

Promoting modern languages beyond the compulsory stage: exploring the relationship between school-level curriculum policy, GCSE uptake and attainment in England

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Abstract

Language learning in state-maintained schools in England is a compulsory part of the curriculum between the ages of 7-14. However, decisions around whether to position languages as 'core' or 'optional' beyond this stage are devolved to individual schools and there is little evidence on how such school-level curriculum policies influence uptake and attainment, particularly in light of wider accountability measures like the English Baccalaureate. This paper addresses this gap by quantitatively analysing data from a representative sample of 615 state-funded secondary schools in England on school curriculum policies for modern languages (ages 14-16) and attainment in GCSE modern languages examinations, controlling for other relevant variables such as disadvantage, prior attainment and linguistic diversity. Multiple regression analysis revealed that school-level curriculum policy is the strongest predictor of GCSE language uptake, highlighting the importance of institutional commitment to language learning in shaping students' opportunities. Analysis of the attainment data indicated that while a higher uptake of GCSE languages was associated with a marginal decrease in average attainment, offering a greater number of language options was independently associated with higher attainment. This suggests that broadening language provision may help support attainment outcomes, even as a more diverse range of students take languages.

Keywords: school curriculum policy; modern languages; language uptake; language attainment; EBacc; GCSE

Introduction

National education policy undeniably has a key role to play in providing access to language learning in schools. In England, for example, learning a language is a compulsory part of the curriculum between the ages of 7-14 (Department for Education 2013). While there will be inevitable variation in the specific language(s) and curriculum time offered by individual schools during these stages of education, they share a statutory requirement to offer language teaching to all students. However, beyond this compulsory phase, responsibility is typically devolved to individual schools to decide whether and how languages are positioned and encouraged (or not) in the curriculum. For example, schools may promote languages as core subjects, or frame them as entirely optional, a decision which may be shaped by the demographics of the school community as well as wider accountability measures. Yet, little is known about how such school-level policy decisions influence uptake and attainment in modern languages in this post-compulsory phase.

Indeed, there has been growing concern in recent years about the reduction in statutory language learning periods in schools and the decline in the study of languages in post-

compulsory stages of education across the Anglophone world (Cruickshank et al. 2020). Such trends have been noted in Australia (Rubino and Hajek 2024; Scarino 2014), New Zealand (East 2021), the United States (Pufahl and Rhodes 2011), and across the UK (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers 2019; Collen and Duff 2025). In addition, many non-Anglophone countries are similarly facing challenges in promoting the study of languages other than English (Ushioda and Dörnyei 2017). Much of this is due to broader socio-political factors such as the global dominance of English (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie 2017) which can contribute to a form of ‘linguistic myopia’ among learners (Lanvers, Thompson, and East 2021), something which has been further compounded by Brexit in the UK context (Broady 2020; Tinsley 2018).

Educational policy therefore has a crucial role to play in reversing these trends by promoting language learning in schools. However, while there is some empirical evidence on the effect of *national* level policies and accountability measures on uptake of language learning, as will be explored below, there is very little evidence of how individual *school*-level curriculum policies on language learning in the post-compulsory stage influence uptake and attainment. This is the gap that the current study seeks to address.

Policy context and background

The policy context of modern languages education in England

To begin, it is important to set out the current policy landscape surrounding language learning in schools in England. In state-maintained schools language learning remains a compulsory part of the curriculum in the latter stage of primary school (Key Stage 2, age 7-11) and in the first stage of secondary school (Key Stage 3, age 11-14). This is defined in the National Curriculum (Department for Education 2013) as the study of ‘any modern or ancient foreign language’ at Key Stage 2 and ‘any modern foreign language’ at Key Stage 3, but by far the most commonly taught languages are French, Spanish and German which between them account for around 90% of language classes (Dobson 2018).

