

Five years on

The language landscape in 2007

John Canning

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In 2002, the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies was commissioned to investigate the health of modern languages in schools and universities. Published as *A New Landscape for Languages*, the report offered possibilities for how the language landscape might look in 2007. Using the most recent statistics, *Five years on* revisits the report and compares the actual landscape with those thought possible five years ago.

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FOREWORD

‘Languages remain vulnerable, despite being strategically important for the future of the country’

The landscape for languages is constantly changing, responding to transformations in the broader social context. Five years ago, we analysed the picture in secondary and higher education and hazarded some scenarios for what the picture might look like in five years' time. The five years have now passed, and it is salutary to see how our prognostications have fared. John Canning has taken a dispassionate look at the forecasts for secondary school languages, offered by myself and Diana Jones. He has found that the picture is both better and worse than we might have expected.

The current position at age 16 has deteriorated sharply, both in England, where the effects of removing compulsion have been felt at GCSE, and more disturbingly in Scotland at Standard Grade, where the trends had looked more promising. From the improved level of average grades obtained by 16 year olds, it is clear that the remaining language students have been the most able linguists, as might be expected. This is also reflected in the much smaller dip in take up at A-level, and the significant proportional increase in languages other than French and German.

The same tendency can be traced through to university entrance. Figures recently released show that, after a period of decline, the number of students taking a first degree in languages has remained steady since 2003-4. The number of students studying a language as part of another degree has grown somewhat (4.6% since 2002-3).

Languages remain vulnerable, despite being strategically important for the future of the country. But there are signs that government initiatives and the efforts of language educators are beginning to have an effect, at least in slowing the decline. Looking forward to the next five years, there are more grounds for optimism than in 2003. It is possible that the decline is bottoming out. And the increasing diversity of languages at school will undoubtedly be reflected in the pattern of provision in universities. Concern will continue to centre on the narrow institutional base, if universities continue to withdraw from language degrees at the same rate as the last five years. But the continued strong demand for language options bodes well for the language capacity of tomorrow's graduates.

Perhaps the most striking conclusion to be drawn from John Canning's analysis is that the next five years will not be easily predictable. Past trends are not a reliable indicator of the future, which always provides surprises, and rarely turns out to be entirely 'familiar'. As the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight* put it: 'the form to the finishment folds full seldom'. On the basis of this five year reappraisal, we can expect that the landscape for languages in 2013 will still be in some senses 'new'.

MICHAEL KELLY
April 2008

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies was commissioned by the Nuffield Languages Steering Group to explore post-16 language provision. Describing itself as 'a wake-up call' the report, *A New Landscape for Languages* (Kelly and Jones 2003) found that the long term trends identified by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry just three years earlier had intensified. *New Landscape* predicted that even greater changes were likely in the following five years.

Five years on, it is fitting therefore that we should revisit *New Landscape*.

Of particular interest to this paper is Part 3, 'Looking into the future' in which *New Landscape* attempted to predict future language trends from 2003 to 2007. Whilst these projections also included a consideration of the organisational structure of language learning provision, this report focuses on the provision of language learning as evidenced through statistical data. The publication of provisional 2007 results for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), A-levels, Standards Grades and Higher Grades has provided us with the ideal opportunity to return to these projections and consider the actual trends.¹

New Landscape acknowledged that '...looking into the future is a hazardous venture, but a necessary one if we wish to shape the society in which we live' (p.28). Part 3 outlined two possible futures. The first of these is a **familiar future** in which although the decline of the 1990s continues, the optional languages policy at Key Stage 4 results in a decline of only 10%.² A second **different future** is one in which optional languages result in just 30% of students studying languages at GCSE. However, the second scenario is more optimistic in Scotland where the fruits of (successful) primary language learning have filtered through to secondary schools.



¹ As in *New Landscape*, English, Welsh, Irish, Gaelic and Celtic Studies have been excluded from this analysis.

² Key Stage 4 refers to the last two years of compulsory schooling in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (pupils age 14-16). Whilst students have to study English, Mathematics and Science in Key Stage 4, it is not compulsory to take the GCSE exam. However, the dominance of the GCSE exam makes it the best statistical indicator of entries and achievement in any given subject.

Table 1: A summary of *New Landscape* 'familiar' and 'different' futures

Familiar future		Different future	
England, Northern Ireland and Wales	Scotland	England, Northern Ireland and Wales	Scotland
Decline after shift to optional GCSE only 10%. Decline bottomed out. Spanish and Chinese hold numbers. Spanish overtakes German at A-level.	Numbers taking higher level languages increases 5%. Early 2000s recovery in Standard Grade entries sustained.	Only 30% of pupils studying a language at GCSE. A-levels preserve of academic and social elite. Decline in university language departments. Increase in informal language learning.	Numbers held steady/ slightly increased due to languages in primary school working through the system. Increasingly 'European' sense of identity encourages language learning.

