



Language Trends Northern Ireland 2021

Survey report

by Dr Ian Collen



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

**NORTHERN IRELAND
CENTRE FOR INFORMATION
ON LANGUAGE TEACHING
AND RESEARCH**

Language Trends Northern Ireland 2021 was carried out by Dr Ian Collen (Director, NICILT) commissioned by British Council Northern Ireland.

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Foreword

The British Council builds connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language.

Our work with school systems 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 to strengthen quality and inclusion in schools, building long-term connections with the UK in the process.

Advocating for language learning in UK schools and the provision of resources, activities and programmes supporting language teaching is an important part of our 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 international 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, understanding and confidence to support employment and prosperity.



Introduction

This year, British Council Northern Ireland contracted the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, based at Queen's University Belfast (QUB), to conduct the second biennial Language Trends Northern Ireland survey report.



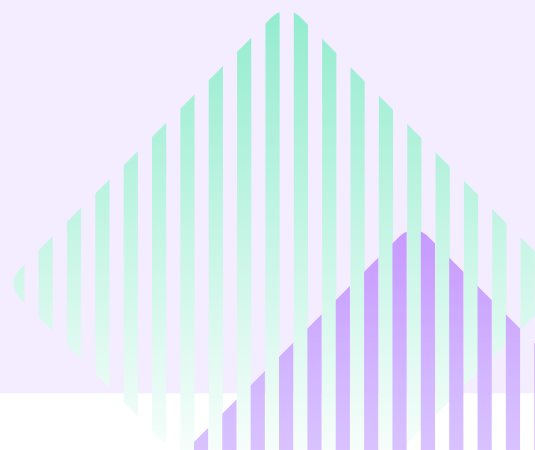
The inaugural report in 2019 found:

- from 2010–18 the number of pupils learning languages at GCSE level declined by 19 per cent, with significant falls in French (-41 per cent) and German (-18 per cent), while Spanish rose by 16 per cent; numbers learning Irish were reasonably consistent
- teachers reported difficulty and grading of exams at GCSE level as a major reason for the decline
- fifty-five per cent of primary schools surveyed provided some form of language teaching
- many teachers would like to see the return of the Primary Modern Languages Programme, which ran from 2007 until 31 March 2015.

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; it is recognised that Northern Ireland is home to a rich melting pot of linguistic diversity, with over 90 languages spoken in our school system. This linguistic diversity enriches the experiences of all young people and our society.



Northern Ireland is home to a rich melting pot of linguistic diversity, with over 90 languages spoken in our school system.



Policy background and context

Language learning in Northern Ireland

The education system in Northern Ireland is very similar to that in most developed western countries, with the three main differences found in the relatively young age at which compulsory education starts (age four), the continuation of a selective system of post-primary education (with grammar and non-grammar/secondary schools),¹ and the significant role of the churches in education governance (Gallagher, 2019).

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 as contributors to the environment and economy. After 2007, education was arranged into the following key stages:

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

Table 1 The stages of the Northern Ireland curriculum

Language learning in Northern Ireland is compulsory at Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14), and this is the shortest time for compulsory language learning in any country in the continent of Europe. Like for all areas of learning at Key Stage 3, there is no guidance from government on how much time should be spent on language learning; it is at the discretion of individual school principals to decide how time is allocated across the curriculum.

In 2012, the Department of Education published the Northern Ireland Languages Strategy. The final strategy document fell short of calling for statutory primary languages, rather proposing in recommended action 2.1:

That pupils have the opportunity to study at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue from the earliest possible age and that all secondary pupils have the opportunity to study throughout their school career at least one language other than English (DE, 2012: p. 17).

1. 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 127 schools which are controlled (48), controlled maintained (57), other maintained – Irish medium (two), controlled integrated (five) or grant maintained integrated (15).

The Northern Ireland Languages Strategy made 18 main recommendations; to date none have been implemented at a system-wide level. Jones et al. (2017) more recently completed a review of primary languages in Northern Ireland and found that the majority of the school principals and teachers involved in the study believed that additional language learning should be included in the statutory curriculum.

In this study, there was also criticism from some school leaders in relation to the Primary Modern Languages Programme. Several principals mentioned that poor communication between visiting peripatetic tutors and classroom teachers had hampered pupil progress. In particular, lack of joint planning with the classroom teacher was seen as a drawback to the programme. In general, they highlighted a lack of progression in language learning. Recent research has also highlighted the need to value the home languages spoken by pupils in the primary school (Carruthers & Nandi, 2020).

There were UK-wide proposals in 2020 from the British Academy – working with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK – for a national languages strategy,² including a number of proposals that relate specifically to Northern Ireland, to tackle the ‘crisis’ (Lanvers & Coleman, 2017: p. 3) in language learning.

In January 2020, a New Decade New Approach (NDNA) agreement, endorsed by all of the main political parties in Northern Ireland, brought about the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly after three years of stasis. It came at a significant period of uncertainty for Northern Ireland in terms of its place within the UK, and on the island of Ireland, and with international partners following the UK’s decision to leave the European Union.


Within the NDNA agreement is a commitment to introduce legislation to create a commissioner to recognise, support, protect and enhance the development of the Irish language, and to provide official recognition of the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. There is also a commitment to legislation for a further such commissioner to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots/Ulster British tradition, and to provide official recognition of the status of the Ulster Scots variety in Northern Ireland. The legislation also places a legal duty on the Department of Education Northern Ireland to encourage and facilitate the use of Ulster Scots in the education system (UK government, 2020). The out-working of this agreement remains to be seen, and at the time of writing *Language Trends Northern Ireland 2021*, the two commissioners are yet to be appointed.

A review of GCSE grading in Modern Foreign Languages (Ofqual, 2019) led to grade adjustments for GCSE French and German, but not Spanish, as of summer 2020 from awarding bodies in England.

In late autumn 2019, the Department of Education commissioned CCEA³ Regulation 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 research are yet to be made available. The review of grading in A-level French, German, Irish and Spanish has not started.

2. See www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/towards-national-languages-strategy-education-and-skills/

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



At Queen's University Belfast (QUB), Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded research as part of the Priority Area Leadership Fellowship for Modern Languages has highlighted the importance of supporting home languages in the Northern Ireland primary system (Carruthers & Nandi, 2020). It has also drawn attention to the extent of the variation in uptake of languages in selective and non-selective schools and across different free school meal entitlement (FSME) quartiles (Henderson & Carruthers, 2021). Carruthers and Henderson's current research engages with pupils' perspectives on a range of factors at crucial points in their decision making (years 10, 12 and 14) in an effort to understand the relative importance of these factors in their decisions relating to uptake.

The educational landscape has recently changed beyond recognition. The Covid-19 pandemic has permeated every aspect of our lives. The last year has brought challenges to language learning at school level unlike anything we could have imagined. Teachers have had to rethink priorities quickly, and in leading successful responses to the pandemic, they have had to focus on technological creativity. People are understandably tired and personal resilience is at a premium.

Schools in Northern Ireland were closed for face-to-face teaching from 23 March to 31 August 2020 and then again from 1 January to 8 March 2021. Face-to-face teaching in the first term of the 2020–21 school year was highly disrupted in many schools due to pupils and staff self-isolating. In summer 2020, the results of GCSE and A-level examinations from CCEA were based on the centre assessment grades provided by schools and colleges. Grades in summer 2021 will be based on centre-determined grades.

British Council Northern Ireland and QUB would like to put on record our thanks to all principals, teachers and pupils who so willingly gave their time to take part in our research, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thank you.

Research outline

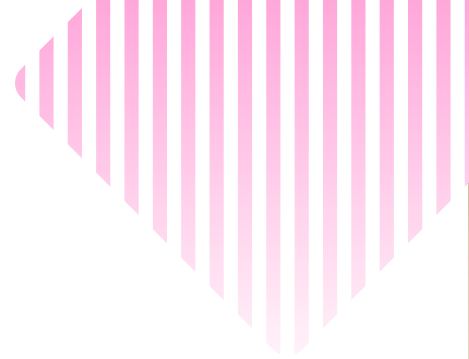
The research question guiding the study was: what is the current state of language teaching in primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland?

To answer the research question, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, building on the inaugural report. There were three surveys: one for each of primary school principals, heads of department (HoDs) in post-primary schools and Year 9 pupils (age 12–13). The Year 9 pupil surveys were followed up by pupil focus groups. Survey questions were drafted in winter 2020 and received feedback from an advisory panel convened by British Council Northern Ireland comprising academics from QUB, Stranmillis University College, St Mary's University College, professionals from CCEA, the Education and Training Inspectorate, and teachers. Semi-structured questions for the focus groups arose out of the main findings of the pupil survey.

The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at QUB. 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 pupil survey and 38 principals opted in. Teachers in these schools shared the link with their Year 9 pupils by email or in an online classroom. Three schools were selected by the researcher using purposive sampling for online focus groups; further details are contained within the body of the report.

After datasets had been cleaned and duplications removed, the following response rates were achieved (Table 2).



	Base	Achieved	Response
Primary principals' survey	803	123	15.3%
Post-primary head of department survey	193	109	56.5%

Table 2 Response rates

A total of 1,528 young people from 38 schools in Northern Ireland chose to complete the Year 9 pupil survey. Girls accounted for 58.6 per cent of respondents and boys 39.1 per cent of respondents; 2.3 per cent of pupils preferred not to reveal their gender. The over-representation of girls in the pupil survey can be partly explained by more all-girls' schools participating: of the 403 pupils who attended a single-sex school just 86 were boys. A total of 1,125 pupils attended a co-educational school: 45 per cent of respondents from co-educational schools were boys, 53 per cent were girls and just under two per cent preferred not to say.

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

Headline findings

The headline findings for Language Trends Northern Ireland 2021 are:

- language teaching in primary schools has all but collapsed due to Covid-19
- the majority of Year 9 pupils have found language learning online harder than their other subjects
- although motivation for language learning in Year 9 is high, almost all pupils do not see the potential for languages to be a part of their future careers
- grammar schools continue to devote much more time to compulsory language learning than secondary schools
- Spanish is now the most popular language at A-level and if current trends continue will soon overtake French for the top spot at GCSE
- if current trends continue, it is likely that Irish will replace French in the next few years as the second most popular language at A-level.

Report structure

The report first considers the impact of Covid-19 on language learning, then language learning at Key Stage 3, drawing on data from the HoD survey, the Year 9 pupil survey and the pupil focus groups. 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 principal survey.



Girls accounted for 58.6% of respondents and boys 39.1%; 2.3% preferred not to reveal their gender.

A young woman with long, dark, wavy hair is smiling and looking upwards. She is wearing a dark school jacket over a white shirt and a blue and white striped tie. Her right arm is raised high, holding a white string. In the background, another person's arm is also raised, and a blue rectangular object is visible on a wall.

1,528 young people from
38 schools in Northern
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the Year 9 pupil survey.