In 2004 language learning ceased to be a compulsory part of the curriculum at Key Stage 4 (age 14-16), however, it remains a statutory entitlement area meaning that students should still have the option to study a language as one of their (typically 8-10) General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects. As a result of this policy change at national level, between 2002 and 2019 the number of modern language GCSE entries in England in French, Spanish and German reduced by almost half (Churchward 2019) and in the 2023/24 academic year only 45.7% of students entered a language GCSE (Department for Education 2025). In stark contrast, 97.9% of upper secondary school students in the European Union study at least one foreign language (Eurostat 2023). While the most commonly taught language in these countries is English, it nonetheless demonstrates a concerning gap between the linguistic skills of young people in the UK compared with their peers in neighbouring European countries.

Another key implication of the 2004 change shift away from compulsory language learning at Key Stage 4 at the national level was in devolving responsibility to individual schools to decide how they position language study in the curriculum (i.e. as a core or optional subject), which has led to a range of different practices. The following section will consider how such decisions may, in turn, influence uptake of language learning among students aged 14-16 against the backdrop of wider accountability measures.

Policies and factors influencing uptake of language learning in the post-compulsory stage

A key national-level factor which has been influential in shaping school-level decisions around languages in the Key Stage 4 curriculum was the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in 2010. The EBacc is not a separate qualification, but rather an accountability measure for schools which considers the number of students studying a core set of subjects at GCSE, namely: English language and literature, maths, science, geography or history and a language (Department for Education 2019). The primary aim of such a measure was to 'increase the take-up of 'core' academic qualifications that best equipped a pupil for progression to further study and work' (Long and Danechi 2019, 5) and, by extension, to 'elevate the status of languages' (Armitage and Lau 2018, 231).

This had direct implications for curriculum policy decisions at school-level with some schools opting to make the EBacc subjects compulsory for *all* at GCSE level to improve their EBacc uptake numbers. A recent review of policies across a representative sample of secondary schools in England, for example, indicated that around a fifth of state-funded schools currently position languages as compulsory or core subjects at GCSE (Forbes and Morea 2024) while other schools opted to introduce a 'pathway' system which may include a more 'academic' EBacc pathway alongside more flexible pathways. While such an approach may provide students with the ability to make their own decisions, it is also important to note that in some institutions students may be 'assigned to a pathway according to the school's perception of their likelihood of achieving passes in all of the EBacc subjects' (Parrish 2024, 725), thereby perhaps only providing the *illusion* of choice. Parrish and Lanvers (2019, 293) similarly note the potential of such policy decisions to, in turn, affect students' motivation to study languages and found that 'offering a free choice to students or making languages compulsory are two school policy models that are likely to yield better student motivation than, for example, selecting students based on achievement, ability or other factors' (see also Hua et al. this issue).

However, while there is some evidence to suggest that the EBacc combination of subjects may be helpful in facilitating progression post-16 (Moulton et al. 2018), overall, it has not had the desired effect on increasing the uptake of language study at GCSE level and, as suggested by Hagger-Vaughan (2020, 529), conversely may have 'reinforced and, in some cases, exacerbated and perpetuated inequalities in languages education rather than leading to a democratisation of language learning'. Indeed, the government's ambition was for 90% of students to be studying the EBacc subject combination by 2025, yet, while this has more or less been achieved for the core

subjects *excluding* languages, the 2023/24 data indicate that only 40.4% of students were entered into the full EBacc *including* a language (Department for Education 2025), falling well short of the 90% target. In particular, Armitage and Lau (2020) note the limited success of the EBacc measure in incentivising uptake of EBacc subjects among disadvantaged students who may be dissuaded from choosing an EBacc 'pathway' that is positioned as being for the 'more able' or 'more academic' students. This is supported by Greevy et al. (2012) who note that learners in schools in England with a high proportion of disadvantaged students are less likely to be studying a language GCSE (see also Coffey 2018; Lanvers 2018). Indeed, socioeconomic status has similarly been identified as a significant factor in shaping students' access to and uptake of language learning in schools in other Anglophone contexts. Through quantitative analysis of data from across Northern Ireland, Henderson and Carruthers (2022, 726) note 'extremely sharp social inequalities in terms of access to language learning which both reflect and reinforce differences in social and economic capital'. Similar trends have been observed in Australia, where some disadvantaged students are 'counselled against' taking languages for fear of negatively impacting the school's overall results (Cruickshank et al. 2020, 23) and also in the United States (Finn 1998). Therefore, students attending schools in more affluent areas are more likely to be given the opportunity to study a language compared to students in more disadvantaged areas.

