity to take exams in their home, heritage or community languages (HHCL) has risen to 70.5 per cent in 2025, compared to 63.9 per cent in 2021.

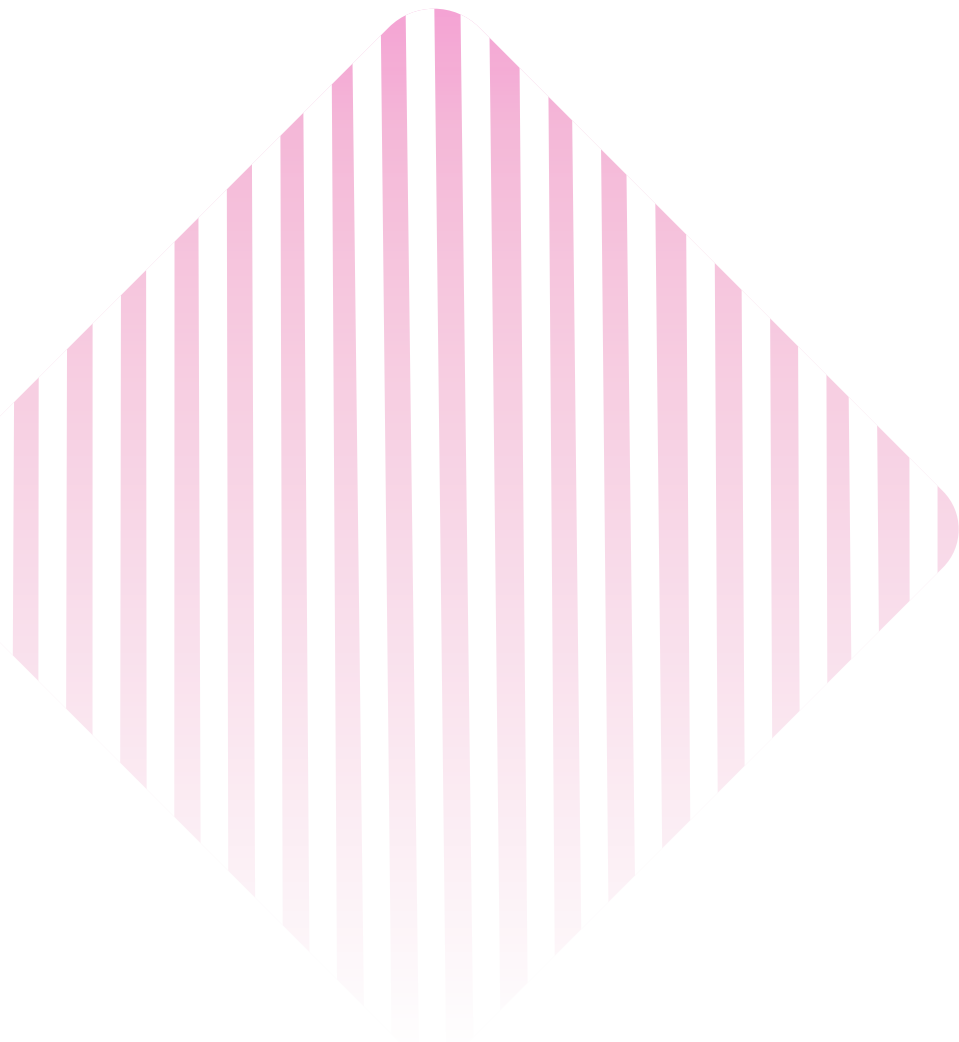


# Policy background and context

The United Kingdom (UK) is in its fourth decade of a decline in language learning in schools (Lanvers and Graham, 2022), but individual languages within individual nations are showing green shoots of growth. For example, Spanish is showing an upward trajectory in England and Northern Ireland at GCSE level.

Education in the UK is a devolved matter, which means the school system and associated qualifications available to young people vary between each nation. Governments have adopted various approaches to help reverse the decline in language learning over recent years.

Some jurisdictions have government-backed centres for languages, such as the National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE) in England, whilst others have a well-conceived government-backed pupil mentoring scheme where university students work closely with young people before choosing their GCSEs. There is currently no comparable support in Northern Ireland.





In March 2025, the Minister of Education announced TransformED NI, a comprehensive strategy for the transformation of teaching and learning in Northern Ireland. The strategy focuses on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage. Reform in each of these areas will be underpinned by significant investment in high-quality teacher professional development. At the

time of writing, it is not yet known whether the new ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum will include languages in the primary phase.

In the 2024/25 school year there are 781 primary schools and 190 post-primary schools (66 grammar, 124 non-grammar/secondary) in Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

Education in Northern Ireland is divided into the following stages and are referred to throughout this report (see Table 1):

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

## Research outline

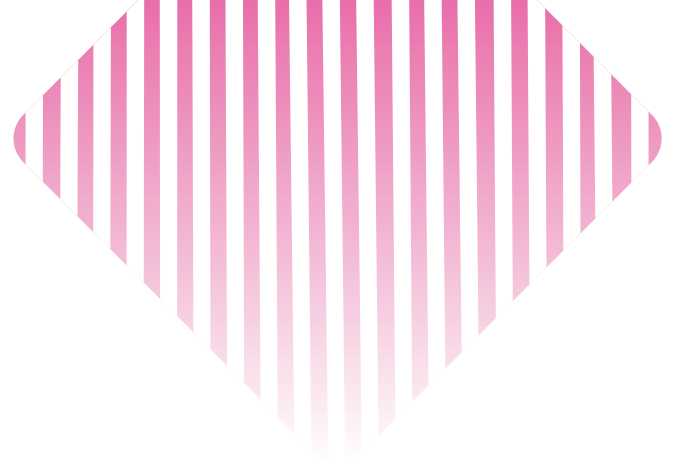
The report is guided by the following research question: ‘What is the current state of language teaching in primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland?’.

To answer the question, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach to collect

data. Three surveys were developed for distribution:

- i) Primary school survey;
- ii) Post primary survey;
- iii) Year 9 pupil survey (for learners aged 12–13).

<sup>2</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 124 schools which are controlled (47), Catholic Maintained (54), other maintained – Irish-medium (2), controlled integrated (6) or grant maintained integrated (15).



The research team received feedback and input on the survey questions from an expert advisory panel convened by British Council Northern Ireland, comprising academics from Stranmillis University College, St. Mary's University College, Ulster University, professionals from CCEA, Department of Education, Foras na Gaeilge and teaching staff.

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 20 principals opted in. Teachers in these schools were given a link and QR code to share with their Year 9 pupils. In total, 1,099 Year 9 pupils completed the survey.

After data sets were cleaned and duplications removed, the following response rates were achieved in the primary and post-primary surveys (see Table 2):

	Base	Achieved	Response rate 2025
Primary	781	136	17.4%
Post-primary	190	105	55.3%

**Table 2:** Response rates in primary and post-primary schools

Survey response rates have risen, with an increase from 10.3 per cent in 2023 to 17.4 per cent in 2025 in the primary survey, and from 50.5 per cent in 2023 to 55.3 per cent in 2025 in the post-primary survey. While statistical significance is not assured with the low figure of responding primary schools, the post-primary data set is broadly generalisable to the Northern Ireland school population.

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 looks at findings from the primary survey, reflecting on the current language learning trends reported by survey respondents. This is followed by a consideration of young peoples' attitudes to language learning, drawing on the data from the Year 9 pupil survey. Subsequently, the report presents the key findings from the post-primary survey completed by Heads of Department, reflecting on the current situation for language teaching, official exam data and teacher voice.

# Languages in primary schools

## Profile of primary schools

According to the 2024 school census, Northern Ireland currently has 769 primary schools and 12 preparatory departments in grammar schools (NISRA, 2025). The total number of primary schools has continued to decline from the figure reported in *Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023*, from 794 to 781.

While English is the medium of instruction for learners in most primary schools, Irish-medium education (IME) teaches the curriculum in Irish through immersion. There are 28 IME primary schools and seven primary schools with an Irish-medium unit, and the 2024 school census recorded 4,621 learners in primary IME.<sup>3</sup>

The primary school survey was sent to all publicly available school email accounts, advertised on social media and addressed to the school principal. One hundred and thirty-six schools responded to the survey, a substantial increase from 82 respondents in 2023.

The majority of respondents who completed the survey were the school principal (83 per cent), with the remaining responses completed by classroom teachers, a language tutor or a member of senior leadership/management team (SLT/SMT). Out of the total number of schools who responded to the survey, 63.2 per cent have learners for whom English is an additional language (EAL).

On average, 27 per cent of primary pupils (P1–7) are entitled to free school meals (FSM) in Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2025). Based on the publicly available data on free school meal entitlement (FSME) from the 2024/25 school year (Department of Education, 2025), the research team calculated the quintiles for FSME in the primary sector and arranged responding schools into those quintiles by the percentage of pupils entitled to FSM (Table 3)<sup>4</sup>. Within the dataset of responding schools, an average figure of 23.1 per cent of pupils are entitled to FSM, and almost 50 per cent of responding schools are in quintiles one and two, suggesting that, overall, the survey received a greater number of responses from primary schools in more affluent areas.

“

**Out of the total number of schools who responded to the survey, 63.2 per cent have learners for whom English is an additional language (EAL).**

<sup>3</sup> See the following for data tables: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data>.

<sup>4</sup> Quintiles calculated based on data known for 751 primary schools. There is no public disclosure of the FSME percentage in schools with less than five pupils entitled to FSM and therefore these schools were not included in the calculations.

Quintile	Quintile range	% of responding schools
1 – least deprived	0.0–12.88%	29.1%
2	12.89–18.87%	17.3%
3	18.88–26.02%	19.7%
4	26.03–38.18%	18.9%
5 – most deprived	38.19% and above	15.0%

**Table 3:** Percentage of responding primary schools in FSME quintiles in the primary sector

## Should primary languages be statutory?

In 2023, 84 per cent of survey respondents were in favour of statutory language learning at Key Stage 2 in the Northern Ireland Curriculum; this figure has decreased by 10 per cent to 74.3 per cent in 2025. Comments made by the quarter of responding schools who do not think that primary languages should be statutory raised concerns about time pressures, a lack of resources and teacher capacity to cover all areas of the curriculum:

“There are many areas of the curriculum currently to be taught within this age group and it would be impossible to fit another area in on a statutory basis. Many schools, including my own, teach some languages in blocks over a series of weeks to ensure pupils have some ‘flavour’ of another language.”

“I think it is excellent that children get an opportunity to learn another language but there aren’t the resources or time to make it statutory.”

“I like the idea of it, but I think there are massive pressures on the primary curriculum already. I don’t know when there would be time.”

Several respondents also commented on learner difficulties with English language literacy:

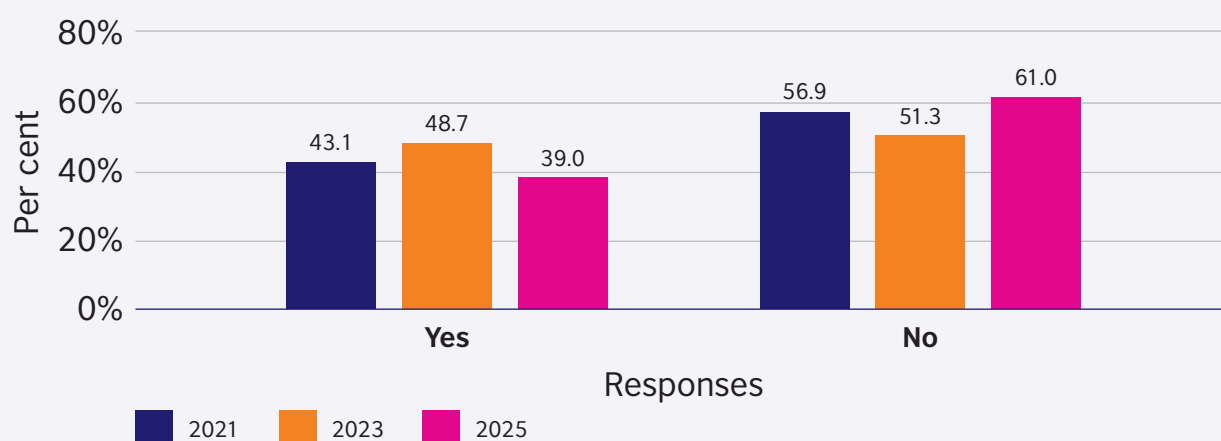
“In theory I agree but pupils have a full enough curriculum and quite a few struggle with reading and writing English never mind a foreign language.”

“We have a lot of children who are struggling to cope with English and developing their literacy skills. Children who are experiencing difficulty with literacy are unable to get support and therefore it would be too much to expect them to learn a new language.”

The survey asked respondents to consider if they have a member of staff with appropriate language skills, should language learning become a statutory part of the curriculum. Since 2023, 10 per cent fewer respondents report having

a member of staff with the skills to co-ordinate language teaching, which may suggest a key challenge for primary staff if languages do become statutory in the curriculum (see Figure 1).

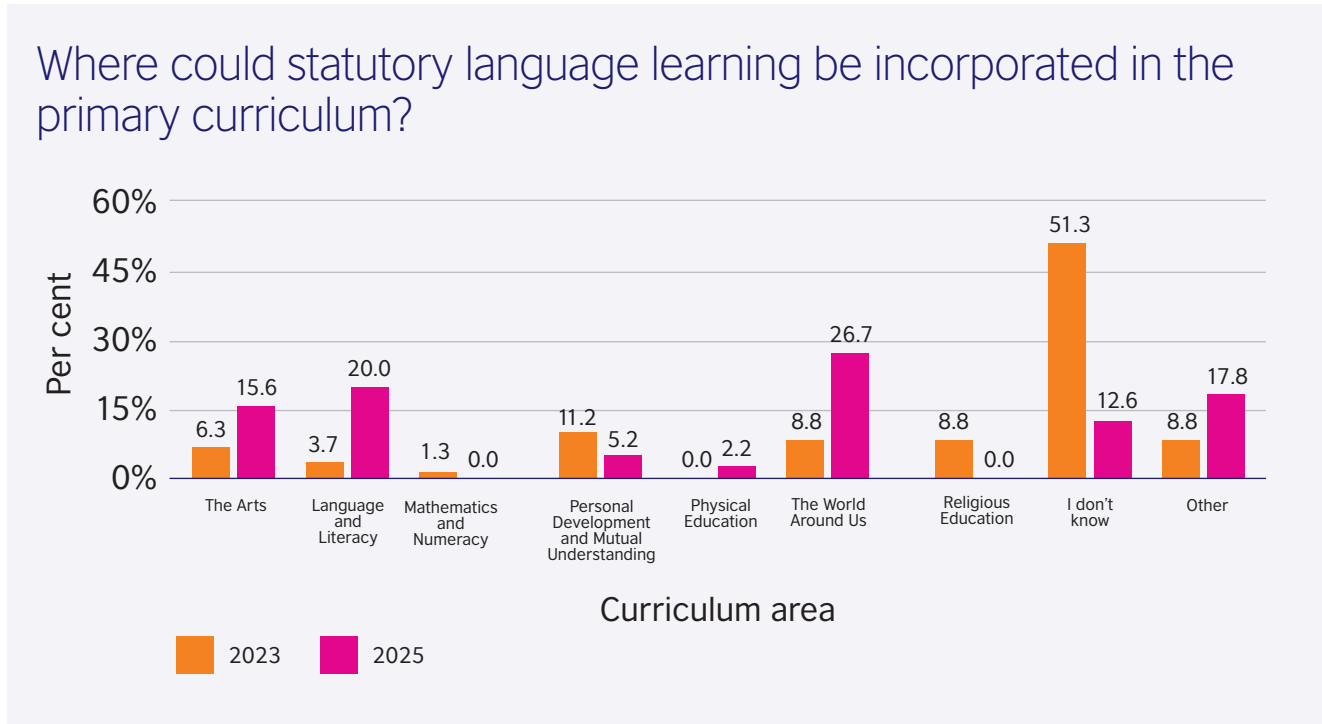
Do you have a member of teaching staff with appropriate language skills to co-ordinate language teaching?



**Figure 1:** Respondent answers from 2021, 2023 and 2025 to '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?'

As raised by the teacher comments, a key challenge to the implementation of statutory primary language learning and teaching would be finding an area of the curriculum in which to incorporate languages. Since 2023, views on where statutory languages could be incorporated in the primary curriculum have changed across all curricular areas (see Figure 2). For example, in 2023, 51.3 per cent of respondents did not know in which area primary languages could be

incorporated, compared to 12.6 per cent in 2025. In 2025, respondents in 26.7 per cent of schools surveyed think room could be made for languages in 'The World Around Us', compared to less than ten per cent in 2023. Almost a fifth of schools also commented 'other' options than those listed in Figure 2; several respondents called for a cross-curricular approach that incorporates languages into several areas of the curriculum.



**Figure 2:** Respondent views from 2023 and 2025 on where statutory language learning could be implemented in the primary curriculum

The survey also asked respondents if languages should be taught in the Foundation Stage and/or Key Stage 1. Just over half of respondents said 'yes', and comments included the following:

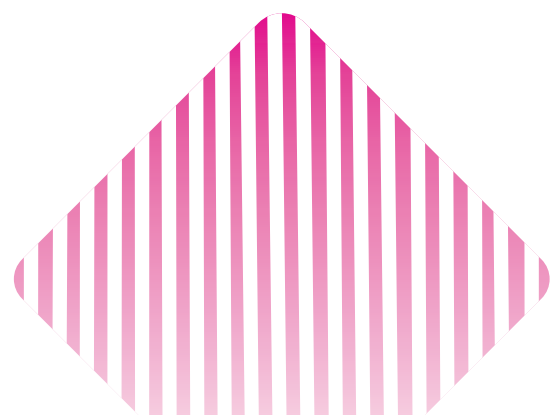
"Yes – we currently teach Spanish in P3. Our pupils love it, have no fear of giving it a go and are keen to learn more."

