

Why do so few English high school students study foreign languages after the compulsory phase?

What this research was about and why it is important

The reluctance of school-aged language learners in England and other Anglophone contexts is a well-documented phenomenon. Even though government policy in England requires all learners to study a foreign language at high school, relatively very few continue to do so beyond the compulsory phase, either at high school or at university. Some research has suggested that one possible reason for this lack of motivation for further language study may be that students often view it as inherently difficult, and commonly attribute success in language learning to 'natural ability' which a student either possesses or does not. However, research has shown that *successful* and more persistent language learners tend to attribute their success to effort and to strategies used, in other words, to personal agency, to factors controllable by the learner, rather than to innate ability. The current paper explores this issue by investigating how high-school students perceive their language learning success, the factors to which they attribute this success, and how this relates to their exam results. The findings suggest that even highly achieving learners lack confidence in language learning but that those who attribute success to effort and strategies rather than to ability or simple luck are more likely to persist with language study.

What the researchers did

- 594 learners of French across three academic year groups (years 11, 12 and 13 – students roughly aged 15, 16 and 17 respectively) in ten separate educational institutions in the South of England completed a questionnaire, exploring their beliefs around: (i) how well the students thought they were doing vs. how their teachers viewed them; (ii) the amount of effort needed to learn French; (iii) areas of relative success or failure; (iv) explanations for their performance. A sample of these learners also took part in follow up interviews to further explore their responses.
- The questions included 'open' questions, in which students used their own words to explain their beliefs, as well as questions in which students rated the influence of various factors on successful learning (namely: *ability, effort, luck, learning strategies, task difficulty*) on a 6-point scale (e.g. 1 = not at all important; 6 = very important)

What the researchers found

- When asked to predict their exam results, the students in years 13 and 12 had similar expectations as their teachers. Students in year 11, especially girls, tended to have lower expectations than their teachers.
- When asked to rate their performance, despite often expecting good exam results, the students expressed low levels of confidence in their actual French ability, thus appearing to separate exam success from actual linguistic proficiency.
- Students in Years 11 and 12 often attributed learning success to natural ability more than effort. However, by Year 13, students tended to attribute success more to effort, often expressing regret for having not worked harder earlier. Interestingly however, among Year 13s there was still a tendency to attribute *failure* in particular skills (e.g. listening/writing) to natural ability (e.g. I guess I am just naturally poor at listening).
- Very few students in any age group mentioned learning strategies as key to success, suggesting a lack of awareness of how important such strategies can be.
- Across all three year groups, higher achieving students were less likely to blame lack of ability or task difficulty for learning problems –i.e. they were less likely to blame outside factors, and more likely to look to themselves for solutions
- Only 19% of Year 11 students intended to study French beyond the compulsory phase, often citing difficulty as the reason. However, those who did plan to continue to study were more likely to attribute success to effort and strategies rather than ability or simple luck

Things to consider

- Given that low motivation and a feeling that learning foreign languages is inherently difficult are principal reasons why many UK students do not pursue language study beyond the compulsory phase, encouraging more positive beliefs about the reasons for success or failure (e.g. effort rather than ability) is a crucial task for language teachers to perform.
- Teaching learning strategies may help students to build a conceptual bridge from effort to ability, as by being shown how to expend their effort in effective, meaningful ways, they can be taught to improve their language learning proficiency.

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