Policies and factors influencing attainment in language learning

While there is a growing body of research considering the provision and uptake of language learning in the post-compulsory phase, as introduced above, much less consideration has been given to the effect of such policies, in particular, school-level policies, on student attainment. Yet, it is crucial to explore such questions, especially in light of evidence that suggests achieving good grades in languages at GCSE level is one of the most influential factors for students in continuing to study languages in the future (Vidal Rodeiro 2017).

Much of the work on the links between policies and attainment in the context of England has focused on the wider EBacc measure and suggests a range of influential factors. One of the most notable is prior attainment, with Armitage & Lau (2018, 241) providing evidence to suggest that 'students with high prior attainment were the most likely to enter and achieve the EBacc, followed by middle-attaining students' and the authors similarly note a widening attainment gap between socially disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students in relation to their attainment in EBacc subjects (Armitage and Lau 2020). Prior attainment and socioeconomic background may therefore be perceived as a barrier for students not only in choosing to study a language in the first place, but also in achieving a high grade where they do study it. In relation to GCSE examinations in England, it is relevant to note that there have been recent accusations of harsh grading of languages in comparison with other subjects which led Ofqual, the exam regulator, to make an adjustment to grading standards in French and German (Ofqual 2019).

Given that 20.8% of students in state-maintained schools in England are currently recorded as speaking a language at home that is known or believed to be other than

English (Department for Education 2024), it is also relevant to consider the role of students' language background on attainment. Lindorff, Strand & Au (2025) found that English as an additional language (EAL) students are, in fact, *more* likely to achieve a good pass in all EBacc subjects (with a score of 4 or above out of 9) than their English as a first language peers. While a breakdown by each subject is not provided here, an earlier analysis revealed that EAL students outperformed their peers in GCSE languages specifically, an advantage that was maintained when focusing only on French, Spanish and German as the main taught languages, suggesting that the EAL advantage was not simply due to EAL students taking home language qualifications (Strand, Malmberg, and Hall 2015).

However, little is known about the GCSE attainment of students in schools where languages are compulsory, compared to those where they are optional (either as part of an 'Ebacc pathway' or through free choice). While it may be logical to hypothesise that overall grades might be lower in schools where languages are compulsory and therefore taken by students with a wider range of prior attainment and motivation, it may also be the case that such policies are more likely to be implemented in schools with more socially advantaged students. This paper therefore aims to address the gap in research in this area by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the overall characteristics of schools with core vs optional GCSE language policies?
2. To what extent does school-level curriculum policy on languages have an effect on uptake of GCSE language study?
3. To what extent does school-level curriculum policy on languages have an effect on attainment in GCSE languages?

Methodology

Research design and data collection

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate associations between school GCSE language policy, language uptake and attainment. A representative sample of 615 state-funded secondary schools (i.e. around 15%) were selected from across England using a random stratified sampling approach. The vast majority of these schools were mixed-sex and non-selective. For each school, publicly available information was collected from websites regarding (a) modern languages offered as curriculum subjects at GCSE level and (b) curriculum policies for language study at GCSE. Based on this information, schools were categorised into one of three 'school language policy' groups:

- Core: Languages presented as core or compulsory subjects i.e. the expectation was that all students would study a language at GCSE (19.2% of sample);
- Optional (with languages EBacc pathway): Students were offered a small number of specified pathways, one or more of which required study of a language at GCSE in order to achieve the full EBacc (29.6% of sample);

- Optional (no languages EBacc pathway): Students had complete choice over whether or not to study a language at GCSE; where pathways were offered, none required the study of a language (51.2% of sample).