Language learning in post-primary schools

Profile of responding schools

For the head of department (HoD) survey, a total of 109 out of a possible 193 schools responded (response rate 56.5 per cent). Eighty-four of the responding schools were co-educational, 14 were all-girls and 11 were all-boys. Forty-one out of a possible 66 grammar schools, and 68 out of a possible 127 secondary (non-grammar) schools, took part. Of the 68 non-grammar schools, eight were designated as integrated schools. It is acknowledged that some of the responding integrated schools have dual grammar/non-grammar pathways.

Using data from the Northern Ireland School Census on 9 October 2021, the full complement of 193 schools which could have responded to the survey were arranged into quintiles by the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals.



109 of 193 schools responded to the head of department survey.

	Base	Achieved	Response rate
Quintile 1 – least deprived	39	28	72%
Quintile 2	38	21	55%
Quintile 3	39	22	56%
Quintile 4	38	18	47%
Quintile 5 – most deprived	39	20	51%

Table 3 Quintiles for free school meal entitlement

Almost all of the schools in Quintile 1 (least deprived) were grammar schools. All of the schools in Quintile 5 (most deprived) and almost all of the schools in Quintile 4 were non-grammar schools. From the achieved responses, it is apparent that there is an over-representation of schools in Quintile 1 and an under-representation of schools in Quintiles 4 and 5 in the survey data. While the achieved sample is more balanced than the inaugural Language Trends Northern Ireland report, the data this year could present language learning in post-primary schools as more positive than the reality.

As previously mentioned, a remarkable 1,528 pupils from 38 schools in Northern Ireland responded to the Year 9 pupil survey. Of those responding, 68 per cent attended a grammar school (the Northern Ireland average for pupils attending a grammar school is 43.2 per cent). Just under two per cent of respondents said they previously attended a *bunscoil* (Irish-medium primary school; Northern Ireland average 2.6 per cent).

Using purposive sampling, follow-up focus groups were held with Year 9 pupils (n=17) in three schools; one controlled grammar, one Catholic maintained non-selective and one voluntary grammar. Three of the 17 pupils previously attended a *bunscoil* for their primary education.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Forty-three per cent of respondents to the HoD survey reported that during the school closures of January and February 2021 there was a 'big impact – language teaching was severely disrupted'. A further 28 per cent said there was a 'small impact – language teaching was partially disrupted'. One in five schools stated that there had been no impact to language teaching as a result of Covid-19.

Over half of schools in Quintile 5 (most deprived) responded that there was a 'big impact', whereas only 28 per cent of schools in Quintile 1 (least deprived) said the same. This may be partly explained by the fact that teachers in Quintile 5 reported that, on average, one in three of their pupils did not have regular access to the internet and more than half of their pupils did not engage with language learning online. For schools in Quintiles 1 and 2 (i.e. more favourable than the Northern Ireland average free school meal entitlement figure), teachers estimated that one in ten pupils did not have regular access to the internet and one in five pupils did not engage with online language learning.

Pupils in Year 9 have had two disrupted school years, and for many, learning a language is a new subject after primary education. In the Year 9 pupil survey, we asked pupils how language learning over lockdown compared to their other areas of learning:

It is harder to learn languages online compared to other subjects	54%
It is about the same	34%
It is easier to learn languages online compared to other subjects	7%
I don't know	5%

Table 4 Pupils' views on how language learning online compares to other areas of learning



We explored this further in the three pupil focus groups, and it became apparent that the word 'hard' means different things to different pupils. Pupils told us:

It has definitely been difficult because we have not been in school. I feel like I am not pronouncing any of the Spanish words properly.

Spanish can be more difficult to learn online compared to history and geography. In Spanish you have to think of ways to remember all of the words, history and geography are more straightforward and you don't have to think as much.

I learned Irish before I learned English, so it actually has been easier for me. Languages just click with me, but learning only from a computer is a challenge.

There are so many words to learn and they are not going from the computer to my brain.

It is easier when in school and teachers are explaining to us.

French is offered at Key Stage 3 in 90% of responding schools, Spanish in 75%, Irish in 35% and German in 20%.

It was clear following the focus groups that the teacher of modern languages is the greatest resource for pupils.

Language learning at Key Stage 3

In terms of time for languages at Key Stage 3, there is great variation between schools across Northern Ireland. Table 5 shows time for learning languages in Year 8, and data for Years 9 and 10 is very similar.

	Grammar	Secondary
Less than one hour per week	0	5.8%
1–2 hours	34.1%	80.1%
2–3 hours	43.9%	5.9%
3–4 hours	12.2%	8.2%
4 hours or more	9.8%	0

Table 5 Contact time for language learning by sector

Grammar schools are more likely to set aside more than two hours per week for language teaching, and secondary schools are more likely to have less than two hours per week for language teaching.

The HoD survey reveals that French continues to be the most taught language at Key Stage 3. This is followed by Spanish, Irish and then German. Our 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, Spanish in 75 per cent, Irish in 35 per cent and German in 20 per cent. This is consistent with the findings of Language Trends 2019, with a notable decrease in German by five percentage points.

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. Thirty-seven per cent of responding schools reported languages have been an area of shared curricular delivery within a Shared Education partnership. A further 38 per cent of HoDs reported that their school is in an active Shared Education partnership, but to date languages have not been an area of shared curricular delivery. It will be interesting to track this trend in the years to come.

Thirteen of the 109 responding schools reported teaching Gaeilge in Year 10 to some pupils. Gaeilge develops the Irish language skills which pupils may have previously developed or currently be developing through Irish-medium education, whereas Irish refers to the language as taught in English-medium education from age 11. A minority of schools (n=fewer than five) offer Latin, Mandarin, Polish and Russian as timetabled curricular subjects at Key Stage 3 for some of their pupils.

Figure 1 shows the number of schools which offer languages other than the 'big four' of French, German, Irish and Spanish as extra-curricular or enrichment subjects at Key Stage 3. 'Other' languages include Portuguese and Persian (Farsi). Lithuanian is absent from our data – this is surprising as it is the most spoken language in our school system after English, Irish and Polish.



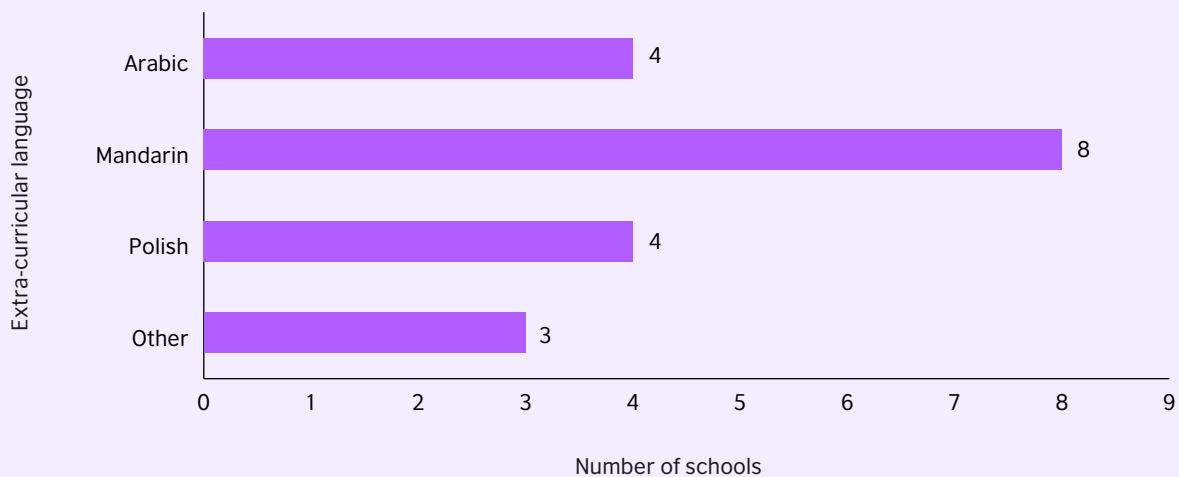


Figure 1 Key Stage 3 extra-curricular and enrichment subjects

There is also evidence that some schools have moved to a carousel of three or four languages in Year 8; pupils then choose two languages which they continue to learn into Year 9. Where schools do offer two languages at Key Stage 3, the main trend is for French to be taught in Year 8 and for Irish or Spanish to be

taught from Year 9 onwards. This can be seen most clearly from our pupil survey results where we asked the Year 9 cohort which language(s) they learned in Year 8 and which languages they are currently learning in Year 9.

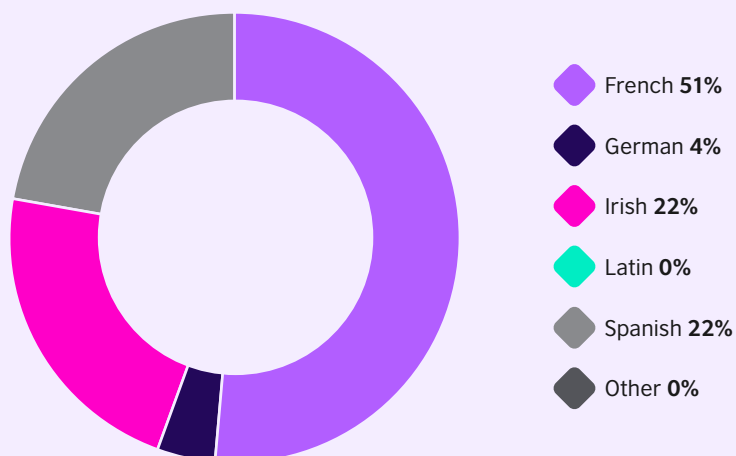


Figure 2 The languages pupils learned in Year 8

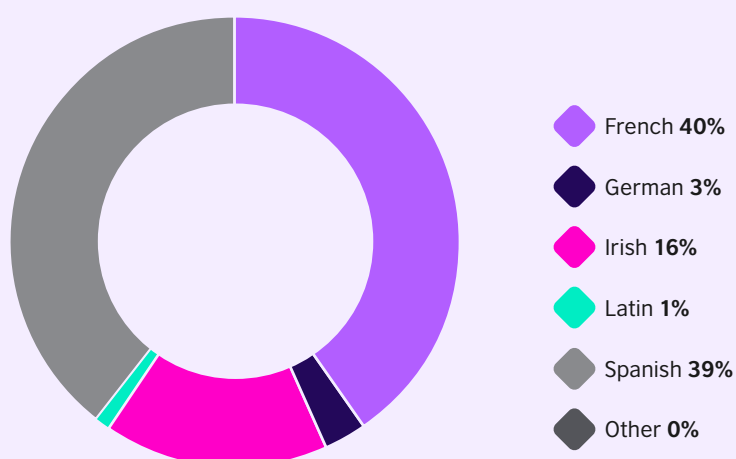


Figure 3 The languages pupils learn in Year 9

To gauge pupil motivation, Year 9 pupils were asked to indicate their opinion of language learning, and it is clear that motivation is high on their agendas (Figure 4).

