Opportunities for all in language learning: overcoming the social divide

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Introduction

The current English government is committed to *Breaking down Barriers* in education. The Department for Education (DfE) talks about

*'Build[ing] skills for opportunity and growth so that **every** young person can follow the pathway that is right for them'.* (DfE, no date, author's emphasis)

This article asks how England is faring with this ambition in relation to language learning at secondary level, at Key Stages (KS) 3 and 4. Manifestly (*Languages Trends*, 2025), students have very unequal access to learning foreign languages (FLs, used here as a shorthand to reference modern, heritage, home and community languages). I discuss what exactly has led to this systemic division of opportunity in terms of SES, and I conclude by offering some policy suggestions to address the divide.

The language learning crisis in the UK is in its fourth decade and is by now well documented. While it it does need to be understood in the context of a decline in language learning across all Anglophone countries and regions (Lanvers et al, 2021), its specific UK characteristic, the sharp social divide between those opting to

continue with FL study beyond the compulsory phase, and those who do not, deserves closer attention. The most recent *Languages Trends* (British Council, 2025) highlights how students from less affluent schools lose out on FL learning opportunities and has rekindled public interest in the social divide (*The Guardian*, 2025). The modest increase in FL uptake experienced in 2024 did not repeat itself in 2025, and language qualifications (both GCSE and A-level) are now more concentrated in fewer, more affluent schools than ever before.

This trend jars with the governmental aim of *Breaking down Barriers* (DfE, 2024). Although the social divide in FL uptake is decades-old, not much effort has been dedicated to fully understand it (one notable exception is Coffey, 2018). At times, the low interest in language learning among British people more generally is attributed to insularity and linguistic chauvinism (see Lanvers & Coleman, 2017), while, at others, the subject itself is blamed for being 'hard' (BBC, 2023); others blame an uninspiring curriculum (Wingate, 2018), still others blame Brexit, and so on. All these accusations hold their own grain of truth but do not address the core issue: why do FLs attract such a stark social division? The answer, I would argue, lies in our dated conceptions of the *purpose* of FLs. Concomitantly, neoliberal education policies (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012) have permitted the social divide to become cemented in our education system. When a social divide has become this systemic, systemic solutions are required, such as *normalising* compulsory language learning up to GCSE. To sustain and grow interest in FLs, however, it is also necessary to *reframe the purpose* of FL study to make it fit for a modern multilingual Britain. Economic arguments alone for language study in the UK, although very powerful in some respects (e.g. Ayres-Bennett et al. 2022), risk not convincing the sceptic, who might argue either that '*English is enough*' or '*Google translate will do the job*'.

Equal Opportunities for language learning: where are we now?

The neoliberal language education policy in England, which permits students to opt out of FL study at the relatively early age of 14[1], is a significant contributor to the SES divide in FL study in that country. Individual schools may make the study of a

[1] In contrast to our European neighbours (Lanvers, 2024b) and the UK nations Scotland and Wales (Gov.Scot.uk, no date; Gov.Wales, no date)

FL compulsory up to GCSE, and adopting this policy (or not) reflects stark SES divides in terms of individual schools' intake (e.g. Lanvers, 2017; *Language Trends* 2025). Although the annual *Language Trends* reports suffer from the problem of under-representation of schools with below average SES intake, thus *under-reporting* the SES divide, they consistently confirm the correlation of both provision and uptake of FL with schools' SES intake profiles, and the stark divide between independent and state schools. To give some representative statistics, in only 10% of state-funded schools do *all* students sit a FL GCSE, as opposed to 31% of students in independent schools, and about half of all independent schools make a FL at GCSE compulsory, as opposed to a mere 15% in the state sector (British Council, 2023). Within the state-funded sector, the percentage of students studying a FL GCSE in less affluent English schools is 32% lower than in the most affluent schools. At A-level, opportunities for FL study are declining across the whole SES spectrum, but more sharply in schools with low SES intake (*Languages Trends* 2025). Furthermore, 'International engagement', classified in *Language Trends* reports as trips abroad or engagement with foreign institutions or visitors, are reported as showing a stark divide, year on year. Teacher shortages also affect the state sector disproportionately (British Council, 2024). The next sections ask what mechanisms have permitted such marked SES division in FL provision to emerge in the first place.