"Yes, it should start as early as possible. However designated language teachers will be required for this and paid for outside of schools' current budgets."

Respondents not in favour of introducing languages to this level commented that:

"There are too many children coming into school with language difficulties and not enough resources to accommodate this."

"No, the children entering education have increasingly more speech and language difficulties. The focus in early years should be in play skills, social skills and early literacy skills."



## Provision of language lessons in primary schools

Almost two-thirds (64.7 per cent) of respondents currently teach primary languages in their curriculum, an increase of over ten per cent from the figure reported in 2023. Similarly to 2023 data, 2.2 per cent of schools who would normally teach a language have temporarily suspended language classes in the 2024/25 school year.

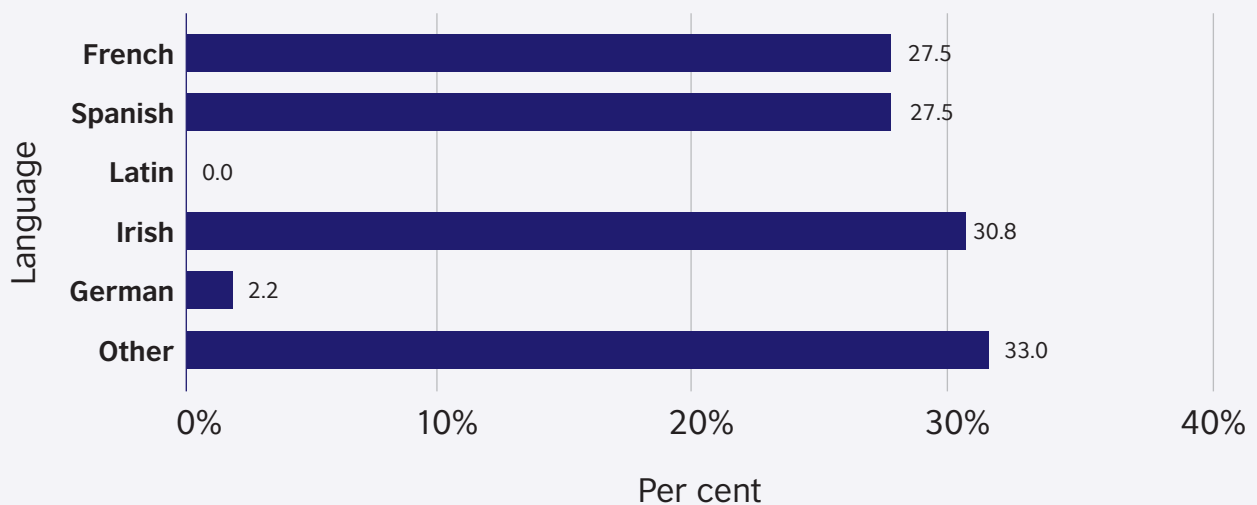
Various languages are taught in Key Stage 2, with just over 30 per cent of schools reporting that they teach Irish, consistent with the 2023 findings (see Figure 3). French is taught in 27.5 per cent of schools, as is Spanish, reflecting a significant decrease to the reported 43.9 per cent of schools teaching French and 56.1 per cent teaching Spanish in

2023. A third of schools responded ‘other’ languages, including 28.6 per cent who teach Mandarin.

“

**Almost two-thirds (64.7 per cent) of respondents currently teach primary languages in their curriculum, an increase of over ten per cent from the figure reported in 2023.**

### Languages taught in Key Stage 2



**Figure 3:** Respondent answers to ‘Which languages does your school teach as part of the school day?’ for Key Stage 2 learners



In responding schools with primary language provision, 46.2 per cent have been teaching languages for more than five years, 23.1 per cent have been teaching languages for three to five years, and 11 per cent just started in the 2024/25 school year. Of the schools with primary language provision, only 2.2 per cent reported that languages have been an area of shared curricular delivery within a Shared Education partnership.<sup>5</sup>

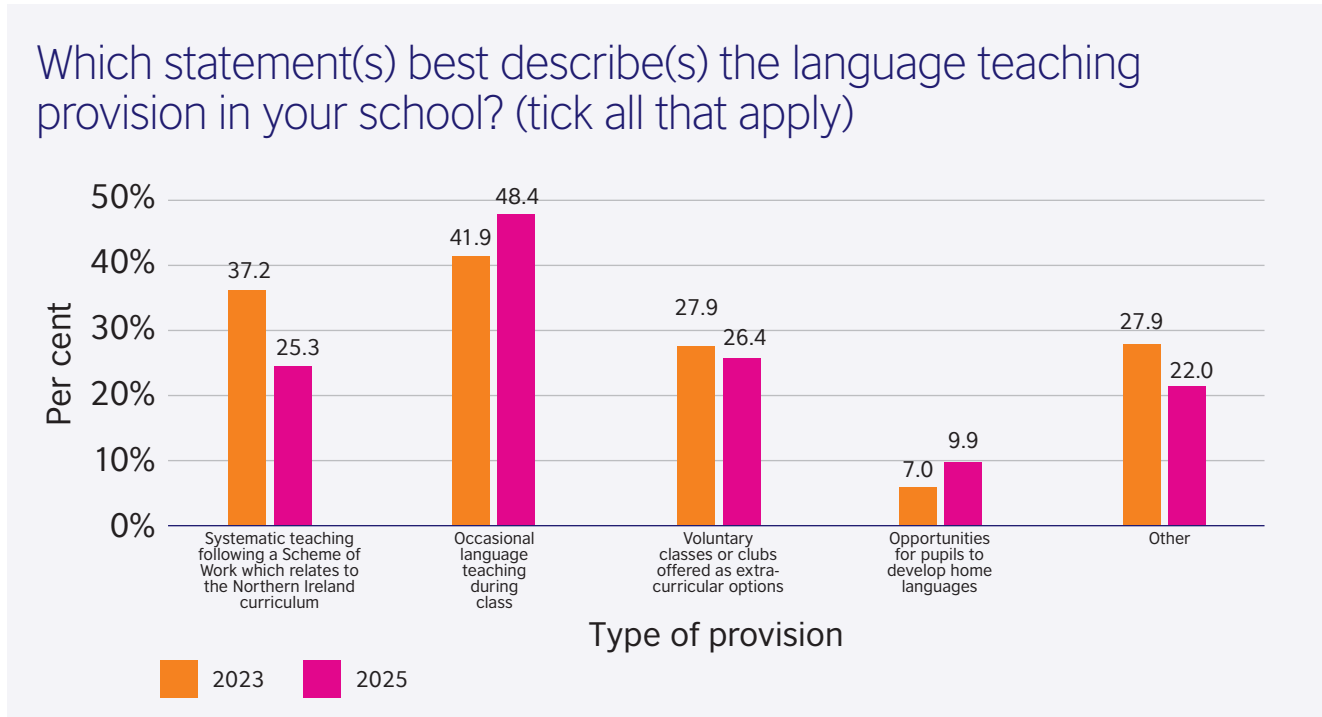
Schools that teach primary languages were asked about their approach to providing such provision (see Figure 4). Fewer schools undertake systematic teaching following a scheme of work (25.3 per cent in 2025 compared to

37.2 per cent of schools in 2023), while slightly more schools provide occasional language teaching during class time (48.4 per cent in 2025 compared to 41.9 per cent in 2023). The number of schools reporting they provide opportunities for pupils to develop home languages continues to increase (9.9 per cent in 2025, 7 per cent in 2023, and 6.2 per cent in 2021). In 'other' comments, respondents noted use of school developed programmes, tutors, weekly lessons, language clubs and local partnerships to deliver language lessons, including Irish classes delivered in partnership with a local Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) Club.



<sup>5</sup> Shared Education enables schools from different sectors to work in partnership to provide opportunities for pupils, staff and communities to engage in collaborative and meaningful learning experiences.





**Figure 4:** Respondent answers from 2023 and 2025 to ‘Which statement(s) best describe(s) the language teaching provision in your school? (tick all that apply)’

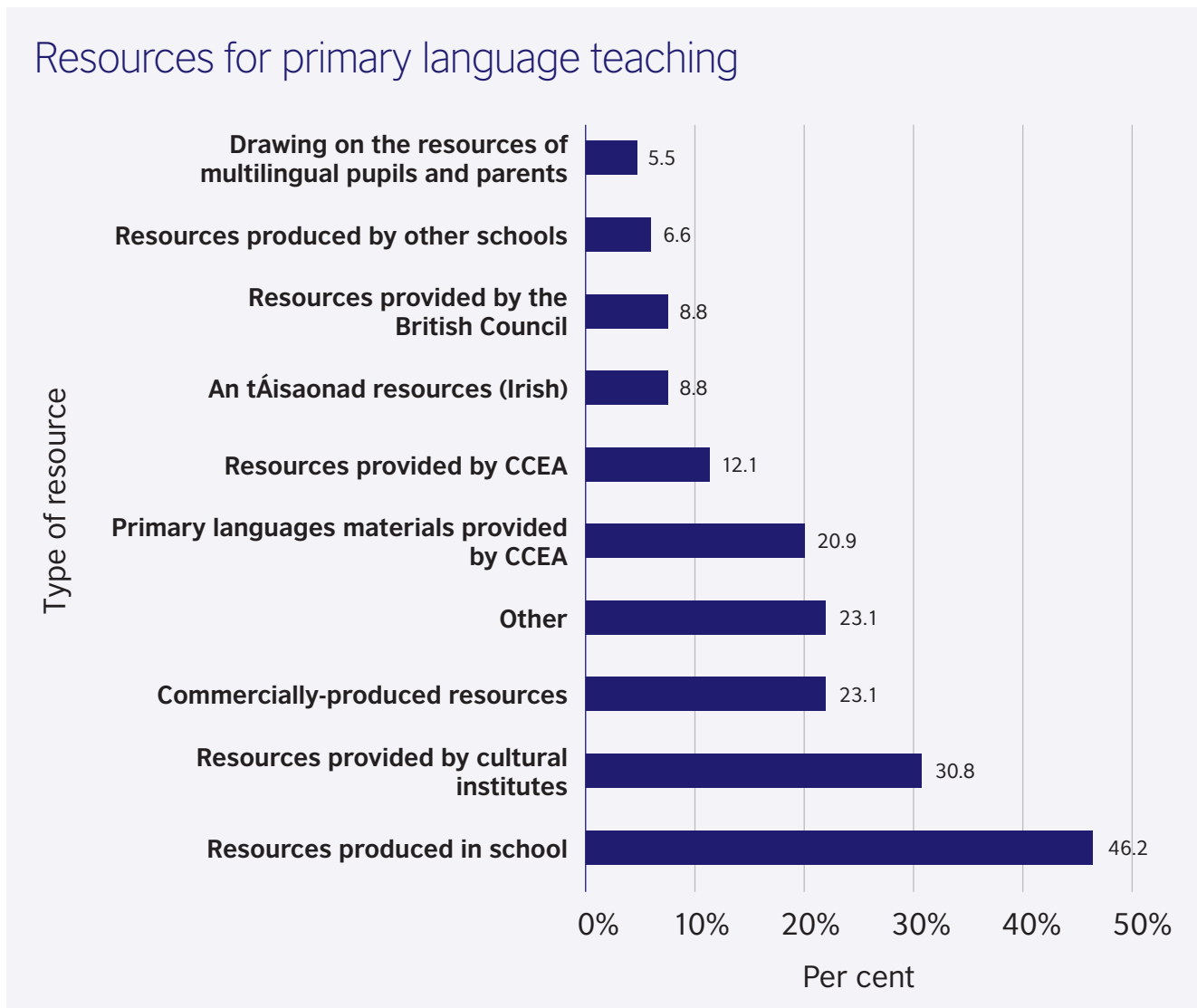
Of the responding 45 schools who do not teach primary languages, 15 reported that there had previously been language teaching over the past five years. Consistent with the 2023 data, the three main reasons for not teaching primary languages are:

- i) no expertise within the school;
- ii) lack of funding; and
- iii) lack of external support and/or teaching resources.

## Primary language resources

Resources for primary language teaching are produced in-house in 46.2 per cent of responding schools, while 30.8 per cent of schools make use of resources provided by cultural institutes (see Figure 5). Amongst the 23 per cent of schools who noted 'other' resources, ten schools use

resources provided by Scoil Spreagtha, an accredited Irish Language Programme funded through Gael Linn that encourages and celebrates the use of Irish in English-medium schools.<sup>6</sup>



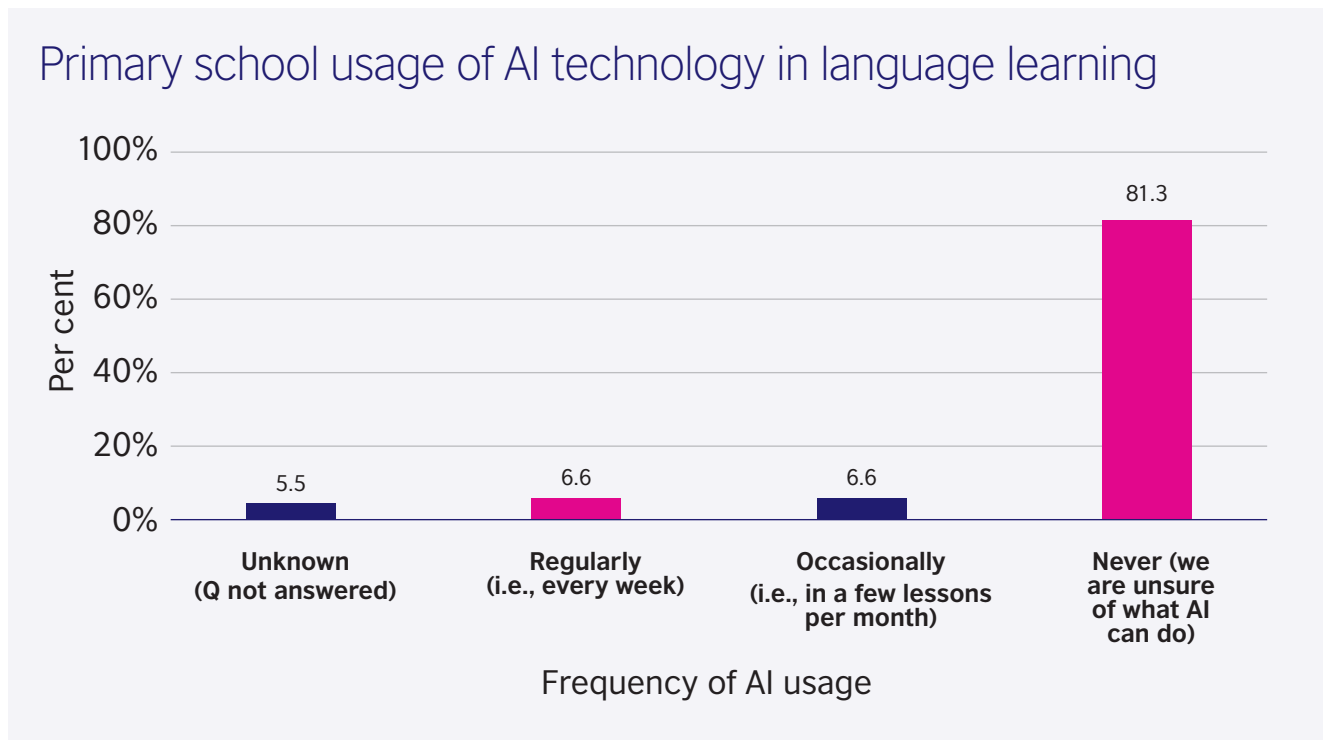
**Figure 5:** Respondent answers to 'What resources do you use for language teaching? (tick all that apply)'

<sup>6</sup> See the following link for further information on the scheme: <https://www.gael-linn.ie/en/news/2023/11/08/polasa%C3%AD/new-accredited-scheme-to-encourage-the-promotion-and-use-of-irish-in-english-medium-primary-schools-launched---scoil-spreagtha/73-194/>.

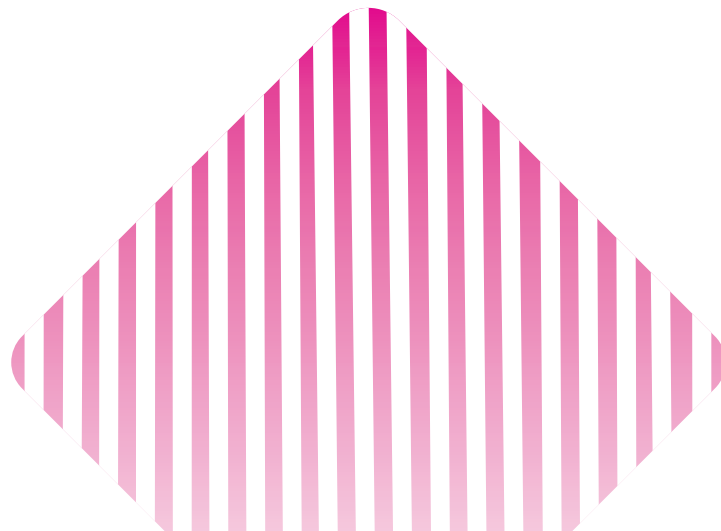
## AI technology in the primary languages classroom

For the first time ever, the survey asked respondents how often their school makes use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology (such as ChatGPT) in language teaching. For most primary schools (81.3 per cent), AI technology is never

used, while 6.6 per cent report using it regularly and a further 6.6 per cent use it occasionally in a few lessons per month (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Respondent answers to ‘How often does your school make use of AI technology (such as ChatGPT, Diffet, etc) in language teaching?’