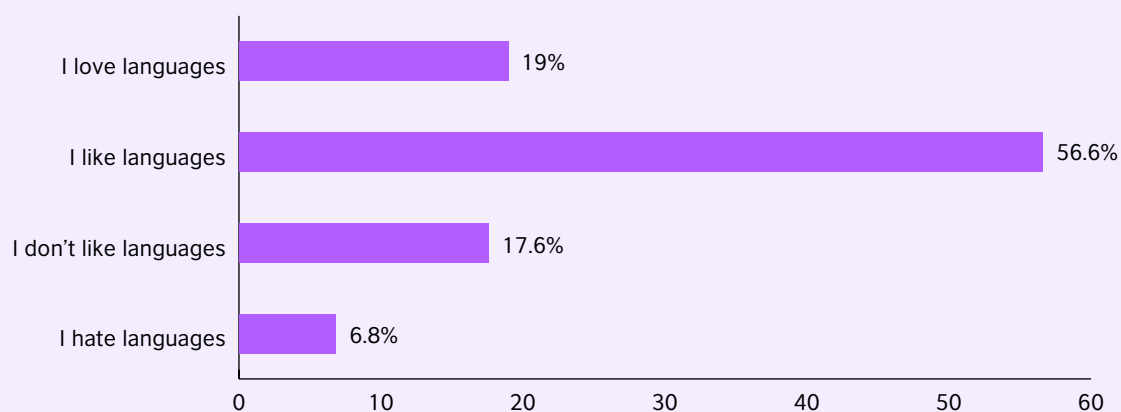


Figure 4 Pupil motivation for modern languages

More specifically, we asked Year 9 pupils to choose one of ten statements that best reflected their view of language learning (Table 6).

1	Language classes are fun	33.6%
2.	I like speaking the language	17.4%
3.	Language classes are boring	11.7%
4.	There are too many words to learn	11.7%
5.	I feel that I am learning a lot of new language	10.5%
6.	The amount of words I have to learn is about right	5.2%
7.	I don't like speaking the language	4.8%
8.	I don't feel that I am learning a lot of new language	3.3%
9.	We rarely use ICT in language class	1.3%
10.	We often use ICT in language class	0.6%

Table 6 Pupils' main feelings about language learning



Just 44% of Year 9 pupils indicated that they plan to do a language for GCSE.

One in ten said they plan to do a language for A-level.

44% are unaware of whether a GCSE language is compulsory in their school.



92% of pupils responded negatively to the question: 'How likely is it you will use languages in your job when you leave school?'

A combined total of 67.3 per cent selected a positive main feeling towards language learning, further indicating high levels of motivation. It is clear from this data that there is much to celebrate: teachers of Year 9 are making language learning engaging, ensuring most pupils feel like they are making progress and enjoy speaking the language.

Just 44 per cent of the Year 9 pupils indicated that they plan to do a language for GCSE and one in ten said they plan to do a language for A-level. Of note was the fact that 44 per cent of pupils are unaware of whether a GCSE language is compulsory in their school.

Two 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. A Net Promoter Score is often used in the commercial world to understand consumer loyalty to a particular brand. Pupils were invited to respond to two 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, while detractors have a negative opinion of the field.

Although the trend is that motivation in the here and now is relatively high, when asked, 'how useful is being able to speak different languages?', 29.1 per cent of respondents were promoters, 28.1 per cent were passives and 42.7 per cent were detractors. By comparison, when we asked, 'how likely is it you will use languages in your job when you leave school?', almost all (92 per cent) of the pupils were detractors. This is clear evidence that pupils do not see languages as being part of their careers. There is thus work to be done in helping pupils to see the potential of languages as a career-enhancing skill and to better understand their future self.

In the pupil focus groups, we asked pupils if they see languages fitting with their future career. Overall, all 17 pupils said they *might* use languages in their career, but none could see languages as *definitely* being part of their future career:

I want to be a doctor, but if I were to use Spanish it would be if someone came in who had that language and couldn't speak English.

I think I would like to be a physiotherapist but I don't think I need languages for that.

I would love to be a ski instructor, so languages could be useful.

What would make language learning better – pupils' views

We provided space in the survey for pupils to tell us what could be done to make language learning better. Their comments have been copied verbatim to maintain authenticity. Pupils told us:

More relevant things to learn about e.g. instead of learning how to say 'I go to the cinema with my friends' something more useful.

To experience things from the cultures of the language we are learning and to really take the time to look back at words/phrases we've learnt a while ago to make sure we remember them.

You should get to choose what language you want to study from year 8 so you don't have to wait until year 11 to choose.

Teach us it in smaller portions so we can focus on that one section and learn it really well.

Do other languages instead of French or Spanish. Languages like Mandarin, Polish, German, Russian, Japanese would be far more useful.

Travel outside of Northern Ireland

Some 96.8 per cent of pupils have travelled outside of Northern Ireland. The most popular destination was Spain, followed closely by Great Britain, Ireland and France.



All focus group participants said they *might* use languages in their career, but none could see languages as *definitely* being part of their future career.

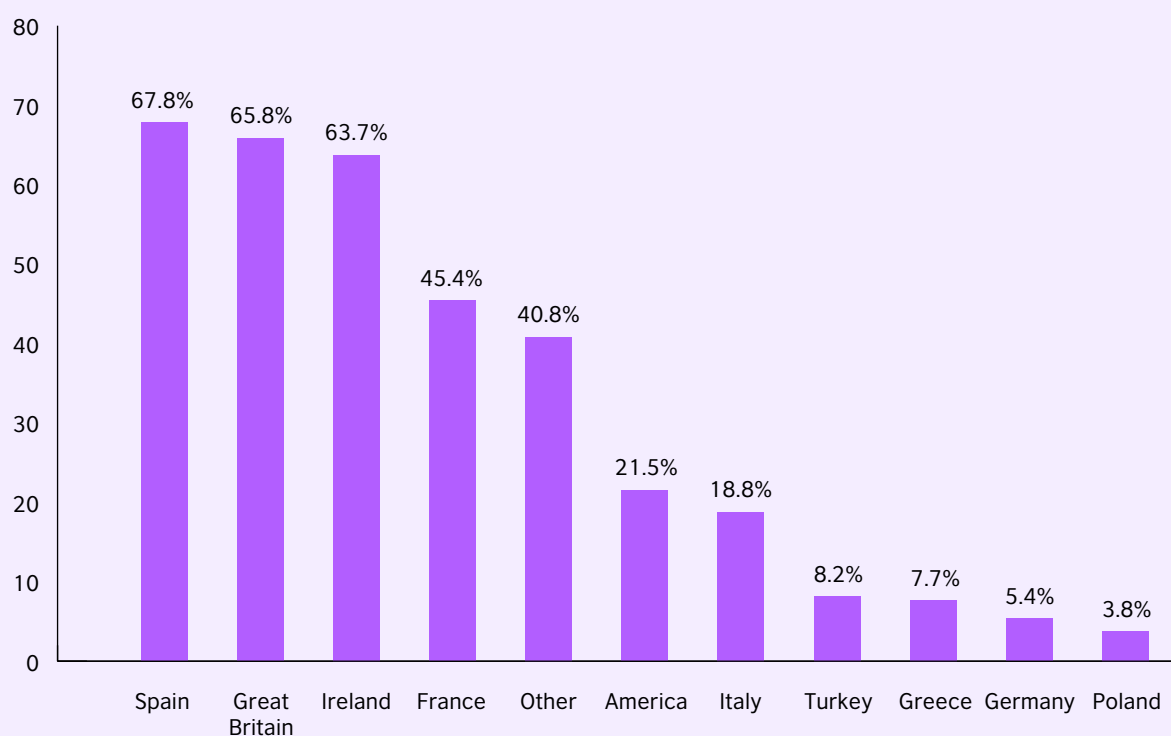


Figure 5 Countries to which Year 9 pupils have travelled

Almost all pupils said that they travelled with their parents/carers, and one in four pupils reported having travelled at some point on a school trip.

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 retain compulsion as part of their school's curriculum policy, though this practice is now the exception.

At age 14, pupils choose which subjects to study for Key Stage 4, a period when GCSE specifications *de facto* become the 'curriculum'. Recent research (Barrance & Elwood, 2018; Vitello & Crawford, 2018) has shown that pupils' access and choice in the curriculum at age 14 is restricted by assessment techniques such as tiering, modularity, timing of entry to GCSEs, and awarding body. In Northern Ireland, revised GCSE specifications in modern languages from CCEA for first teaching from September 2017 retain tiering in listening, reading and writing while speaking is not tiered. Teachers and pupils have the option to mix tiers, unlike in England where mixing of tiers between the individual components is no longer allowed.

Almost half of responding schools said that 20 per cent or less of their Year 11 cohort was currently studying a language for GCSE or equivalent level 2 qualification. Only a quarter of teachers reported 70 per cent or more of their Year 11 cohort taking a GCSE in a language, and languages are only compulsory for all pupils up to age 16 in eight per cent of schools. This is the first time that this data has been collected as we did not ask about compulsion in 2019.

A stark contrast is found between grammar and secondary (non-grammar) schools.

- On average, teachers estimated 65 per cent of the Year 11 cohort in grammar schools were taking a language, as opposed to 23 per cent in non-grammar schools.
- Seven secondary schools reported that ten per cent of their Year 11 cohort were taking a language; a further eight schools reported that less than ten per cent were taking a language, and four schools said they have no language classes currently running in Year 11.

On average, teachers reported that 74 per cent of pupils who attend a Quintile 1 school are learning a language in Year 11; the average figure for Quintile 3 schools plummets to 22 per cent and for Quintile 5 schools the average is 18 per cent. Of the four participating schools reporting no uptake whatsoever, this comment from one teacher resonates with others:

There are currently no Year 11 or Year 12 languages classes as pupils are focusing on more vocational subjects in order to better attain at the end of Key Stage 4.

In short, grammar schools are most likely to report stable numbers for GCSE languages, whereas non-grammar schools are most likely to report declining numbers. These findings are consistent with information about the number of pupils taking languages in each school in Northern Ireland, available from the Northern Ireland School Census in 2018. Henderson and Carruthers (2021) have analysed this particular dataset by school type and socio-economic profile and have shown stark inequities in access to language learning at Key Stage 4 in Northern Ireland.

In Language Trends Northern Ireland 2021, teachers were asked to think about the uptake of a language at Key Stage 4 over the past three years (Figure 6).