School-level GCSE results for modern languages from the 2023-2024 academic year were then downloaded for these schools from the Department for Education website. These data included results for all modern languages subjects offered as part of the curriculum in each school and excluded additional entries in other, non-timetabled languages which were likely to be taken by home language speakers. The following GCSE subjects were included in the dataset, with the number of schools in the sample offering each language shown in parentheses: French (488), Spanish (440), German (163), Chinese (18), Italian (11), Urdu (8), Modern Hebrew (4), Arabic (3), Japanese (2) and Bengali (1). GCSE grades are awarded on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 9 (highest) and so an overall average GCSE language grade was calculated. Where a result was recorded as ungraded ('U') a score of 0 was entered. Where multiple languages were offered, GCSE scores were averaged across all language entries to derive a single overall average score per school. No schools had missing data for any of the variables analysed.

Given that schools may change their policies over time, it is important to note that the data collected from school websites was done so during the 2021-22 academic year as part of a related study on school language policies (Forbes and Morea 2024). This timing corresponds to the academic year in which the vast majority of students sitting GCSEs in 2024 would have selected their options. However, while every effort was made to verify and align the datasets, it is important to acknowledge that stated policies may not fully reflect actual practices. Additional demographic data pertaining specifically to the end of Key Stage 4 cohort (i.e. those taking GCSE exams in 2024) for key indicators were also downloaded from the Department for Education website for each school (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic data collected for each school

Indicator	Definition (Department for Education 2024)
% EAL	Percentage of students recorded as speaking English as an additional language i.e. being exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English.
% disadvantaged students	Percentage of students recorded as disadvantaged i.e. those who were eligible for free school meals at any point during the previous six years, were looked after by the local authority for at least one day during the academic year and/or were adopted from care.
Average KS2 scaled score	Based on pupils' performance in standardised tests in English and maths at the end of Key Stage 2 (age 11), the average KS2 scaled score serves as an indicator of prior attainment. Scaled scores convert raw marks into a consistent scale to allow comparison across different test years; a score of 100 represents the expected national standard.

% entering a language at GCSE	Percentage of students taking at least one GCSE in a language.
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Data analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. To answer the first research question, a series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests examined differences in school characteristics by GCSE language policy group: core, optional (with language EBacc pathway), and optional (no languages EBacc pathway). The dependent variables were: percentage of EAL students, percentage of disadvantaged students, average KS2 scaled score, percentage of students entering a language GCSE and the number of languages offered at GCSE. Levene's test for equality of variances indicated violation of the homogeneity of variances assumption for four of the five dependent variables ($p < .05$). However, given the large and roughly balanced group sizes, ANOVA is considered robust to such violations (Field 2018); thus, analysis proceeded with caution. Where significant group differences were found, post hoc pairwise comparisons were performed using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test to identify specific group contrasts. Effect sizes were calculated using eta squared (η^2) with values interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) thresholds: small (.01), medium (.06), and large (.14).

To address the second and third research questions, a two-step regression approach was employed. First, simple linear regression models assessed the unadjusted bivariate relationship between school GCSE language policy and the dependent variables: (1) percentage of students entering a language GCSE (RQ2), and (2) average GCSE language score (RQ3). Second, multiple linear regression models were conducted to account for potential confounding school-level variables: percentage of EAL students, percentage of disadvantaged students, average KS2 scaled score, and the number of languages offered at GCSE. The sample size of 615 schools exceeds recommended thresholds for multiple regression analyses, ensuring sufficient statistical power and stable estimates (Field 2018). Assumptions of linear regression were tested and met. Residuals were approximately normally distributed with no evidence of non-linearity or heteroscedasticity. The Durbin-Watson statistics indicated independence of residuals (1.831 for RQ2 and 2.156 for RQ3), and variance inflation factor (VIP) values for all predictors were below 3, suggesting no multicollinearity. All analyses used a significance threshold of $p < .05$ and significant results are indicated with an asterisk. All data were publicly available and at the school level with no results attributable to individual students. Institutional ethical approval was granted for this study.

Results

RQ1. What are the overall characteristics of schools with core vs optional GCSE language policies?

This research question sought to broadly explore the characteristics of schools that adopt different policies regarding the study of languages at GCSE level. To address this,

a series of one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine differences across GCSE language policy groups for the following dependent variables: percentage of EAL students, percentage of disadvantaged students, average KS2 scaled score, percentage of students entering a language GCSE and the number of languages offered at GCSE (see Table 2).

