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A-level results: key takeaways for language learning

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Exam-entry statistics in the summer tend to prompt debates about the future of language learning in the UK. These are often framed around languages being in crisis: fewer young people study languages than two decades ago, and concerns persist about the UK's linguistic capacity in an interconnected world.

The emerging figures for 2026 reinforce some of those concerns. But they also show a more complex picture than a simple narrative of decline. Language learning is changing unevenly, with growth in some places, fragility in many others, and important questions about which languages, learners and pathways are being valued.

Combined A-level entries in French, German and Spanish (the “modern foreign languages” traditionally taught in the UK) rose slightly in absolute terms in England, Northern Ireland and Wales – from 17,407 in 2025 to 17,616 in 2026. But this still lags behind the overall growth in A-level entries, which have increased by 2.7%.

Against that backdrop, the growth in language entries looks more fragile. Since 2022, the number of A-levels taken in the three languages has fallen from 19,820 to 17,616 – an over 11% decline in five years.

According to provisional data published by Ofqual, England's exams regulator, GCSE entries in French, German and Spanish have seen a slight overall decrease in 2026, as have “other modern languages” and ancient languages.

Scotland has had a national policy commitment to language learning since 2013, yet sustaining uptake remains challenging there too.

While overall entries for Scottish Highers (a school-leaving qualification in Scotland) have gone up by 2.7% in 2026, entries in languages have fallen by 3.6%. The number of entries for languages (including Gaelic) was 6,955, which amounts to only 3.3% out of the overall 207,980 entries.



The picture for language learning is uneven. s880/Shutterstock

National 5 entries (roughly equivalent to GCSEs) for languages have been more or less stable since 2022, but the proportion of language entries in 2026 was relatively small too (4.7%).

Looking across the data, and alongside the British Council's annual Language Trends surveys, five key observations can be made.

1. Spanish is now the leading school language

The rise of Spanish is one of the clearest shifts. Spanish is now the most-entered GCSE language.

This continues a longer-term change already visible at A-level, where Spanish overtook French as the most popular language in 2019. In 2026, Spanish attracted 8,434 entries, compared with 6,888 for French and 2,294 for German. All “other modern languages” combined accounted for 6,944 A-level entries.

The same trend can be observed in Scotland, where Spanish has been the most popular language in Higher exams since 2023, and in National 5 exams since 2025.

2. Greater recognition of multilingual identities

The “other modern languages” category deserves some special attention. At A-level, it grew by 25.8% between 2022 and 2026, reaching 6,944 entries. At GCSE, provisional entries in this category fell slightly, but the age profile is striking: 41.5% of entries came from younger pupils in Year 10 or below – far more than for French, German or Spanish, or indeed any other subject.

Many pupils are taking qualifications in languages they already use in family or community contexts, such as Arabic, Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, Turkish and Urdu.

The question is therefore not only how to persuade more young people to learn a “foreign” language from scratch. It is also how schools, colleges and universities recognise, value, develop and accredit the linguistic knowledge many students already bring with them. The planned GCSE in British Sign Language marks another important step towards recognising linguistic diversity more fully.

3. Access is uneven, especially in state schools

The British Council highlights that language provision remains under particular pressure in state schools: more than a quarter of primary schools and around a fifth of state secondary schools in England report reductions in curriculum time for languages. It also found persistent problems with transition from primary to secondary school.

Post-16 provision is particularly vulnerable. 43% of surveyed state secondary schools report that A-level language courses do not run if minimum student numbers are not met.

4. The university pipeline remains fragile

School trends feed directly into higher education. Data published by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) shows a steady decline in applications to university courses in the subject group “languages and area studies” (which includes modern languages as well as, for example, English, linguistics and **creative** writing). Since 2022, applications have fallen from 89,190 to 74,110 in 2026 – an almost 17% drop.

This puts university language departments under significant pressures but also encourages them to rethink their offer. Many have introduced beginners pathways into their language degrees and increased opportunities to combine languages with other subjects.

5. Teacher supply is a cause of concern

Teacher supply remains one of the most important structural challenges, which will be exacerbated if even fewer students study languages at university and more university language departments close.

The British Council reports that around half of state secondary schools identify recruitment and retention of qualified modern foreign language teachers as an issue.

A cautiously optimistic outlook

All in all, there is reason for cautious optimism when it comes to language learning in the UK. The growing demand for Spanish signals a general interest in, and openness to, other languages and cultures. So does the increased visibility and recognition of multilingualism in communities.

A constructive response to the challenges should focus on protecting access in state schools and valuing home, heritage, community and signed languages alongside traditionally taught languages. It should also focus on transitions – from primary to secondary to higher and further education – and on building attractive routes into teaching.

All this depends on a shared understanding of the intellectual, cultural, practical, political and economic value of language learning.

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