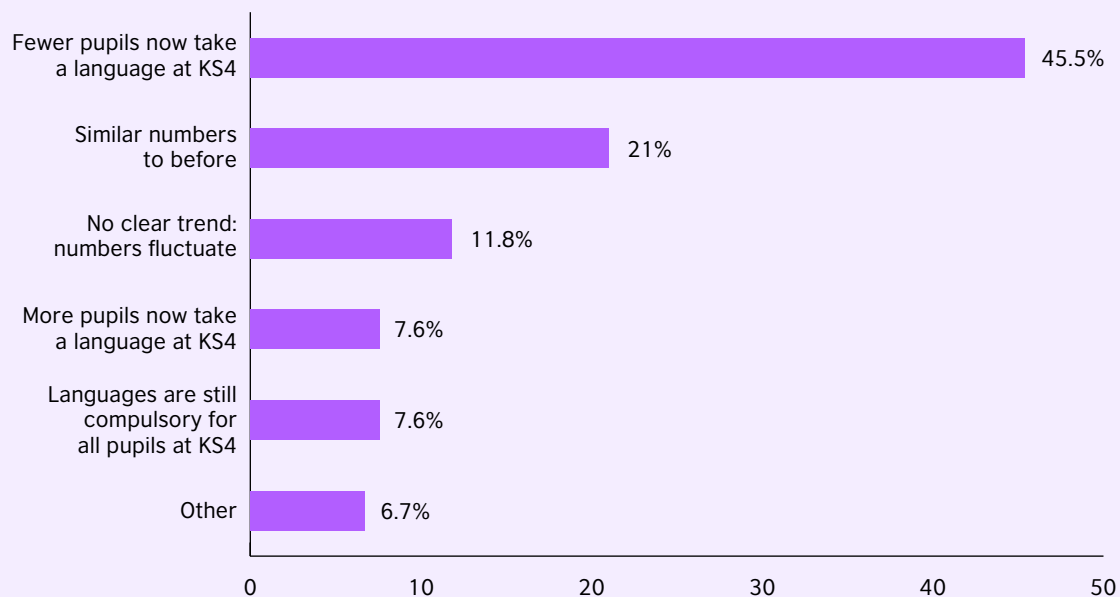
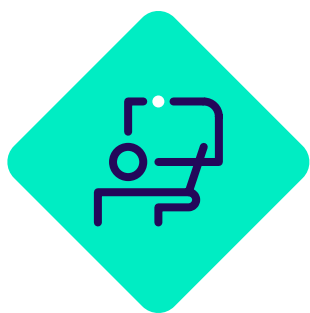


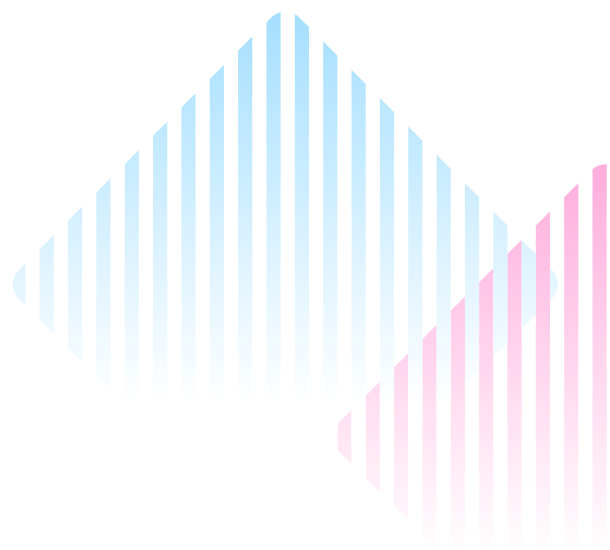
Figure 6 Teachers' perceptions of Key Stage 4 languages uptake over the past three years



Almost half of teachers reported that fewer pupils in their school take a language to GCSE than three years ago.

This is a considerable increase from the 35% of teachers who reported the same in 2019.

This sentiment is reflected in the entry pattern trends since 1995 (Figure 7).



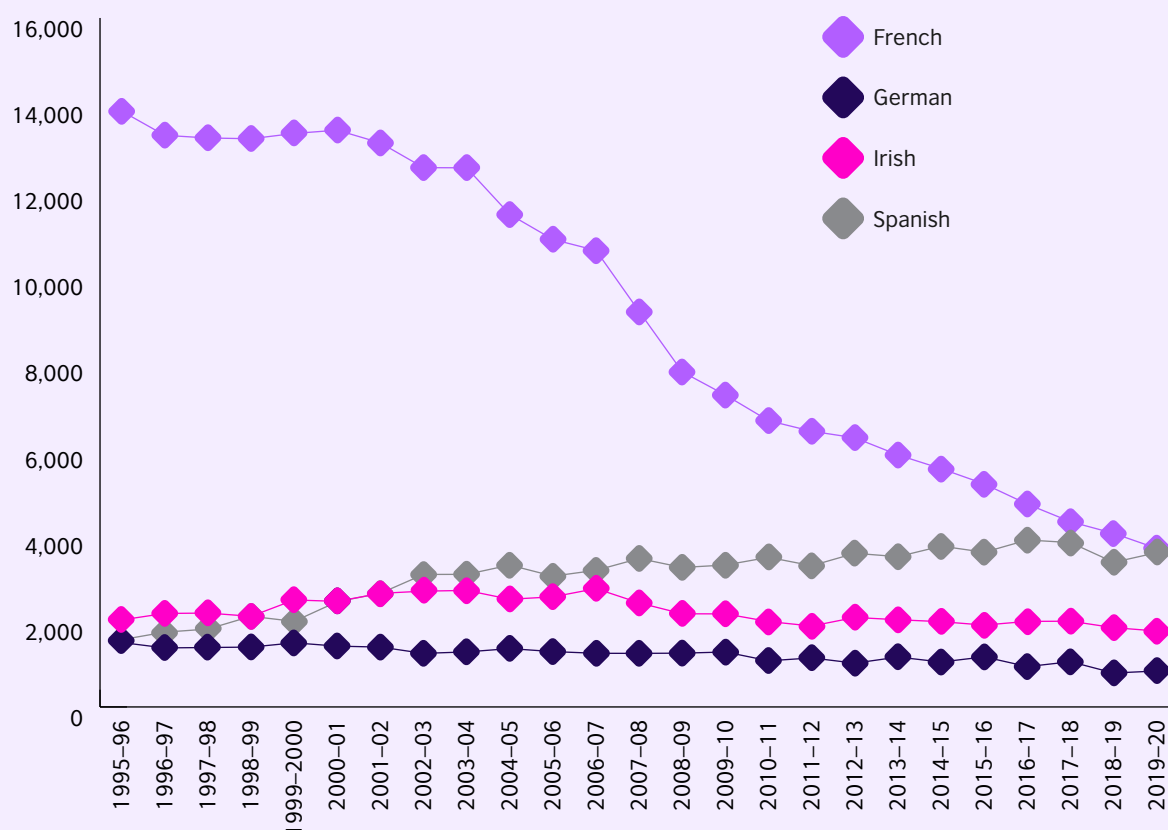
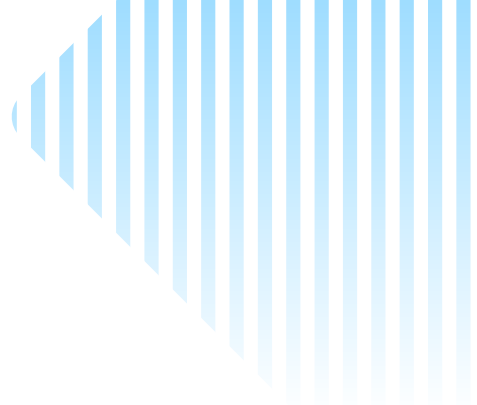


Figure 7 Entry data for Modern Languages GCSE in Northern Ireland 1995–2020

It must be borne in mind that this graph does not account for fluctuations in pupil enrolment and is a reflection of entries not pupil numbers, i.e. dual or triple linguists are conflated in the data. Nonetheless, we can see that French has undergone a steep decline since the turn of the millennium; Spanish has grown, albeit from a small base, and is expected to overtake French as the most popular GCSE language within the next couple of years; and Irish and German have both declined overall.



We asked teachers to describe their school's approach to take up for languages at Key Stage 4 – multiple responses were allowed:

1	Classes do not run if there are not enough pupils	58.6%
2.	Lower than average attaining pupils are discouraged from choosing a language	37.1%
3.	Timetabling means that not all pupils are able to take a language	37.1%
4.	Some pupils may be advised by SMT not to take a language	32.8%
5.	The school strongly recommends that the most academically able take a language	13.8%
6.	The school strongly recommends that all pupils take a language	11.2%
7.	All pupils MUST take a language	7.6%
Other		14.7%

Table 7 Schools' approaches to take up for languages at Key Stage 4

The emerging trend mirrors uptake findings from Language Trends reports in England over time. 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 low pupil numbers and timetabling restrictions mean that GCSE languages may not run. Further, more often than not, languages are taken by pupils with higher prior attainment.



“

59% of teachers said language classes do not run at Key Stage 4 if pupil numbers are too low.

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.⁴ It was pleasing to see that three out of five schools offered

newcomer pupils the option to take language qualifications at GCSE in their home/community language, but the trend from our 2019 survey shows a decrease in the availability of qualifications for newcomer pupils (Figure 8).

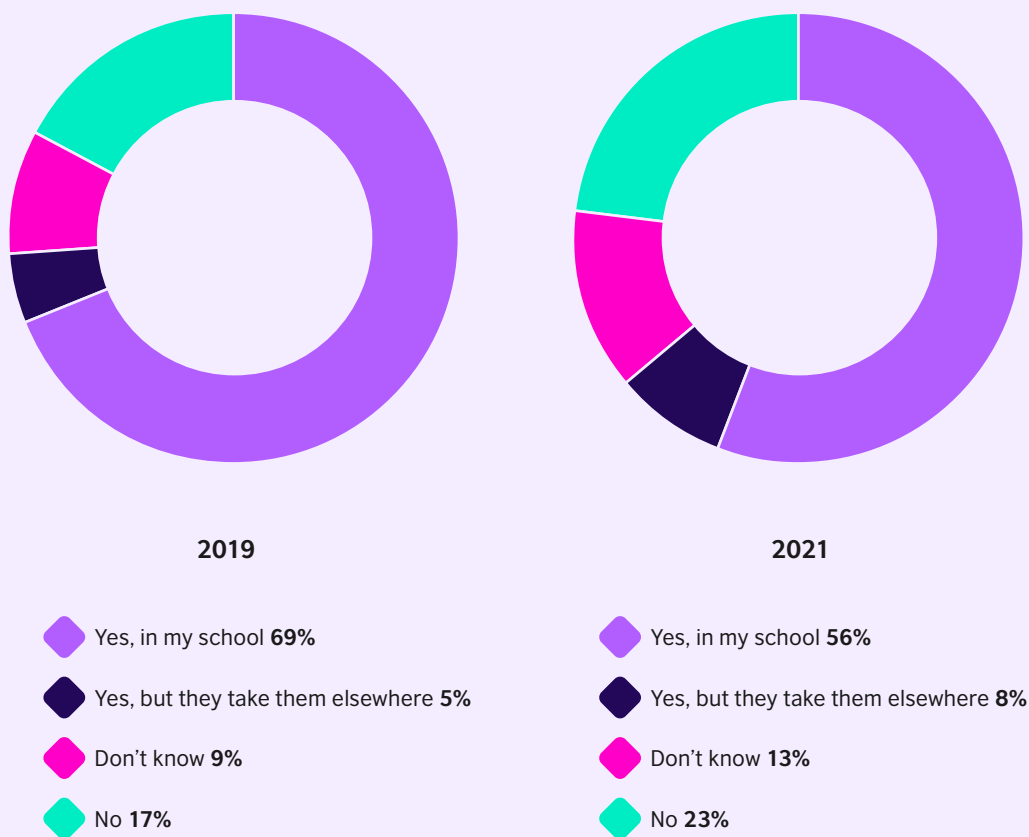


Figure 8 Do schools offer newcomer pupils the opportunity to take exams in their home or community languages?