The actual picture in 2007

This report briefly examines these possible futures in light of the 2007 provisional figures for entries at GCSE, A-level, Standard Grade and Higher Grade. The figures presented are for the number of entries, not the number of students (some students will be entered for more than one language).

Languages are no longer statutory at Key Stage 4 in England, but schools have an obligation to '...provide the opportunity for all students at Key Stage 4 to take a minimum of one course in a language that leads to a qualification approved under Section 96 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000' (Smith 2006). In June 2007, the Schools Minister Lord Adonis clarified that languages, arts, design and technology, and the humanities were 'statutory entitlement subjects' and that pupils are entitled to study a subject from each of the four areas (BBC 2007).

Table 2: Languages provision and take-up in English maintained schools, 2007 (CILT 2006, 2007a)

	% of schools offering language KS4 2007 (maintained sector)	% cohort taking GCSE 2001	% of cohort taking GCSE 2007
French	99	53	29
German	71	22	12
Spanish	57	8	8
Others	≥ 9	3	3
Any language	≥ 99	78	46

Table 3: GCSE entries 2003 and 2007 in comparison with *New Landscape* projections (Source: Joint Council for Qualifications, 2007)

	2003 (actual)	2007 (familiar)	2007 (different)	2007 (provisional)
Chinese	2,675	2,371	869	3,007
French	331,890	304,653	111,706	216,718
German	125,851	113,598	41,653	81,061
Italian	5,542	5,027	1,843	5,490
Russian	1,585	1,426	534	1,897
Spanish	61,490	52,210	19,144	63,978
Other languages	18,156	18,844	6,910	19,173

GCSE entries in Modern Languages decreased by 27.6% between 2003 and 2007. Entries in French declined by 34.7% and entries in German by 35.6%. It would be safe to assume that this can be explained by languages becoming optional for pupils (in England) starting Key Stage 4 in September 2004 impacting on the 2006 figures, though there is evidence that some schools pre-empted this policy allowing earlier cohorts of students not to take a language for GCSE. However, the entries in French and German have not declined to the extent *New Landscape* suggested under our 'different future' though they are around 40% below those which could be expected under the familiar scenario outlined in 2003. In short the picture for French and German is about half-way between the two scenarios. The general trend does seem to indicate a bottoming out of the decline.

The decline in French and German has been partly offset by a rise in the number of pupils taking other languages. Whilst *New Landscape* predicted a decline in Spanish, entries continue to rise (4% between 2003 and 2007). Even in our familiar (more optimistic) scenario we underestimated 2007 entries in Spanish by 18%. Russian and Chinese also increased by 19.7% and 12.4% respectively, though from a much smaller base than Spanish. 1,908 students took GCSE Polish, an increase in over 600% from 2003 overtaking Russian.³ It is likely that most entrants for Polish GCSE are native speakers who arrived in the UK when Poland joined the European Union.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) now publishes the percentages of GCSE students who gain 5 A*- Cs at GCSE including English, Mathematics, Science and Modern Languages. This is an additional incentive for schools to enter native speakers of languages other than English for GCSE in that language.

Table 4: A-level entries 2003 and 2007 in comparison with *New Landscape* projections
(Source: Joint Council for Qualifications, 2007)

	2003 (actual)	2007 (familiar)	2007 (different)	2007 (provisional)
Chinese	1,914	1,735	573	2,422
French	15,335	10,150	5,153	14,615
German	6,876	4,558	2,314	6,406
Italian	839	512	260	830
Russian	569	313	159	729
Spanish	5,748	5,573	1,839	7,152
Other languages	2,392	1,201	610	3,026

The decline in numbers of students taking French and German A-level has slowed down with a decline of only 4.7% for French and 6.8% for German in the 2003-7 period. This decline is much smaller than predicted in *New Landscape's* familiar (more optimistic) future. However, we correctly predicted that Spanish entries would overtake entries in German. With an increased uptake of other languages at A-level, total entries in languages rose by 4.4% between 2003 and 2007. In line with trends at GCSE, entries increased for Chinese (26.5%) and Russian (28.1%). Other languages enjoying increased popularity over the period are Dutch (up 282.1%), Polish (up 128.4%), Arabic (up 84.5%) and Portuguese (up 71.2%), though these accounted for much smaller numbers. Although the numbers of students studying languages at A-level is growing, 'market share' continues to fall as the total number of A-Level entries in all subjects rose by 8%.

³ Whilst 833 people took GCSE Polish in 2006, DfES figures reveal that only 325 pupils took the exam at the end of the Key Stage 4 in England. This suggests a high take-up of the exam amongst older or younger people. The figures of 2007 were not available at the time of going to press. Personal communication - Sarah Joy.