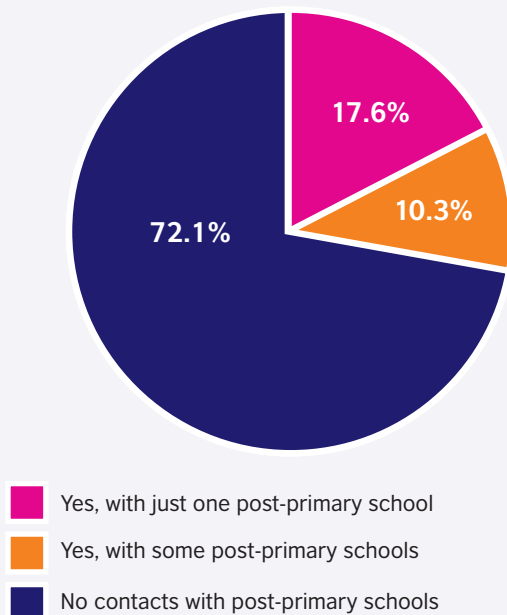




## Primary language learning and post-primary connections

Seventy-two per cent of all responding schools reported that they do not have any contact with local post-primary schools in relation to language learning (see Figure 7). The remaining schools (17.6 per cent) are in contact with one post-primary school, and 10.3 per cent are in contact with some post-primary schools.

Do you have contacts with your local post-primary schools in relation to language learning?



**Figure 7:** Respondent answers to 'Do you have contacts with your local post-primary schools in relation to language learning?'

Respondents with post-primary links in relation to language learning were invited to comment further on what this contact entails:

"Last year a local post-primary school provided a language assistant to teach French and a teacher to teach German to pupils in P7 for a term."

"We are currently a hub school within the Confucius Institute. As such, we have close working relationships with a number of post-primary colleagues. We meet regularly to consider provision and to further develop the sharing of resources."

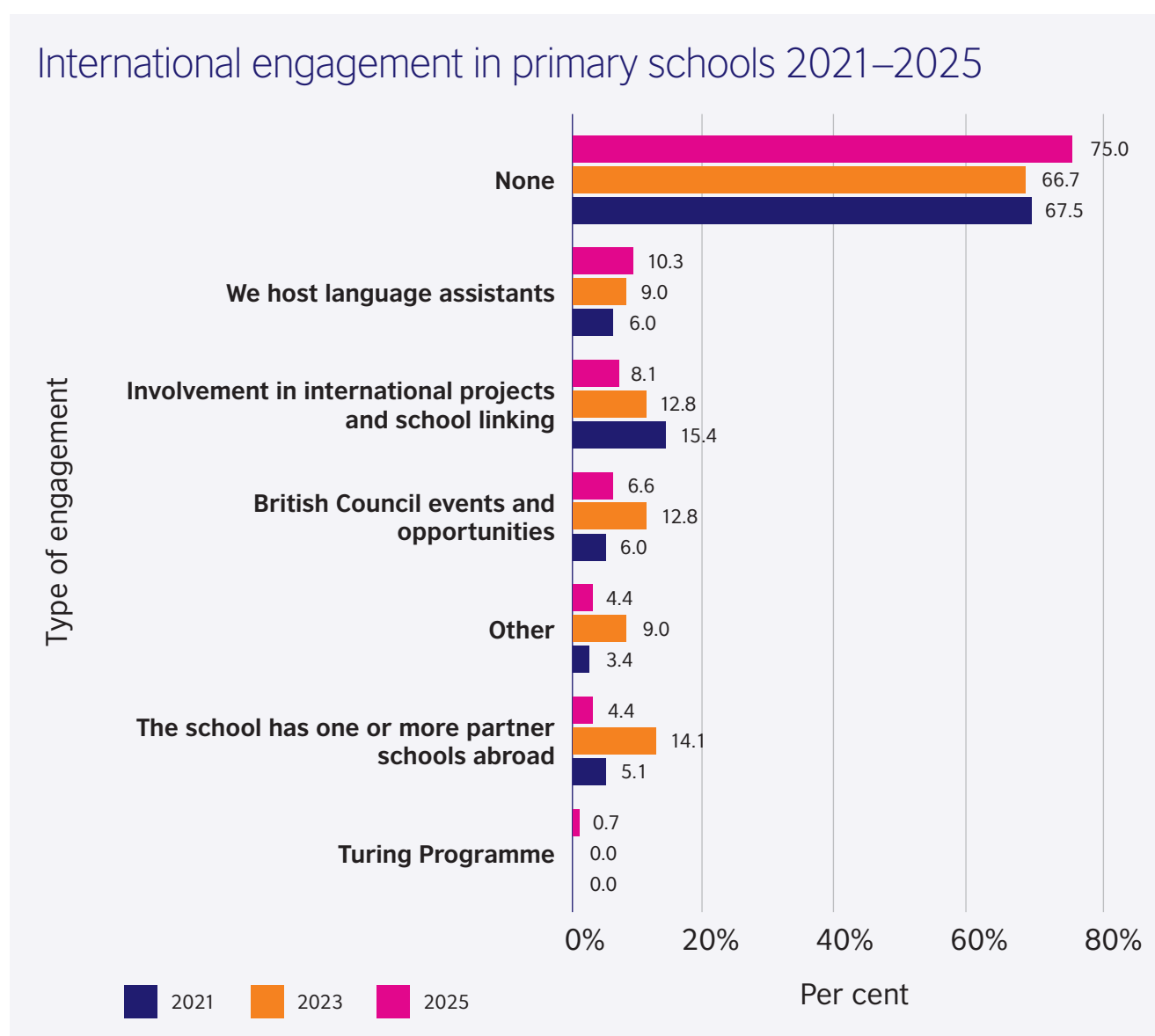
"Post-primary pupils would visit during 'International Week' to teach our pupils about the language/culture of different countries."

## International dimension in primary schools

All primary survey respondents were asked about their external links and international engagement opportunities, regardless of whether they currently teach languages. While just over 30 per cent of respondents have no links with outside organisations to promote language learning, a further 30.9 per cent reported links with cultural institutes.

In terms of opportunities for international engagement for pupils and teachers in their school (see Figure 8), there is a decrease in engagement since 2023 with more respondents reporting no opportunities in their school (75 per cent

in 2025, 66.7 per cent in 2023). Fewer schools also reported engaging with international projects and school linking, British Council events and opportunities, and partner schools abroad.



**Figure 8:** Respondent answers from 2021, 2023 and 2025 to ‘What opportunities are there for international engagement for pupils and teachers at your school? (Please tick at least one and all that apply)’

## Teacher perspectives on supporting primary language learning

The survey asked schools if they would welcome a language hub scheme whereby post-primary schools would provide support to primary and post-primary schools in relation to language learning, and 73.5 per cent of respondents commented that they would welcome such a scheme, with positive comments including the following:

“Yes. I would like there to be contacts who can provide language teaching and resources for schools to access that can be used in the classrooms without the need to be amended.”

“I would welcome a language hub. Maybe this could include a link teacher from the post-primary school with each primary, sessions to Key Stage 2 children facilitated by post-primary teachers, access/links to suitable resources, or events/ activities for the primary school to engage in at points through the year.”

Some teachers that would welcome the scheme also noted the need for a language hub that complements teaching already in place without increasing teacher workload:

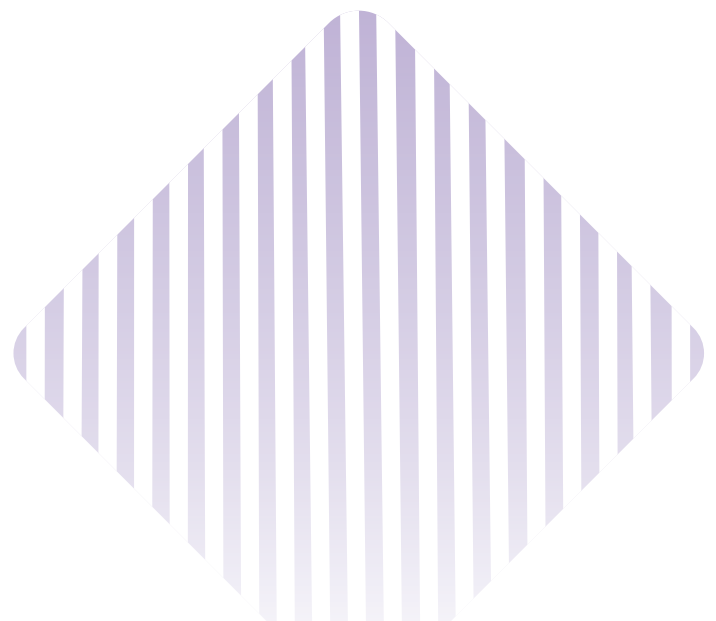
“This would be a fantastic idea. However, it would be better if a teacher could be deployed to schools to teach their subject.

The majority of primary school teachers do not have the confidence to teach a language. Time budgets also constrain what teachers are able to do and fit into a school day.”

“While I would welcome the creation of a hub, it would depend on how this was managed. Workload, as always, continues to be an issue so any facility would have to be designed in such a way that support would be seamless and without increasing teachers’ workloads.”

When asked about what additional support would be welcomed for the development of language teaching in primary schools, the top three answers included:

- i) funding (n=27);
- ii) resources (n=29);
- iii) training (n=16).



Teachers noted the need for:

“Contacts who are able to teach and funding to employ them.”

“Funding to employ a language teacher or the reinstatement of the Primary Languages Programme with a wider variety of languages to choose from.”

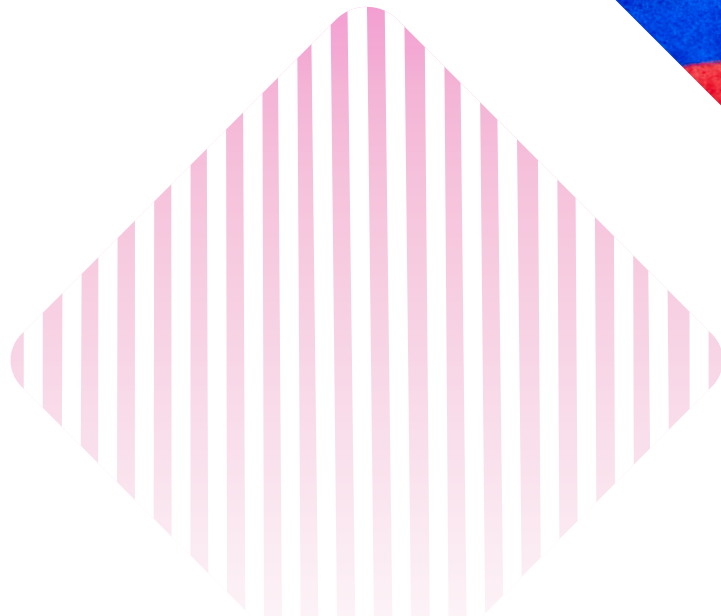
“An online resource that was easily accessible, comprehensively planned and structured, and easily delivered by all staff regardless of their capacity in another language.”

“Funding and training opportunities.”

“Teachers with expertise. Suitable resources. Funding.”

“Staff training and resources. Knowing more about the free opportunities we could avail of.”

“Online resource Hub. Hub staff who could deliver the lessons. Training for primary staff interested in learning a new language.”





# Year 9 pupil survey

## Pupil voice: Year 9 pupil survey

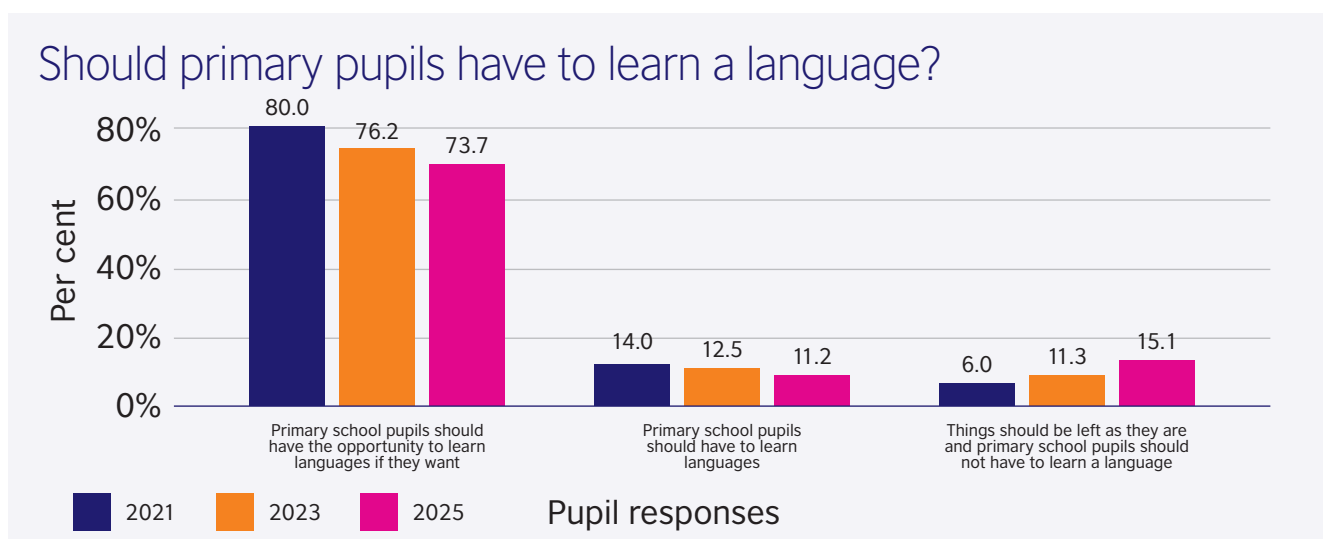
The Year 9 pupil survey on languages was completed by 1,099 learners in 20 schools across Northern Ireland. Girls accounted for 61.6 per cent of respondents, boys 35.9 per cent and 2.5 per cent preferred not to say. Almost all (93.6 per cent) responding pupils went to an English-speaking primary school.

## Home languages of pupils

The pupils surveyed were asked what languages they speak at home, and 82 per cent reported English. Almost thirty (n=29) languages other than English are spoken at home by the pupils surveyed, including: Arabic, Irish, Lithuanian, Chinese, Bulgarian, Romanian, Malayalam, Portuguese, Latvian, Polish, Spanish, German, Japanese, Ndebele, Yoruba, French, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Swahili, Dutch, Russian, Shona, Tamil, Turkish, and Ukrainian.

## Do Year 9 pupils want statutory primary languages?

In contrast to over 70 per cent of primary practitioners who think primary languages should be statutory in Key Stage 2, many Year 9 pupils (73.7 per cent) think that primary pupils should have the opportunity to learn languages, if they want (see Figure 9). An increasing number of young people think that things should simply be left as they are with no statutory primary languages (15.1 per cent in 2025, compared to 6 per cent in 2021). Just under half (46.5 per cent) of the Year 9 pupils surveyed learnt a language in primary school, compared to 50.7 per cent in 2023 and 66.3 per cent in 2021. The most learnt languages at primary reported by responding pupils in 2025 included French, Irish, Mandarin, and Spanish.



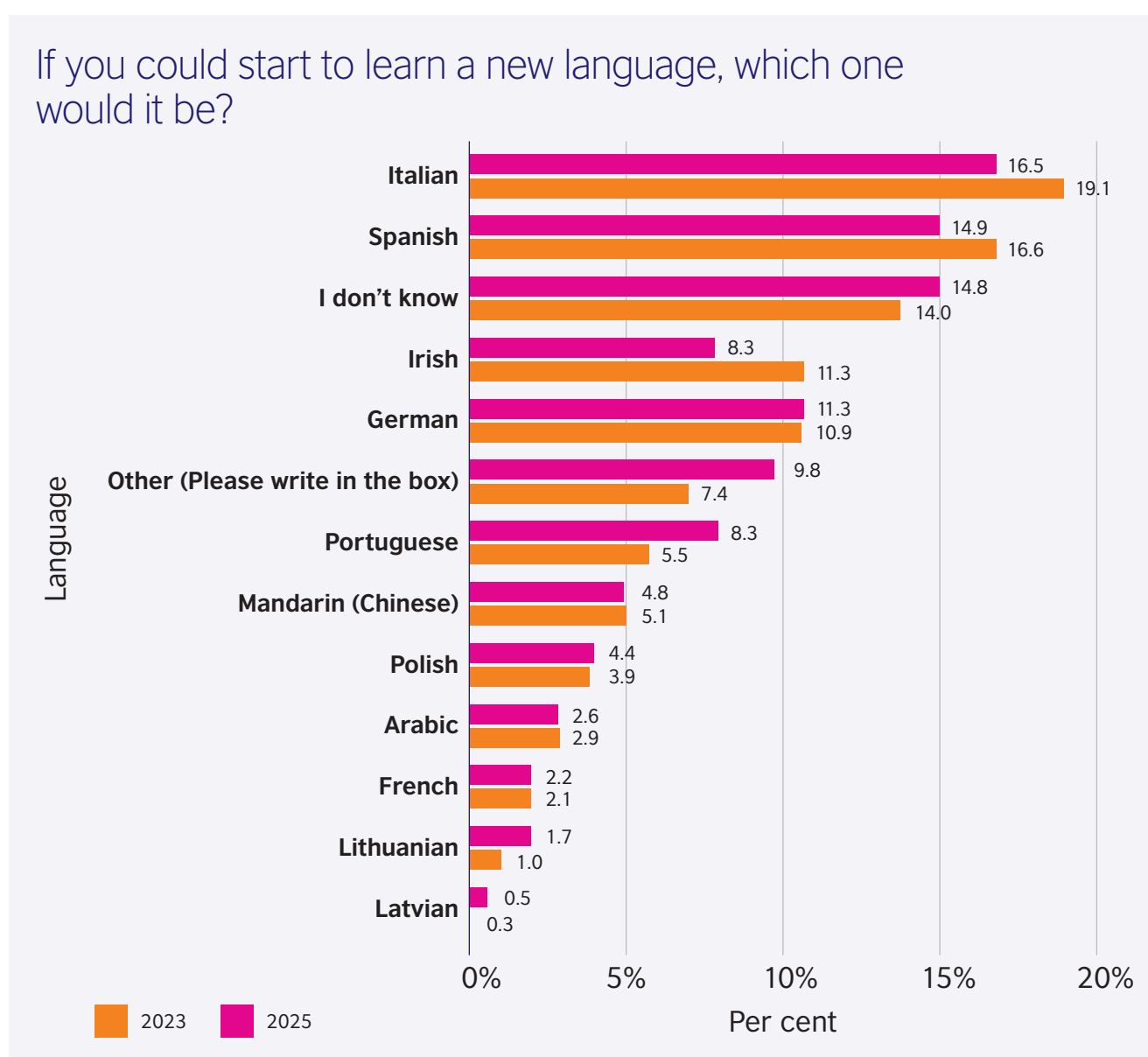
**Figure 9:** Respondent answers in 2021, 2023 and 2025 to 'Do you think pupils in primary schools should have to, or have the opportunity to, learn a language?'