4. See www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/newcomers

Regrettably, our survey also presents some evidence from nine schools that the lockdown of spring 2020 and subsequent cancelling of exams had an adverse impact on the awarding of grades to newcomer pupils taking a GCSE in their home/community language. This comment from a teacher was typical:

Yes, we have had one student unable to complete GCSE Arabic. Preparation for other languages spoken by newcomer students is guided by a languages teacher, so no evidence or assessment could be submitted to support a grade.

Publicly available data from the Joint Council for Qualifications supports this evidence as there was a significant decrease in entries for other modern languages between 2018 and 2020 (Figure 9).

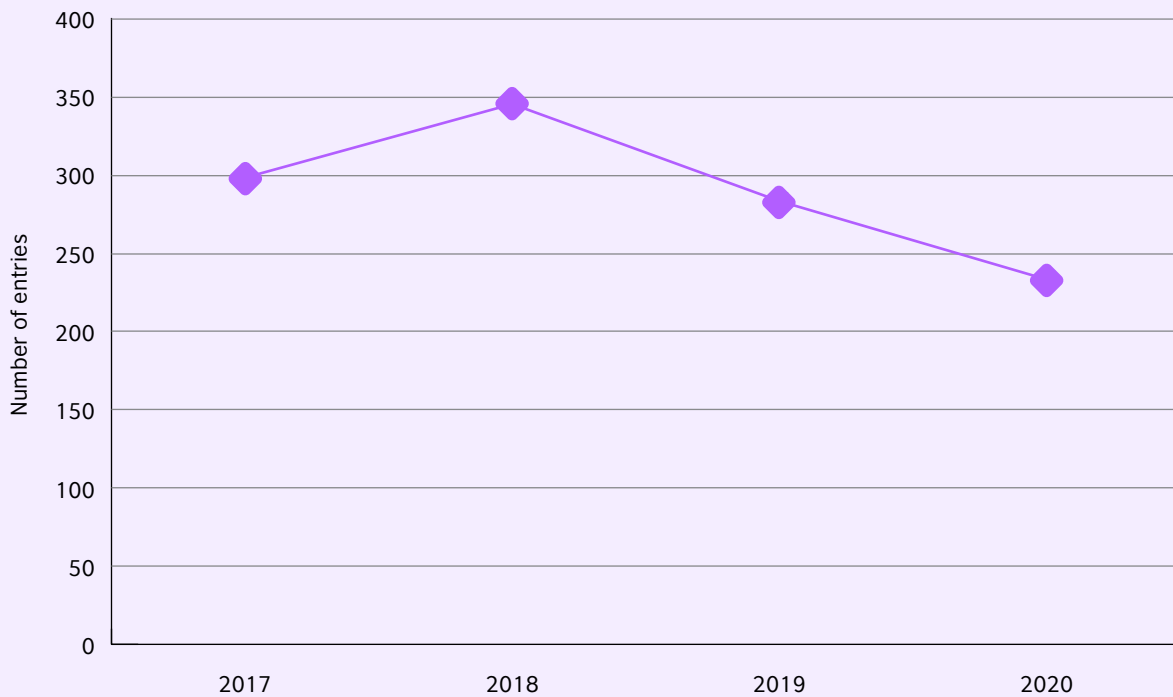
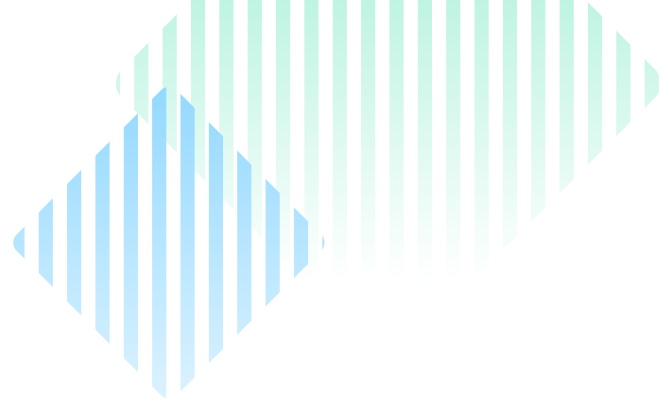


Figure 9 Entries for modern languages other than French, German, Irish, Spanish and Welsh



Time for languages at Key Stage 4

Just over 76 per cent of schools say they devote 2–3 hours of contact time per week to GCSE languages and 13.6 per cent of schools allocate 3–4 hours per week. At either extreme, six per cent of schools devote less than two hours and six per cent of schools allocate more than four hours per week.

Languages post-16

The inaugural Language Trends Northern Ireland report found that from 2010 to 2018, the number of pupils learning languages at A-level fell by 40 per cent for French, 29 per cent for German and six per cent for Spanish. Irish was reported to be stable. Since the last report, entries for French have continued to decline, but Spanish and Irish have both shown some growth. The recent picture for German has been erratic: 110 pupils in 2018, 67 in 2019 – the lowest figure on record – and 90 pupils in 2020 sat A-level German in Northern Ireland.

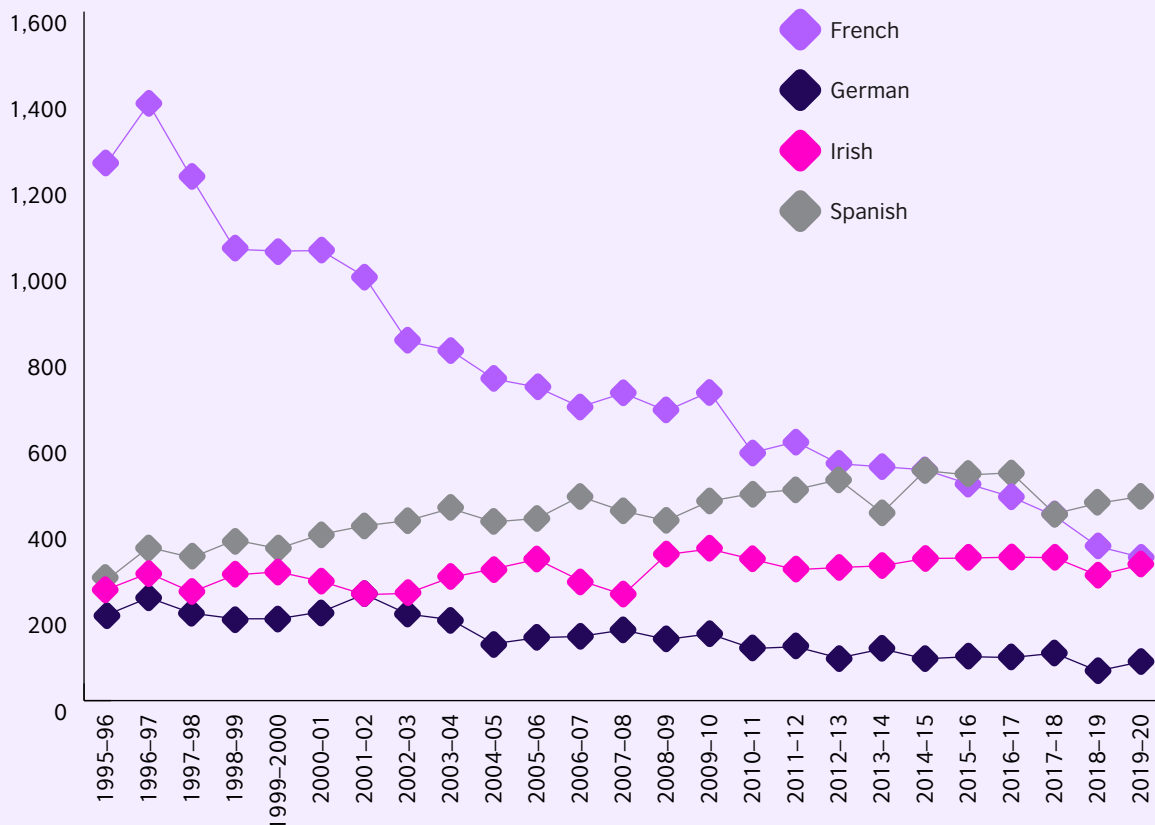


Figure 10 Entry data for Modern Languages A-level in Northern Ireland 1995–2020



On average, HoDs report that just three pupils per school in Northern Ireland study languages for A-level.

Similar to GCSE, entries for A-level French have declined sharply over the past 25 years. In 2019, Spanish overtook French as the most popular language at A-level. If the current trend continues, it is likely that Irish will soon overtake French to be the second most popular language at A-level. Entries for German have more than halved since 2002, when the outworking of Curriculum 2000 led to a healthy temporary increase.

On average, HoDs report that just three pupils per school in Northern Ireland study languages for A-level. Such low numbers are economically very difficult for school leadership to finance. All post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are members of an area learning community (ALC). ALCs, in theory, provide a mechanism by which schools come together to plan the curriculum they offer on an area basis. Schools work together with other schools, further education colleges and other training providers to deliver pupils access to the Entitlement Framework, thus enabling them to offer a broad and balanced, economically relevant curriculum to meet the needs and aspirations of all pupils. There are currently 27 ALCs in Northern Ireland, which generally consist of 6–10 schools.

All responding grammar schools reported that their pupils have access to post-16 language provision, either in-house or within their ALC. The gap in access to A-level languages provision between grammar and non-grammar is particularly acute at A-level (Henderson & Carruthers, 2021).

Fifty per cent of the responding secondary schools with a sixth form stated that pupils had access to post-16 language provision, either in-house or within their ALC. However, 11 of the 31 secondary schools which offer languages currently do not have any pupils taking languages in Year 13 or Year 14, and a further six schools only have pupils learning languages for qualification in one of the two post-16 year groups.

	Total number of responding grammar schools	Number of schools in which no pupils choose to study languages	5 pupils or fewer	6–10 pupils	11–15 pupils	16–20 pupils	More than 20 pupils
Year 13	41	1	11	6	9	2	12
Year 14	41	1	11	6	9	6	8

Table 8 Indicative class sizes in post-16 languages: grammar schools

We asked teachers what pupil numbers are needed for an A-level class to run. Responses ranged from three pupils (on a reduced timetable) to 11 pupils; the average was eight pupils. It continues to be the case that the size of AS- and A-level groups is very small in both grammar and secondary schools, and that

provision in many schools is therefore very vulnerable in a context of tight budget constraints. We also asked teachers what happens in their school when not enough pupils choose to study a language (where offered). Multiple responses were allowed (Figure 11).

