

Boys and Languages: Information on increasing the uptake of MFL at Key Stage 4

This paper builds on research commissioned by the British Council and published in January 2020.

It is suitable for school leaders in primary and secondary phases, and all members of the senior leadership team (SLT) who are involved in language learning and developing the curriculum.

In the British Council's report, *Boys Studying Modern Foreign Languages at GCSE*, entries in modern foreign language GCSEs have fallen since 2014. Boys' rate of entry and attainment in language subjects are consistently below those of girls. Boys are far less likely than girls to be taking languages – especially French and Spanish – and amongst those that do, girls out-perform boys in terms of the proportion achieving the top grades.

The performance variation between genders is comparable between English and MFL and 2019 results continue a trend with this.

- For the most prior able (KS2 Level 5a), 15% of boys achieved a 9 compared to 24% of girls (again very similar percentages to English).
- Similarly, at KS2 level 4a, there is almost a grade difference in the attainment between boys and girls.

Research findings

Being a boy is a greater factor in not learning a foreign language than coming from a disadvantaged background

Girls from poorer backgrounds are more likely to out perform affluent boys.

In 2018, just 38% of boys sat GCSE languages compared to 50% of girls. Girls are more than twice as likely as boys to enter and achieve at least a grade 4 in a language GCSE. The strongest predictors of a pupil's attainment in a GCSE language is their prior attainment at KS2, as can be seen above and their DACI score (derived from their home postcode).

The higher the prior attainment of the pupil and the more affluent their neighbourhood, the more likely they are to achieve at least a grade 4.

Why encourage boys to take languages?

- Gender inequality is a key issue in GCSE MFL entry: in 2019, almost 35,000 more girls sat a GCSE in either French, Spanish or German compared to boys.
- Language GCSEs are associated with better social mobility indicators: schools with the highest proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals, are more than three times as likely as schools in the most affluent areas to have low uptake for language GCSEs and no plans to improve this. (*Language Trends 19*).
- Supporting bilingual pupils in achieving a GCSE turns their latent language skills into an asset for themselves and their school.

- Studying a language is part of a broad and balanced curriculum, offers an international dimension and supports the government’s EBacc targets.

Facilitating languages for all pupils contributes towards a school curriculum focussed on a curriculum of “breadth and ambition” for all, as highlighted in **The Association for Language Learning’s summary** of how MFL fits in to Ofsted’s Education Inspection Framework which took effect in September 2019.

- Languages broaden horizons and open doors for pupils, as highlighted in the British Council’s report *Broadening Horizons, Addressing the needs of a new generation*.
- Learning languages – at any age – has cognitive health benefits, helping to develop other skills and protecting against dementia and stroke impairment (Bak et al, 2014, Annals of Neurology. Alladi et al 2013, Neurology. Alladi et al 2016, Stroke).

“Beating the odds”

The research identified a number of schools which are “beating the odds” in securing high entry to GCSE languages among boys and investigated their practice. The research was designed to identify schools with intakes that are generally particularly challenging for encouraging uptake of languages (eg high deprivation, low attainment), therefore these schools have achieved better results than would be expected given their challenging contexts.

These schools are more likely to:

- allot a substantial amount of time for languages in Key Stage 4 to allow for a wide ability range to be successful (three to four hours per week or more)
- support and fund language-related extra-curricular activities (eg work with local primary schools, school assemblies, visits, and ensuring boys take a lead in these)
- seek governor support for smaller language classes to run to benefit slower learners or simply where numbers are low to protect the subject
- adopt inclusive policies on accepting pupils on GCSE courses
- where languages are optional, ensure languages feature in all or almost all option blocks
- offer opportunities to sample or choose to learn more than one language in Key Stage 3
- link with a school overseas to enable pupils to have virtual or face-to-face contact with pupils abroad
- provide opportunities for students to gain a qualification in their home or community language
- balance ability groups to avoid an overrepresentation of boys in lower ability groups
- designate a dedicated member of staff responsible for careers advice and guidance with languages
- subsidise careers visits for languages in the same way as those for science
- make sure pupils have regular opportunities to learn about the value of languages in their future lives and careers. Invite outside speakers and former students into the school to talk about languages, including male role models
- ensure the direct involvement of the SLT in providing positive messages to pupils about the importance of language learning

Language choice

The choice of languages offered is not important according to respondents, and there is no clear pattern of provision among odds-beating schools to suggest that the choice of languages might influence take-up or achievement by boys.

However, the majority of schools in the sample take steps to offer pupils a language-rich environment by giving them opportunities to learn, or at least try out, more than one language in Key Stage 3. Respondents cited a wide variety of extra-curricular language activities in their schools, and teachers clearly work hard to provide pupils with a rich array of language related activities in addition to normal lessons.

There is no strong bias towards male teaching staff in the sample schools.

Examples of practical actions that support higher uptake among boys

- Opportunity to continue learning a language with other accreditation, such as Global Languages, French Academy diplomas or Chartered Institute exams.
- Support for pupils to be able to sit their home language GCSE in school.
- Work with local independent schools, universities and the post-16 sector.
- Celebrating European Day/Week of languages.
- Ensuring a strong focus on learning about the culture of the countries where the foreign language is spoken.
- Targeting Pupil Premium funds on supporting boys with languages.

Further information

Boys Studying Modern Foreign Languages at GCSE, British Council, January 2020

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/boys-language-gcse>

Broadening Horizons, Addressing the needs of a new generation, British Council, November 2017

https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/mta-bh_2017.pdf

Why more UK students should work, study or volunteer overseas, Go International Stand Out Campaign, Universities UK International

https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/Stand%20Out%20report_online.pdf

Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review, Teaching Schools Council, November 2016

<https://tscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MFL-Pedagogy-Review-Report-2.pdf>

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