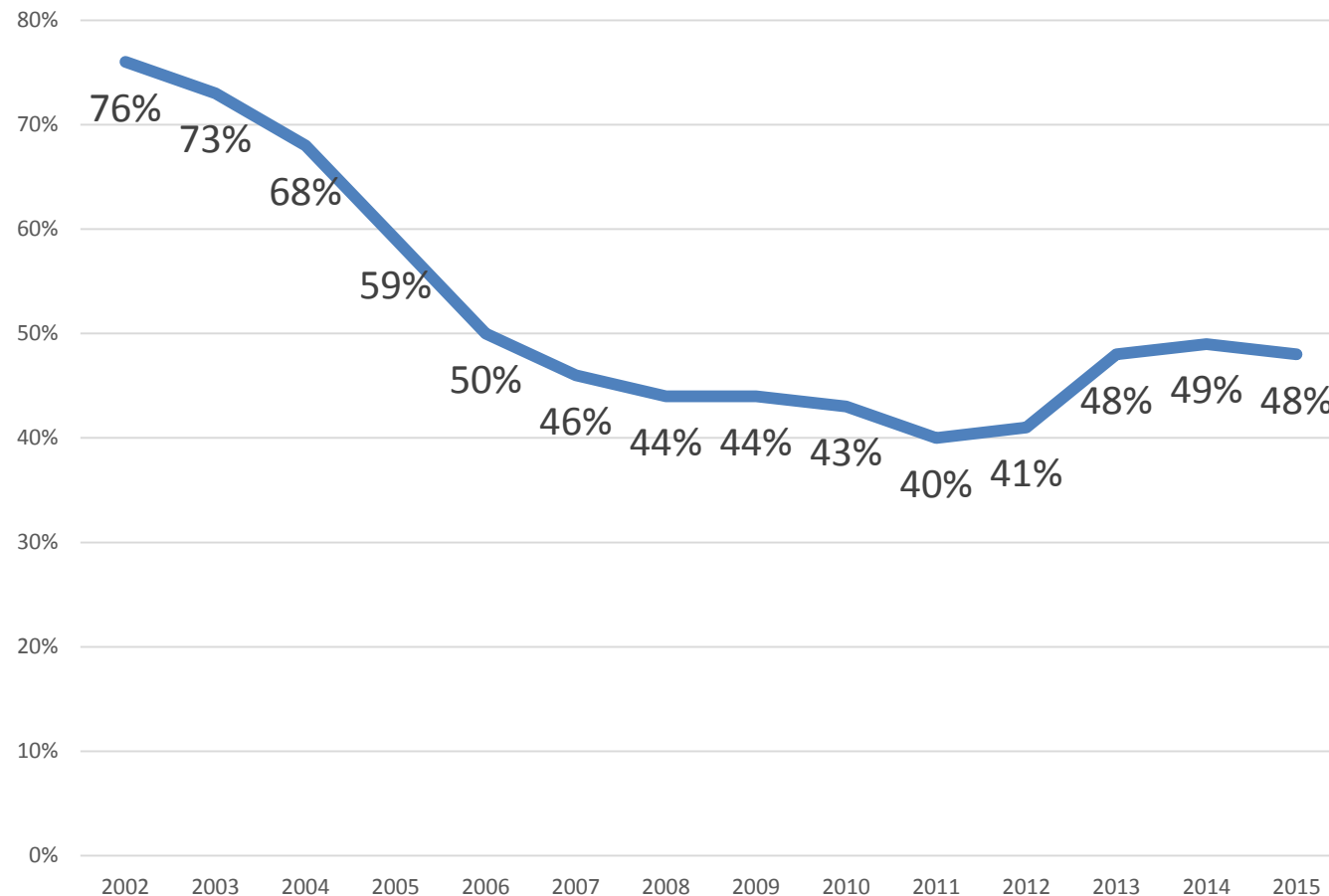


Language Trends 2015/16

Early findings on issues of concern to secondary teachers

Kathryn Board and Teresa Tinsley

Proportion of cohort taking GCSE languages, 2002-2015



Exams and assessment

- *‘Very concerned about the increased level of difficulty built into new specifications, especially at a time when most students will increasingly be expected to continue with a MFL at Key Stage 4. Totally unrealistic. The vast majority of students will simply not be able to cope!’*
- *‘The changes at GCSE are going to provide a real challenge for schools. They are going to become more inaccessible, more demanding and less enjoyable for pupils. This, combined with a serious lack of qualified (let alone quality) teachers is creating a perfect storm.’*

GCSE concerns

- *‘We are deeply concerned about the marking and changing of grade boundaries in Languages by the exam boards at GCSE... How can we predict or guide our students with these changes beyond our control?’*
- *This does not support low-ability students at all! How can we explain to our students that just because they were born a year later their work is worth less than it would have been the year before?’*

- *‘Some of our pupils say that they find languages too difficult - consequently they do not want to 'blot' their copy book of A or A* grades with a lower grade - hence a high rate of disapplications recently’*
- *‘This does not encourage students to take up languages for further study, nor do Senior Management support languages as much, as they usually have a negative effect on the school results’*
- *‘The GCSE content is overloaded and the wide range of skills they need is so vast we cannot concentrate on the fundamentals.’*

Barriers to take up at GCSE

- *‘Not seen to be important - culture stresses maths and English as the important subjects’*
- *‘Limited number of option choices means that many who don't take a language simply because they have other priorities - a language often comes in as choice five or six!’*

More barriers...

- *‘It is simply too hard in its new format for many students who are weak. It would have an impact on behaviour’*
- *‘Languages are perceived as a challenging subject. Some students think that they will be more successful by getting higher results in less demanding subjects.’*