Table 2: ANOVA results by school GCSE curriculum policy for modern languages

Dependent variable	Core (N = 118) mean (SD)	Optional (with langs EBacc pathway) (N = 182) mean (SD)	Optional (no langs EBacc pathway) (N = 315) mean (SD)	ANOVA F(df)	p	Effect size (η^2)	Post Hoc Significant Differences
% EAL	26.06 (23.90)	17.52 (17.72)	15.82 (17.47)	F(2, 612) = 12.78	<.001*	.040 (small)	Core > Opt- Lang*, Core > Opt-NoLang*
% Disadvantaged students	21.33 (14.60)	25.65 (13.85)	28.73 (13.57)	F(2, 612) = 12.61	<.001*	.040 (small)	Opt-NoLang > Core*, Opt- Lang > Core*, Opt-NoLang > Opt-Lang*
Average KS2 scaled score	106.92 (3.73)	104.63 (2.04)	103.63 (1.89)	F(2, 612) = 81.32	<.001*	.210 (large)	Core > Opt- Lang*, Core > Opt-NoLang*, Opt-Lang > Opt-NoLang*
% entering a language GCSE	82.60 (13.99)	52.69 (19.26)	31.93 (15.74)	F(2, 612) = 413.02	<.001*	.574 (very large)	Core > Opt- Lang*, Core > Opt-NoLang*, Opt-Lang > Opt-NoLang*
Number of GCSE languages offered	2.29 (0.74)	2.03 (0.69)	1.77 (0.72)	F(2, 612) = 24.35	<.001*	.074 (medium)	Core > Opt- Lang*, Core > Opt-NoLang*, Opt-Lang > Opt-NoLang*

The analyses revealed statistically significant differences between language policy groups across all five variables. Schools where languages are positioned as a core subject were more likely to have students with significantly higher prior attainment (as indicated by the average KS2 scaled scores), a higher proportion of EAL students, and a lower proportion of disadvantaged students (although the effect size for the latter two is small). The largest effect size was observed for the percentage of students entering a GCSE language. As expected, uptake was highest in schools where language study is positioned as core, yet, it is notable that uptake here is only at 82.6%, suggesting that there are still a substantial number of students being exempted from language study at GCSE even where it is positioned as a core part of the curriculum. Also of interest here is the significant difference between the two optional groups, suggesting that explicitly incorporating language study as part of one or more specific optional pathways may have a positive effect on uptake.

Given the significant differences with large effect size in language GCSE uptake identified across policy groups in the initial analysis, it is important to explore this relationship in more depth. While the ANOVA highlights group-level differences, it does not account for the simultaneous influence of other school-level factors that may also affect uptake. To address this, the second research question therefore investigates the extent to which school language policy predicts uptake of GCSE language study, beginning with a simple linear regression model and progressing to multiple regression models that control for additional contextual variables.

RQ2. To what extent does school-level curriculum policy on languages have an effect on uptake of GCSE language study?

Firstly, a linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether school language policy predicts uptake of language study at GCSE level in schools in England ($N = 615$). The overall model was statistically significant, $F(1, 613) = 807.68, p < .001$, and explained 56.8% of the variance in language uptake ($R^2 = .568$, Adjusted $R^2 = .567$). School language policy was therefore a strong positive predictor of language uptake, with a significant regression coefficient ($B = 24.614$, $SE = .867$, standardized $\beta = .754$, $t = 28.396, p < .001$). The intercept was also statistically significant ($B = 31.067$, $SE = .894$, $t = 34.755, p < .001$). This indicates that schools with core language policies tend to have substantially higher GCSE language uptake.