## Languages learnt in Year 9

French is learnt by 77.1 per cent of responding Year 9 pupils, followed by Spanish (55.3 per cent) and Irish (41.5 per cent); only 6.7 per cent reported learning German in Year 9.

Learners were asked what new language they would learn if they could, and provided a range of responses (see Figure 10). This question was also asked in 2023, and Italian remains the most popular



**Figure 10:** Pupil answers in 2023 and 2025 to 'If you could start to learn a new language in Year 9, which one would it be?'

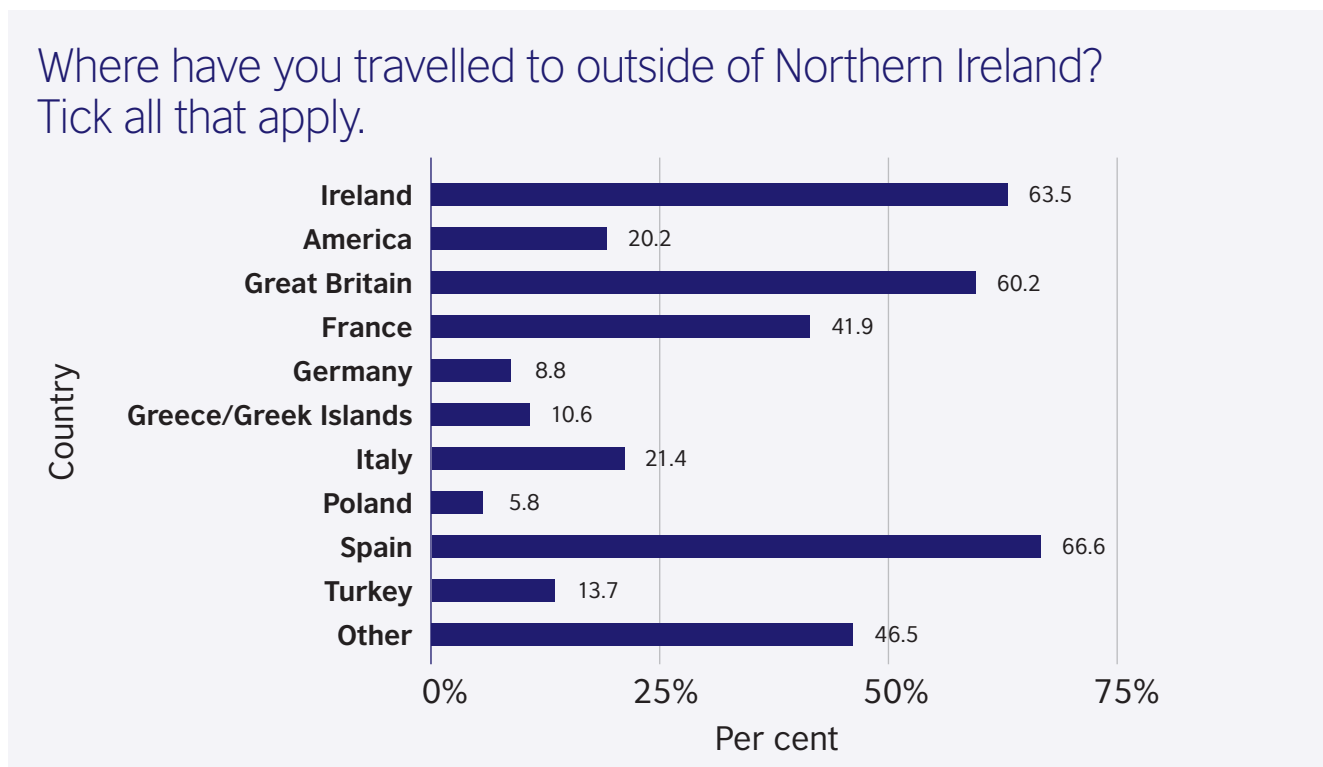
language that learners would choose, followed by Spanish. Pupils also commented other languages, and these included Japanese, Sign Language, Hungarian, Korean, Latin, Russian, Greek, and Dutch. Sign Language is not a mandatory part of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, however a bill has been introduced that aims to strengthen provision and the rights of sign language users.<sup>7</sup>

## Travel abroad in 2025

Ninety-six per cent of pupils surveyed have been to a country outside of Northern Ireland, and 19.7 per cent of

pupils have been to another country on a school trip. Consistent with 2021 and 2023, two-thirds of pupils have been to Spain and a fifth to America (see Figure 11). More pupils are visiting Turkey (13.7 per cent in 2025, compared to 9 per cent

in 2023), and Germany (8.8 per cent in 2025, compared to 6.4 per cent in 2023). In 'other' comments, several pupils noted different countries that they had been to, including Bulgaria, Lithuania, India, Dubai, Portugal, Austria, Norway, Switzerland, Cyprus, Brazil, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada, China, Croatia, Romania, Japan, Indonesia and Egypt, amongst others.



**Figure 11:** Countries that Year 9 pupils have visited

<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing, the Sign Language Bill is at the Committee Stage of consideration in the Northern Ireland Assembly: <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/communities/legislation/bills-primary-legislation/sign-language-bill/>

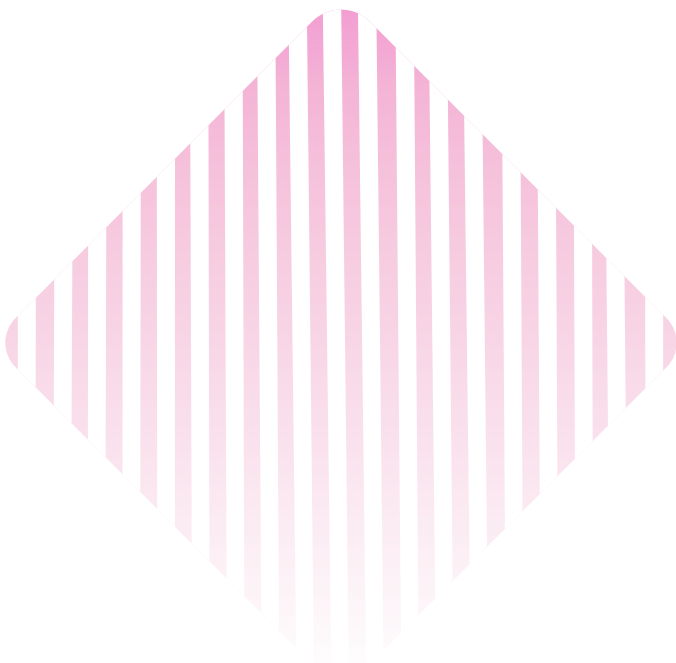
## How useful are languages to young people?

As in 2021 and 2023, three questions were included in the Year 9 survey resulting in a Net Promoter Score to consider current pupil perceptions of languages. 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 about language learning, passives could be encouraged to become promoters, while detractors have a negative opinion of language learning.

When asked how well they could speak a language after learning it in school, 64 per cent of Year 9 pupils responded negatively and feel that they cannot speak a language well at all (approximately 60 per cent of pupils reported the same in 2023).

Young people were asked how likely it is that they will use languages in their future job when they leave school; largely consistent with 2021 and 2023, nine out of ten pupils (89 per cent) in 2025 answered this question negatively and do not see the relevance of languages for their future career. When asked if they had received any advice on jobs that you can do with languages, or if they were aware of jobs using languages, 46.7 per cent of pupils surveyed said no.

Although all young people may not see the relevance of languages for their future careers, 23 per cent consider it very useful to be able to speak different languages. A further 28.8 per cent were passive about the usefulness of speaking different languages, while 48.2 per cent responded negatively when asked how useful it is being able to speak different languages. This reflects a slight decline in the number of pupils who consider it useful to speak different languages since 2021, of which 29.1 per cent were promoters, 28.1 per cent were passives and 42.7 per cent were detractors.

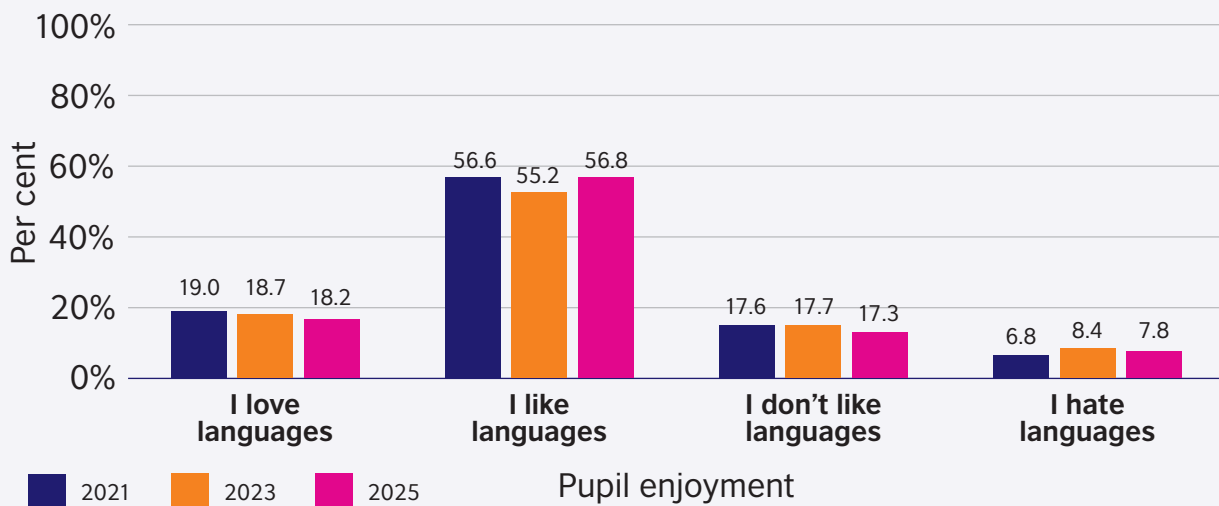


## Do Year 9 pupils enjoy language learning?

Even though there is room for improvement in helping young people to see and understand the usefulness of

languages, three out of four pupils enjoy language learning (see Figure 12).

### Do you enjoy learning languages?



**Figure 12:** Year 9 pupils' enjoyment of language learning in 2021, 2023 and 2025

Year 9 pupils were also asked to pick their main feelings about language learning. Pupils' main three feelings about languages are that:

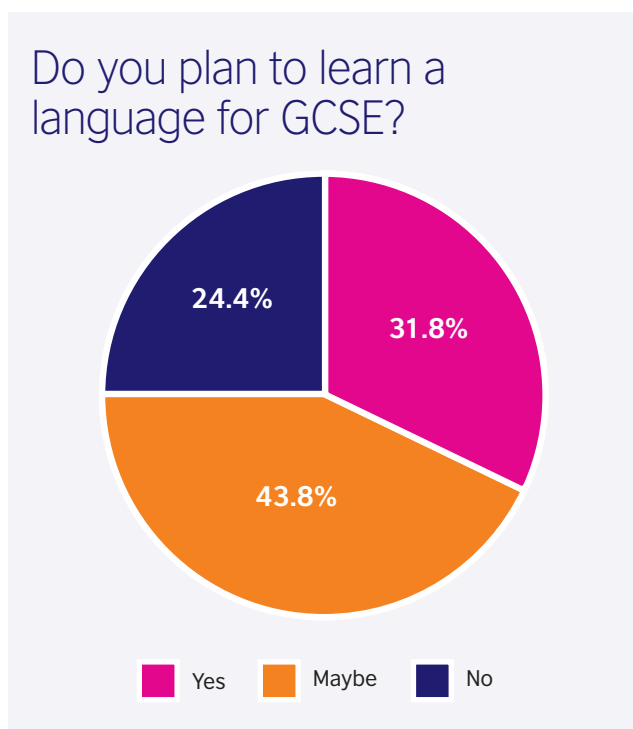
- language classes are 'fun';
- they like speaking the language;
- language classes are boring.

These sentiments largely echo findings from the 2023 cohort, with the exception that 'language classes are boring' has replaced 'there are too many words to learn' in 2025. This suggests that different learners have different experiences and emotions in relation to language learning; nevertheless, it is a positive finding that many learners enjoy language classes and speaking a language.

### Thinking ahead: continuing with languages

Fifteen per cent of the Year 9 pupils surveyed said that GCSE languages are compulsory for everyone in their school, but 27.5 per cent did not know their school policy on compulsion.

All pupils were asked if they plan to learn a language for GCSE (see Figure 13); less than one third (31.8 per cent) intend to, while 43.8 per cent were unsure. Comparatively, in 2021, 44 per cent of the Year 9 pupils surveyed intended to study a language for GCSE.



**Figure 13:** Year 9 responses to 'Do you plan to learn a language for GCSE?'

Pupils who responded 'no' provided further comments on why they do not plan to study a language for GCSE. Some common themes emerged:

- languages are too difficult;
- there are too many words to learn;
- pupils do not feel like they are good at languages;
- pupils do not intend to use their language knowledge/do not see benefits for career;
- some pupils simply do not enjoy learning a language;
- languages are boring.

In 2025, 18.7 per cent of pupils surveyed intend to learn a language for A level, compared to 9.9 per cent of pupils surveyed in 2021. The pupils who said 'yes' intend to study one of French, German, Irish, Polish or Spanish; one commented:

"Yes, I am planning on doing languages for A levels, as they are useful and it's enjoyable being able to speak multiple languages, and I think it would be useful for my future career options."

Two-fifths (40.6 per cent) of pupils are unsure if they will study a language at A level; for many learners in Year 9, the prospect of studying A levels is too far in the future for them to know how they will feel. Some comments included:

"I'm not interested in learning languages at the moment, but maybe I will change my mind about it later."

"I am not entirely sure because I'm not completely sure as to what I would like to do for my future job yet."

"I might have other interests by the time it comes to A levels."

"I can possibly see myself doing this, but mostly likely not. It depends on how I feel about and progress in languages during the rest of my years at school."

A further two-fifths of Year 9 pupils reported that they will not study a language at A level and commented why:

“I don’t really want a job involving languages.”

“I don’t think that I will really use another language in the future other than English because more people speak it or understand it rather than other languages.”

“No because languages are very confusing and I don’t understand them.”

“I don’t think I need to do A level languages and it’s a lot of work and I don’t think there’s a point in me doing it.”

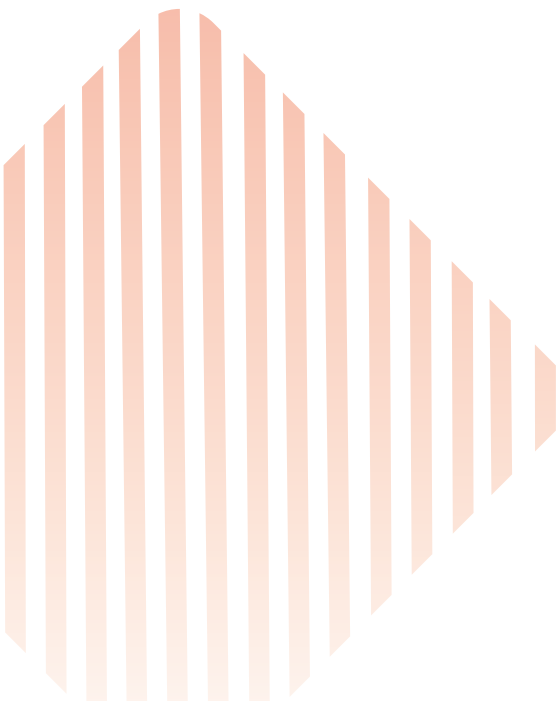
“I find it difficult to learn the vocab and I’d be too nervous to speak in the language for the teacher testing me.”

“Because it is absolutely useless. Universities don’t care about it.”