	Total number of responding secondary schools with a sixth form	Number of schools in which languages are not available to pupils	Number of schools in which no pupils choose to study languages	5 pupils or fewer	6–10 pupils	11–15 pupils	16–20 pupils	More than 20 pupils
Year 13	62	31	13	15	2	0	1	0
Year 14	62	31	11	16	2	1	0	1

Table 9 Indicative class sizes in post-16 languages: secondary schools

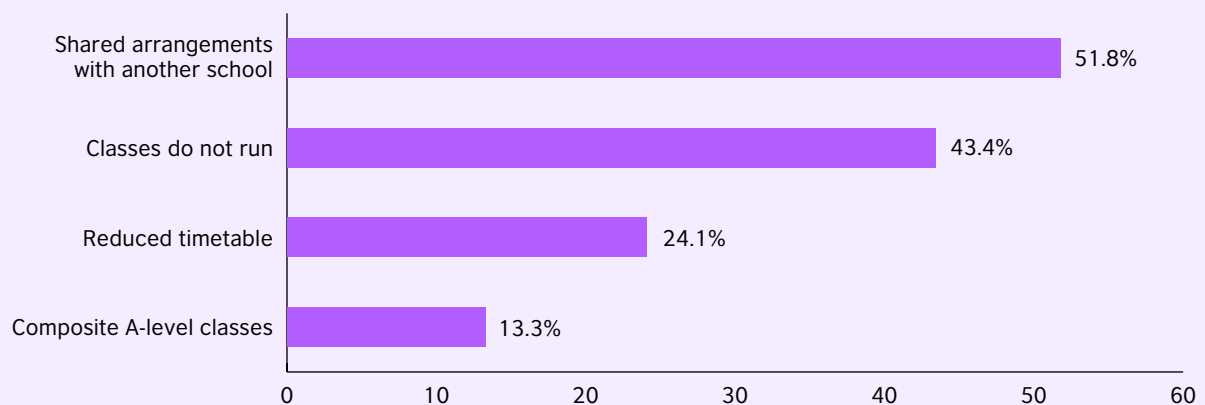


Figure 11 What happens when few pupils choose to study a language at A-level?

It is positive that ALCs are playing an important role in assuring post-16 provision in languages, but it is alarming that 43 per cent of schools report classes do not run if there are not enough numbers: the pupils' language learning journey is effectively halted before the crucial transition point to further and higher education.

The British Academy et al. (2020) have recommended the introduction of an 'advanced languages premium' across the UK for study of languages at A-level. This would be an incentive to schools that have low levels of provision and uptake.

Our data reveals a growing trend of Year 13 and Year 14 classes being taught together as composite classes. Given the decoupling of A-levels, this is something which we do not tend to see in Language Trends England data. While composite classes have been widely studied at primary level, more research needs to be done to better understand the impact, positive or negative, on teaching A-level Modern Languages as a composite class.

We specifically asked HoDs to think about uptake and provision at A-level over the past three years. The results for individual languages follow.

A-level French

Sixty-nine schools provided information about A-level French. One school has recently introduced French as a new A-level; six schools report that uptake has increased; 19 say that numbers are stable, but 38 schools state that numbers have decreased and five schools have discontinued the language.

A-level German

Twenty-three schools shared information about their post-16 provision for German. Take-up has increased in one school and is stable in six schools. However, less positive is that uptake has decreased in 11 schools and German has recently been discontinued altogether in eight schools. Provision is now geographically patchy; if a young person attends a grammar school in Belfast or North Down they are statistically more likely to have an opportunity to learn German than if they attend school elsewhere.

A-level Irish

Of our 37 responding schools offering Irish, one stated that it is a new subject on their curriculum and three reported increases in uptake over the past three years. Eighteen schools reported stable uptake, but 13 schools said uptake has decreased and two schools had decided to withdraw the subject.

A-level Spanish

Of the 63 schools providing information on patterns of uptake in Spanish over the past three years, two have introduced the language as a new A-level and ten reported increased pupil numbers. Although 27 schools said uptake is stable, 22 schools reported declining interest from their pupils. Two schools had taken the decision to withdraw the subject.



Languages as enrichment subjects post-16

The increased flexibility of the post-16 timetable means that some schools use enrichment time as an opportunity to offer additional language learning. Eleven schools reported teaching Mandarin and ten schools teaching one of Arabic, Portuguese or Polish in the sixth form.

International dimension

This year, we asked schools to tell us about the international dimension of their school. A language assistant can help students in Northern Ireland develop their linguistic and cross-cultural skills. 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.

Arabic	<3
French	54
German	15
Irish	22
Mandarin	<3
Polish	<3
Spanish	47

Table 10 Number of schools in our survey employing language assistants

The presence of a language assistant has been a lifeline in many schools during online learning:

Live online language classes with the language assistants have continued and this has been invaluable, in terms of continuing to develop language skills but also in maintaining social contact with our students.

While two-thirds of schools continue to employ a language assistant, more nuanced research is needed to see if assistants' hours have been reduced over time. Over half of schools engage with cultural institutes and one-third of schools have a partner school abroad.



Language assistants have been a lifeline in many schools during online learning.

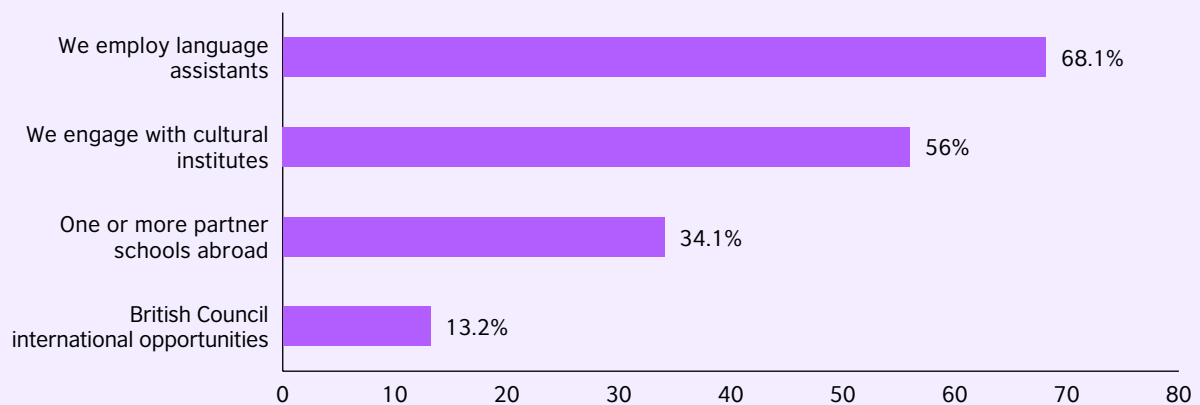


Figure 12 International dimension of schools

It is not surprising that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the international dimension of schools. All planned school trips have been cancelled:

French exchange had to be cancelled and we fear for its future. Suspension of extra-curricular activities has meant that many of our language-based activities (Junior Languages Club, European Day of Languages, Languages Assembly, Languages Choir, Languages Debating) have not been able to take place. No new trips are allowed to be planned due to ongoing uncertainties around Covid-19.

The current pandemic has been a disaster for our international dimension. While our exchange partners would be interested in online 'meetings', I really cannot see how our students would take part as many of them do not even participate in online learning. We fear that our school population has turned in on itself and we will struggle to keep languages afloat. Languages depend to a very large extent on face-to-face teacher contact and cultural input.



Not only the pandemic, but due to time constraints, it has been difficult to facilitate international exchange programmes. Much curriculum time over the past few years has been focused on ensuring we are covering schemes of work and catching up. I attribute this to the pressures of preparing pupils, even in KS3, for the demands of the new specification GCSE course.

On a more positive note, some teachers reported that they have tried to keep their international dimension alive despite Covid-19:

We have engaged with language initiatives run by NICILT [Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research] and QUB – careers webinar, German spelling bee, Year 13 translation competition, Year 12 translation competition. All classes with language assistants have continued, remotely.

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 five:

1. the nature and content of external exams (35.6 per cent)
2. the way external exams are marked and graded (26.1 per cent)
3. lack of opportunities for learners to practise their language outside the classroom (14.4 per cent)
4. global English, i.e. the importance of English as a world language (14.4 per cent)
5. timetabling of options in Key Stage 4 (14.1 per cent).

While the choices differed from the inaugural Language Trends report (to include the 'impact of Covid-19' as an option), the 'nature and content of external exams' has occupied the number one spot in both years.

Teachers were given the opportunity to give reasons for their choices. This part of the dataset was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The 'nature and content of external exams' has been named the main barrier to language learning in both the 2019 and 2021 reports.

The main themes emerging from the dataset were '(perceived) difficulty of languages', followed by 'grading of external examinations' and then 'structural barriers (timetabling, finance)'.

Students are driven by the likelihood of achieving higher grades which for languages and in particular French is more difficult to achieve. This along with the fact that our school is a secondary school where pupils veer more towards the practical subjects at GCSE.

The content of the GCSE French exam is much too difficult. Too much is expected of the pupils in terms of writing and speaking exam in particular. The exam must be made easier in order to improve uptake at GCSE.

Languages are perceived as more challenging at GCSE and A-level, compared to other subjects (too many skills assessed, big jump from Year 12 to Year 13).

Composite classes at A-level are not an attractive prospect for many pupils.

German numbers decreased significantly after QUB stopped offering the German course.

Due to budget cuts A-level languages have not run for French, German, Spanish in recent years. Small class sizes meant classes could not run.

Within the dataset, there was also some evidence of languages being in competition with each other, with one teacher commenting:

At GCSE French is now finding it very hard to compete with Spanish. The perception is that Spanish is easier. Public exam content and marking/grading have not helped.

Sharing next practice

We are conscious that the findings of this report could mask the excellent work which is going on in schools and classrooms. We gave HoDs free space to tell us what is currently working well in language education. Responses from all HoDs totalled 4,000 words and we performed a simple content analysis on this data. The most cited next practice was 'online learning', followed by 'staff collegiality/presence of language assistants', 'revamping Key Stage 3 content', 'support from senior leadership' and finally 'competitions'. Some comments from teachers follow which reflect the general consensus of all comments received:

Very positive engagement of Year 8 pupils in particular with online learning. Opportunity for teachers to explore a greater variety of online resources throughout remote learning. Using the Gianfranco Conti sentence builder model. Sharing next practice through Facebook and Twitter groups (#mfltwitterati) with Northern Irish teachers and teachers in Great Britain. Use of apps such as Quizlet, Blooket, Kahoot to motivate students, as well as Flipgrid and Microsoft teams. Excellent practical training delivered by NICILT at QUB and An Gréasán, where teachers demonstrate next practice and activities that are working well for them.

Numbers continue to be healthy at GCSE and A-level in our school. We have a language assistant who has worked at our school for 6 years and is very experienced at helping pupils with speaking, their confidence in speaking is very high.

Highly educated and motivated staff who have good IT skills, especially this year. Enthusiastic teachers. Programmes like the ML Leadership Fellow Language Ambassador programme making links with Queen's University Belfast in previous years. Trips and events focused around the language have a huge impact- not feasible of course in current school year.

The cancellation of exams has allowed us to be freer in our delivery of the content as we haven't been rushing to get things 'covered'. This has made the teaching and learning more enjoyable. Obviously the impact of the pandemic has meant we have had to use alternative web-based teaching strategies which have actually worked well in many cases.

We have a Cumann Gaelach and participate in lots of extra-curricular activities, some of which are funded by Foras na Gaeilge. Our pupils participate in Gael Linn Competitions and Conradh na Gaeilge activities. We have an energetic language department and all members of the department are enthusiastic about languages. We always strive to explore new strategies and resources to help engage our pupils.