To further explore the relationship between school language policy and GCSE language uptake, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to test whether this relationship remained significant when controlling for other relevant school-level factors: the percentage of EAL students, the percentage of disadvantaged students, the average KS2 scaled score, and the number of languages offered at GCSE (Table 3). The overall model was statistically significant, $F(5, 609) = 224.21, p < .001$, and explained approximately 64.8% of the variance in language uptake ($R^2 = .648$, Adjusted $R^2 = .645$). School language policy emerged as the strongest predictor ($B = 19.277$, $SE = .912$, $\beta = .590$, $t = 21.127, p < .001$), followed by average KS2 scaled score ($B = 2.216$, $SE = .314$, $\beta = .235$, $t = 7.053, p < .001$), percentage of EAL students ($B = .200$, $SE = .037$, $\beta = .152$, $t = 5.463, p < .001$), and the number of languages offered at GCSE ($B = 3.836$, $SE = .935$, $\beta = .112$, $t = 4.101, p < .001$). Percentage of disadvantaged students was not a significant predictor ($B = -.002$, $SE = .060$, $\beta = -.001$, $t = -.030, p = .976$).

The results of this analysis therefore indicate that school language policy is the strongest predictor of uptake of GCSE language study, highlighting the importance of institutional commitment to language learning in shaping students' opportunities. In addition, prior academic attainment, linguistic diversity, and the number of languages offered are also important factors associated with GCSE language uptake, whereas socioeconomic disadvantage was not directly associated in this model once other factors were taken into account. Indeed, for each additional language offered by a school, the proportion of students taking a language GCSE increases by approximately 3.84 percentage points, controlling for other school-level factors. Taken together, these findings suggest that schools aiming to increase language uptake at GCSE level may

benefit from developing clear and inclusive language policies and offering a wider range of language options to students.

Table 3: Multiple linear regression predicting uptake of GCSE modern languages study

Predictor	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error (SE)	Standardized Coefficients Beta (β)	t	p
(Constant)	-208.022	33.108	-	-6.283	<.001*
School GCSE language policy	19.277	.912	.590	21.127	<.001*
% EAL	.200	.037	.152	5.463	<.001*
% Disadvantaged students	-.002	.060	-.001	-.030	.976
Average KS2 scaled score	2.216	.314	.235	7.053	<.001*
Number of GCSE languages offered	3.836	.935	.112	4.101	<.001*

Note. $N = 615$. $R = .805$, $R^2 = .648$, Adjusted $R^2 = .645$, $F(5, 609) = 224.21$, $p = <.001$.

Having established that school language policy is a strong predictor of GCSE language uptake, the third research question seeks to examine the extent to which such policies are also associated with outcomes for students who do take a language at GCSE.

RQ3: To what extent does school-level curriculum policy on languages have an effect on attainment in GCSE languages?

Firstly, a linear regression analysis was conducted to investigate whether school language policy predicts attainment in language subjects, as measured by the average overall GCSE language score across schools ($N = 615$). The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 613) = 5.073$, $p = .012$, but explained only a small proportion of the variance in average language attainment ($R^2 = .010$, Adjusted $R^2 = .009$). School language policy therefore emerged as a significant, though weak, positive predictor of attainment ($B = .138$, $SE = .055$, $\beta = .101$, $t = 2.252$, $p = .012$), indicating that schools with core language policies tended to have slightly higher average GCSE language scores. However, the size of the effect was small, suggesting that while policy may play a role, other factors are likely more influential in shaping attainment outcomes.

To further examine the relationship between school language policy and language attainment, a multiple linear regression analysis was therefore conducted including additional school-level factors: the percentage of EAL students, the percentage of disadvantaged students, the average KS2 scaled score, the number of languages offered at GCSE, and the percentage uptake of languages at GCSE (Table 4). The overall model was statistically significant, $F(6, 608) = 86.05$, $p < .001$, explaining 45.7% of the variance in average language attainment ($R^2 = .457$, Adjusted $R^2 = .452$). After controlling

for other factors, school language policy in itself no longer had a direct effect on scores ($B = .044$, $SE = .062$, $\beta = .032$, $t = .706$, $p = .480$). Indeed, prior attainment (KS2 scaled score) was the strongest positive predictor of attainment ($B = .278$, $SE = .017$, $\beta = .707$, $t = 16.422$, $p < .001$), followed by the percentage of EAL students ($B = .014$, $SE = .002$, $\beta = .248$, $t = 7.014$, $p < .001$), and the number of languages offered at GCSE ($B = .234$, $SE = .049$, $\beta = .164$, $t = 4.762$, $p < .001$). Percentage of disadvantaged students was not a significant predictor of attainment ($B = -.006$, $SE = .003$, $\beta = -.076$, $t = -1.808$, $p = .071$) and percentage uptake of GCSE languages was slightly negatively associated with average attainment scores ($B = -.019$, $SE = .002$, $\beta = -.466$, $t = -9.264$, $p < .001$).

