ALL Briefing No. 48 **Date: January 2026**

Theme: House of Lords Library: In Focus: Modern foreign language education in England December 2025

Background:

A **House of Lords Library Briefing** was published in December, 2025, ahead of a debate in the House in January 2026: *Baroness Coussins (Crossbench) to move that this House takes note of measures, such as visa waivers, to improve the supply chain of qualified modern foreign language teachers and the sustainability of language learning in schools and universities.*

This reviews the picture of Languages in education, with this table of contents

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https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/modern-foreign-language-education-in-england/

ALL Members may be interested to read what researchers have found, or what they highlight, in comparison with what they omit.
In the light of the forthcoming Curriculum Review Consultation members may wish to collate evidence to clarify issues which are not reflected in this research, or create case studies of successful practice which could inspire positive developments.

Sample salient quotations:

4.1 Shortage of specialist teachers

In 2024, the House of Commons Education Committee said that teacher recruitment had been "a persistent challenge for over a decade" despite government action to address the issue. The committee noted that many subjects had experienced teacher shortages, but that particular subjects had been "acutely impacted", including MFL. A lack of specialist teachers can make it hard for education providers to put on courses in those subjects.

4.1.2 Reasons for low recruitment and retention

The House of Commons Education Committee has explored some of the factors driving low recruitment and retention of MFL teachers. The committee said that the value of financial incentives such as bursaries can contribute to subject shortages, particularly where teacher pay is relatively low compared to other sectors. It also said that workload was an issue. The committee quoted René Koglbauer, chair of the board of trustees at the Association for Language Learning, who argued that there were other careers for those with language qualifications which did not have the "stressful environment that a school would present".

In addition, Mr Koglbauer said that the recruitment of international MFL teachers has become more challenging in recent years. He said that prior to the UK's exit from the EU and the teacher supply crisis in Europe, domestic teacher shortages were mitigated through European teachers who had been unable to find positions in their own countries. However, he said this had "more or less stopped". The digital newspaper Schools Week has also highlighted that the government's Brexit deal led to many EU overseas nationals losing their automatic right to work in the UK and added in extra steps for them to secure qualified teacher status (QTS). It said that the UK was looking to other countries to fill teacher vacancies, noting a recruitment drive in Jamaica. It also noted that British teachers were being "lured overseas" often to Gulf States.

4.2.3 Socio-economic disparities

Research has shown that a school's ability to position languages as an optional subject has led to socio-economic disparities in who studies MFLs. A study of state schools in England by the University of Cambridge found that while a student's socio-economic background does not have a significant impact on their desire to study languages, poorer students are disproportionately concentrated in schools that give languages lower priority. This has significantly reduced the chances of poorer students studying a language after the age of 14.

The study also found that GCSE language scores overall were better in schools that offered a wider choice of languages. Average scores rose by almost a quarter of a grade. However, research from 2023 revealed that two-thirds of state secondary schools in England only taught one foreign language.

4.3 A 'vicious circle'

Commenting on these issues, various stakeholders have referred to a 'vicious circle' or used similar language. For example, Professor Charles Forsdick, lead fellow for languages at the British Academy, has argued that the fall in the number of students studying MFL and the lack of specialist teachers have formed a "vicious circle":

Schools struggle to recruit and retain language teachers and assistants, meaning language provision is becoming increasingly limited in schools. This reduces the number of students studying languages at GCSE and A-level, which, despite the good efforts of university departments to innovate in their provision, leads to declining registrations for languages degrees—and fewer people able to use languages in their careers or train as languages teachers.

The House of Commons Education Committee has similarly used the phrase a "vicious circle" when discussing the link between the issues of teacher shortages and a lack of students studying MFLs.

Neil Kenny, a professor of French at the University of Oxford and the British Academy's lead fellow for languages, has also noted "the self-reinforcing cycle of supply and demand". He said that declining interest by students had resulted in schools having to offer fewer options and that fewer pupils studying languages at school had resulted in fewer studying them at university, leading to teacher shortages.

