**Research Records**

**Title:** Europeans and their languages

**URL/location:**

https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f551bd64-8615-4781-9be1-c592217dad83

**What is it:**

Detailed report on the abilities and aptitudes of Europeans and their languages.

**Who produced it:** x

the European commission (the government of the European union) and conducted by TNS opinion and social, a survey company.

**Date:** 2012

**Summary:**

 56% in EU vs 38% in UK able to hold conversation in second language

The UK ranked 19th in their perception of how important learning a foreign language is (81%)

As expected, English is perceived by Europeans to be by far the most useful language to know (68%).

English remains the most widely spoken foreign language throughout Europe.

38% of EU citizens state that they have sufficient skills in English to have a conversation.

**Reliability:** x

Very reliable. Thorough, transparent research (they publish the full dataset) overlooked by the governing body of the European Union. Also, fairly recent.

**Title:** Y9 perceptions of languages

**URL/location:**

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/about/press/speaking-other-languages-%E2%80%98important%E2%80%99-understanding-different-cultures-and-places-say>

**What is it:**

A YouGov survey of Y9 students on their opinions and perceptions of languages

**Who produced it:**

YouGov, a survey company where people can be paid to complete surveys. The British Council, a British organisation specialising in international cultural and educational opportunities. It is a government organisation funded by the foreign, commonwealth and development office. It works in over 100 countries: promoting a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom and the English language; encouraging cultural, scientific, technological and educational co-operation with the United Kingdom.

**Year:** 2021

**Summary:**

41% said that learning a language was relevant to their life

Languages were percieved as more difficult than other subjects by 53%

38% said that languages were less important that other subjects

**Reliability:**

Fairly reliable as it is mostly just data. It doesn’t seem very biased, but the full data is not accessible, and British council has been called a tool for propaganda.

**Title:** Key stage 4 performance 2019

**URL/location:**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2019-revised>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc>

**What is it:**

Official government records documenting performance of GCSE subjects, especially in the eBacc

**Who produced it:**

The UK government department for education / office for national statistics

**Year:** 2019

**Summary:**

The eBacc is a government initiative to get more students taking subjects which keep their options open for further study and future careers. It includes maths, English language and literature, history or geography, the sciences and a language.

MFL eBacc average point score was only 2.28 (p6)

**Reliability:**

Very reliable data directly from the department for education.

**Title:**  Standards in GCSE languages through the lens of the CEFR

**URL/location:**

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/844034/Investigating_standards_in_GCSE_French__German_and_Spanish_through_the_lens_of_the_CEFR.pdf>

**What is it:**

A study into how various GCSE grades compare with the CEFR (common European framework of reference for languages)

**Who produced it:**

Ofqual, the exam regulator

**Year:** 2019

**Summary:**

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French is at B1, A2, A1, for grades 9, 7 and 4 respectively.

**Reliability:**

Very reliable as it is from a reliable government body and it is very transparent in its methodology and data.

**Relevance:**Relevant to understanding what skill a GCSE language qualification is equivalent to, and therefore identifying whether schools teach languages successfully.

**Title:** 2000 more teachers needed

**URL/location:** https://schoolsweek.co.uk/2000-more-mfl-teachers-needed-for-ebacc/

**What is it:**

An article stating that there is a lack of teachers to have 75% of students taking a language at GCSE

Who produced it: schoolsweek magazine, education data lab

**Date:** 2015

**Summary:**

Schools will have to find more than 2,000 “missing” teachers to meet the government’s demand for the inclusion of a modern foreign language in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), Schools Week can exclusively reveal.

The new qualification requires every secondary pupil to study English, maths, science, history or geography and a modern foreign language (MFL) until they are 16. The change will affect all pupils starting year 7 this September.

Figures from research body Education Datalab reveal that delivering this for MFL will require 2,000 extra teachers and about 7,000 extra language classes across secondary schools.