Academisation (Hoctor, 2023) and accountability measures have driven consumer attitudes in UK education systems, along with increased diversification and competition between schools. Accountability measures imposed on individual schools mean that school managers are well advised to design their curriculum delivery to maximise accountability figures rather than, for instance, to broaden or deepen their curriculum. The implementation of the EBacc is a case in point. In 2010, the DfE introduced the EBacc as a performance measure for schools (not a student qualification), in the hope that more students would choose five core subjects deemed of high academic rigour as their GCSE options. A 'good grade' in a FL GCSE is needed to achieve the EBacc. The hopes that this would drive FL uptake at GCSE did not, however, materialise, most likely because it remains unclear to students and their parents what the reasons to aim for an EBacc qualification might be (Armitage & Lau, 2020). EBacc rates have plateaued around

40%, as against the target of 95%, mainly due to students lacking the stipulated FL GCSE. School managers currently receive little incentive to increase numbers of students achieving the EBacc, since they are actually accountable for performance on two different measures, namely Attainment 8 and Progress 8, rather than for the EBacc (Lucas, 2023). Thus, a measure introduced in the hope of steering more students towards 'academic' GCSE choices such as FLs has effectively been undermined by higher-ranking concomitant performance measures. To sum up the current state of the SES divide, we can quote Baroness Coussins' view, as reported in the *Guardian*, that there is '*a real risk that A-level languages could disappear from state schools altogether and even GCSEs could become the preserve of affluent state schools and the independent sector*' (*The Guardian*, 2025).

Parents, students and school managers all contribute to the SES divide: parents holding FL qualifications are more likely to steer their children towards FLs, with the latter, in turn, echoing parental options on FLs (Lanvers & Martin, 2021), thus perpetuating the divide trans-generationally. School managers in schools situated in low SES catchment areas, in a bid to maximise their performance according to the above measures, justify their (poor) FL provision with reference to the purported (low) future need for FLs within their cohort, despite the fact that students in schools with a low SES profile profess the same curiosity for languages as those in more affluent schools (Lanvers, 2018). Thus, both the neoliberal FL policy and schools' stark social segregation in terms of intake (Gorard, 2016) have led schools to tailor their provision to purported local demands. In this manner, opportunities to study FL have become the opposite of what education was intended for: equalising opportunities to all (DfE 2025).[2]

'Nudging' towards FL uptake?

Critics might argue that free choice to study a FL is laudable, and 'nudging' students towards FLs post-14 is the best way forward. The question is whether 'nudge' policies actually work.

'Nudge' initiatives have been tried. For example, the DfE has addressed the harsh grading of FL GCSEs in an attempt to encourage FL uptake. Adjustments to the grading of French and German GCSEs were made in 2022, but grades in these

[2] Similar trends can be observed for HE FL provision, see Muradás-Taylor & Taylor (2024).

subjects still remain below the mean of other subjects. Furthermore, low mean scores in Spanish suggest that this subject should also have been adjusted (British Council, 2024b). Still, the fact that Spanish enjoyed an increase in uptake between 2015 and 2024, while the two adjusted languages experienced a decline (French from 2015-2018, German continual since 2015), strongly suggests that grading adjustment has had no actual effect on uptake. The EBacc, a further 'nudge' policy, has already been discussed above. A further policy that could be interpreted as indirectly encouraging FL uptake was the preferential HE admissions policy practised at some Russell Group universities prioritising applicants in possession of a qualification in an academically demanding 'facilitating' subject, such as a FL. This practice was implemented differently at different institutions and completely abandoned in 2019.[3] There is no data available to ascertain whether adopting this policy encouraged FL uptake at school level.