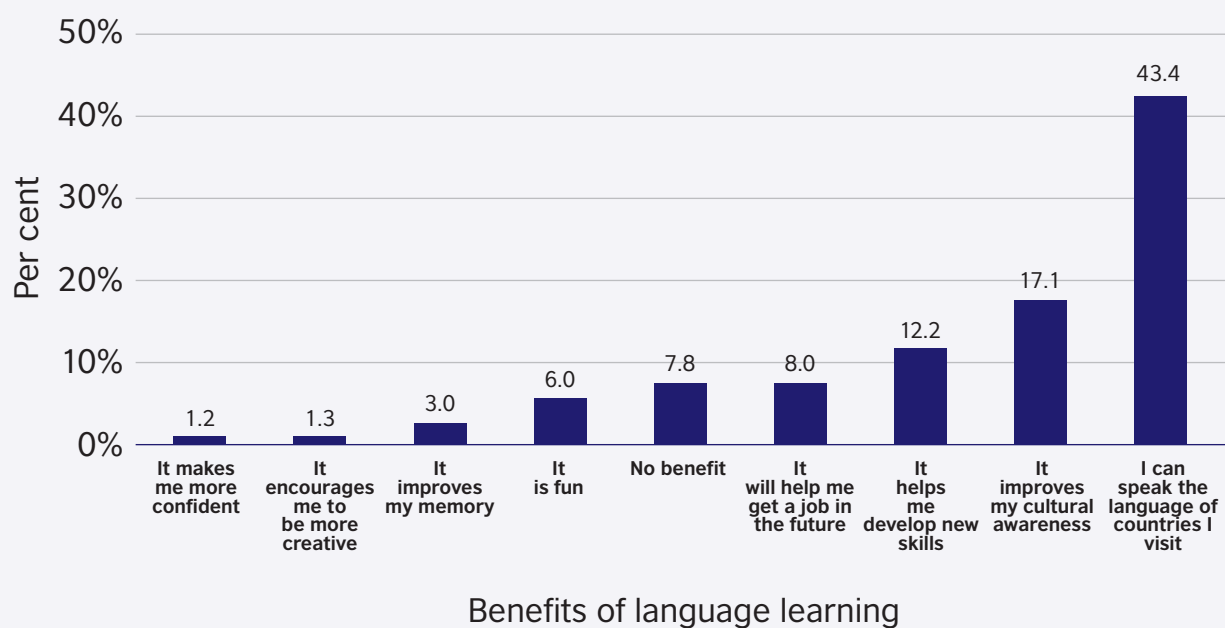
What young people hear about language learning on social media, in daily life and at home is key to opening their perspectives on the skills and knowledge they can gain through language education. These comments reflect that many young people are not aware of the benefits of plurilingualism, and instead associate language learning with negative factors, with many pupils questioning the necessity of learning a language if they do not think they will use it for their career. Now more than ever, it is crucial to critically frame a positive discourse surrounding languages, and the current Northern Ireland curriculum review presents a timely opportunity to address these points.

## Pupil perspectives on language learning

Year 9 pupils were asked what they think is the greatest benefit of learning a language at school (see Figure 14); for 43.4 per cent, this is being able to speak the language of the countries they visit. Just under a fifth of young people consider the improvement of their cultural awareness as a great benefit to learning a language; few think that it will help them secure a job in the future.



What do you think is the greatest benefit of learning a language at school? Please select one.



**Figure 14:** Pupil perspectives on the greatest benefit of learning a language at school





The pupils surveyed were asked what would make learning a language in school better. The word ‘fun’ was mentioned 164 times by pupils, and ‘less boring’ 20 times. Over one hundred pupils suggested learning languages through games, or more ‘interactive’ activities:

“More interactive activities and more learning about the country and culture rather than simply memorising endless vocabulary.”

“I think it’ll be better if the teacher plays games based on the topic of the language with the entire class, as it’ll be fun and the pupils will most likely remember the stuff they were taught whilst playing the game.”

“I think more language themed games should be encouraged and mini clubs that encourages students to participate in speaking the language.”

“Instead of loads of written work (although it is mostly beneficial) we could do more practical and creative tasks using quizzes, ICT and creative resources. I think this would really help me understand and remember words and phrases better.”

Forty-one pupils suggested that using more ICT in their lessons would help with their language learning, 25 pupils mentioned going on school trips, and 32 pupils expressed a desire to have the option to choose which language they learn.

“

**Over one hundred pupils suggested learning languages through games, or more ‘interactive’ activities.**





# Languages in post-primary schools

## Profile of responding post-primary schools

The 2024/25 school census recorded 190 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, 124 of which are secondary schools and 66 are grammar schools. One hundred and five post-primary schools responded to the *Language Trends Northern Ireland 2025* post-primary survey, comprising 49 grammar schools and 56 secondary schools. This resulted in a high response rate of 55.3 per cent.

The number of learners enrolled in post-primary schools has increased from 154,312 in 2023 to 156,895 in the 2024/25 academic year, an increase of more than 2,000 pupils. There are 29,554 learners enrolled in sixth form in the 2024/25 academic year, an increase of over 400 since the previous census (NISRA, 2025).

Twenty-six per cent of all young people in funded education in Northern Ireland are entitled to free school meals, however, the breakdown of this figure varies between school types. A low number of pupils (11

per cent) are entitled to free school meals in the grammar sector, compared to 32 per cent of pupils in the non-grammar sector. Combined, the FSME average in the post-primary sector is 23 per cent (NISRA, 2025).

Based on publicly available FSME data for post-primary schools in the 2024/25 school year, the research team calculated the quintiles for FSME in the post-primary sector (see Table 4). The FSM average amongst the post-primary survey respondents is 23.5 per cent, akin to the total post-primary FSM average of 23 per cent. Notably, in quintile one, there are no responding secondary schools; and in quintile five, there are no responding grammar schools. This highlights a significant point of disparity in the socio-economic profile of responding schools, with almost half of respondents in quintiles one or two, the majority of which are grammar schools.

Quintile	Quintile range	Percentage of respondents in quintile
1 – least deprived	0–10.30%	26.5%
2	10.31–20.08%	21.6%
3	20.09–26.84%	16.7%
4	26.85–34.95%	14.7%
5 – most deprived	34.96% and above	20.6%

**Table 4:** FSME quintiles for post-primary schools and percentage of responding schools in each quintile

## Time for languages at Key Stage 3

Time in the curriculum, an engaging and relevant syllabus, and high-quality language teaching are key factors in helping pupils learn a language and progress in their studies (Graham et al., 2024). As noted in previous iterations of *Language Trends Northern Ireland*, the amount of time for language learning at key stages varies between schools, as well as between the grammar and secondary sectors. Time for language learning remains largely consistent between Years 8 and 10 in the secondary sector, with

over 70 per cent of schools reporting that one to two hours of time is allocated to language learning (see Table 6). By comparison, schools in the grammar sector reported that more class time is allocated for language learning, with 26.5 per cent of schools reporting two to three hours, and a further 20.4 per cent reporting three to four hours, is spent on language learning in Year 10 (see Table 5).

	Grammar (% calculated out of 49)				
	Less than 1 hour	1–2 hours	2–3 hours	3–4 hours	More than 4 hours
Year 8	0.0%	40.8%	40.8%	12.2%	4.1%
Year 9	0.0%	34.7%	30.6%	24.5%	8.2%
Year 10	0.0%	42.9%	26.5%	20.4%	8.2%

**Table 5:** The total amount of class time per week allocated for language learning in Years 8–10 in responding grammar schools

	Secondary (% calculated out of 56)				
	Less than 1 hour	1–2 hours	2–3 hours	3–4 hours	More than 4 hours
Year 8	3.6%	76.8%	16.1%	3.6%	1.8%
Year 9	5.4%	71.4%	14.3%	3.6%	1.8%
Year 10	5.4%	75.0%	14.3%	1.8%	3.6%

**Table 6:** The total amount of class time per week allocated for language learning in Years 8–10 in responding secondary schools

## Languages learnt in Key Stage 3

For the first time, Spanish is the most widely taught language at Key Stage 3, followed by French, Irish and German. Teachers were asked what languages either all, or some, of their pupils were learning as part of the normal school day in Key Stage 3; when combined, these responses evidence that Spanish is taught in 84.8 per cent of responding schools (compared to 80 per cent in 2023). Eighty-one per cent of schools reported that pupils are learning French, down from 90 per cent in 2023. Sixteen per cent of schools teach German, one per cent less than the figure reported in 2023. Irish language learning is increasing, with 41.9 per cent of schools reporting that learners study Irish in 2025, compared to 35 per cent in 2023.

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**For the first time,  
Spanish is the most  
widely taught language  
at Key Stage 3.**

## Key Stage 3 accreditation scheme

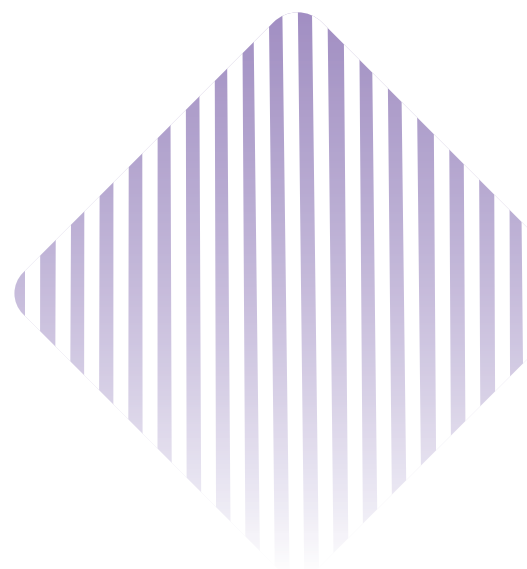
Approximately two out of five responding teachers are in favour of a refreshed recognition scheme for languages at Key Stage 3 (compared to five in ten in 2023). Teachers commented what this could look like:

“Yes, a short modular course based on relevant topics and language progression. Pupils would need to gain a sense of achievement, confidence and self-efficacy to help build numbers at GCSE.”

“Yes. A short course certificate would encourage students to continue language learning as rewards always drive motivation.”

“Yes, I think it would be a good idea since success and recognition at this level would encourage further study at GCSE. A clear, well-defined programme of study with user friendly resources which mimic GCSE would be good.”

“Yes, but it needs to be something that is recognised and cost effective.”



## Languages at Key Stage 4

All learners in Northern Ireland are provided with the opportunity to continue with language study beyond age 14; however, it is not a requirement of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and many learners stop learning languages in Year 10, once it is no longer a curricular requirement. Eleven schools require learners to continue with language study as part of their school's curriculum, but this is not the case in the majority of schools.

Teachers surveyed were asked 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). The research team calculated 39.5 per cent to be the combined average of Year 11 learners in 2024/25 who are learning a language in Northern Ireland grammar and secondary schools. Teachers in the grammar sector estimate that 61.3 per cent of their Year 11 learners study a language, a decline of 14 per cent since 2023. It is positive to note that 20.2 per cent of learners in secondary schools are learning a language, an increase of four per cent since 2023; furthermore, six

secondary schools reported that no Year 11 pupils study a language, compared to 11 schools in 2023, though statistical significance cannot be assured.

In the past three iterations of *Language Trends Northern Ireland*, teachers were asked to think about Key Stage 4 uptake in languages over the past three years (see Table 7).

Thirty-nine per cent of respondents reported that fewer pupils now study a language at Key Stage 4, compared to 45 per cent in 2021; this is a positive difference of six per cent. In the 2025 survey, 15 per cent reported that more pupils take a language, compared to 11 per cent in 2023. In 'other' comments, some teachers observed the following:

"Classes are only allowed to run if there is a minimum of ten students. In previous years, smaller groups would have been facilitated to keep GCSE languages going."

"Spanish is fairly constant; Irish has increased in Year 11 this year."

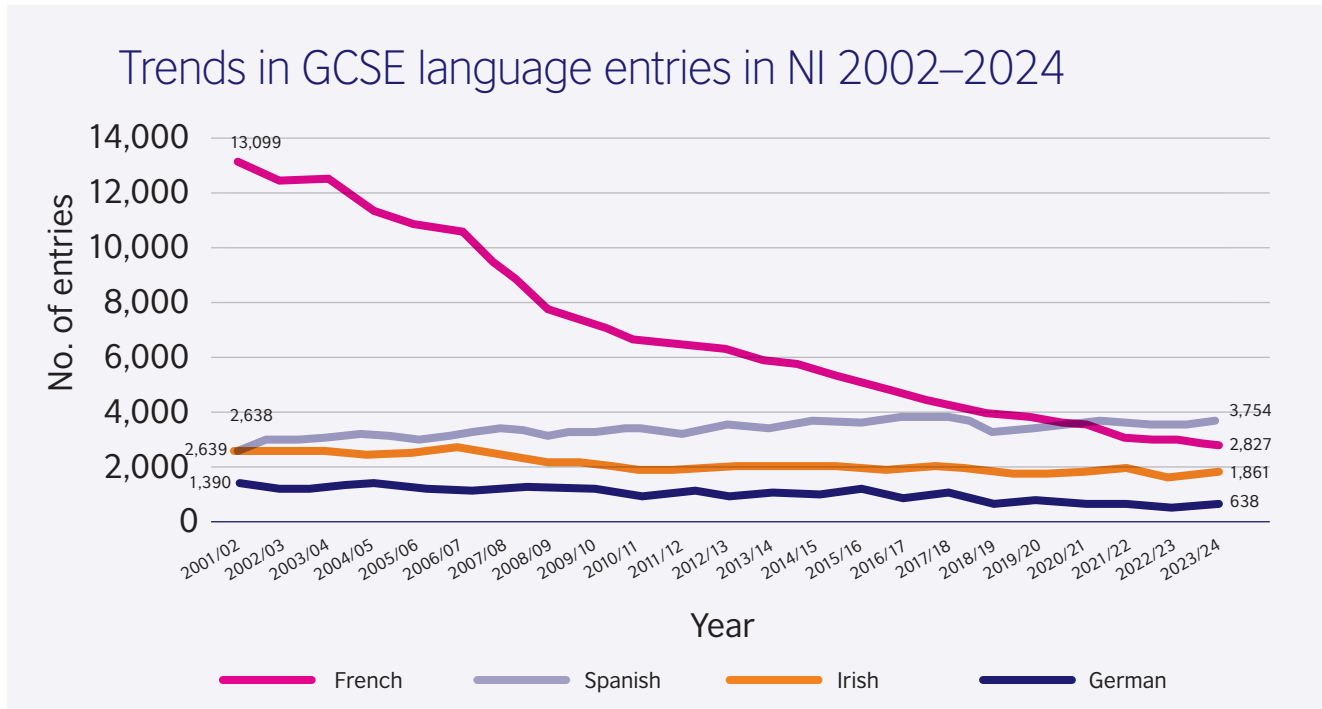
"Most pupils must take a language. About ten per cent are exempted due to special needs or dyslexia."

	2021 (109 responses)	2023 (97 responses)	2025 (105 responses)
Fewer pupils now take a language at Key Stage 4	45%	40%	39%
Similar numbers to before	21%	25%	19%
More pupils now take a language at Key Stage 4	12%	11%	15%
No clear trend: numbers fluctuate from year to year	8%	9%	10%
Languages are still compulsory for all pupils at Key Stage 4	8%	9%	10%
Other (please specify)	6%	6%	7%

**Table 7:** Teachers’ perceptions of Key Stage 4 uptake over the past three years (responses from 2021, 2023 and 2025).



## Official data on GCSE entries in languages



**Figure 15:** Entry data for GCSE Modern Languages in Northern Ireland, 2002–2024 (Source: Joint Council for Qualifications [JCQ])

Figure 15 presents Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) exam entry data for French, German, Irish and Spanish from 2002 to 2024.<sup>8</sup> Spanish overtook French as the most popular GCSE language in Northern Ireland in 2021, and entries have continued to rise with 3,754 pupils studying Spanish for GCSE in 2024. The decline in French has slowed, but there

is a continued downward trajectory, with 2,827 entries in 2024 compared to 3,151 in 2022. Irish entries have increased in 2024 with 1,861 pupils, compared to 1,620 in 2023. Since 2002, German entries have declined by over 50 per cent, with 638 recorded in 2024 (compared to 1,390 in 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Please note that the data represent entries, not pupil numbers.

The popularity of Spanish over French is reflected in several comments made by teachers noting how languages are organised in their school:

“We are currently transitioning from teaching only French, to teaching only Spanish. We have our final GCSE French cohort now in Year 11. All of Year 8, 9 and 10 currently study Spanish.”

“All students study Spanish in Key Stage 3. GCSE Spanish is the option for GCSE.”

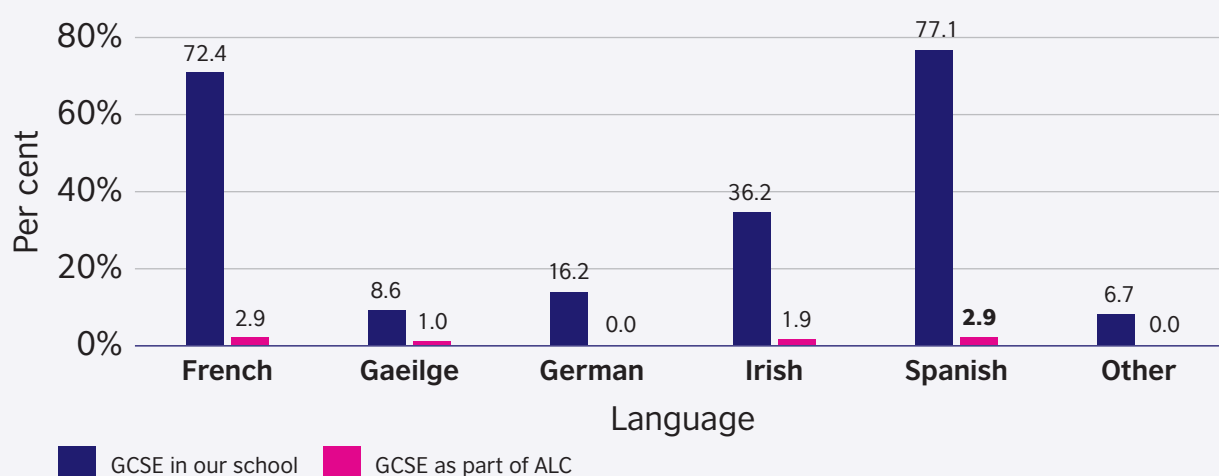
“All pupils do French in Year 8. At the end of Year 8 pupils are given a free choice of which additional language to study (German or Spanish) in Years 9 and 10. This usually breaks down into a 2/3 to 1/3 split with Spanish being the preferred option.”