**Reliability:**

Somewhat reliable, as it is from a respected magazine, but how this data was found is not transparent.

**Improving Foreign Languages in the UK**

English schools are failing children when it comes to languages. The UK is one of the worst foreign language learners in the world by many measures, and the problem starts in schools. People are aware of the issue: a BBC article from 2019 documents the steadily falling uptake of languages[[1]](#footnote-1), while a guardian article remarks, “We need languages graduates to steer us post-Brexit.” In this essay I will discuss the shortage of language skills in the UK, the shortcomings of schools, and how the problem might be solved. I chose this topic as I have personal experience with feeling failed in my foreign language education and highly value language learning, as an EU citizen. I feel that, as the world becomes more and more globalised, learning foreign languages could have the potential to improve people’s personal and professional lives, as well as build positive political and economic relationships between the UK and other countries.

**Glossary:**

EU – European union

CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

KS1 – Key stage 1 (reception, year 1 and year 2)

KS2 – Key stage 2 (Years 3-6)

SATs – standardised exams taken at age 10/11 (year 6) used to assess school performance

GCSE – Standardised exams taken at age 15/16 (year 11) in England and Wales. Currently graded from a scale of 9-1, where 9 is the highest and 1 is the lowest. Pupils take around 9 subjects.

A-levels – Standardised exams taken at age 18 (year 13). Pupils usually take 3 or 4 subjects.

eBacc – English Baccalaureate, a set of GCSE subjects to keep pupils options open for further study and employment. Maths, English language and literature, the sciences, history or geography, and a modern language.

Brexit – the UK leaving the European Union

According to a survey about Europeans and their languages, conducted by members of the European commission in 2012, only 39% of UK citizens self-reported as able to hold a conversation in a foreign language, while the same was true for 54% of all respondents.[[2]](#footnote-2) Due to the extremely low uptake of languages at A-level (which is largely due to the high specialisation of A-levels), I will focus on GCSE languages, as this is the highest level of language education most people will receive.

One method of assessing a person’s foreign language proficiency is the CEFR – the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. It is divided into 3 main categories (marked by the letter A, B or C) and a total of 6 subdivisions (marked by appending a 1 or 2). These subdivisions are, in order of lowest level to highest level: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2[[3]](#footnote-3). Ofqual, the exam regulator, published an assessment of what CEFR level corresponds to grades 4, 7 and 9 at GCSE of various languages in 2019, and found that a grade 4 (pass) at GCSE French corresponds to only A1 level of the CEFR. This means that students with a GCSE qualification in French may only be able to “interact in a simple way” and “use very basic everyday phrases”.[[4]](#footnote-4) The average GCSE grade in French in 2019 was 5.48[[5]](#footnote-5), meaning that the ability of an average French GCSE student is only slightly better than A1 level. Grade 7 was found to correspond to A2 level and grade 9 – achieved by just 5% of students – to B1 level, meaning “use simple language to communicate feelings, opinions, plans and experiences.

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Figure

These findings are supported by my primary research, where I conducted a survey of students across all years in my school and found that the most common self-reported CEFR level of year 10 students was A2 (44%), followed by B1 (30%). It is important to note, here, that firstly, year 10 students are still a year from sitting their GCSE exams so will likely be working at least a grade lower than their final outcome, and that secondly, the most common grade in French GCSE at my school are 9s, followed by 8s[[6]](#footnote-6); therefore, the year 10 students in my survey were likely working at around a grade 7 or 8 level. This demonstrates that my primary data also concluded that a grade 7 likely corresponds to around level A2.

Furthermore, the Ofqual assessment revealed that there was a particular lack in listening skills, with students at grade 9 level demonstrating B1 level in reading, writing and speaking, but only A2 level in listening, so even the few who achieve this grade may not be able to “deal with most situations likely to arise when travelling”.[[7]](#footnote-7) When surveyed, language teachers at my school noted that when they transitioned from learning a second language at school or university to attempting to use it with native speakers on a day-to-day basis, they struggled with listening skills. This shows that there is a significant lack of listening teaching not just in the UK but around the world.