The current 'nudge' flagship is a £14.9 million investment of public money in the *National Consortium for Languages Education* (NCLE),[4] aimed at increasing uptake via (very welcome) attempts to improve classroom delivery. Thus, while the governmental response is to nudge more students towards FLs via improved classroom delivery, there is no concomitant attempt to address the systemic divide or its root causes. In sum, there are currently no DfE-supported initiatives that can demonstrate an effect on diversifying uptake in terms of SES background[5].

Equal Opportunities *via* FL learning?

At this point, the sceptic might ask: does it matter? When did *not* having a FL qualification ever stop a student from a low SES background achieving highly later in life? Much as this question jars with those passionate about equal opportunities, and/or language learning, this challenge must be permitted, all the more since the question addresses the ultimate purpose of FL study. First, let us consider if

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[3] https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/russell-group-universities-scrap-list-facilitating-subjects#:~:text=The%20Russell%20Group%20of%20universities%20has%20dropped,secure%20a%20place%20at%20a%20top%20university.&text=Campaigners%20are%20using%20the%20Russell%20Group's%20decision,based%20on%20the%20list%20of%20facilitating%20subjects.Accessed 20/06/2025.

[4] https://ncle.ucl.ac.uk/. Accessed 20/06/2025/

[5] *Routes into Languages*, see https://university-council-for-languages.org/routes-into-languages/, is not government funded. To date, no data exists linking its intervention work to SES-related FL uptake.

empirical evidence suggests that having a GCSE or A-level FL qualification does indeed correlate with subsequent measurable success, educational or career-related. The Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) interim report states:

> *Evidence suggests that a portfolio of academic subjects does aid access to A level and to university,*[27] *and that taking the full suite of EBacc subjects positively correlates with a learner applying to and attending university. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the EBacc combination per se has driven better attendance to Russell Group universities.*(CAR, 2025: 24)

There is no evidence, moreover, that FL qualifications in themselves predict HE trajectories:

> *Students who study a foreign language are 25 percentage points more likely to apply and 26 percentage points more likely to attend university. However, once the background of those studying these subjects is taken into account, these differences are reduced to be small and statistically insignificant, whether we use regression modelling or consider our matched sample.* (Anders et al, 2017:24)

FLs results at GCSE also correlate poorly to future predicted earnings compared to correlations with other subjects, such as maths or business studies (Hodge at al, 2024). In other words: FL qualifications are neither a predictor nor a catalyst for future educational trajectories or earning potential. Rather, correlations to future success measures exist because they are a *corollary* of the strong SES divide in FL: SES background itself is the main predictor of future success. Statistically speaking, FL qualifications are just a *resultant factor*. The question then is:

Why languages?

While an SES divide in general educational achievement is both global and pertinacious, across both subjects and countries around the globe, the divide in FL in England is especially striking (*Languages Trends* 2025). What makes FL offers so divisive is their historic legacy, whereby FLs served to access high culture, broaden students' horizons, and represented symbolic capital for a future life of privilege (McLelland, 2013). FL learning was considered a *personal* cultural enrichment

activity for the aristocratic elite, free from demands of 'return on investment'. Elitist undertones in rationales for FL study can be found in today's curricula. The DfE (2013:1) states that languages are to serve as a *'liberation from insularity*' and that students should '*read great literature in the original language'*, but omits to say what end(s) this liberation and literature would serve in their turn. Students not already inculcated in the social and cultural *habitus* (Coffin, 2018) of engaging with (European) culture and languages are thus starting their FL learning journey on the back foot, unsure of how this school subject might relate to their background and identity. This is also the case for the 20% of English school students who speak languages other than English at home, thus bringing significant cultural and, potentially, linguistic diversity to the classroom: do they need the same 'liberation from insularity'? England has shown little success in supplanting elitist thinking about FL with more utilitarian and modern alternatives (Lanvers, 2024a) that might offer meaningful visions of future multilingual selves to a wider range of learners. Language education, like all education, should serve to (1) create wealth for the nation, (2) promote equality and cohesion, and (3) provide citizens with a sense of identity (Byram, 2008). With such dated conceptualisations of FL study, rationale (3) will only reach a minority of students. But how does the provision fare in respect of rationales (1) and (2)? Concerning wealth creation, German may serve as an illustration of the mismatch between instrumental needs and learning opportunities. German is currently identified as the language most needed for the development of UK trade and is most highly demanded by UK employers (Ayres-Bennett at al, 2022), thus potentially offering good 'return on investment' (CBI, 2019). Yet, precisely this language is the least available to study in schools with low SES intakes (*Languages Trends* 2025). Is this further testimony to the nefarious effects of school managers 'tailoring' their FL provision to their school's intake? Or a reminder that attempts to motivate our students instrumentally, promising some uncertain rewards in the distant future, do not work well? The answer is both. The social divide in both provision and uptake can serve as further evidence to gauge how FL education is currently doing in respect of aim (2). The ultimate *purposes* of education are not being addressed.