Scotland

Whilst the 'different future' was pessimistic for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, *New Landscape* was optimistic for Scotland on the basis that the introduction of languages in primary school would have worked its way through the system. However, as in the rest of the UK, numbers entering Standard Grade languages declined and the modest recovery observed in the early 2000s has not been sustained in French (down 14.9% from 2003) and German (down 27.1%). Spanish rose slightly by 5.1%. All languages fell well short of the numbers outlined in both the 'familiar' and 'different' futures. In contrast to the growth in Russian entries at GCSE and A-level, Russian has been virtually eliminated in Scotland.

Table 5: Actual Standard Grade entries, 2003 and 2007 in comparison with *New Landscape* projections

	2003 (actual)	2007 (familiar)	2007 (different)	2007 (provisional)
French	37,988	41,151	43,208	32,315
German	13,413	14,695	15,429	9,784
Italian	569	722	759	420
Russian	7	18	19	1
Spanish	2,779	3,183	3,342	2,923
Other languages	181*	210	221	149*

* All Urdu

Scottish Higher

Entries in Higher French declined by 6.4% and Higher German by 15% between 2003 and 2007. As in the rest of the UK Spanish is increasing (up 16.7% since 2003). Unlike the rest of the UK, Spanish has yet to overtake German as the second most popular language in post-compulsory education though this is likely to happen soon. With the exception of Spanish the 2007 figures fall well short of both *New Landscape* scenarios.

Table 6: Actual Higher Grade entries, 2003 and 2007 in comparison with *New Landscape* projections

	2003 (actual)	2007 (familiar)	2007 (different)	2007 (provisional)
French	4,886	5,010	5,000	4,573
German	1,908	2,316	2,300	1,621
Italian	263	298	400	225
Russian	23	15	20	16
Spanish	1,045	961	1,200	1,220

UK trends

Overall, French and German continue to decline at all levels throughout the UK, with German suffering the worst decline. In contrast, Spanish has not only consolidated its popularity, it continues to rise at all levels throughout the UK. It has exceeded even the most optimistic scenario outlined by *New Landscape*. However, the rise in Spanish has not been sufficient to stem the overall decline in school languages as a whole.

The impact of the removal of compulsory languages at Key Stage 4 in England has not been as severe as we feared it might be when *New Landscape* was published, though the decline has been substantial and numbers fell well short of the more optimistic scenario. At A-level the picture is different with an overall rise in numbers. Despite the decline in French and German at A-level, numbers are well above those suggested in either possible future. In 2008 it will be possible to clarify with greater certainty whether or not making languages optional at Key Stage 4 has impacted on numbers taking A-level.

A much neglected issue in discussions about exam entry trends is the number of 16 year olds available to take the exams. Students who turned 16 in the 2006-7 academic year were born in 1990 or 1991 when the number of births recorded in the UK was at its highest level since the early 1970s. Since 1991 the number of births has decreased and 100,000 fewer children were born in 2001 than in 1991 (National Statistics). Leaving aside questions of immigration and emigration there will be 14% fewer students taking GCSEs in 2017. The rise of alternatives to GCSE, A-levels and Scottish Standard and Higher Grades such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSEs), Asset languages, 14-19 Diplomas and the International Baccalaureate may render it increasingly difficult to get an overall sense of the national picture in the future, with 29% of state schools and 12% of independent schools offering alternatives to GCSE (CILT 2007b). Whilst most candidates for these exams are 16-19 year olds, it also important to note that the exams are open to adult students, and more and more under 16s are taking one or two GCSE subjects a year or two early. The view expressed in *New Landscape* that language learning could increase in less formal evening/lunchtime classes and in universities' Institution-Wide Language Programmes (IWLPs) is, almost by definition, not easy to substantiate in a statistical sense.

Implications

New Landscape worked on the (statistical) assumption that demand for modern languages in general was congruent with the demand for individual modern languages. In practice, different languages have experienced different trends, which suggest that the general assumption of a 'common fate' for Modern Languages as a whole may need to be reconsidered. Although most schools have Modern Languages departments (as opposed to French, German, Spanish departments), whether or not language choice is a zero-sum game (a gain for one language is a loss for another) could usefully be explored. It would also be also useful to continue to explore pupil perceptions of different individual languages, as opposed to foreign languages in general.

