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**Language GCSE take-up significantly lower in less affluent state schools across England – report**

Key findings from Language Trends England 2025:

* Modern foreign language GCSE uptake is more than 20 percentage points higher in the most affluent state schools.
* 68% of the least affluent schools face difficulties recruiting language teachers.
* Almost one-third of the most disadvantaged schools have pupils who speak English as an additional language.
* Spanish has overtaken French as the most popular GCSE language, while access to German remains unequal.
* Small A-level class sizes are a growing concern; fewer than one-third of the most disadvantaged schools can run them.
* International engagement in state schools is nearly back to pre-pandemic levels.

**Fewer than half of GCSE students in state schools across England study a modern foreign language (MFL) - except in the most affluent areas where participation is significantly higher, a new report reveals.**

Students at the most affluent state schools in the country are more likely to take a language GCSE than those elsewhere by more than 20 percentage points, according to the *Language Trends England 2025* report. However, the most deprived state schools have a higher proportion of students who speak an additional language at home.

Now in its 23rd year, the survey gathered responses from over 1,000 primary, secondary, and independent schools. State schools were divided into quintiles based on free school meal eligibility. In quintile one, the most affluent, 69% of teachers reported their Year 11 students were taking a language GCSE, compared to 46–47% across less affluent quintiles two to five. Overall, 53% of students study a language GCSE, with the EBacc ambition set at 90%.

The report was carried out by Dr Ian Collen, Reader in Modern Languages Education (PGCE) and Academic Lead of the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT) at Queen’s University Belfast.

**Teacher recruitment challenge hits disadvantaged schools hardest**

Recruitment remains a challenge, especially for schools serving disadvantaged communities. This year, 68% of schools in the highest free school meals bracket reported difficulties hiring qualified MFL teachers, compared to 57% in more affluent areas.

Over a third (34%) of Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teacher trainees were international applicants—10 percentage points higher than the average across other subjects—yet they were almost twice as likely to be rejected as UK-based candidates. One of the key barriers preventing schools from employing overseas applicants is the high cost of skilled worker visas, which schools are required to cover if candidates do not already have the right to work in the UK.

The National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE) — funded by the Department for Education and delivered by IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society, the British Council and Goethe-Institut — is addressing access gaps through school-led research networks focused on widening participation in language learning.

Initiatives include new curriculum approaches to boost motivation and regional festivals celebrating the diverse languages spoken in local communities.

**Students in most deprived schools are more likely to speak multiple languages at home**

Language Trends reports have shown that schools in the most deprived areas tend to have more pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL), compared to those in more affluent areas. This year’s report found nearly a third (30%) of quintile five (less affluent) schools have students with EAL, compared to just 12.8% of quintile one schools.

Ensuring students can gain qualifications in the languages they speak at home is a key aim of the NCLE, especially in schools where multilingualism is most common.

**Spanish becomes most popular GCSE language, German access unequal**

As predicted in previous *Language Trends* reports, Spanish has now overtaken French as the most popular GCSE modern foreign language, with entries rising by 1.6% to 131,985 this year. Despite this, French remains the most offered language at Key Stage 3.

Access to German remains limited and uneven. Only one school in the most disadvantaged bracket (quintile five) offers German, while 73% of schools teaching it are in quintiles one and two.

German is the most in-demand language among employers (University of Portsmouth, 2022) and teachers are being urged to contact the NCLE and the GIMAGINE initiative, which offer funded resources, training and activities for German learning. German does not already need to be part of the curriculum to receive this support, as German clubs and other extra-curricular activities are also supported.

**Small A-level classes a growing concern**

A-level entries for French, Spanish, German, and other modern languages rose last year, but limited provision and small class sizes are making it harder for schools to keep courses running.

Just over half of responding schools reported having the capacity to offer A-level languages, either delivered within the school or in partnership with a neighbouring school. Among schools in quintile five (the least affluent), that figure drops to just 31%. Meanwhile, the proportion of teachers reporting five or fewer students in A-level language classes has increased from 36% to 41% since last year.

**Weak primary–secondary links undermine language learning**

Stronger collaboration between primary and secondary schools is seen as key to improving language uptake. Early exposure and continuity can prevent students having to start from scratch at secondary level. However, just 30% of primary schools report any contact with a local secondary. Over half have no contact at all, and only 9% receive direct support for language teaching.

Time constraints were the most cited barrier in primary language delivery, followed by limited subject knowledge among teachers and low teacher confidence.

**International engagement nearly back to pre-pandemic levels**

There are encouraging signs of renewed international engagement. In 2023/24, 36% of state schools reported offering no international opportunities. That figure has dropped sharply to just 13% in 2024/25, suggesting schools are returning to pre-pandemic levels of global activity.

**Dr Ian Collen said: “**I continue to be concerned about small MFL classes not running at A-level. Local decisions have national consequences; when multiplied throughout England, it means that the language learning journey stops for hundreds of young people. We must invest at post-16 to ensure a healthier pipeline into Further and Higher Education, and indeed the economy. A way to build capacity in MFL at A-level needs to be urgently found.”

**Vicky Gough, Schools Adviser at the British Council, said:** “This year’s report shows a clear gap in language learning linked to socioeconomic background. Last year, we found just 6% of students across the UK thought it was very likely they’d use another language in their future career. Together, these findings highlight a stark reality: young people from less privileged backgrounds are missing out on opportunities their peers are more likely to access. That’s why the British Council’s work with the NCLE is so important - to help level the playing field and make language learning more accessible for all.”

**Scott McDonald, Chief Executive of the British Council, said:** "This report makes it clear that students in less affluent areas are the least likely to study a language at GCSE level, that is a missed opportunity not just for them, but for the UK. The British Council believes that every young person should have the chance to learn a language and gain international skills that open doors and further their education and careers or simply provide a broader view of the world. Helping our young people connect across borders, build friendships and foster trust has never mattered more, and language learning is a powerful gateway to that future."

**ENDS**

**Notes to Editor**

Interviews available with Dr Ian Collen and Vicky Gough on request. The British Council can also facilitate interviews and broadcast opportunities with the NCLE’s network of schools and stakeholders.

Please contact Richard Evans, Media Manager, for all press enquiries on [**richardjames.evans@britishcouncil.org**](mailto:richardjames.evans@britishcouncil.org) or call +44 7759 717810

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