A specific problem with instrumental rationales concerns English-speaking regions more generally (Lanvers et al, 2021): the misconception that '*English is enough*'

looms large in the background. It is neither specific to the UK, nor reserved to the lower SES stratum, but it will resonate most with those lacking plausible alternatives to elitist rationales. Non-material orientations to sustain learner interest are more durable and resistant to motivational 'lulls' that learners may experience. Motivational interventions focusing on instrumental arguments to encourage students also generally yield poor results (Lanvers & Graham, 2022; Taylor & Marsden, 2014). For a host of reasons, non-material rationales and motivation for FL study are more desirable, but, for too long, they have been overshadowed by elitist conceptions of accessing 'high culture', for the benefit for personal fulfillment only.

Holistic rationales for FL study

Non-material rationales need not be elitist at all. For example, a large body of research now underscores the cognitive benefits (including delaying the onset of Alzheimer's) derived from any FL study. For the wellbeing of our ageing nation (and the relief of the public purse), this alone could mandate comprehensive compulsory FL study. More important still are the soft skills acquired via FL study, such as international posture (curiosity and willingness to engage with difference), as well as better communication skills in interactions with speakers of other languages and cultures, and with those using English as an additional language (Lanvers, 2024a). Such skills are in growing demand in our fast-changing global economy. Internally (in the UK), they can also reduce sectarian and ethnic tensions, for instance in multicultural educational settings. These rationales entail a greater focus on teaching community languages. In a nation as multilingual as England, teaching the languages that are spoken in our multilingual classrooms can significantly reduce sectarianism, racism and inter-religious tension, as many empirical studies can testify (e.g. Bryam, 2009; Kirkham, 2016). Teaching diversity as lived reality also offers learners a model of identity fit for modern Britain (Byram's aim (3)) (Gholami, R., & Costantin, 2025).

Pre-empting the next caveat from the sceptic corner, the next section asks: would students from lower SES backgrounds be interested in such rationales?

Empirical motivation studies have shown that the most effective approaches to influence motivation are those focusing on *intrinsic* psychological dimensions, such as self efficacy (e.g. Graham, 2022) and openness and international outlook (Lanvers & Graham, 2022). Boosting self efficacy in particular is a promising motivational pathway for the target cohort, as students from lower SES report lower self efficacy in FLs *regardless* of their actual success in language learning (Lanvers, 2018; Lanvers & Martin, 2021). Moreover, students across the SES spectrum profess the same level of curiosity about linguistics, language diversity, alternative ways of learning languages, and cultural differences, and are similarly concerned about fairness and equity in FL learning (Lanvers et al, 2019).[6] In sum, there is evidence that instrumental rationales serve motivation badly, and that students across the whole SES spectrum more strongly embrace non-material holistic rationales.

I now turn to a final sceptical voice, asking: in the age of Global English and AI translation, do we really need language skills?