The diversity of trends of individual languages is well illustrated by the graph, over, which is an index for A-level and GCSE entries (2002=100).⁴

⁴ The index shows the number of students studying a language each year **relative** to the number of students studying it in a base year (in this case the year 2002). Figures 1 and 2 therefore show the **relative** trends of different languages, not actual student numbers. For more about indexes, see www.bized.co.uk/learn/economics/macro/indnos/student.htm

Figure 1: Index of A-level trends (2002=100)⁵
 (Source: Joint Council for Qualifications, 2007)

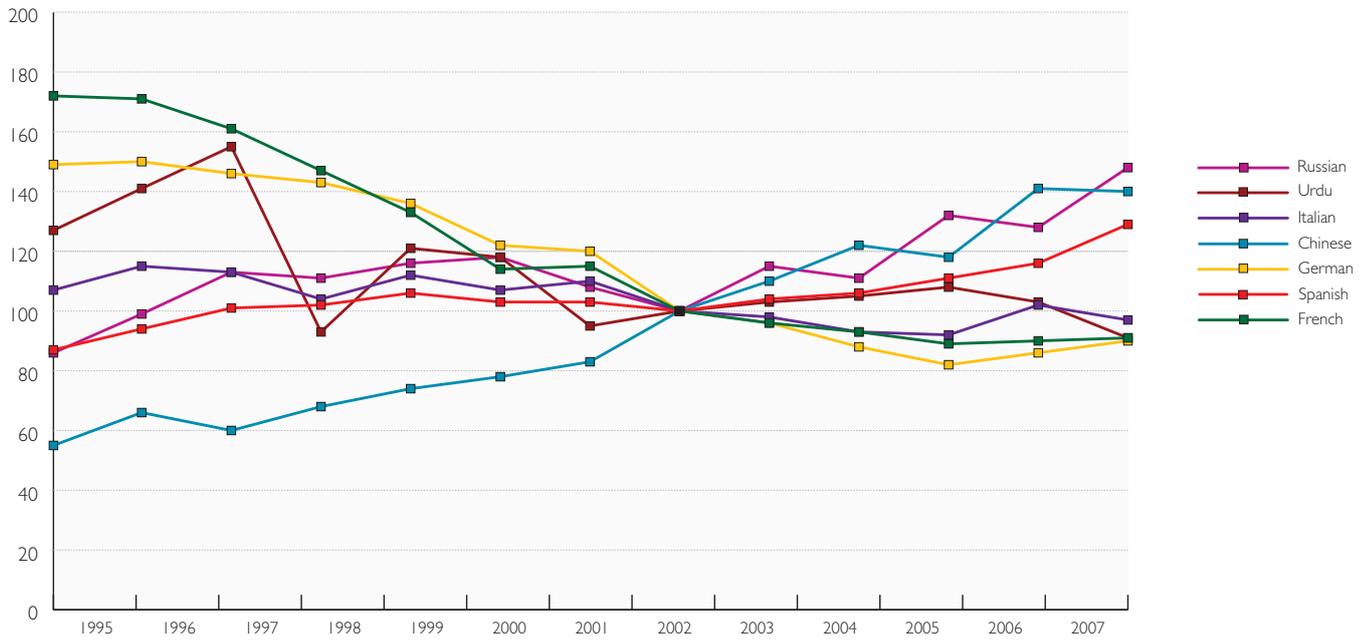
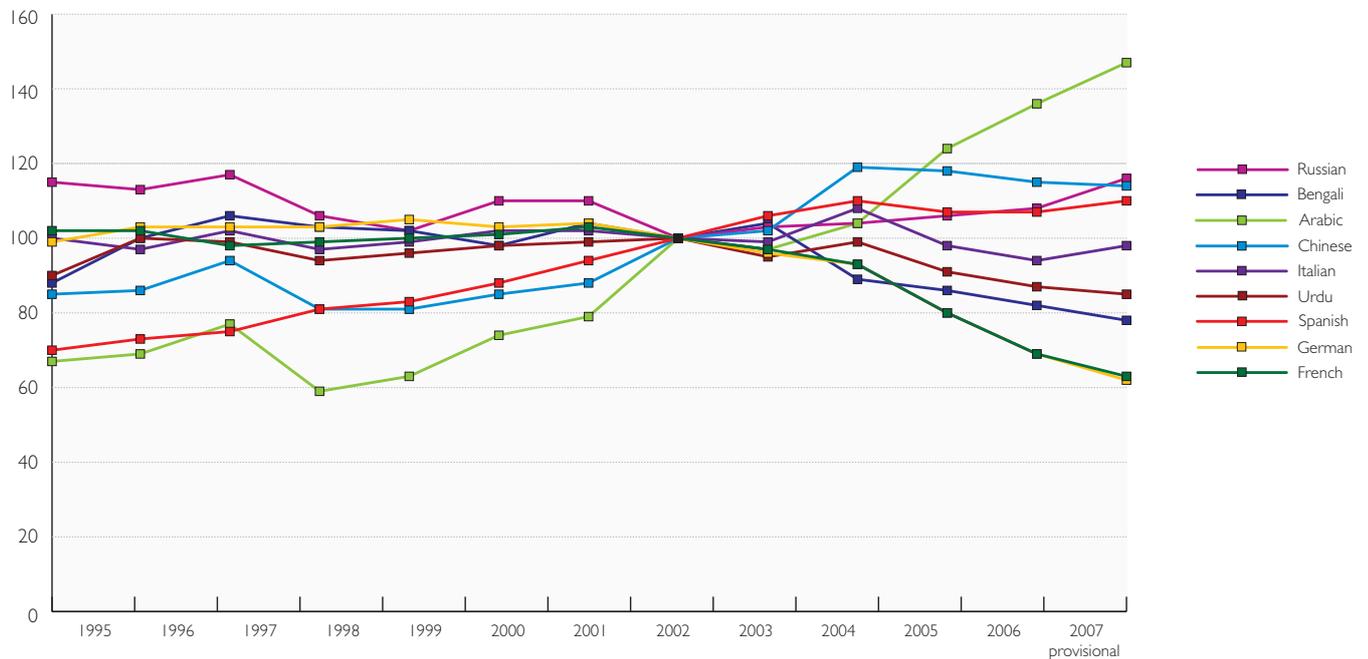