Table 4: Multiple linear regression predicting attainment in GCSE modern languages

Predictor	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error (SE)	Standardized Coefficients Beta (β)	t	p
(Constant)	-23.900	1.771	-	-13.495	<.001*
School GCSE language policy	.044	.062	.032	.706	.480
% EAL	.014	.002	.248	7.014	<.001*
% disadvantaged students	-.006	.003	-.076	-1.808	.071
Average KS2 scaled score	.278	.017	.707	16.422	<.001*
Number of GCSE languages offered	.234	.049	.164	4.762	<.001*
% entering a language GCSE	-.019	.002	-.466	-9.264	<.001*

Note. $N = 615$. $R = .676$, $R^2 = .457$, Adjusted $R^2 = .452$, $F(6, 608) = 86.05$, $p = <.001$.

The results of this analysis reveals a complex pattern of associations influencing GCSE language attainment across schools. They suggest that prior academic attainment, linguistic diversity, and the number of languages offered, rather than language policy itself, are the strongest factors associated with language attainment. However, even though a higher percentage uptake was associated with a small decrease in average attainment (with the average GCSE grade decreasing by 0.019 points – roughly one fiftieth of a grade - for every percentage increase in uptake), offering a greater number of language options remained a significant predictor of higher attainment, even after accounting for school language policy and other contextual factors (with the average GCSE grade increasing by 0.234 points – equivalent to almost a quarter of a grade - for each additional language offered). This suggests that broadening language provision may help support attainment outcomes, even as more students take languages.

Discussion

Explicit positioning of languages in school curriculum policies is crucial in encouraging uptake in the post-compulsory stage

Analysis revealed that school curriculum policy in relation to modern languages (i.e. whether and how schools position the study of GCSE languages in the curriculum) was the strongest predictor of language uptake, accounting for 56.6% of the variation in the percentage of students taking a GCSE. Schools where languages were positioned as a core subject had an average of 82.6% uptake, which dropped to 52.69% in schools where it was optional (but with a specific EBacc pathway) and further to 31.93% in schools where studying a GCSE language was entirely optional. Given that all of these schools were subject to the same national-level policies and accountability measures (such as the EBacc), these findings indicate that school-level interpretations and enactments of national policy significantly impact uptake of language study at GCSE i.e. schools which explicitly position languages in their GCSE curriculum as core or 'valued' subjects have higher levels of uptake.

However, while the role of school language policy remained the strongest predictor of uptake, even when controlling for other factors such as prior attainment and disadvantage, it is nonetheless important to note that schools where languages are positioned as core subjects (and, to a slightly lesser extent, those with a specific EBacc languages pathway) typically had students with higher levels of prior attainment and lower levels of disadvantage compared with schools where languages were entirely optional. This is in line with findings from Greevy et al. (2012) and Henderson and Carruthers (2022) and suggests that there is still work to be done in encouraging and widening access to language study for *all* learners beyond the compulsory phase. These findings similarly suggest that the effects of high-stakes accountability measures such as the EBacc may both facilitate and constrain access to language learning depending on the context.

The potential of balancing the uptake-attainment tension through broadening language provision

Analysis of the attainment data revealed that school language policy did not have a direct effect on GCSE grades and that, unsurprisingly, the strongest predictor was prior attainment (as measured by KS2 scaled scores), followed by percentage of EAL students. This is in line with previous studies which have similarly highlighted the importance of prior attainment (e.g. Armitage and Lau 2018) and the tendency for EAL students to outperform their English as a first language peers in GCSE languages (e.g. Strand, Malmberg, and Hall 2015). These findings further suggest that EAL learners are well positioned to succeed in GCSE language study and add to evidence against the growing tendency for schools to withdraw EAL learners from these lessons (Forbes & Morea, 2024).