The government have made attempts to improve the language provision at schools, such as including it in the eBacc – the English baccalaureate, a school performance indicator for which you must take a certain combination of subjects – but this has not really succeeded. The eBacc average point score across all the subjects included is 4.07, but for languages it is a mere 2.28, and only 45% of GCSE students took a foreign language in 2019, despite the government’s attempt to incentivise schools to promote it.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Learning a second language has a wide range of benefits. It affects cognitive function, including higher test scores, better multitasking and a reduction in age-related cognitive decline. It’s even associated with creativity.[[9]](#footnote-9) Knowing a second language doesn’t just have benefits for the brain; it has financial implications too. Knowing a second language has been associated with at least a 2% increase in wages for college graduates in the USA (even when controlling for cognitive ability)[[10]](#footnote-10). This may not seem like much, but in fact that is equivalent to an additional 68,000 dollars throughout a lifetime.[[11]](#footnote-11) A report by British Chambers for commerce identified a serious need for improved language ability, including that 60% of companies interested in international trade considered a lack of multilingual employees to be a barrier. Our poor language skills are inhibiting growth, but change is possible.

Through a variety of sources, I have shown that languages are shockingly behind other subjects’ performance at GCSE level, and within the wider population, and that this is a detriment to individuals and the country. The next question is how can this be changed? I believe that in order to change uptake and proficiency, it is crucial to address attitudes towards MFL learning.

Less than 3% of respondents to the survey completed by pupils at my secondary school cited modern foreign languages as their favourite subject, and in a survey of year 9 pupils, 53% perceived languages to be more difficult than other subjects[[12]](#footnote-12): clearly pupils in the UK tend to have negative views of language learning, and this is affecting the population’s ability to speak foreign languages. I believe that to improve uptake, we must keep language lessons enjoyable, and put a stronger emphasis on positive feedback, as well as better tests. In 2019, 152 university language teachers said that exams that are too difficult and unreliable grading are driving learners and teachers out of the subject.[[13]](#footnote-13) In the same survey, of the pupils who planned to study a language at GCSE, 72 per cent said that they currently enjoyed learning languages, compared to 16 per cent of those who did not intend to study a language at GCSE.12 We must also put a focus on having high quality language teaching, as this will improve their performance and perception of difficulty.

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Figure

Attitude has additionally been shown to be correlated with proficiency of MFL[[14]](#footnote-14), which I also found in my primary research: 37% of those who said that they thought languages were of 1, 2 or 3 out of 5 importance reported their proficiency of CEFR level B1 or higher, compared with 59% of those who said languages were of 4 or 5 importance, as shown in Figure 2. This demonstrates that not only does the perceived importance or usefulness of languages affect the likelihood of a person to decide to learn it, but it may also affect how much a student applies themselves to the subject. It is worth noting that it is likely that this relationship goes both ways: attitude does not only improve proficiency or perceived proficiency, but perceived proficiency likely has an effect on attitude. Therefore, it is important to provide language learners with a supportive environment to learn and improve confidence.

Attitudes to foreign languages in the UK are not particularly positive. In the survey of Europeans and their languages, also previously mentioned, only 81% of people in the UK thought that learning a language other than their mother tongue would benefit them personally, which is low compared to many other countries, such as the Netherlands, of which 94% thought the same.[[15]](#footnote-15) These attitudes are formed early on and continue to be shaped by one’s environment. Research has shown that introducing language lessons early on can shape a positive attitude towards language learning in later life.[[16]](#footnote-16) Therefore, I feel that it is crucial to improve the provision of MFL at key stages 1 and 2. Although the government made language learning in key stage 2 compulsory in 2014, languages are rarely viewed by primary schools as a priority. During the first covid-19 lockdown, more than half of primary school children did not receive any foreign language education[[17]](#footnote-17), and at least 50% of primary schools normally only teach foreign languages for less than 45 minutes per week[[18]](#footnote-18). In the previously mentioned survey of year 9 students, 78 per cent of pupils planning to study a language at GCSE said they had been encouraged to do so by their parents/carers. Of those pupils not intending to study a language at GCSE, just 25 per cent said their parents had encouraged them to study one.[[19]](#footnote-19) This shows that attitudes have specific and identifiable causes and can therefore be addressed.