- *‘Financial concerns as government funding decreasing to grammar schools’*

How will schools respond to the 'Ebacc for all?'



New GCSE specifications

- *'I doubt that the new GCSE exams will be any more helpful as they will get even more difficult, thereby disadvantaging non-selective schools who feel pressured into entering more than 90 per cent of their students for the GCSE exams'*
- *'The new spec for GCSE is welcome as is the new specification for A Level but the fear is it will be too hard to access the top grades. We have bright students who get A in Maths, History etc but then B or C in MFL, it is no wonder that they are not opting for them at GCSE and A Level'*
- *'We welcome the new GCSE changes and are happy with new writing and speaking changes. Hopefully we'll produce more spontaneous speakers and writers! I hope it will lead to higher 6th form numbers'*

Responses to challenge of new GCSEs

- *‘Delivery of grammar is now essential and we have started with current KS3 learners’*
- *‘We are adjusting our teaching in Key Stage 3 to incorporate the skills needed at Key Stage 4 such as translation, transcription and reading authentic texts.’*

- *‘We have always organised clubs and extra support and valued independent work. Unfortunately, we lost our Foreign Language Assistants two years ago due to finances. We are also going to lose one hour of teaching in Year 11 (only four hours left per fortnight). There has been no increase of allocation for languages at KS3.’*
- *‘New challenges, harder exams, but less or no additional time.’*

Primary languages?

- *'Primary language provisions are not as rigorous as promised. They do not have the capacity to teach languages well in many primary schools and so pupils are often already 'turned off' languages before they arrive at secondary school.*
- *To say that they are entering with NC level 3 or 4 is ridiculous - they only know nouns! It is assumed that because of primary languages, secondary teachers can get pupils to almost the previous AS level by Year 11, but this is not the case.*
- *If there was funding for excellent MFL teachers to work in primary schools, the new model could actually work, but I fear this will not be the case and languages will suffer yet again.'*

