



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

The uptake of Modern Foreign Languages at GCSE in 2013

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Introduction

Previous research (Gill, 2013) has shown a substantial decline in recent years in the number of students studying modern foreign languages (MFL) at GCSE (although 2013 saw a revival in uptake for the most popular languages; French, Spanish and German (JCQ, 2013)). The decline is likely to be due to the decision in 2004 to make studying for a language in Key Stage 4 (KS4) no longer compulsory. Instead it became one of the entitlement areas that schools must offer as part of the KS4 curriculum, should any of their students wish to take it up. Individual schools can still make studying for an MFL a compulsory part of their curriculum.

Successive governments have attempted to increase the uptake of MFL through various incentives. The most recent of these was the requirement for students to have a grade C or better in at least one MFL qualification (along with C grades in English, maths, history or geography and science subjects) to achieve the 'EBacc' performance measure¹.

This report describes some aspects of uptake of MFL GCSEs in 2013. It repeats the analysis undertaken in Statistics Report No.10 (Vidal Rodeiro, 2009) which looked at uptake in 2007. However, for the current report (accredited) International GCSEs (IGCSEs) have also been included, due to the increasing numbers of students taking these qualifications as alternatives to GCSEs. For the remainder of the report 'GCSEs' will be used to refer to both GCSEs and IGCSEs.

Data and methods

Data for this report was extracted from the National Pupil Database (NPD) for 2013. This database is compiled by the Department for Education using data received from schools and awarding bodies. It contains national examination data for all students who sat an examination in the academic year 2012/13, as well as student and school background characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and level of deprivation.

The analysis of levels of uptake was broken down by several background factors, as now described:

Student attainment

The attainment of students was measured by their mean GCSE, calculated by converting grades into a numeric scale (A* = 8, A = 7 etc), summing for each student and then dividing by the number of GCSEs taken. Students were then divided up into three approximately equally sized attainment groups: low, medium and high.

Student deprivation

The level of deprivation experienced by students was measured by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). This is a measure of the proportion of children in a very small geographical area (Lower Layer Super Output Area or LSOA) who live in families that are income deprived. It varies between 0 and 1, with 0 representing minimum deprivation and 1 maximum deprivation. It should be noted that there was some missing data for this measure (over 10% of students had no record). Students who did have a measure of deprivation were divided up into three equally sized groups (low, medium and high).

School type

In this report schools have been categorised into five different groups: 'Academy' (including free schools), 'Comprehensive', 'Grammar', 'Independent' and 'Secondary Modern' schools. Students attending schools classified as 'Other', 'FE College', 'Tertiary College', 'Sixth Form

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/english-baccalaureate-information-for-schools>
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College' or 'Unidentified' were excluded from the analysis as these schools tend to have very few students taking GCSEs.

Schools' attainment

Schools' attainment was computed as the mean of the attainment of the students attending them. The attainment of the students was based on the mean GCSE indicator. A frequency distribution of the school means was obtained and used to allocate the schools into three attainment groups: low, medium and high.

Deprivation of schools

The deprivation of the schools was based on the mean IDACI of students attending each school. Three categories for the deprivation variable (bottom, middle and top) were created and schools were allocated into them.

It should be borne in mind that the location of a school might not reflect its intake, in terms of deprivation; for example, a school might be located near the boundaries of an area thus attracting a large proportion of children from other areas or a school might be located in an area where students have to travel long distances to get to it.

Results

Overall uptake

There were 609,880 students taking at least one subject at GCSE level in 2013. Among those, 301,987 students took at least one MFL (49.52% of the GCSE entry) with a total number of MFL entries of 332,041.

Table 1 presents the uptake of MFL in 2013 and Table 2 the distribution of the number of languages taken by individual students.

There were three languages which were by far the most popular (French, Spanish and German). Whilst entries in French and German have declined over many years, entries in Spanish have been increasing (Gill, 2013), to the extent that they now constitute the second largest entry. Although most MFL students take one language only, around 9.5% take two or more (Table 2).