Embodiment of language competencies

In many international airports today, it is likely to be possible to find a taxi driver who speaks sufficient English to get you to your destination. Day by day, Google Translate also gets better at telling you what the menu in your chosen restaurant abroad offers, or at helping you to order things online. AI and English lingua franca serve us well for these mundane purposes. They do not, however, serve to instill the attitudinal changes that are desirable in a language pedagogy that aims to foster a more inclusive, tolerant, prosperous and cohesive society. For these changes to occur, language learning needs to be experienced holistically, in body and mind. Learning needs to be embodied and transformative. Each language and culture offer a different view of the world, making FL learning a unique place for

[6] The following quotation can serve as an example of awareness of a sense of equity and justice in language learning among 13-year-old learners in England: '*It would be quite rude to just always answer in English. You should show at least some common courtesy and use some phrases in French*.' (Lanvers, 2018:138)

transformative learning ‘when previously taken for granted assumptions and norms and roles are reflected upon and modified’ (Finnegan, 2014:19).
At its core, embodied learning rejects the Cartesian duality of mind and body, arguing for a holistic, cognitive and bodily processing of learning (Macedonia, 2019). The concept of embodied learning can be traced to the liberational pedagogy of Freire (1985), who rejected conceptualising learners as (empty) vessels to be filled with knowledge, and argued instead that learning involves a continual dialogue between teacher and learner, and the concomitant raising of students’ consciousness of own (learning) context.
In FL contexts, embodied learning can be practised via pedagogies using body and mind to enhance learning, such as associating vocabulary with actions or gestures (Jusslin et al, 2022). But embodiment in FL learning can go further, helping learners ‘*to behave in ecosocially adaptive ways*’ (Atkinson, 2010:600). Our engrained dispositions and preferences are only malleable if we expose ourselves to new embodied experiences (Bourdieu, 1990). To develop the soft skills associated with FL study, such as sensitivity to cultural difference, international posture and enhanced communication skills with interlocutors from different cultures, encounters with otherness need to be experienced holistically and embodied in real encounters with humans from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Language learning offers many opportunities to challenge engrained ways of thinking, from the discovery that words have no direct translation equivalent, or that time, and even colour, is perceived differently across cultures, to discovering how much cultural practices may differ in daily life.

When social injustice in education has become as engrained as it has within FL provision, a systemic answer is needed. By way of conclusion, I offer two avenues for policy reform addressing the language learning crisis, and the social injustice embedded within it.

Conclusion: Policy reform

We have identified four key factors facilitating the SES divide in FL provision in English secondary schools: (1) a neoliberal FL policy, (2) neoliberal education

policies more generally; (3) school segregation by SES cohort intake in England, especially at secondary level; and (4) an outdated and elitist understanding of the purpose of FL study. Only two of these factors, (1) and (4), pertain specifically to FLs. Academisation and performance metrics (2) were introduced into the system by means of a large variety of individual measures and would therefore be difficult to remove through a small number of specific counter-measures. Social segregation between schools (3) is closely linked to the nature and distribution of the UK's housing provision, as reflected in schools' catchment areas, and is therefore very difficult to address within the education system alone (Gorard, 2016). This is also a problem shared with many other countries. Rather, changing FL provision to equalise access for all up to GCSE, and changing the way we justify FL learning to our end users, is the way forward. The two approaches, which deliver slightly different outcomes, are now discussed in turn.

Compulsory FL GCSE

Together with many professional bodies (e.g. British Chambers of Commerce, 2024; CBI, 2019), we call for FL learning to be compulsory for all, at least to GCSE level. This measure will greatly contribute to equalising provision and is likely to impact positively, in turn, on post-16 uptake. Schools with low SES intakes should receive state financial support to extend their FL departments. Evidence suggests that current and past 'nudge' policies do not result in increasing uptake or closing the SES gap. So long as schools with different SES intakes develop FL policies to serve performance indicators, FL provision will continue to be an educational divider, running counter to the current governmental education agenda.

Compulsory FLs at GCSE are the only way to address the divide and *normalise* language learning for all, and thus counter the negative images of languages being only for the 'brainy', the 'posh', or those who can afford to travel abroad, etc. Changing the 14-16 FL policy is targeted, neat, and efficient and will go a long way to address both the language crisis overall and the SES divide; it might also go some way to address the crumbling post-16 provision.