4.4 Other factors

Abigail Parrish, lecturer in education at the University of Sheffield, has argued that there are several "clear reasons" why MFLs are unpopular with students. She said that historically languages have been graded more harshly than other subjects and that the curriculum has not taken account of the cultural aspects of learning a language. The recent curriculum review also noted that outcomes for MFLs are comparatively lower than those in other subjects. It said that data and research have shown that students who have similar prior attainment are less likely to achieve a GCSE grade 4 or above in French, German and Spanish than in English and Maths. The government said that perceived difficulty and harsher grading have been cited as factors behind this. It also said that recent reforms were aimed at addressing these issues, but these were still in their infancy, and it was too soon to comment on whether they have had the intended effect.

Ms Parrish also claimed that there was a perception that due to the global dominance of English, learning a language is only useful if it will be needed for work. In addition, she argued that while students are interested in learning a language, they are not interested in taking a MFL degree. Similarly, research by the British Council highlighted that students do not study MFLs at GCSE because they do not see themselves using a second language in their future career. This is despite a study by the University of Portsmouth which showed hundreds of vacancies where an additional language was required, with German being the most requested language.

5.3.1 Improving uptake

Dr Karen Forbes, associate professor in second language education at the University of Cambridge, has published research which showed that poorer students are more likely to miss out on studying a language at GCSE. As a result of her findings, Dr Forbes has focused on the choice of schools to position languages as either a core or optional subject at key stage 4. She has called for languages to be re-established as core subjects at GCSE across all schools, arguing that

this would signal the importance of the subject and create more equitable opportunities for students. In the absence of such a policy change, Dr Forbes said that "something is better than nothing" and argued that national-level accountability measures such as the EBacc have helped to influence both schools and students. She also argued that broadening the choice of languages on offer is key to reducing inequalities between students and to raising both participation and attainment.

Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), has linked some of the current problems with MFL education to the decision to stop languages being compulsory at key stage 4. He said that this policy could be reversed, but that the government would first need to address the shortage of teachers.

However, Abigail Parrish has argued that making languages compulsory again is not the answer to the lack of students taking the subjects. She said that instead, the focus should be on changing the way the subject is perceived by students from being a general good to being of personal value. Ms Parrish also argued that harsh grading of MFL subjects needed to be addressed to increase participation.

Focusing on the issue of low uptake at universities, several professors of foreign languages have written for the Times Higher Education magazine arguing that universities could take action to bolster the number of students who choose a MFL degree. For example, they argued that universities could offer opportunities to study languages from scratch and form regional alliances.

5.3.2 Improving recruitment

In a 2025 report on the "languages crisis", HEPI set out 10 recommendations for improving languages education. Its first recommendation related to 'action on teacher recruitment'. It argued that schools are underequipped to support languages and that the UK government should ease the pathway for international language teachers. As part of this, it said the government should reinstate the international relocation payment for trainee teachers that was removed in April 2024. It also said that professional development for teachers to deliver plurilingual opportunities should be a priority. Other recommendations included offering alternative qualification pathways, revitalising language hubs, enhancing recognition or multilingualism and supporting British Sign Language.

In its report on teacher recruitment, training and retention, the House of Commons Education Committee made a number of conclusions and recommendations. These included that teacher salaries need to be attractive and competitive and bursaries need to be targeted so that the subjects struggling the most with recruitment receive the highest bursaries. The committee also called for improved communication of the different routes into teaching and encouragement for the return of former teachers and the entry of veterans into the profession. In addition, it called on the government to continue to promote and build on efforts to reduce teacher workload.

References:

The briefing
https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/modern-foreign-language-education-in-england/

The debate: https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2026/jan-2026/members-debate-visa-waivers-and-the-supply-of-modern-foreign-language-teachers/
Recording: https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/2bb318d7-b85d-4667-a579-0e9736398f42

Points for reflection / action:
This Briefing is for updating of members.

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