Table 1: Uptake of modern foreign languages in 2013

Language	Frequency	Percentage (of language entries)	Percentage (of students who took at least one language)	Percentage (of students who took at least one GCSE)
French	162,005	48.79	53.65	26.56
Spanish	82,751	24.92	27.40	13.57
German	60,444	18.20	20.02	9.91
Urdu	4,214	1.27	1.40	0.69
Italian	4,130	1.24	1.37	0.68
Polish	3,490	1.05	1.16	0.57
Arabic	2,722	0.82	0.90	0.45
Chinese	2,610	0.79	0.86	0.43
Russian	1,975	0.59	0.65	0.32
Portuguese	1,571	0.47	0.52	0.26
Turkish	1,506	0.45	0.50	0.25
Bengali	962	0.29	0.32	0.16
Japanese	849	0.26	0.28	0.14
Punjabi	788	0.24	0.26	0.13
Gujarati	482	0.15	0.16	0.08
Dutch	420	0.13	0.14	0.07
Modern Hebrew	406	0.12	0.13	0.07
Persian	405	0.12	0.13	0.07
Modern Greek	308	0.09	0.10	0.05
Welsh (Second Language)	3	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01

Table 2: Number of modern foreign languages taken by students

Number of languages taken	Frequency	Percentage of language students
1	273,213	90.47
2	27,526	9.11
3	1,217	0.40
4	30	0.01
5	1	0.00

In 2013, there were 217 unique combinations of MFL subjects taken by individual students. Table 3 shows the most popular combinations.

Table 3: Combinations of two or more modern foreign languages

Combinations	Frequency	Percentage of language students
French – Spanish	10,047	3.33
French – German	6,864	2.27
German – Spanish	1,733	0.57
French – Italian	875	0.29
French – Polish	588	0.19
French – Arabic	478	0.16
French – Chinese	475	0.16
Spanish – Polish	429	0.14
Spanish – Portuguese	419	0.14
French – Russian	380	0.13

Uptake by student characteristics

Table 4 presents the uptake of each language by gender. Female uptake was higher overall, and in almost all of the individual languages.

Table 4: Uptake of modern foreign languages by gender (% of GCSE students)

Language	Female	Male
French	30.77	22.44
Spanish	15.72	11.46
German	10.41	9.42
Urdu	0.91	0.48
Italian	0.77	0.58
Polish	0.61	0.54
Arabic	0.51	0.39
Chinese	0.41	0.44
Russian	0.31	0.34
Portuguese	0.28	0.24
Turkish	0.26	0.24
Bengali	0.17	0.14
Japanese	0.15	0.12
Punjabi	0.15	0.11
Gujarati	0.10	0.06
Dutch	0.08	0.06
Modern Hebrew	0.09	0.05
Persian	0.07	0.07
Modern Greek	0.06	0.05
Welsh (Second Language)	<0.01	0.00
At least one MFL	55.67	43.48

Table 5 presents the uptake of individual languages by attainment group. This shows that for most languages (and particularly for the most popular languages) the uptake was much higher among higher attaining students.

Table 5: Uptake of modern foreign languages by attainment group (% of GCSE students)

Language	Low	Medium	High
French	9.26	26.62	43.90
Spanish	5.01	13.57	22.18
German	2.90	9.21	17.69
Urdu	0.58	0.80	0.69
Italian	0.17	0.52	1.34
Polish	0.60	0.65	0.46
Arabic	0.27	0.47	0.60
Chinese	0.05	0.20	1.04
Russian	0.10	0.19	0.69
Portuguese	0.27	0.29	0.21
Turkish	0.25	0.30	0.20
Bengali	0.12	0.18	0.17
Japanese	0.03	0.07	0.32
Punjabi	0.06	0.13	0.19
Gujarati	0.03	0.05	0.15
Dutch	0.05	0.07	0.09
Modern Hebrew	0.01	0.04	0.15
Persian	0.05	0.07	0.08
Modern Greek	0.02	0.04	0.10
Welsh (Second Language)	0.00	<0.01	<0.01
At least one MFL	19.14	50.74	78.79

Table 6 presents the uptake by deprivation level. Uptake was higher amongst less deprived students for most languages. However for several minority languages (e.g. Urdu, Polish and Arabic) uptake was higher amongst the more deprived.