Languages in primary schools

Northern Ireland is 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 803 primary schools and on average 28.6 per cent of pupils are entitled to free school meals.

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 (IME). The IME sector is growing: in the school year 2019–20, there were 28 Irish-medium primary schools and seven primary schools with an Irish-medium unit, in which 4,510 pupils learned through Irish (2.6 per cent of the primary school population).

Two large-scale pieces of work have been carried out in relation to primary languages in recent years: Review of Current Primary Languages in Northern Ireland (Jones et al., 2017) and Language Trends Northern Ireland 2019.

In their mixed-methods study, Jones et al. (2017) collected data from 101 (12 per cent) of the then 850 primary schools in Northern Ireland as well as 165 pupils at KS2. Aside from not being a statutory part of the primary curriculum, the biggest obstacle to progress in developing primary languages in Northern Ireland was perceived by principals to be funding, closely followed by lack of time to plan. The research also brought to light social inequities in revealing that schools in more affluent areas were more likely to offer languages.

Language Trends Northern Ireland 2019 found that 55 per cent of responding primary schools offered some form of language teaching, either as part of the school day or after school. Forty-five per cent of responding schools had previously taken part in the Department of Education-funded Primary Modern Languages Programme, which ran from 2007 to 2015.

Profile of responding schools in 2021

A total of 123 primary schools responded this year (response rate 15.3 per cent), compared to 218 responses to our survey in 2019. Covid-19 and lockdown may have contributed to a decrease in participation. The lower-than-expected response rate in comparison to our 2019 survey must be borne in mind when interpreting the primary school data which follows. Seven responding schools were involved in IME, either as a *bunscoil* or as an Irish-medium stream within an English-medium primary school. The responding schools represented all geographical areas of Northern Ireland.

This year's main finding

Just 15 per cent of responding schools were teaching a language, down from 55 per cent in 2019. This dip can be explained by the 38 per cent that said they usually teach a language, but it has been temporarily suspended due to Covid-19. We can conclude that primary languages are currently in a state of stasis.

The 2021 findings are based on combined data from schools teaching a language in this school year and those which usually teach a language.



Just 15% of responding schools were teaching a language, down from 55% in 2019.



How long have primary schools been teaching modern languages?

	Language Trends Northern Ireland 2019	Language Trends Northern Ireland 2021
More than 5 years	48%	65%
3–5 years	25%	32%
Started in the preceding school year	17%	3%
Started in the school year of the respective Language Trends report	10%	0%

Table 11 Length of time primary schools have been teaching languages

On the surface, the trend suggests that languages are now embedded in schools; however, caution with this data is needed as the decreased response rate (down from 25 per cent in 2019) could be masking reality – it would not be unreasonable to assume that only schools which have a positive disposition to languages chose to respond this year. Almost all (98 per cent) responding schools reported that languages have not been an area of shared education provision.



How are primary languages being delivered?

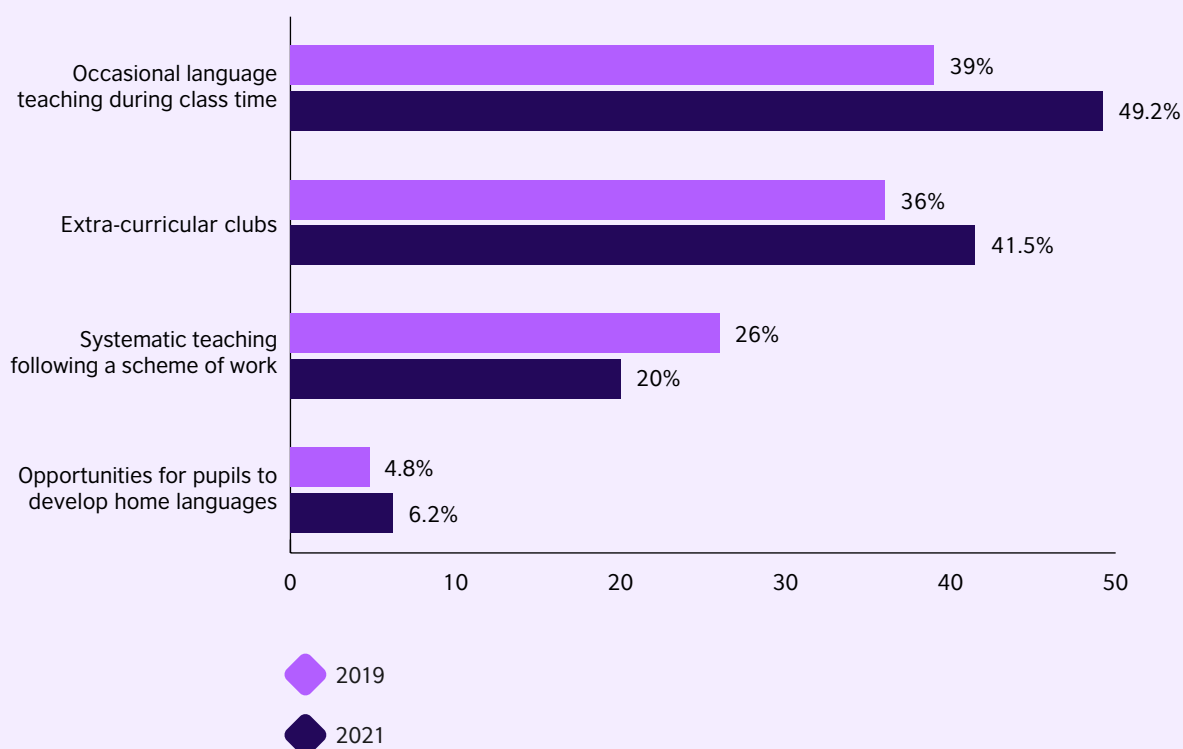


Figure 13 Delivery of primary languages

Most schools in this year's survey were teaching languages occasionally during class time, but not explicitly following a scheme of work. Two in every five schools teaching languages offered them to some pupils as an extra-curricular club. The dataset was too small to say with confidence that anything was statistically significant, but the trend is for schools with better-than-average free school meal entitlement figures to offer languages as an extra-curricular club.

Who is the teacher of primary languages?

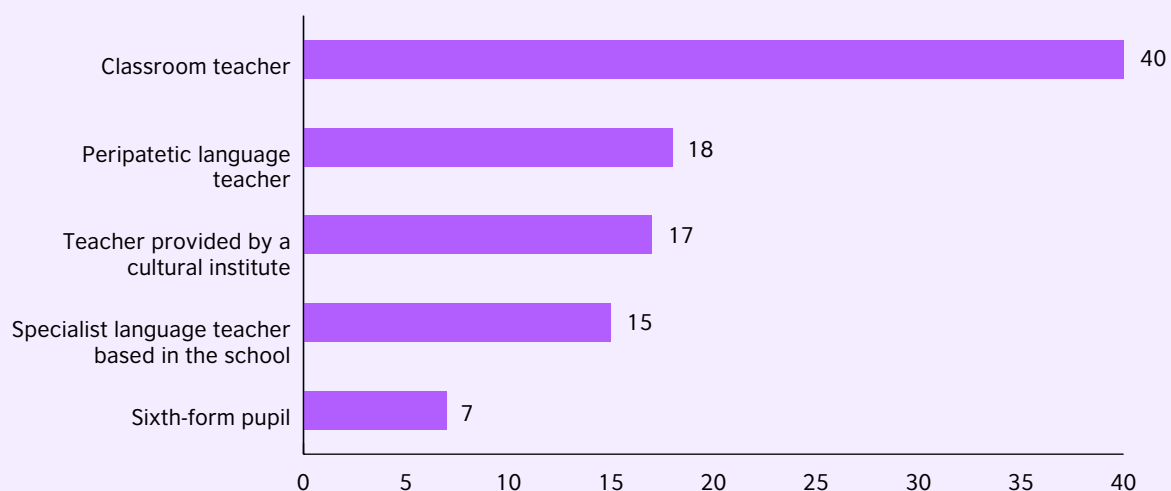


Figure 14 Primary languages teachers

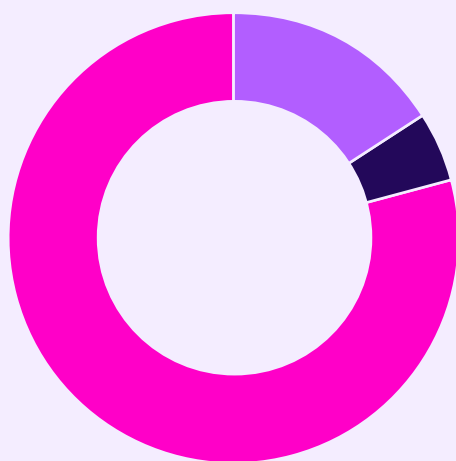
Where sixth-form pupils taught languages in primary schools, it was clear that this was only occasionally. There was very limited evidence of primary schools employing language assistants or teachers from local post-primary schools teaching languages as part of primary/post-primary outreach work. Four in ten primary schools signalled that they have a member of staff who holds an A-level or above in a language and this teacher could potentially assume the role of languages co-ordinator.

Over the past decade, Stranmillis University College has been developing an optional final year module in primary languages on the Bachelor of Education degree for aspiring primary school teachers.

They have done so in collaboration with colleagues in a wide range of schools and organisations, including Irish-medium organisations, the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT), British Council Northern Ireland, CCEA, the Education and Training Inspectorate, and community arts groups. Unfortunately, the module did not run in 2020–21, because the assessed weekly placement in schools that is central to its success could not be completed due to Covid-19. In recent years, the module was taken by home students as well as Erasmus and international students who brought with them global perspectives and taught their languages in primary schools.

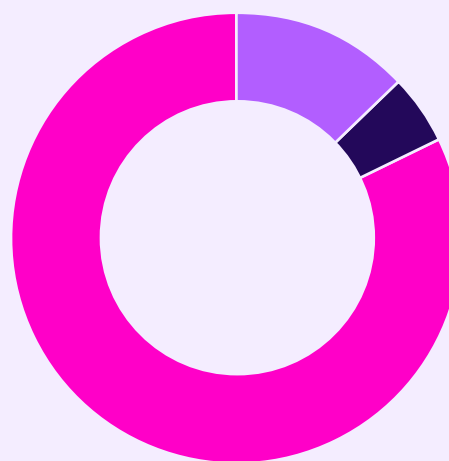
Contact with post-primary schools

All schools, including those which do not teach and never have taught languages, were asked about contact with local post-primary schools. We asked the same question in 2019, and the proportion of schools reporting no contact has deteriorated further:



2019 (218 schools)

- Yes, with just one post-primary school **16%**
- Yes, with two or more post-primary schools **5%**
- No contact with post-primary schools in relation to language learning **79%**



2021 (123 schools)

- Yes, with just one post-primary school **13%**
- Yes, with two or more post-primary schools **5%**
- No contact with post-primary schools in relation to language learning **82%**

Figure 15 Does your primary school have contact with any post-primary schools in terms of language learning?

In terms of more promising practice, primary principals commented:

We have strong links with our local Grammar School. They participate in our European Day of Languages and provide us with Year 13 & 14 pupils to assist with our after-school language club. (All pre-Covid 19).