Challenges of take up at AS/AL

- *‘There is no correlation between increased take up at GCSE and A Level as the GCSE exams have become so difficult and the controlled assessment have taken out all the fun that fewer students choose to stay on.’*
- *‘Pressure to take Maths and further Maths has meant some students wanting to take an A level language but study engineering type university courses, cannot fit the Maths and Science requirements as well as the demands of a language and it is the language which gets sacrificed!’*

- *‘Very few want to continue. We have had three or four students who were interested but the school would not finance such a small class. We have a partnership with another school but students are put off travelling and having different teachers’*
- *‘The numbers at A level continue to drop and are disappointing - to the point that courses are under threat. We put over 120 through French GCSE each year and are lucky to get five in Year 12’*
- *‘SLT have decided to scrap A level language for the current Year 11 who are our biggest intake of MFL students in several years...and we know we have several who wish to take languages but that option will not be available to them.’*

Current A levels – pros

- *‘Logical progression from GCSE and there is a gradual increase in complexity of language content and topic area throughout the course. Topics and cultural topics are engaging’*
- *‘The specification and examinations are good and test a range of skills and important topics. The marking is unreliable.’*

Current A levels - cons

- *'Perceived as too difficult compared to other subjects and not valued high enough by employers and HE institutions to encourage students to opt and put the work in. Funding also an issue'*
- *'Generally we feel that the topics are beginning to seem rather outdated. The level of language demanded at A level is consistently fair. Inconsistencies in marking and grading. The small number of candidates awarded A* is of concern. Many able candidates who gain A* in other subjects fail to gain A* in languages'*

New A level specifications

- *'I think the renewed focus on literature and culture will have a positive impact. My hope is that they become more accessible and relevant. Hopefully the gap between KS4 and KS5 will be less challenging and so more will consider it. My fear is that as the GCSE becomes harder (no CAs etc) fewer people will go on to opt for it at KS5'*
- *'The new A-Level specifications will not attract many learners in comprehensive schools as they seem very elitist in their content and the difficulty level may lead students to opt for other subjects'*
- *'We are not happy with the focus on literature in the new specifications. Students are only expected to produce writing on a book or a film, rather than on different topics taken from current affairs.'*

Impact of 'decoupling'

- *'We are concerned that the linear A-levels without the one year AS will cause scientists to take yet another STEM subject instead of branching out into languages'*
- *'Many of our A level students study a language alongside Maths and sciences - they would not wish to study literature in a MFL as is proposed by the new A level so I anticipate far fewer students opting for A level if literature remains compulsory'*
- *'The way options will work - they have to choose if they are doing an AS or A level - could be detrimental'*

- *‘We are abolishing AS levels because of funding shortages. Pupils choose three subjects now and continue with them to A2. This will have an impact on numbers in languages’*
- *‘The two-year course seems to reassure pupils as they feel they have longer to gain a true knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary. The subject content seems a lot more engaging and preparing our pupils for university’*

What next?

'The universities ... are in for a big shock when they discover over the next few years that these new qualifications will result in fewer students and further closures of university departments'

'Most of our 6th form language recruits choose the language as a fourth subject, then discover it's their favourite and go on to study it at university. Next year's Year 12 will only start three subjects, which we think will drive numbers seriously down. What's more, few of our students like the sound of compulsory literature'

'Few of our pupils are academic enough to study languages at university so we are looking at them studying a language to support/augment their portfolio for UCAS. Whilst compulsory study of literature appeals to me as a graduate of languages, it does not appeal to pupils in a very competitive market for recruiting pupils to study my subject in the Sixth Form. The current A Level is a bit off-putting for pupils, the new A Level is even more so'

For discussion...

- *The problems occur when elitist exams are introduced which don't encourage the "maybe students" to have a go, when exam boards fail to recognise and reward outstanding pupils and fail to reward them equally for the language they are learning.*
- *I am honestly stunned by attitude of the boards - they seem to be completely unaware that if they carry on in this way, nobody will be continuing with languages in the future.'*