Table 6: Uptake of modern foreign languages by deprivation group (% of GCSE students)

Language	Low	Medium	High
French	32.20	25.73	20.44
Spanish	15.30	12.62	11.29
German	14.70	9.60	5.57
Urdu	0.06	0.26	1.44
Italian	0.75	0.60	0.43
Polish	0.19	0.61	1.00
Arabic	0.09	0.16	0.70
Chinese	0.27	0.24	0.27
Russian	0.17	0.17	0.20
Portuguese	0.07	0.17	0.55
Turkish	0.04	0.09	0.62
Bengali	0.01	0.04	0.43
Japanese	0.15	0.12	0.07
Punjabi	0.06	0.15	0.20
Gujarati	0.03	0.07	0.11
Dutch	0.03	0.04	0.13
Modern Hebrew	0.04	0.07	0.03
Persian	0.02	0.06	0.12
Modern Greek	0.05	0.05	0.04
Welsh (Second Language)	<0.01	<0.01	0.00
At least one MFL	58.73	47.03	40.15

Uptake by school characteristics

There were 3,790 schools with at least one student taking a MFL GCSE. The mean uptake within schools (percent of students taking at least one MFL) was 52.48%. Table 7 presents the frequency of schools with different percentages of (GCSE) students taking at least one MFL. Thus, 5% of schools did not have any students taking an MFL and another 15.80% had less than 25% of their students taking an MFL.

Table 7: Percentage of students within schools taking at least one modern foreign language

Percentage of students taking at least one MFL	Frequency (of schools)	Percentage (of schools)
None	196	4.92
Less than 25%	599	15.80
25% - 50%	1,289	34.01
50% - 75%	1,015	26.78
Over 75%	772	20.37
All students	115	3.03

Table 8 presents the percentage of each school type with different percentages of their students taking at least one MFL. Table 9 presents this data broken down by school attainment group and Table 10 by school deprivation group.

Table 8 shows that grammar and independent schools had the highest percentages taking MFL. It also shows that for all school types apart from Independent schools² the percentages without any students taking a MFL were very small.

Table 8: Percentage of students taking at least one modern foreign language by school type

Percentage of students taking at least one MFL	Academy	Comprehensive	Grammar	Independent	Secondary Modern
None	2.84	1.26	1.35	13.89	2.02
Less than 25%	16.10	15.86	0.00	11.05	36.36
25% - 50%	35.51	42.77	5.41	10.61	46.46
50% - 75%	27.45	28.74	13.51	19.69	12.12
Over 75%	16.49	10.87	64.86	36.65	2.02
All students	1.61	0.51	14.86	8.1	1.01
No. of schools	1,267	1,563	73	787	97

Table 9 shows that just over 10% of the low attaining schools had no students taking an MFL. Of the high attaining schools 80.82% had at least 50% of their students taking an MFL. The differences between the deprivation groups were less stark, although 67.77% of schools in the high deprivation group had fewer than 50% of students taking an MFL, compared with 39.40% of schools in the low attaining group.

² The relatively high percentage of independent schools with apparently no students taking any MFL (13.89%) is partly because non-accredited IGCSEs are not included in the NPD. Some independent schools offer the non-accredited language IGCSEs instead of the accredited versions and these will not be counted here.

Table 9: Percentage of students taking at least one modern foreign language, by the attainment level of the school

Percentage of students taking at least one MFL	Low	Medium	High
None	10.69	1.58	2.48
Less than 25%	29.52	9.79	5.79
25% - 50%	43.30	42.85	10.91
50% - 75%	13.18	34.56	28.67
Over 75%	2.86	10.39	44.85
All students	0.45	0.90	7.30
No. of schools	1,328	1,329	1,329

Table 10: Percentage of students taking at least one modern foreign language, by the deprivation level of the school

Percentage of students taking at least one MFL	Low	Medium	High
None	1.41	1.97	3.66
Less than 25%	5.63	17.92	24.65
25% - 50%	32.36	42.5	39.46
50% - 75%	34.33	24.11	22.49
Over 75%	23.83	12.2	8.72
All students	2.44	1.31	1.03
No. of schools	1,066	1,067	1,067

References

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