The second policy change, although more conceptual in nature, has concrete implications for delivery. It proposes the replacement of the dated elitist rationales found in DfE policy statements with rationales fit for a modern, multicultural and multilingual UK.

FLs for societal benefits

To date, rationales for FL study in England have focused, on the one hand, on personal enrichment and personal material advantages (Lanvers, 2024a), and, on the other, material benefits for the nation: non-material benefits, such as the soft skills listed above, do not feature, despite mounting evidence of the benefits of FL skills for a host of soft skills that benefit society, such as social cohesion and international posture. These soft skills also translate into material benefits for the UK (Ayres-Bennett et al, 2022), internationally, by improving communication with potential political and business partners, and internally, by reducing the call on resources to alleviate ethnic, racial and cultural tensions (Baires et al, 2022). Currently, the DfE has nothing to say on these non-material benefits, despite the evidence that such altruistic incentives for FL study do resonate with learners across the whole SES spectrum (Lanvers at al, 2019).

The question is how such a shift in thinking can be encouraged in all stakeholders, and implemented. To this effect, four concrete initiatives are proposed:

Teaching language awareness at Key Stage 2

For several decades now, many professional pedagogical bodies have been calling for better language awareness teaching across Key Stages and integration of literacy in English and FL teaching (e.g. CLIE, 2025), in order to encourage cross-fertilisation between learning English and FLs, and to lay the foundations for future learning of (any) FLs. Moreover, teaching contrastive linguistics can be a motivator for FL learning itself (Lanvers et al, 2019). Given the perpetual problems around transition from Key Stage 2 to 3 (*Languages Trends* 2025), delivering content on language awareness and contrastive linguistics at this stage *alongside and via* the FL learned at Key Stage 2 would be most time-efficient. It would prepare students better for learning a variety of different FLs at Key Stage 3, thus lessening the effect of discontinuity between Key Stage 2 and 3. Delivery at Key Stage 2 would also not compromise contact hours and attainment goals at Key Stage 4.

Whole-school multilingual policies

Primary and secondary schools should adopt *whole-school multilingual policies*, celebrating the linguistic and cultural diversity of their schools, delivering all subjects with sensitivity to linguistic and cultural diversity, and involving the school's whole community. Support for policy development can be found in many places such as the Bell Foundation (no date). Whole-school multilingual approaches can demonstrate an impressive track record of success, promoting social cohesion, while lessening ethnic and racial tensions (Little & Kirwan, 2021).

Diversification of our FL provision

Diversification towards other European and global languages is needed for the economic benefits it can bring in terms of outward-facing communication (Ayres-Bennett et al, 2022), but the societal and economic benefits of teaching community languages have been somewhat overlooked in this context. As argued above, promoting societal cohesion and lessening ethnic tensions can have real material and immaterial benefits for the nation.

Engaging stakeholders in holistic rationales

Fallacies such as '*English is enough*', '*AI will do a better job*' or '*Languages are only for the brainy*' and so forth have been propagated so much over recent decades, including in the media (Lanvers & Coleman, 2017), that they need addressing in a concerted manner. Schools are good institutions for the propagation of positive and modern counter-images about FL learning among students, parents and the community, but they need support from academic institutions such as the NCLE, the British Academy and the British Council. These institutions can call on the expertise and resources needed to develop a range of outreach activities and communications that schools, in turn, could deliver directly to their students. Key messages in these communications should focus on the societal and holistic purposes of FL study, English linguistic chauvinism (and the ways of countering it), and the fallacies inherent in images of FLs as being 'difficult' or only for the 'posh kids'.

The two-pronged approach set out above offers the chance, by maximising the uptake of FLs at Key Stage 4 and offering students a set of more modern and more

relevant rationales for language learning, to fix the leaky pipeline of language students through Key Stage 5 and into Higher Education, thereby addressing a serious threat to the sustainability of FLs in that sector. In a nutshell, it offers the UK FL community and all those that care about the study of languages a concrete goal to guide their lobbying and advocacy in the years to come.

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