Yet, an interesting pattern emerged when looking at the interactions between percentage uptake and attainment in GCSE languages. On the one hand, there was a

slightly negative association between the percentage uptake of GCSE languages and average attainment scores with the average GCSE grade decreasing by 0.019 points for every percentage increase in uptake. This may reflect a trade-off effect, where schools with higher uptake might include a broader range of students with varying abilities, potentially lowering average scores. However, offering a greater number of language options remained a significant predictor of higher attainment even after accounting for other school-level factors, with the average GCSE grade increasing by 0.234 points for each additional language offered. This suggests that expanding the range of languages offered may help to enhance attainment outcomes, even as more students engage in language study. In other words, schools can potentially increase uptake in language learning without sacrificing overall attainment by providing a wider variety of language options.

This aligns with Parrish's (2020) finding that students are often interested in a wider variety of languages than is on offer. Hagger-Vaughan (2020, 527) similarly draws attention to a potential unintended consequence of the EBacc measure on narrowing the range of languages offered, as 'the intense pressure on schools to ensure 'good' outcomes at GCSE in one language, compounded by reduced funding and struggles for curriculum time, has diverted attention away from offering a range of languages'. While there are inevitable practical barriers for schools such as timetabling and staffing constraints, the evidence suggests the potential benefits for both uptake and attainment of offering a greater choice of language subjects.

Conclusion

This paper explored the influence of school-level curriculum policies on both uptake and attainment in GCSE modern languages through analysis of publicly available school policy and GCSE attainment data from a representative sample of 615 state-funded secondary schools in England. Findings indicate that school-level curriculum policy is the strongest predictor of GCSE language uptake, highlighting the importance of institutional commitment to language learning in shaping students' opportunities. However, schools where languages are positioned as core subjects tended to have students with significantly higher levels of prior attainment and lower levels of disadvantage, suggesting there is still work to be done in encouraging and widening access to language study for *all* learners beyond the compulsory phase. In relation to attainment, while a higher uptake of GCSE languages was associated with a very slight decrease in average attainment, offering a greater number of language options remained a significant predictor of higher attainment.

Overall, therefore, this paper provides evidence to suggest that prioritising and promoting languages at the level of school curriculum policy significantly increases uptake without dramatically lowering average grades. While the EBacc in itself may not have led to the desired target of 90% of students studying a language at GCSE, the findings suggest that when schools actively integrate the EBacc into their curriculum structures, uptake is significantly higher than in schools where language study remains optional. Crucially, this increase in participation is not associated with a major decrease in attainment, suggesting that broadening access need not come at the cost

of performance. While making languages compulsory at GCSE remains the most direct route to reversing long-term decline, in the absence of such a policy, wider measures like the EBacc may still play a role, *if* they are implemented in such a way that supports inclusive and sustained engagement with language learning.

However, there are several limitations that must also be acknowledged. First, this study relied on publicly available school-level attainment data, which, while useful for identifying broad trends as presented above, cannot capture the nuanced interplay of individual student-level factors. Second, data on curriculum policy for modern languages were drawn from school websites and therefore may not reflect actual practice, for example, where pathways were set out as options it is not known the extent to which students were truly offered a free choice as opposed to being ‘assigned’ or ‘allocated’ to a particular pathway. Further in-depth qualitative research within schools would therefore be valuable (see also Hua et al. this issue). Despite these limitations, the findings nonetheless suggest several important implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, this study contributes to our understanding of how school-level policy shapes opportunities and outcomes for students, particularly in relation to post-compulsory stages of learning where there is substantial variation between the decisions made by individual schools. At the level of school policy, the evidence presented suggests that in order to promote both uptake and attainment in modern languages in the post-compulsory stage, schools should consider (1) explicitly framing languages as a valued and integral part of the curriculum; (2) avoiding restrictive academic pathways that limit access to languages, particularly for disadvantaged students; and (3) offering a wider range of language options to support both uptake and attainment. Ultimately, this paper highlights the role of school-level curriculum policy not only in shaping who participates in language learning, but also how successfully they do so.

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