

School learners' perceptions of foreign languages, an intervention to change perceptions, and how these relate to the choice to study a foreign language

What this study was about and why it is important

Researchers investigated the perceptions, attitudes and uptake of foreign languages of learners aged 13-14 in English schools. According to the English national curriculum at that time, one foreign language (usually French, Spanish or German) was compulsory between ages 11-14, beyond which, in the participating schools, students could choose whether or not to continue studying a foreign language. The study looked at the extent to which a short intervention designed to promote the value of studying a foreign language actually resulted in learners continuing their foreign language education beyond age 14. The study found that there was no increase in the number of learners continuing their foreign language education after the interventions.

What the researchers did

- Learners from three schools took part in one of two types of intervention: 1) **1 hour panel discussion**, with six external speakers from a range of professional backgrounds (247 students), 2) a **1 hour lesson** by an external tutor (251 students). A **control group** (106 students) did not participate in either intervention.
- The **panel discussion** covered speakers' *successes* with languages, for their personal lives and careers, and also their *regrets* at not having continued to study a language. The **lesson** covered winter and Christmas customs, with multimedia activities designed to engage interest, but generally these activities simulated normal school lessons. The purpose of this lesson was to give these learners a 'novel' experience with an external person, to try to separate out any effects of 'general novelty' from any effects of the actual content of the panel discussion. The interventions happened in December. **Questionnaires** about perceptions of, and attitudes towards, foreign languages were administered in October before the intervention and February after the intervention. In April, learners' final decisions about whether to take a foreign language after 14 were recorded.

What the researchers found

- There was an increase in foreign language uptake compared to the previous year among learners from the intervention, particularly boys, but not among those in the control group, where uptake decreased. However, intentions to continue with foreign language and reactions to the intervention were actually associated with their perceptions of the subject before the intervention; 74% of learners did not change their intentions between October and making their final decision. That is, if they had more positive perceptions about foreign languages at the outset, they were more likely to choose the subject, (and *vice versa*), regardless of which intervention they had experienced. This suggests that the interventions did not change their minds about choosing to study the subject (and reactions to the interventions were predictable on the basis of initial perceptions).
- Intended uptake declined between October and February and actual uptake was even lower. This emphasises the importance of collecting data on actual choices rather than just intentions. This decline (in intended and actual uptake) seems to have been linked to *perceptions* of foreign language lessons, which became significantly more negative between October and February with learners indicating they were learning less and the work was harder. These declining attitudes were not altered by the different types of intervention (panel, lesson, or no intervention).
- *General* attitudes to modern foreign languages and perceptions of the personal importance of the subject became more positive in the panel group, but more negative in the lesson group. Critically, where perceptions of *personal* importance or the *ease of the subject* were higher, intentions to continue were also higher.
- Perceptions of the importance of languages to society in general (i.e. 'importance to others') were not linked to higher uptake. This suggested that instrumental, general reasons for learning did not increase uptake.

Things to consider

- The interventions were short and occurred in the same school year as decisions about continuation. Longer, earlier, or repeated interventions may have had a bigger effect.
- **In your teaching:** How do you promote language learning: via enjoyment and personal achievement, and/or by emphasising the usefulness of languages in society? When do you do this in the learners' school life, and how often?

Materials available from www.iris-database.org/

How to cite this summary: Parrish, A. & Marsden, & E., (2018). School learners' perceptions of foreign languages, an intervention to change perceptions, and how these relate to the choice to study a foreign language. *OASIS Summary* of Taylor & Marsden (2014) in *The Modern Language Journal*. <https://oasis-database.org>

This summary has a [CC BY-NC-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) license.