Some years A level Spanish and French students come out to teach the children.

Our primary school is the Lead School, within the local Confucius Hub and as such, facilitates the teaching of Chinese culture and Mandarin across 9 Post- Primary Schools, both selective and non-selective.

Primary schools not teaching languages

Of the schools which replied that they do not teach a language at all, over half have taught a language in the past. Figure 16 shows the reasons for no longer teaching a language.

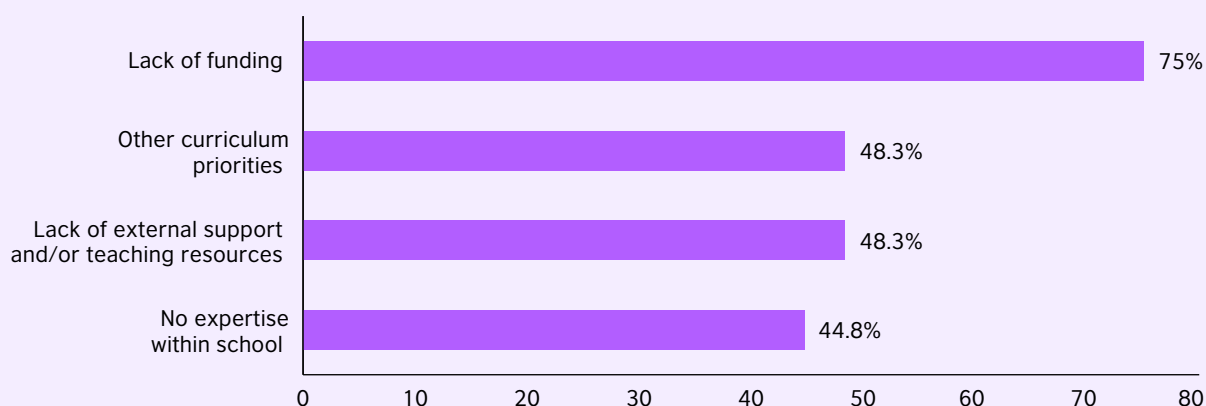


Figure 16 Main reasons for not teaching primary languages



70% of primary school principals who responded to our survey think that language learning should be statutory in primary schools in Northern Ireland.

Just one in 20 schools said that their reason for not teaching languages was that they were not convinced of the benefits. One teacher's sentiment echoed the thoughts of many:

The demands of the curriculum are already huge and primary languages could be seen as another area to be taught. In the past we have held after-school clubs, teaching Irish and Spanish. We were lucky at the time to have a teacher willing to do this and we had employed a classroom assistant from Spain. Obviously if it was made statutory, space would have to be set aside to enable this to be implemented. And then there is the problem of who would implement it. Maybe a 'roving' teacher, employed to cover several schools over a week's timetable.

Should languages be compulsory in primary schools in Northern Ireland?

In the past ten years, England, Scotland and Wales have lowered the age at which instructed language learning begins in the belief that an earlier start will lead to better learning outcomes.

In 2012 the Scottish government introduced a '1+2 approach' to primary languages, recommending a first additional language (L2) from Primary 1 and a second additional language from Primary 5. Full implementation is planned by 2021 (Scottish government: Learning Directorate, 2017). Gaelic as an additional language is recognised as a potential L2 subject for some pupils. The strategy incorporates positive recognition of young people with a community language as mother tongue, where both the acquisition of English and the continuation of mother-tongue learning are anticipated. There are various initiatives to upscale teacher competence, such as the Open University courses for primary practitioners in French, German, Mandarin and Spanish (Open, 2020) offered in co-operation with the Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, a partner of NICILT. While the strategy seems laudable, its feasibility has been questioned (Murray, 2017), not least since funding is insecure beyond 2021.

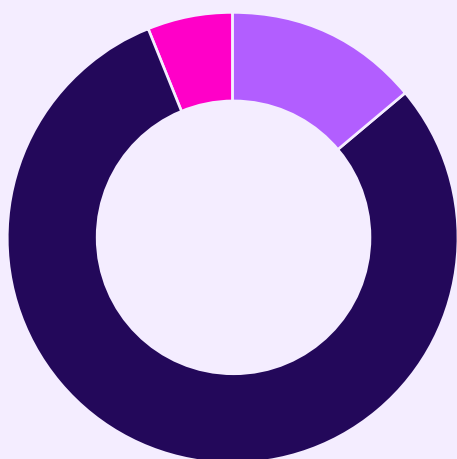
In England, language learning has been compulsory at Key Stage 2 since 2014. In Wales, all pupils must learn Welsh in addition to English and from 2022 the area of 'international languages' will feature on the new curriculum in Wales as part of the 'Languages, Literacy and Communication' area of learning.

In Ireland, all pupils must learn Irish in addition to English, and modern foreign languages are strongly encouraged through Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026.

Seventy per cent of primary school principals who responded to our survey think that language learning should be statutory in primary schools in Northern Ireland. Of those principals who think languages should not be compulsory, the majority think that pupils should at least be given the option of learning a language at Key Stage 2. Twelve out of the 123 responding schools think that there is no place for languages on the primary curriculum.

Primary school pupils mainly learn implicitly, particularly younger learners. This is a slow process requiring plentiful and high-quality language input. We know from recent research (Graham et al., 2017) that the ideal conditions for teaching languages in primary schools are a minimum of one hour of contact time per week, delivered by a teacher with degree-level proficiency in the language. Any future primary languages initiative in Northern Ireland would need to be properly funded and resourced.

We asked the same questions about compulsion to our Year 9 pupils (n=1,528). The overwhelming majority said that primary school pupils should have the opportunity to do languages if they want. This was a different view to that of primary school principals.



- Yes, languages should be compulsory in primary schools **14%**
- Pupils in primary schools should have the option to learn a language **80%**
- Languages should not be compulsory in primary schools **6%**

Figure 17 Year 9 pupils' opinions on language learning in primary schools

We explored this further in the Year 9 focus groups:

I went to an Irish-medium primary school and knowing Irish and English helps me to learn Spanish now in secondary school. I can switch between Irish and English very easily. The experience of knowing how language works has made learning Spanish easier for me.

We didn't do any languages in primary schools. But, I think it would be a good idea to make the move to secondary school easier.

“

Overall, much more research is needed if Northern Ireland is to (re)consider primary language provision.

International engagement

All 123 responding primary schools were asked about international engagement.

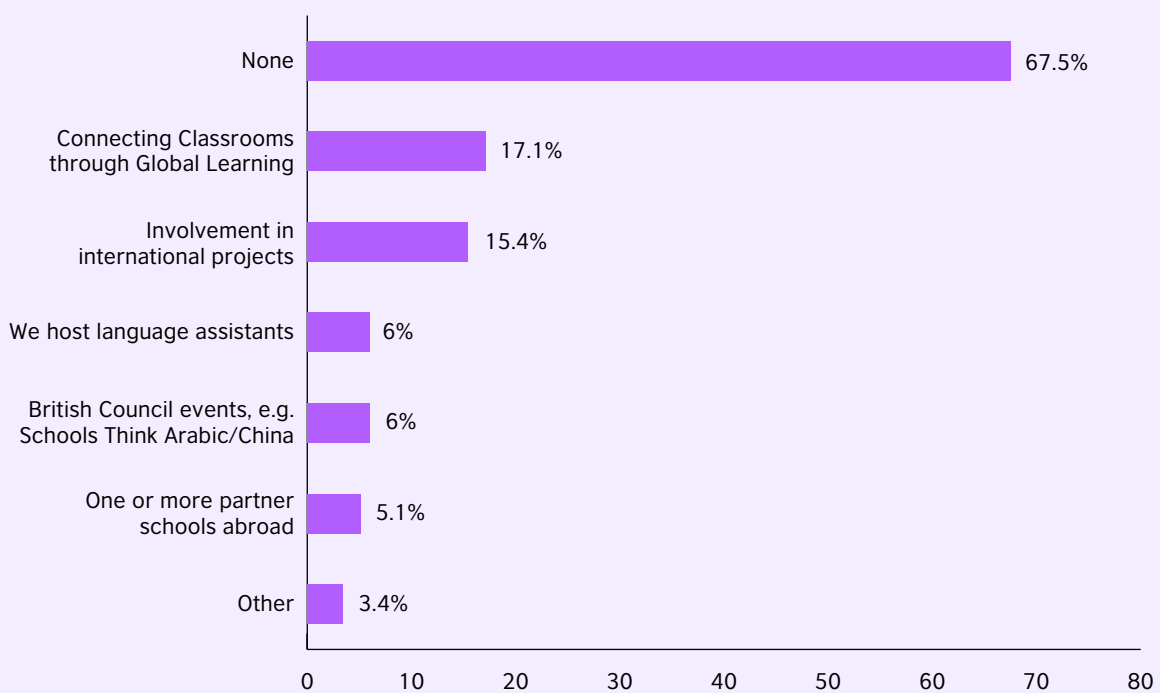


Figure 18 International engagement in primary schools

The overwhelming majority of primary schools reported that there are no opportunities for their staff and pupils to be involved in international activities. This is understandable given the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Limitations and suggestions for further research

Language Trends Northern Ireland successfully shows the general trends in language learning. The balance is in trying to produce a timely report and simultaneously conducting a robust analysis. The lower-than-expected response rate from primary schools means that this data needs to be interpreted with some caution. With more time, a more nuanced statistical analysis could be completed on the post-primary data and a discourse analysis from the pupil focus groups data could also be performed.

In future research, young people could be more involved at all stages of the research process through the adoption of a children's rights-based approach. It was evident from the response rate (n=1,528) that young people have a lot to say about language learning.

Final remarks

It is clear from our research that the non-statutory position of languages on the primary curriculum has meant that instructed languages have all but disappeared from participating primary schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. If languages are to become a part of the curriculum, substantial funding will be required to ensure pupils can make progress. Transition to post-primary language provision will also need to be assured.

Data from our post-primary school survey shows a very clear divide in terms of contact time for language learning between grammar and secondary schools. There are shifting sands in terms of the popularity of individual languages, with considerable growth in Spanish. German is precariously low and provision geographically patchy across Northern Ireland.

Pupils have been at the heart of this year's research, and it is clear that they have found languages more difficult to learn online in comparison to other areas of learning. Most pupils do not see languages being part of their future career, and just 44 per cent of the 1,528 pupils who chose to respond are planning to do a language for GCSE. Pupils tell us they like languages and they appreciate how hard their teachers work, but it is clear that more needs to be done to encourage pupils to see themselves as life-long language learners.

Teachers have told us that the biggest barriers to uptake of languages beyond age 14 is the nature and content of external exams, as well as the grading of external exams. Our data shows that languages are not secure at A-level in any sector and at GCSE are only secure in the grammar sector.

There is, however, much to celebrate. Teachers have displayed their agility in teaching online and in trying to keep the international dimension alive in their schools. By working together, we have an opportunity to improve language learning for all young people in the future: *on y va! Auf geht's! Ar aghaidh linn! ¡Vamos!*⁵



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