To summarize, the key factors that I believe must be addressed in order to improve language proficiency are teaching quality, attitude and perceived usefulness, and primary education. However, there are a multitude of barriers to achieving this.

Language teachers are in short supply. In order to fulfil the government’s commitment for 75% of pupils to be studying the English baccalaureate program, which includes studying a foreign language until 16, 2,000 missing teacher roles will have to be filled[[20]](#footnote-20). This will be enormously difficult given the immigration changes due to Brexit. In the year ending April 2016, net immigration from EU countries was 282 thousand, but by 2021, this had fallen to 118 thousand[[21]](#footnote-21). This massive shift in migration could lead to roles simply not being filled, and courses not being offered, or roles taken up and courses being taught by improperly qualified teachers.

Perceived usefulness is one of the most difficult issues to combat, as English is such a worldwide language. English remains the most widely spoken foreign language throughout Europe, with 38% of EU citizens stating that they have sufficient skills in English to have a conversation.[[22]](#footnote-22) This means that in many scenarios, British people may find that those from other countries with whom they interact actually speak English, especially as it is possible that jobs in the tourism and restaurant industry – the main professions people come into contact with on holiday – value or require English as a second language. Furthermore, few British children have exposure to foreign languages in the same way that some other countries do. The Netherlands is listed as the best country for English as a second language by the English proficiency index[[23]](#footnote-23), followed closely by many countries in Scandinavia. One of the most cited reasons for this is that most television programmes are shown in their original language (usually English) with Dutch subtitles, rather than dubbed[[24]](#footnote-24). Watching television in a different language with subtitles has been shown to be an effective method of vocabulary acquisition in children[[25]](#footnote-25), and it allows them to see words used in context whilst also being an accessible, appealing and fun way of learning. Dutch children are exposed to English in this way naturally when they consume English media as it is all that is available; however, as almost all programmes shown on UK television are in English, English children do not have this opportunity. That said, it is still possible to watch foreign television in its original language, and I believe it should be encouraged, especially when considering shortcomings in listening skills.

There are multiple significant barriers to primary language teaching in the UK. Firstly, an average of up to 10 hours a week is spent teaching maths and English[[26]](#footnote-26). This is due to the SATs: standardised tests taken in year 2 and 6 to determine pupils’ and schools’ progress and attainment in spelling, punctuation, grammar, reading and maths. The high focus on SATs and performance can mean that in many schools, a wholistic education is lacking. In 2017, 96% of National Union Teachers said that preparation for SATs doesn’t support a broad and balanced education[[27]](#footnote-27). Primary schools are under pressure to perform well in SATs because the attainment and progress scores are used for Ofsted reports and ranking tables, and although KS1 SATs have now been made optional, many schools still choose to take them for the same reasons.

Furthermore, although it is compulsory in KS2, language education is not compulsory in KS1, despite this being, as previously mentioned, an ideal time period to set the groundwork for positive attitudes to languages throughout pupils’ lives, which in turn will positively affect proficiency and uptake.