“Key Stage 4 – languages are not compulsory. We have 46 pupils in Year 12 Spanish, reducing to 24 in Year 11. There is a very small uptake of French.”

“This is the first year where no Year 11 pupils chose to do French GCSE. There are currently ten Year 12 Spanish GCSE pupils.”

When asked what GCSE languages were being learnt in the 2024/25 school year, 77.1 per cent of post-primary schools responded that pupils are learning Spanish, while just over 70 per cent reported that learners were studying French. Over a third of schools who responded to the survey have pupils who are learning GCSE Irish in the 2024/25 school year, and 16.2 per cent reported the learning of German (see Figure 16).

### Languages learned at GCSE as full timetabled subjects or as part of an ALC



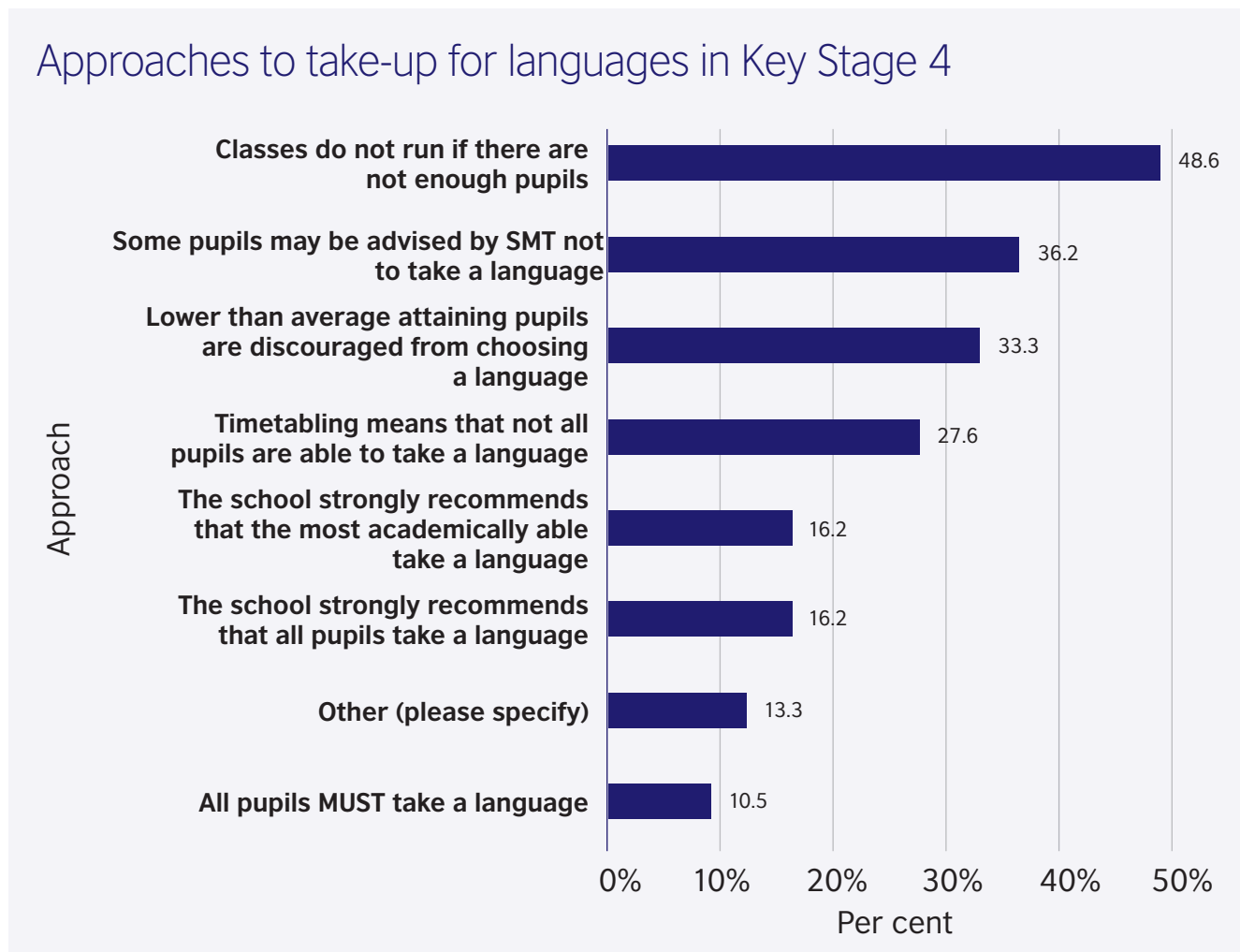
**Figure 16:** Respondent answers to ‘Which languages are currently being learned at GCSE by some of your pupils as full timetabled subjects within your school? And which languages are currently being learned by pupils from your school at a nearby school as part of your Area Learning Community (ALC)?’



## School approaches to take-up for languages in Key Stage 4

In just less than half of all responding schools, language classes do not run if there are not enough learners; pupils in over a third of schools may be advised by SMT not to study languages, while a further third are discouraged from choosing a language if they have lower than average attainment. In ‘other’

comments, several teachers noted that students have free choice to study a language or not; however, overall teacher responses in Figure 17 suggest that there are several discouraging limitations placed upon learner choice and the freedom to study a language put in place by school policies.



**Figure 17:** Post-primary respondent answers to ‘What is your school’s approach to take-up for languages in Key Stage 4? (tick all that apply)’



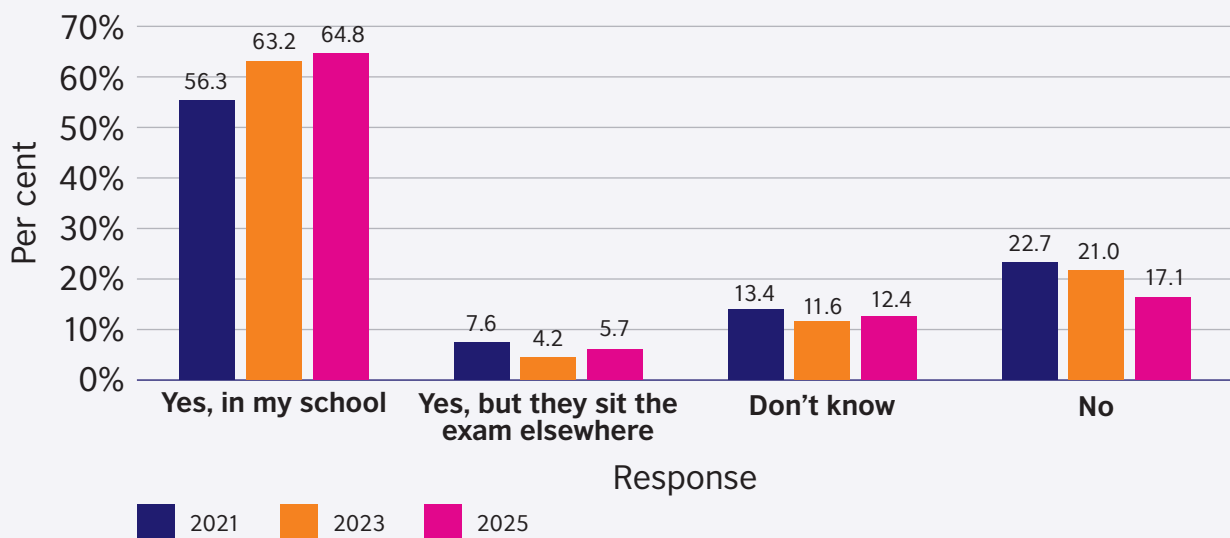
## Home, Heritage and Community (HHCL) languages

In Northern Ireland, learners for whom English or Irish is not their home language are referred to as ‘newcomer’ pupils (Education Authority, 2023). Newcomer pupils may not have sufficient English or Irish language skills to fully engage and participate in the school curriculum, and their home language is not the same as that of their teacher, whether it be English or Irish. There are more than 21,350 newcomer pupils enrolled in Northern Ireland schools, accounting for six per cent of the total school population in 2024/25, which is an increase of more than 3,960 pupils since 2019/20 (DE, 2025). In the grammar sector, one per

cent of enrolled learners are newcomers, while this figure is just under five per cent in secondary schools. Amongst schools responding to the *Language Trends Northern Ireland* survey, a high number (87.6 per cent) reported that they have learners in their school for whom English is not their home language.

In 2025, seven out of ten schools offer pupils the opportunities to take exams in their home or community languages, either in the school or elsewhere. This continues the positive increase in the number of schools offering such opportunities since 2021 (see Figure 18).

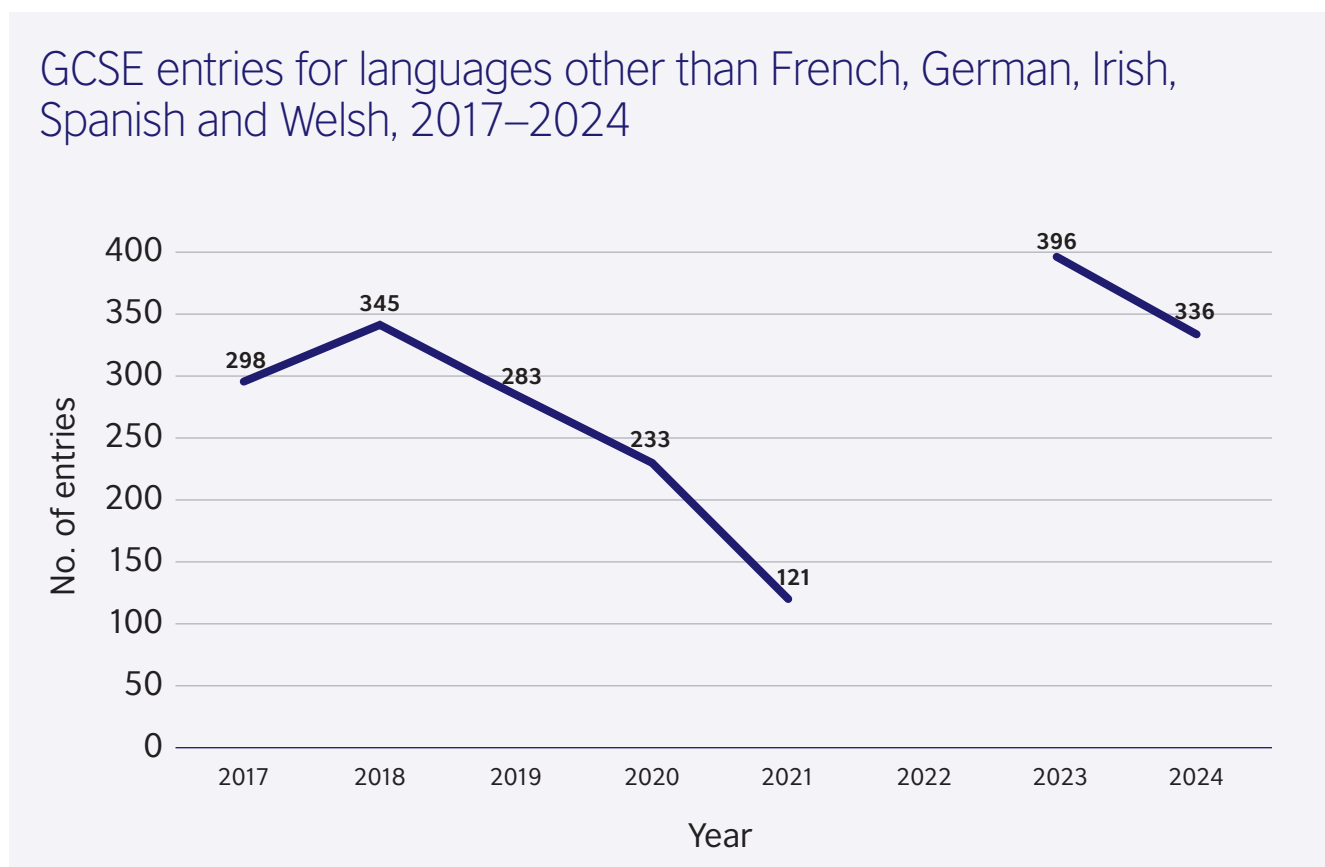
### Opportunities to sit HHCL exams 2021–2025



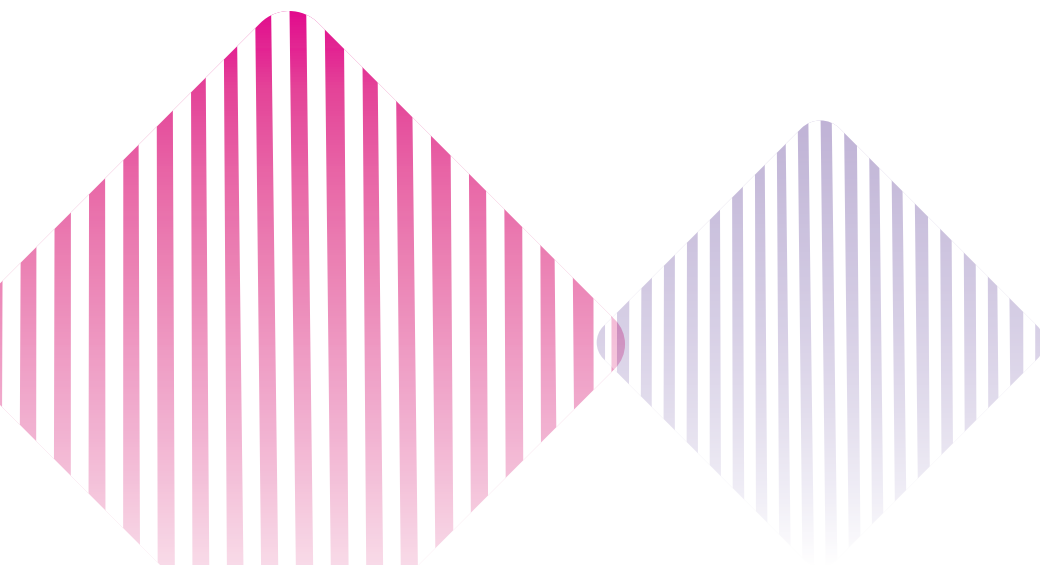
**Figure 18:** The percentage of schools offering pupils the opportunity to take exams in their home or community languages 2021, 2023 and 2025

GCSE exam entries in Northern Ireland for languages other than French, German, Irish, Spanish and Welsh are presented in Figure 19. Although there is a decrease of 60 entries between 2023 and 2024,

it is positive to note the overall upward trajectory of GCSE entries in other languages (please note that all data is taken from JCQ and the exact figure for 2022 is not publicly available or known).



**Figure 19:** GCSE entries for other languages, 2017–2024 (Source: JCQ; data not available for 2022)

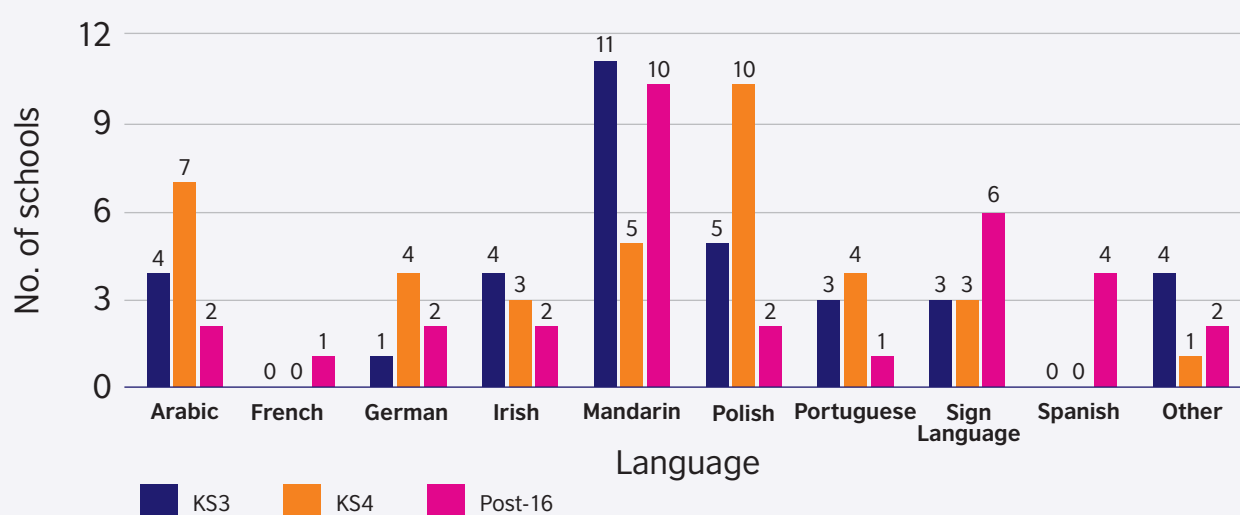


## Languages learnt as enrichment subjects

In the 2024/25 school year, there is some evidence of Arabic, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese and Sign Language being

taught as enrichment or extra-curricular subjects amongst responding schools (see Figure 20 for the raw number of schools).