Figure 2: Index of GCSE trends (2002=100)⁵
 (Source: Joint Council for Qualifications, 2007)



⁵ The rise of Polish is something of a statistical shock to the system and it has been left out of the above graphs in order not to render the trends of other languages indistinguishable.

Grades

So far we have only addressed numbers entering the exams. Critically, the general health of languages in the UK depends upon the numbers of students who achieve a sufficient standard to progress (or have the opportunity to progress) to A-level/Higher Grade and onto higher education.

Table 7: Percentage GCSE awarded grades A*-A and A*-C 2007 (2003)
(Source: Joint Council for Qualifications, 2007)

	A* - A	A* - C
French†	23.2 (17.9)	66.5 (51.2)
German†	23.7 (17.3)	71.4 (55.4)
Spanish†	33.1 (25.5)	70.6 (59.1)
Other Modern Languages†	55.2 (49.5)	82.9 (78.0)
Mathematics*	13.7 (11.7)	55.2 (50.2)
English*	15.3 (14.3)	62.2 (59.7)
Science: double award*	13.5 (12.5)	58.0 (53.8)
Information Communication Technology*	21.2 (18.1)	65.0 (58.5)
Drama†	16.7 (20.5)	72.0 (68.1)
History†	29.1 (25.7)	67.5 (64.5)
Geography†	25.2 (20.6)	66.8 (61.3)
Design and Technology†	17.6 (14.2)	59.8 (54.2)
All subjects	19.5 (16.7)	63.3 (58.1)

*compulsory subjects (2007)

† examples of entitlement subjects (2007)

In 2003, when languages were compulsory at Key Stage 4, only 51.2% of entrants to GCSE French gained grade C or above, well below the all subject average of 58.1%. In 2007 attainment at this level in French had reached 66.5%, noticeably above the all subject average of 63.3%. In German and Spanish the percentage of students gaining grades A*-C exceeds 70%. In view of research revealing that take-up of languages is lowest in low-performing schools (CILT 2006) this would seem to indicate that higher performing pupils are more likely to choose languages than their lower performing peers (thus rejecting the alternative hypothesis that language exams have become much 'easier' vis-à-vis other subjects). The percentage of all pupils achieving a grade A*-C at GCSE has declined in recent years: 19% for French in 2007 (23% in 2005) and 8% for German in 2007 (10% in 2005) (CILT 2007a). Additionally, it has been claimed that GCSEs in languages are graded harder than GCSEs in some other subjects including Physical Education and Drama (Coe 2008). In short a student taking a 'harder' GCSE would expect to get a lower grade than if they had chosen an 'easier' GCSE.

Higher education

Identifying trends in higher education languages is complex for a whole variety of reasons. First, the data available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA) website is actually the 'full person equivalent' which does not record actual numbers of students. For example a subject with five 'students' could mean five single honours students, 10 joint honours students, 15 minor/triple honours students or any other permutation. However, the data displayed below is the 'headcount data' which shows the number of students studying each subject (for at least 33.3% of their degree). Second, the reliability of the data depends upon the way in which institutions report their data to HESA. CILT, the National Centre for Languages has suggested that institutions are using the categories 'Other European Languages' and 'Other Non-European Languages', when they should be using named languages (CILT 2007a). Third, the data presented by HESA are for total numbers of undergraduate students in all years of study. Fourth, this data is likely to exclude students studying extra-mural languages and students studying one or two language units as part of, but less than 33.3%, of their degree.

Despite the caveats outlined above, it is probably the most reliable data available on the number of individuals engaged in language learning in higher education. The 'headcount' table below shows the actual number of individual students studying each language in higher education in all years of their course for at least one third of their degree. However, as most language students are taking languages as part of a joint honours degree some students will be 'double counted'; for example a student studying joint honours French and German will be counted once for French and once for German. Therefore it would be erroneous to add up the figures to acquire a total for the number of individuals studying languages in higher education.