The structure of the English school system also affects language education from pre-school to higher education. One of the issues with primary school languages is that there is little continuity between primary and secondary. Just 3.5 per cent of secondary teachers say that pupils in Year 7 continue with the same language learned at primary school, according to a survey conducted by British council in 2020.[[28]](#footnote-28) Although, as discussed previously, the actual progress made is less important than attitudes formed when it comes to early years language education, this still means that pupils essentially must start from scratch in year 7, disregarding, and likely forgetting, all the hours of language education that occurred throughout primary school. This is not only a poor use of students’ time and a failure on their education, but a misuse of government resources. In order to ensure that pupils have the best language provision possible, it is crucial to provide them with the option to continue studying the same language despite a change of school.

Another way that the structure of the English education system inhibits language learning is post-16 education. Pupils may choose only 3 or occasionally 4 A levels, meaning that languages are easily disregarded in favour of other subjects, whether that is due to university entry requirements, not liking languages as much as other subject, or a perception that languages are less useful. When surveyed, MFL teachers at my school mentioned that there was a bias towards core subjects, and that students who loved languages at GCSE have ended up giving them up at A-level in favour of subjects perceived to secure them a better career. In 2017, less than 6% of A level students took French, Spanish, or German. Just 3% of A level students studied French, while 21% of GCSE students studied French.[[29]](#footnote-29) In the Netherlands, on the other hand (where 90% of the population speak English[[30]](#footnote-30)), learning English is compulsory from age 10 to 18, and to pass the highest-level high school (similar to a grammar school) one must achieve a grade equivalent to B2 or C1 level.

In conclusion, in order to improve language proficiency in the UK, we must target schools. Specifically, instilling positive attitudes in children by teaching them about the benefits of language learning could improve both uptake and proficiency, as well as making testing at GCSE more accessible. Attitudes may also be addressed by improving primary language education. In order to do this, it may be necessary to consider the harmful impact of SATs as well as devote more resources and provide more incentives for language education, especially in KS1. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to expose children to a more international range of media, and to try to improve the UK as a whole’s attitude towards foreign language and culture in general. This is especially important when you consider the impact Brexit and the subsequent immigration laws may have on the already lacking availability of language teachers. Finally, I believe that it would be pertinent to seriously consider changing the structure of our school system to broaden young people’s education to improve their range of opportunities in later life.

**Evaluation**

I wanted to find out more about language teaching in the UK because I am an avid linguist and I have always been curios about why the UK is so bad at language speaking and how things could be improved. I found data on the UK’s language ability compared to other countries, how languages perform in schools, and looked into some of the root causes, such as attitudes, teaching shortage and the structure of the English school system.

I was quite happy with the secondary research I performed, as my sources were reliable and mostly very transparent and unbiased, which allowed me to reach valid conclusions. I did find it difficult at first, when I wasn’t sure exactly which direction to go in, especially as when I first tried to compare the UK with other European countries, I was using separate sources, and the sources for other countries were often in another language.

Despite challenges, I think that my primary research was a success overall. I collected a large dataset and used it successfully, finding correlations between attitude and proficiency, as well as analysing how students felt about their ability. The problem with this was that many of the students in KS3 I believe severely overestimated their ability, with many year 7s saying they were able to speak with a degree of fluency, despite only learning a language for sixth months and only having encountered the present tense. I also forgot to add an option for sixth formers who weren’t studying a language when I asked what language they were currently studying and had to manually filter those results.

I concluded that the main barriers to language learning in the UK were attitudes, the structure of the school system, as well as a teacher shortage. I was surprised to learn that this may be affected by Brexit as well. Over the course of the project, I learned a huge amount of research skills as well as new technology skills. The organisation was difficult at times, especially in the run up to the submission deadline, as I misjudged how long finishing touches would take, but in the end, I was very happy with my outcome.

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2. op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f551bd64-8615-4781-9be1-c592217dad83 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common\_European\_Framework\_of\_Reference\_for\_Languages [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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8. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2019-revised [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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14. core.ac.uk/download/pdf/81147309.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f551bd64-8615-4781-9be1-c592217dad83 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13670050.2020.1749230 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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26. assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/924093/Summer\_2018\_SSS\_Final\_Report.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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