### Languages learnt by pupils as enrichment or extra-curricular subjects



**Figure 20:** Raw number of schools who reported these languages as being learnt by pupils as extra-curricular or enrichment subjects, either in the school or in an Area Learning Community (ALC)

## Languages post-16

Languages are delivered post-16 in over 70 per cent of schools (see Table 8). Just over a fifth of schools do not have post-

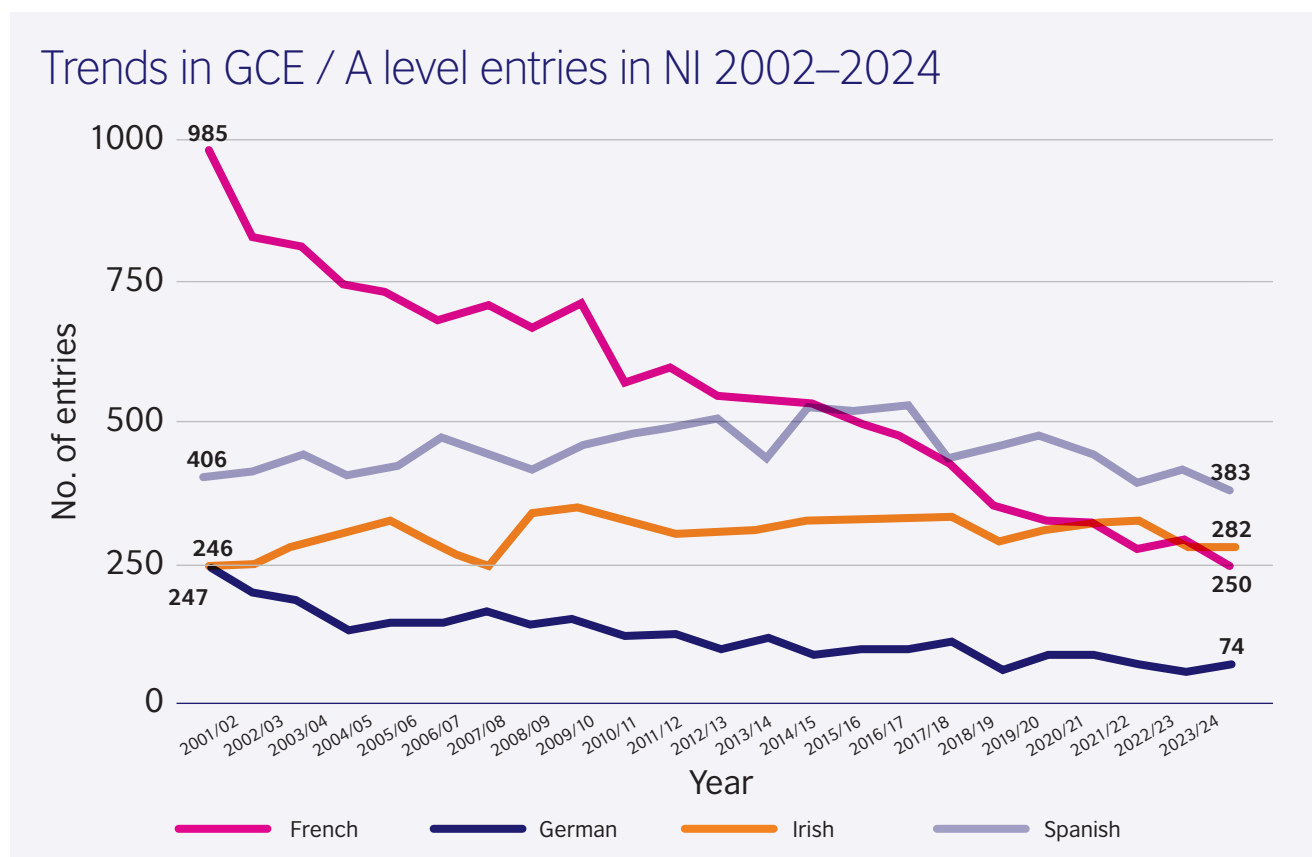
16 provision in languages, the majority of which are secondary schools.

Yes, delivered wholly in my school	41.0%
Yes, delivered between my school and a school in our Area Learning Community	16.2%
Yes, but delivered wholly by another school in our Area Learning Community	17.1%
No	21.9%
Other	3.8%

**Table 8:** Respondent answers to 'Does your school have post-16 provision in languages?'

Spanish continues to have the highest number of entries, with 383 pupils enrolled in A level Spanish in 2024. Irish entries are stable, and it is the second most popular A level language in Northern Ireland with

282 entries, followed by French with 250 entries. German entries remain low at 74 in 2024, although this is a slight increase since 2023 (see Figure 21).

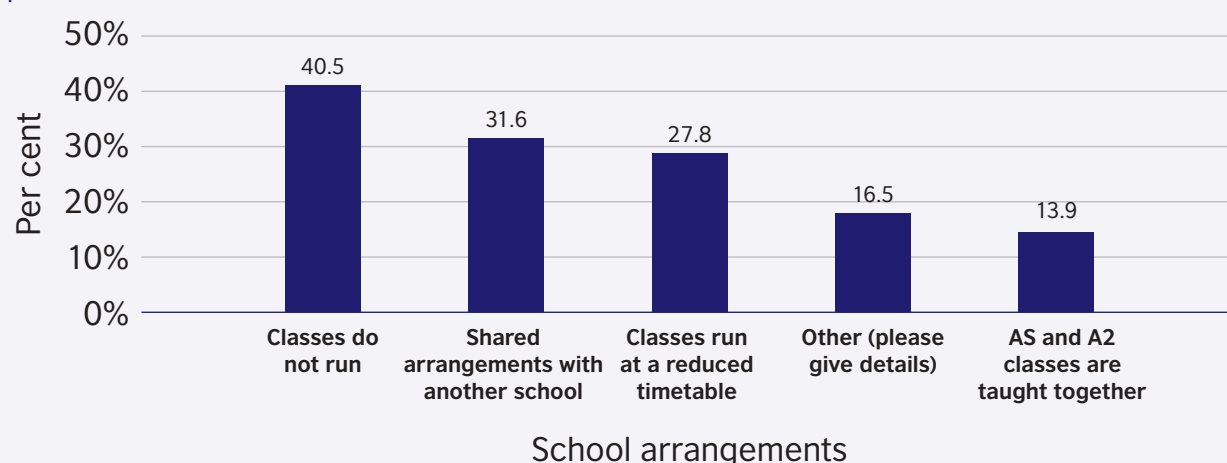


**Figure 21:** Entry data for A level Modern Languages in Northern Ireland, 2002–2024 (Source: JCQ)

In schools with post-16 provision, language classes are generally small with over a third of responding teachers reporting that there are five or fewer post-16 pupils studying a language in Year 13 or Year 14. A quarter of schools reported that no learners currently study any languages post-16 (consistent with the findings of *Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023*).

Teachers were asked about the arrangements in place, if any, when only a few post-16 learners wish to study a language (see Figure 22); for 40.5 per cent, classes do not take place if this is the case. There are shared arrangements with another school amongst 31.6 per cent of respondents, and classes are delivered at a reduced timetable in 27.8 per cent of schools.

## Arrangements when a few pupils wish to study a language post-16



**Figure 22:** Responses to ‘What arrangements are in place, if any, when only a few pupils wish to study a language post-16?’ (Respondents ticked all that applied)

The number of pupils required for an A level language class to be timetabled varies, with 22.8 per cent of respondents reporting that this is not applicable to them. The remaining respondents specified a range of numbers, from three to ten, reflecting a lack of consistency and standardisation.

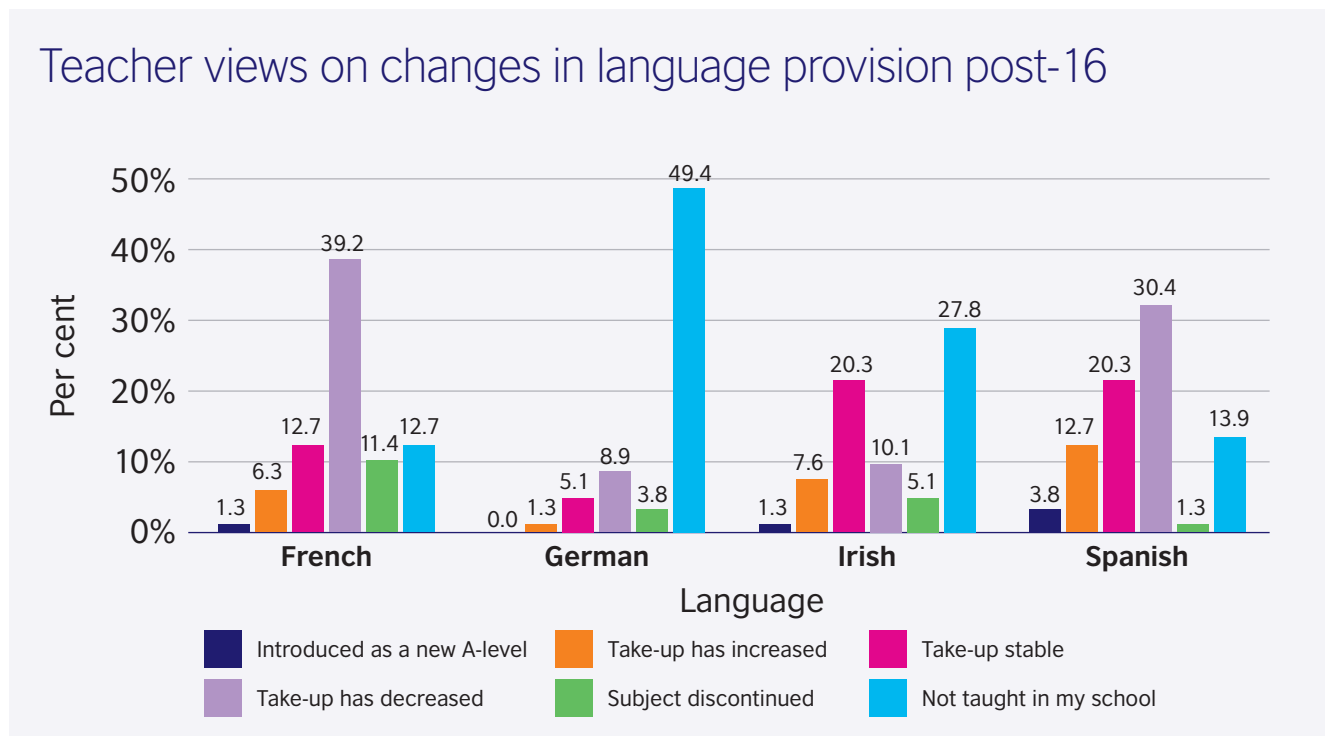
In schools with post-16 provision, Spanish and Irish uptake is stable in a fifth of schools. However, a considerable number of schools have reported that Spanish and French take-up has decreased (see Figure 23). As a subject, French has also been discontinued in over ten per cent of schools, evidencing an overall downward trend in the uptake of French in schools and suggests a dwindling pipeline of future French linguists.

In reflecting on the changes in uptake and provision, teachers commented:

“Our Spanish take-up has generally increased steadily at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5. We think that the decrease in French post-16 is due to the harsh-level grading at GCSE meaning that pupils believe themselves to be underachieving.”

“Lower than expected results in GCSE French (mainly due to a very challenging listening paper) last year which had an impact on numbers.”

“In Spanish we have only seen a small decrease. In French there has been a much bigger decrease. In my opinion, pupils consider doing a language a very onerous task and most pupils in our school seem to want to pursue a career in Mathematics and in Science.”



**Figure 23:** Teacher responses to the following question: ‘Thinking about the last three years, what changes have there been, if any, in take-up and provision for languages post-16 in your school?’

## Modern Language Assistants

Language assistants provide an invaluable opportunity for learners to communicate with a real-life speaker of the language that they are learning, as well as helping them strengthen their intercultural and linguistic skills. While there remains a demand for language assistants, the numbers may be affected by increased charges and the financial barriers caused by UK immigration policy.

As in previous years, all responding post-primary schools were asked if they employ a language assistant either through the British Council or otherwise. Between

2023 and 2025, 12 additional schools report that they employ a Spanish-speaking assistant, and the number of Irish-speaking language assistants has increased from 13 in 2023 to 18 in 2025 (see Table 9 for further data on language assistants). It is important to note that several schools will share a language assistant with another school, so the number of schools reporting that they employ a language assistant will not necessarily equate to a total headcount of language assistants employed in Northern Ireland.

	2021 (n <sup>9</sup> =109)	2023 (n=97)	2025 (n=105)
Arabic	*	Unknown	*
French	54	40	41
German	15	11	13
Irish	22	13	18
Mandarin	*	8	5
Polish	*	Unknown	Unknown
Spanish	47	40	52

**Table 9:** Number of responding post-primary schools who employ a language assistant in 2021, 2023 and 2025 (\*=less than five schools)

## International dimension in post-primary schools

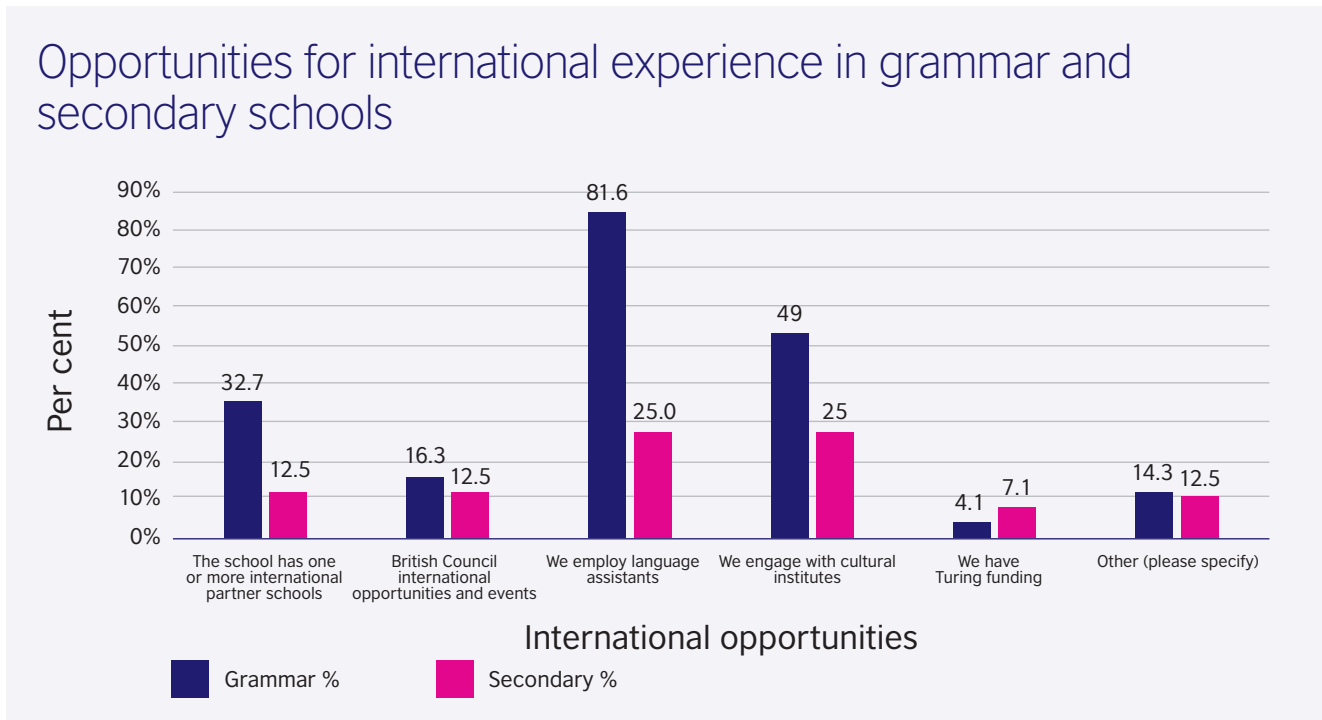
Schools have reported less engagement in international opportunities in the 2024/25 school year, with 51.4 per cent employing language assistants (compared to 64.7 per cent in 2023), 36.2 per cent engage with cultural institutes (compared to 39.7 per cent in 2023), and only 14.3 per cent engage with British Council International Opportunities (compared to 22.1 per cent in 2023). School links with partner schools remain largely consistent with the figure reported in 2023 (21.9 per cent in 2025, 23.5 per cent in 2023).

However, when this data is analysed and broken down between the secondary and grammar sectors, disparities emerge that suggest there are greater opportunities for international experience in grammar schools than in secondary schools. Figure

24 shows the differences in international experience and engagement between the sectors; out of the responding grammar schools, 81.6 per cent employ a language assistant, compared to 25 per cent of responding secondary schools. Forty-nine per cent of responding grammar schools engage with cultural institutes, compared to 25 per cent of the secondary schools who responded to the survey. This imbalance is likewise seen in the number of schools who have links with international partner schools, with a third of grammar schools reporting links compared to 12.5 per cent of secondary schools. In 'other' comments, both sectors noted school trips abroad, while some schools reported that their staff and pupils currently do not engage with any international opportunities.

<sup>9</sup> Here "n=" refers to the total number of responding post-primary schools.





**Figure 24:** International dimension in responding grammar and secondary schools

Schools were asked to comment further on their international dimension, focusing on international school visits and trips, and teachers provided some positive reflections on current opportunities:

“School trips to Paris, Berlin and Barcelona. Links to schools in Spain have resulted in us hosting pupils for two to three months in our school. German students come for a term (usually one per year).”

“Our school visits France/Belgium as part of the History Department and they go to Italy for the Ski trip. As a Spanish

department, we are hoping to get a trip up and running in the very near future, perhaps every other year.”

“We have gained the international schools award through the British Council. [...] We have formed partner schools through the British Council and are currently working on joint projects.”

“We have a partner school in Mexico, developed through Turing Scheme funding. GCSE and A Level Spanish students visited in March 2024 and will visit again in April 2025.”