Table 8: Modern languages in higher education (HESA)

	% change 1998-9 to 2001-2	2002-3	2003-4	2004-5	2005-6	% change 2002-3 to 2005-6
French	-19%	14,400	14,130	13,930	13,925	-3%
Spanish	+3%	8,225	8,255	8,535	8,655	+5%
German	-17%	5,875	5,805	5,550	5,350	-9%
Italian	-5%	3,005	2,885	2,755	2,620	-13%
Russian	-15%	1,535	1,585	1,600	1,635	+7%
Chinese	-16%	605	685	755	850	+40%
Modern Middle Eastern Studies	-9%	805	920	995	955	+19%
Japanese	-23%	685	715	810	860	+26%
Portuguese	+5%	620	665	680	715	+15%
South and Other Asian languages	+7%	395	395	435	450	+14%
Scandinavian languages	-38%	175	175	215	150	-14%
Other European languages	*	8,985	8,245	6,915	7,120	-21%
Other non-European languages	*	1,485	1,295	1,240	1,205	-19%

As in the schools sector, French, Spanish and German continue to dominate the scene, albeit not to the same extent. The fortunes of different languages are very different with large increases for Chinese, Arabic (Middle Eastern Studies), Portuguese and Japanese with decreases in French and German and a modest increase in Spanish and Russian.

Other language study

Whilst the HESA data give a sense of the number of the students studying for a degree (or part of a degree in languages), it says little about the overall picture of language learning. The Association of University Language Centres (AULC) undertook a survey in 2007 to count the numbers of students studying languages in language centres (AULC 2007). The survey estimated that over 73,000 students were studying languages in university language centres. In some institutions this may include students studying for degrees in Modern Languages, whereas in other cases these students are excluded where they are taught languages in a separate Modern Languages department. For example, some universities record zero students studying languages as an accredited part of their degree, whilst it is known that these institutions teach language degrees.

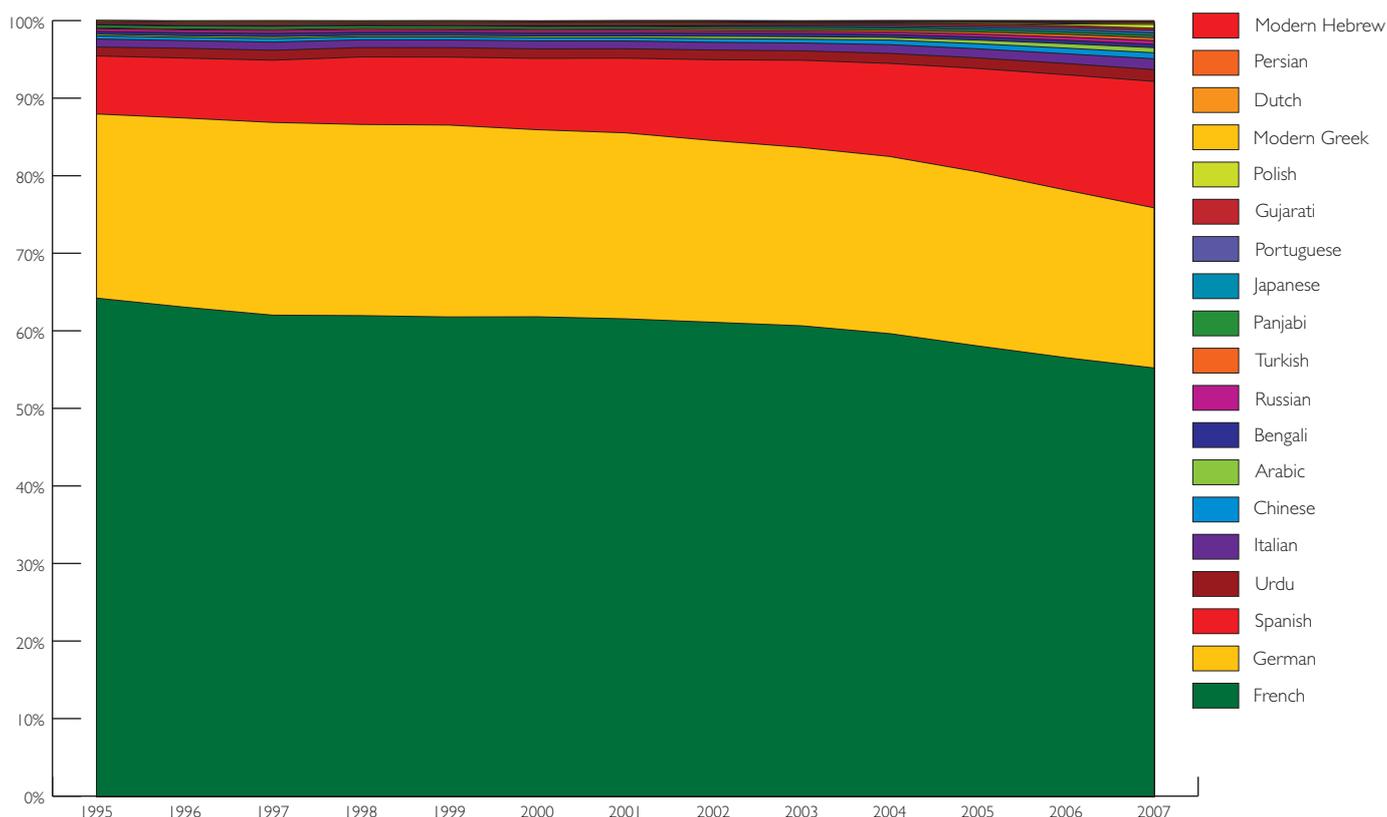
These figures also exclude language courses taught by further education colleges, private companies and other organisations, so the number of adults learning languages is likely to be much higher. For example, according to its website *Institut Français du Royaume-Uni* has 7,000 students enrolling each year. In addition the availability of 'teach yourself' materials makes *New Landscape's* observation that an increasingly significant amount of language learning is taking place outside formal classes of particular importance here.

