

The study of Modern Foreign Languages in England: uptake in secondary school and progression to Higher Education

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Abstract

The decline in the numbers of students learning a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) at A-level, together with the low and decreasing number of top grades in these subjects, has raised concerns among educationalists, employers and politicians in the last few years. Research on the uptake of MFLs is, hence, of particular interest as the numbers of students choosing these subjects will largely determine the numbers of students with good linguistic skills entering the labour market and also will provide indicators about potential university applications for further study of languages.

This research used data from three different sources (Inter-Awarding Body Statistics; National Pupil Database; Higher Education Statistics Agency) to investigate the uptake of and progression from MFLs at A-level. Descriptive analyses and multilevel logistic regression models were employed to address the above issue.

The outcomes of this work showed that:

- The uptake of language subjects at A-level continued to decline. In particular, the numbers of students taking French and German decreased considerably in the last few years, while Spanish entries remained fairly stable.
- A-levels in MFLs were combined with a wide range of subjects. Many students combined them with English literature, history or economics, whilst very few did so with practical subjects. Combinations of languages with science subjects and with mathematics were relatively popular. This shows that young people recognise the value of languages alongside skills in STEM subjects.
- Performance in MFLs was, in general, worse than average performance at school.
- The factor with the largest positive effect in the uptake of MFLs at A-level was having a GCSE in the subject and, in particular, having achieved good grades in it. The effects of other factors (*e.g.*, gender, school type, school size, average GCSE attainment) were small in comparison.
- Progression rates to Higher Education (HE) were around 60% for students with A-levels in MFLs. Of those progressing, less than half progressed to universities in the Russell Group. The highest progression rates were to language courses.
- Achieving good grades in A-level MFLs was the factor with the greatest influence on the progression to HE language courses.

The research concluded that the current position of languages in schools might lead to low levels of language competency at the end of compulsory education. This will have an impact on HE provision, and languages, an already vulnerable area, is likely to become more so.

Full paper

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