However, several schools highlighted ongoing disruption to international activities and trips abroad caused by the global pandemic:

“Covid meant a trip was cancelled and we haven’t got it back up and running yet. Hopefully next year.”

“No visits since Covid. A French trip used to run biannually. International dimension is not valued by school and only happens if individual teachers do it.”

“We have not organised a trip since before the pandemic – much too expensive.”

## Barriers to uptake

The survey asked teachers what they see as the main challenges to providing high quality language learning experiences for pupils in their school; the nature and content of external exams, relevance of languages for pupils and their future career, and external grading remain the top three challenges:

- i. The nature and content of external exams (37.1 per cent in 2025, 38.5 per cent in 2023);
- ii. Pupils do not see the relevance of languages for their future career (24.8 per cent in 2025, 16.1 per cent in 2023);
- iii. The way external exams are marked and graded (13.3 per cent in 2025, 27.1 per cent in 2023).

Teachers have consistently reported the nature and content of external exams as the biggest challenge to providing high quality language learning experiences for pupils (reported in *Language Trends Northern Ireland* in 2019, 2021, 2023 and now 2025), as well as grading. One teachers’ comment summarises the sentiment shared by several respondents:

“Pupils view languages as too hard, and I’m inclined to agree with them, as examiners mark incredibly harshly at GCSE. [...] Examiners and exams boards need to be far more realistic in their expectations. GCSE should not mean fluency and pupils studying GCSE languages should be able to immerse themselves in the language and culture and enjoy their learning, not just focus on learning endless amounts of vocabulary and grammar.”

“

**Teachers have consistently reported the nature and content of external exams as the biggest challenge to providing high quality language learning experiences for pupils.**

For the first time, *Language Trends Northern Ireland* asked teachers about their professional opinion on the GCSE Summer 2024 grades achieved by pupils in comparison to other subjects. Respondent answers to this question are presented as raw figures in Table 10. Across the board, few schools reported that their pupils got a higher grade than expected. In those schools with Key Stage 4 French, 33 reported that their pupils got the grade they deserved, while 32 believe pupils' grades were lower than expected.

While German is only taught in a low number of schools, opinions are divided between pupils obtaining the grade they deserved (n=6), and pupils' grades being lower than expected (n=7). Twenty schools (out of 38) reported that their pupils got the grade they deserved in GCSE Irish, while eight schools expected the grades to be higher. Out of the 72 schools who answered this question in relation to GCSE Spanish, 47 believe that pupils got the grade they deserved, while 14 reported pupils' grades were lower than expected.

	French	German	Irish	Spanish
In general, our pupils got a higher grade than expected	5	1	3	9
In general, our pupils got the grade they deserved	33	6	20	47
In general, our pupils' grades were lower than expected	32	7	8	14
Don't know	4	1	7	2
Not applicable to our school/not answered	31	90	67	33

**Table 10:** Respondent answers presented as raw figures to 'Following GCSE Awarding in Summer 2024, what is your professional opinion on grades achieved by your pupils in comparison to other subjects?'

Language reforms in French, German and Spanish are underway in England that aim to make language learning a more appealing and attainable GCSE subject choice with defined frequency word lists of the most common occurring vocabulary in each language. Based on these reforms, teachers responding to the *Language Trends Northern Ireland* survey were

asked if they would welcome similarly defined frequency word lists (1200 at Foundation Tier and 1700 at Higher Tier) for CCEA GCSE Modern Languages. Many respondents said 'yes' (80 per cent), 15.2 per cent were unsure and just under five per cent said 'no'. Teachers were asked to expand upon their answer and those who said 'yes' noted the following:

“I would welcome anything and everything to make languages a more attractive and accessible option. Up until last year when we made the move away from compulsory language at GCSE, our pupils’ main complaint is that the amount of work expected from them (compared to other subjects) is not reflected in the grades they get.”

“Currently there is too much vocabulary specified and too much content to cover everything in the allocated time. This would make it fairer and cut down the pressure on having to cover the current content.”

“The course at GCSE level is enormous and this makes it particularly difficult for less able students. Teachers are flying through the course at breakneck speed and students do not have the time or opportunity to really enjoy some of the cultural aspects. I feel students would be more confident going into an exam (and so would teachers) if they knew the set list of vocabulary.”

Those who said ‘no’ to the word frequency lists agreed that in general the content of GCSE languages needs reduced and refreshed.

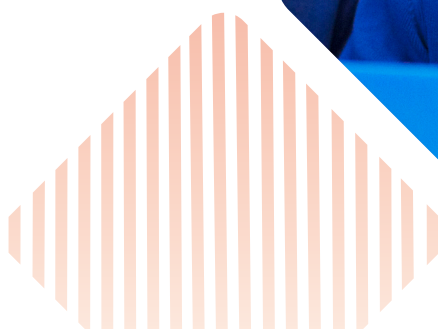
## Recruitment of language teachers

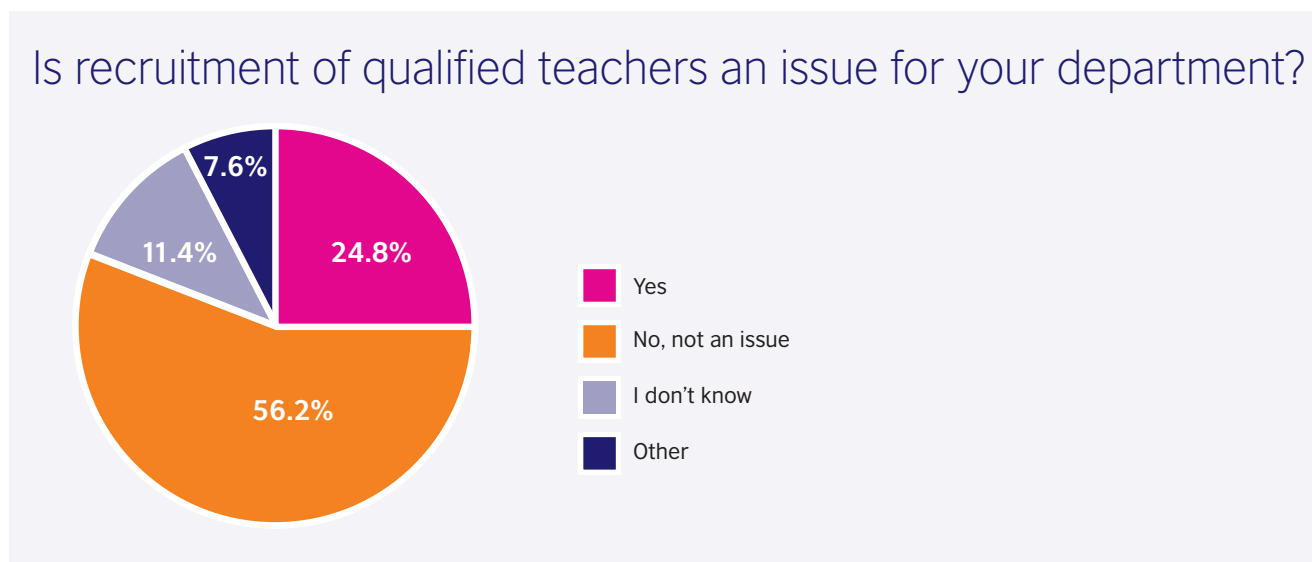
For the first time in the 2025 survey, respondents were asked if recruitment of qualified teachers is an issue in their department (see Figure 25). A quarter of schools revealed this to be an issue, 12 of whom were grammar schools and 14 were secondary schools. It is positive to note, however, that this is not an issue for over half of all post-primary schools surveyed (56.2 per cent). Eight per cent commented ‘other’ and challenges specified by those respondents included the following:

“We’ve not had to recruit a new teacher in some time. However, getting sub teachers with languages is difficult.”

“We haven’t recruited in a while, but substitute cover is very hard to find.”

“Retention could be a bigger issue.”



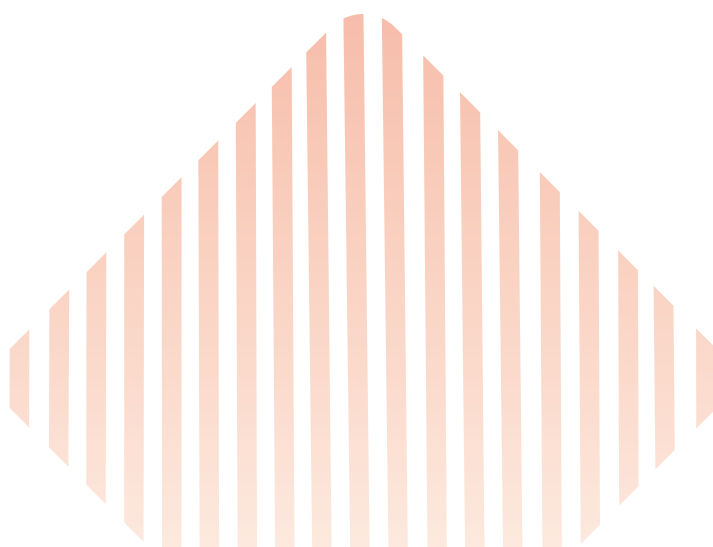


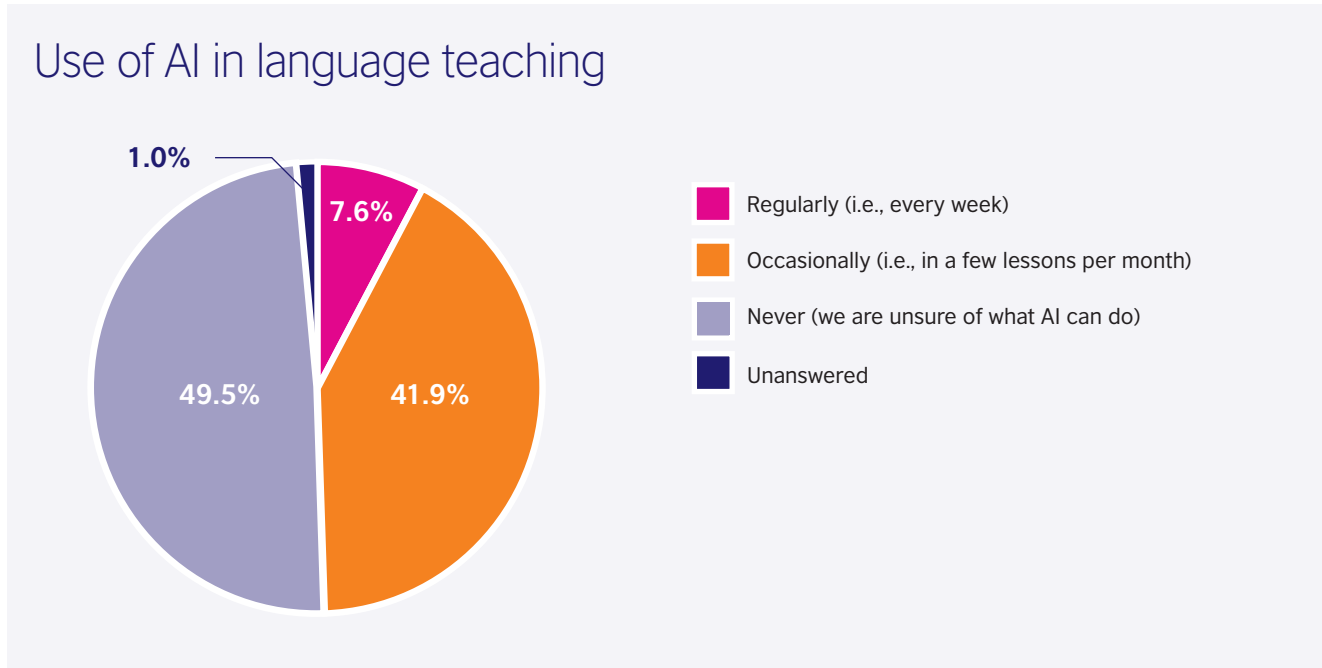
**Figure 25:** Respondent answers to 'Is recruitment of qualified languages teachers an issue for your department?'

## AI technology in the post-primary languages classroom

The British Council recently conducted a comprehensive review of AI and English language teaching that looks at AI-powered educational tools worldwide, with a vision to better prepare educators for using AI in the future (Edmett et al, 2024). Specific to the languages classroom, there are various AI technologies freely available online (such as ChatGPT, Diffet) that allow users to translate texts, create exercises, and provide interactive speakers in the target language. However, little research has been conducted on the benefits and challenges of using AI technology in the languages classroom. Moreover, there has been no official system-wide training provided to teachers in Northern Ireland schools on how to use these new technologies.

Teachers were asked a new question on their departmental use of AI technology in language teaching (see Figure 26). Very few schools (7.6 per cent) use AI technology regularly in language teaching, 41.9 per cent use it occasionally in a few lessons per month, while half of respondents never use it.





**Figure 26:** Respondent answers to ‘How often does your department make use of AI technology (such as ChatGPT, Diffet, etc) in language teaching?’

“

**Very few schools (7.6 per cent) use AI technology regularly in language teaching, 41.9 per cent use it occasionally in a few lessons per month, while half of respondents never use it.**

Teachers who use AI, either regularly or occasionally, were asked to comment further on departmental use of AI in the languages classroom. Most teachers commented that they use it to create worksheets, exercises, homework resources, with some respondents noting a very comprehensive knowledge of how to use AI to their advantage:

“AI is used to generate grammar exercises as it can do this very quickly. We also use it to create texts on certain subjects that we want to use as resources, especially at A level. We can ask for a particular standard of difficulty, and it can generate the appropriate material. We also use it to generate reading comprehension questions based on a text.”



“Not on a department level, but as an individual I have used AI in the following ways:

1) I have given Microsoft Co-Pilot our Schemes of Work for Key Stage 3 and asked it to design a schedule of retrieval practice for Y10 pupils so that each week, I am better informed on what Y8 or Y9 vocabulary or grammar I need to review with a class. 2) I have used AI to design WAGOLLs for classes from Y8–Y13, although the models often take some tweaking to an appropriate level. 3) I have used AI to design grammar drills for Y13 to help prepare them for the Use of Language part of their exam.”

However, other teachers noted that they are not proficient in AI educational technology, or that they would like training on how to use it, as thus far they have been ‘learning as they go’:

“Creating texts, gap fill exercises, matching exercises etc. We do not have enough knowledge of everything it can do.”

“We would be keen to explore MFL specific opportunities for AI with suitable training.”

“Very occasionally ... to rarely ... still coming to grips with the technology.”

“I would like to find out more about this and have only started to investigate it.”

“Teachers are becoming au fait with how AI can help, but training is needed as to how AI could be used for language resources, especially in subjects like Irish where many of the resources are teacher made. Irish teachers have used AI to create authentic listening material which is then recorded by our language assistant for A level assessments.”





## Teacher voice: recommendations and observations for the future of language learning

All post-primary respondents were asked to reflect on what can be done either in their school and/or at Northern Ireland level (system level) to improve language learning. Their suggestions included improving outcomes, more funding and raising the profile of languages:

“Improve outcomes – pupils need to be able to access top grades more easily. Improve course content – a reduction in content at GCSE and A level is imperative.”

“There was a big push at one time about STEM and that was all that was ever on the news. Perhaps a languages equivalent would be helpful. Funding for a language assistant for school to share.”

“Greater awareness and promotion of the benefits and career opportunities. Review of exam grading in comparison to other subjects.”

“In our school, we would benefit from re-establishing links with a partner school and organising educational trips again to the target language country.”



# Conclusion

Primary languages are on an upward trajectory, but schools need support and finance to develop and nurture a primary languages scheme of work. Primary practitioners are working diligently to introduce learners to languages, but they could be helped in their endeavours by strengthening links with local post-primary schools, and by improving their access to opportunities for international engagement in relation to language learning and education.

The Year 9 findings highlight that the 2025 post-primary classroom is linguistically diverse, with several different home languages spoken by young people. Many young people in Year 9 continue to enjoy learning languages and enjoy the benefit of being able to speak the language of the countries to which they travel. However, the Year 9 survey also revealed that young people can find the subject challenging and not engaging, suggesting that languages are 'boring', thus raising the question of how to better captivate the attention of young people and develop a lifelong love for languages. The comments made by Year 9 pupils allude to a lack of relevant and engaging content in the corpus, as well as some concerns about examinations, and, in some cases, learners do not see a connection with future career prospects.

The post-primary survey reveals that French is in decline, with schools that provide post-16 provision reporting that the subject has been discontinued (11.4 per cent), or that uptake has declined (39.2 per cent). The biggest barrier to uptake continues to be the nature and content of external exams, reported by 37.1 per cent of post-primary schools. A further concern unveiled by the survey is inconsistent and harsh grading; French had the highest number of schools reporting that their pupils got a lower grade than expected (reported in 32 schools), though this is counterbalanced by 33 schools reporting that pupils got the grade they deserved. In comparison, Spanish grading appears to be more consistent, with 47 (out of the 72 schools who answered this question) reporting that pupils got the grade they deserved.

Both the secondary and grammar sectors are working hard to deliver high-quality language teaching and education; however, the secondary sector faces greater challenges. Notably, in comparison to the grammar sector, there is less time for languages timetabled in Key Stage 3, and there are fewer reported opportunities for teachers and learners to engage with international experiences (see Figure 24). Overall, fewer pupils study languages in responding secondary

schools compared to responding grammar schools (61.3 per cent of Year 11's in grammar schools compared to 20.2 per cent of the Year 11 cohort in secondary schools responding to the survey).

Teachers have voiced their recommendations to support languages, including a need for 'more time, money, training, and investment in the promotion of languages and better support for teachers'. As one teacher thoughtfully commented, we must 'continue to promote the value of language learning ... and keep making it fun!'.



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