Summary

The continuing decline in numbers of students studying languages in schools means that the 2008 language landscape is as much a cause for concern as it was in 2003. Whilst the decline is not as bad as we feared it could be when *New Landscape* was published, there are no grounds for complacency. Whilst there are some signs of encouragement in the continuing growth of Spanish, Russian and Chinese, the decline in numbers studying French and German since 2003 remains alarming. Growth in numbers studying these 'less widely taught' languages is falling a long way short of offsetting the decline in French and German.

Any suggestion that there is a move away from a French-dominated model of provision towards much more diverse provision is premature. French continues to account for over 50% of entries at GCSE and A-level, around 60% at Scottish Higher and over 70% at Scottish Standard Grade. The graph below gives an idea of the continued dominance of French at GCSE, though the increasing share of Spanish is equally as clear:

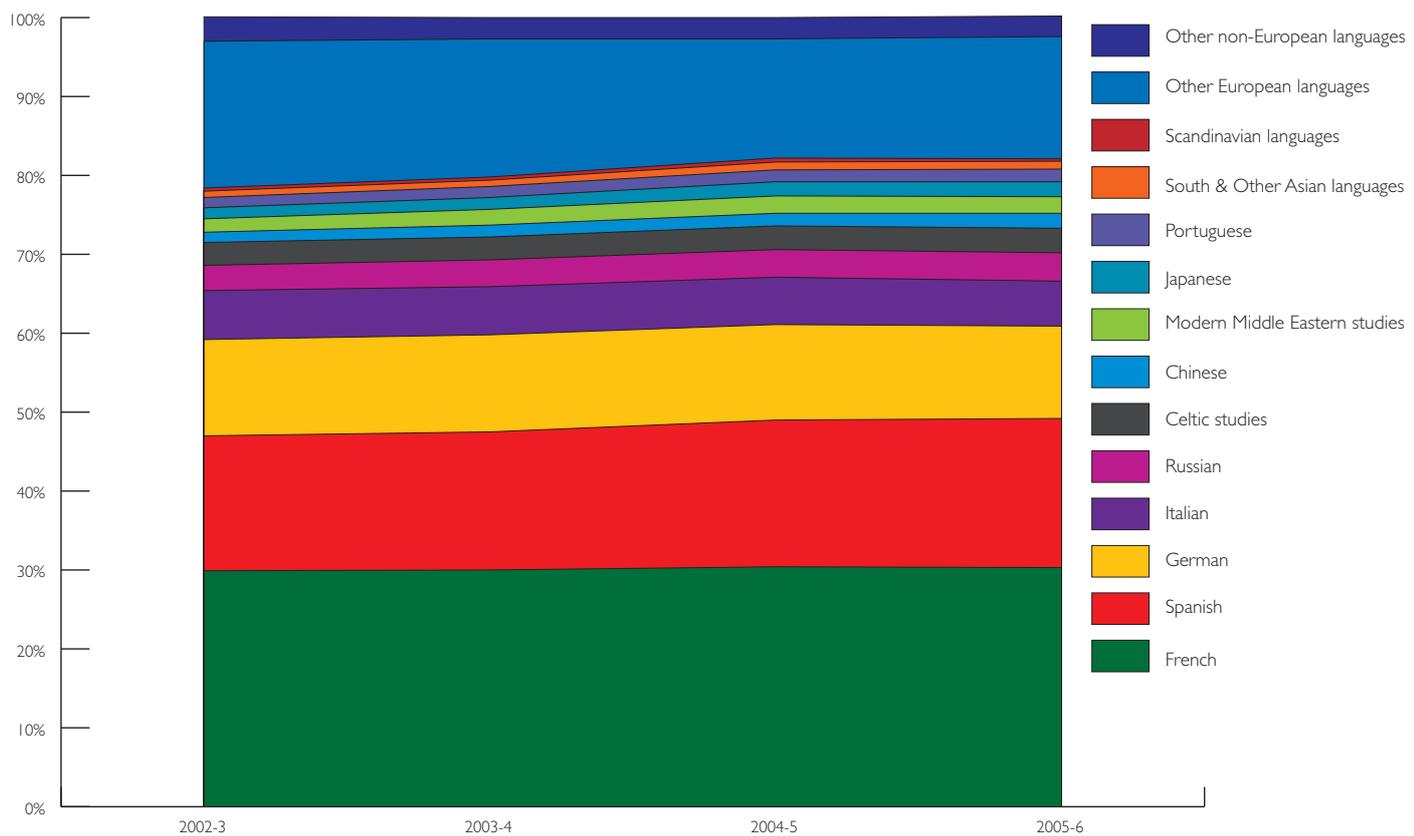
Figure 3: Share of modern languages 'market' at GCSE (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2007)



The provision of languages to 14-19 year-olds is not a free market. The dominance of French is likely to continue into the future if for no other reason than the fact that it is the language that most existing MFL teachers are able to teach. The most recent Department for Education and Skills (DfES) survey into teacher numbers estimated that there were 16,000 teachers of French, 6,900 teachers of German, 3,600 teachers of Spanish and 1,400 teachers of other languages (DfES 2003).⁶ Despite languages being optional at Key Stage 4, individual schools are entitled to make them compulsory and it is unclear what modern language provision might look like if pupils could choose any language and staff were available to teach it. An undersupply of qualified teachers of some less widely taught languages could restrict the growth of some languages which might otherwise flourish. The significance of a possible decline in the number of the 16 year olds over the next ten years should not be underestimated and it is likely that numbers taking languages will continue to fall for this reason alone. The increase in births in the early 2000s will provide a further challenge to planning provision in the 2010s and 2020s.

Any return to compulsion at Key Stage 4 will see an increase in numbers studying French (and perhaps to a lesser extent German and Spanish) and it is likely that language provision in primary schools will centre on the provision of French. This could have implications (positive or negative) for choices made later on. On a national level, fears of wipe-out have not been realised since languages became optional post-14, though some individual schools report very low take-up. The effects of the trends identified vary by school. The most recent survey by CILT, the National Centre for Languages found that 83% of independent schools but only 23% of maintained schools made GCSE languages compulsory (CILT 2007b).

Figure 4: Market share in higher education languages (HESA)



⁶ Two new government departments, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), took over the remit of the DfES in June 2007.

Higher education changes are similar to those in schools with French and German still declining (though much less rapidly than previously), a slow growth in Spanish, and a more substantial upsurge in demand for Russian, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic (Modern Middle Eastern Studies). Notwithstanding the caveats about the higher education statistics outlined above, the growth of less widely taught languages is probably not offsetting the decline in French and German in terms of actual numbers. Spanish is well-established as the second most popular language behind French which is maintaining its share of the 'languages market'.

However, the modest growth of French and Spanish since 2002-3 and the decline of German indicate that languages as a whole are not keeping pace with the overall expansion in higher education. In 1996/7, 3.9 % of undergraduate students were studying languages compared to just 2.8% in 2005/6 (HESA).

Conclusion

New Landscape described itself as 'a wake-up call for languages' (p.1). Since 2003 we have seen the publication of *The National Languages Strategy in Higher Education* (Footitt 2005) and our own *Why Study Languages?* CD-ROM. Languages are about to be introduced in primary schools, and the £8m *Routes into Languages* programme has just passed its first birthday. The sector has woken up but there is still work to do. A landscape does not change overnight. Whether we like it or not the success or otherwise of these initiatives will be assessed in terms of future student numbers and exam results. Whilst we expected a decline in student numbers between 2003 and 2007, the decline is not as great as many had feared. Moreover, the continuing rise in Spanish, Chinese and Russian offers much encouragement, even if it offers little in the way of consolation for the vast decline in French and German.

Although we have not made projections for the future, in five years' time it will be possible to begin to assess the impact of these major policies and initiatives.

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Five years on: The language landscape in 2007

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In 2002, the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies was commissioned to investigate the health of modern languages in schools and universities. Published as *A New Landscape for Languages*, the report offered possibilities for how the language landscape might look in 2007. Using the most recent statistics, *Five years on* revisits the report and compares the actual landscape with those thought possible five years ago.

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