



Report

2018



The University of Manchester

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**How has the recent government lead change in
legislation for language learners impacted the
decisions and opinions of students to choose to study
languages post 2016?**

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1 Introduction

In 2011, studying a language was made compulsory from the age of seven. By surveying individuals affected by this, we aim to investigate the impact of this legislation. Focus will be put on the way languages are taught in Primary and Secondary education, to understand if this is critical towards students' decisions to study a language further.

We began by reading the research of Worton (2009)¹, Levitt (2009)² and Wade et.al. (2009)³, as well as two reports: Born Global⁴, and Language Trends 2015/16⁵. Wade et. al explored the awareness of the legislation, and gave an insight into teacher's opinions and responses to these changes. Worton explored Gove's change in legislation and expressed the subjects that students chose instead of languages. The Language Trends 2015/16 report discussed how entries for both GCSEs and A Levels in Modern Foreign languages were down, and how the legislation affected this.

Levitt expanded on why certain languages are taught. His report also argued that the business market is the reason for French, German, and Spanish being the main languages taught in schools. Furthermore, the Born Global report analysed the responses of businesses to the changes, and agreed that French, German and Spanish are the top languages for businesses.

2 Methodology

A questionnaire was the best-suited methodology for our data collection, due to ease of distribution and analysis. Questionnaires are anonymous and so may lead to respondents being more honest with their answers, increasing the reliability of the data⁶. An online questionnaire was created, as it was believed sharing it electronically would increase the number of willing participants.

The original investigation plan involved surveying teachers as well as students to gain a broader view of the legislation impact. However, after further thought we decided that surveying students alone would provide sufficient data. A sample questionnaire was piloted with one individual, in order to ensure that our questions were clear enough and would provide insightful responses. After the pilot, we added a new question relating to the self-proficiency of language skill, which was helpful for analysis on the fluency of the participants. The questionnaires were then shared on the researchers' social media accounts, in order to reach other students. We decided that the research would be best conducted among university students as they are likely to have been affected by the legislation.

49 individuals responded to the questionnaire. This sample size allows us to make reliable claims about the attitudes towards the legislation. This also means that we have more of a range of different opinions that can be analysed. The questionnaires gathered multiple types of data. Semantic differential scale questions as in *Example 1* provided quantitative data, which is clear and easy to analyse⁷.

“On a scale of 1 – 5 (5 being the highest importance), how important do you think learning a language at school is?”

1 2 3 4 5

Example 1.

Open-ended questions such as *Example 2* provide qualitative data and allow respondents to outline their own thoughts. This type of data is more difficult to analyse, however it provides invaluable insight into students’ attitudes towards language teaching changes, and allows us to better understand the quantitative data⁷.

“Why do you think the way languages are taught should change?”

Example 2.

3 Patterns

Here we explore and analyse the findings from the questionnaire. Proportional distribution and bar charts are used to explore the different responses. To ensure this work is justified and easily quantifiable we included some statistical analysis including error bars and Frequency Comparison tests.

On a scale of 1 -5 (5 being the highest), how important do you think learning a language at school is?

There is a positive correlation between participants believing that language is important at school, as seen in Figure 1. The group with the highest value is the number (5) group, at 37%. However, there is quite a high percentage of people who only rated the importance at a (3), 24%, or (4), 27%. While there isn’t a majority for any of the groups, there seems to be quite an even distribution across the 3-5 categories. It appears that people generally think learning a language is important, however maybe these participants thought that there were other subjects that were more important.

1	2
2	4
3	12
4	13
5	18

Table 1: Table of N’s for Figure 1

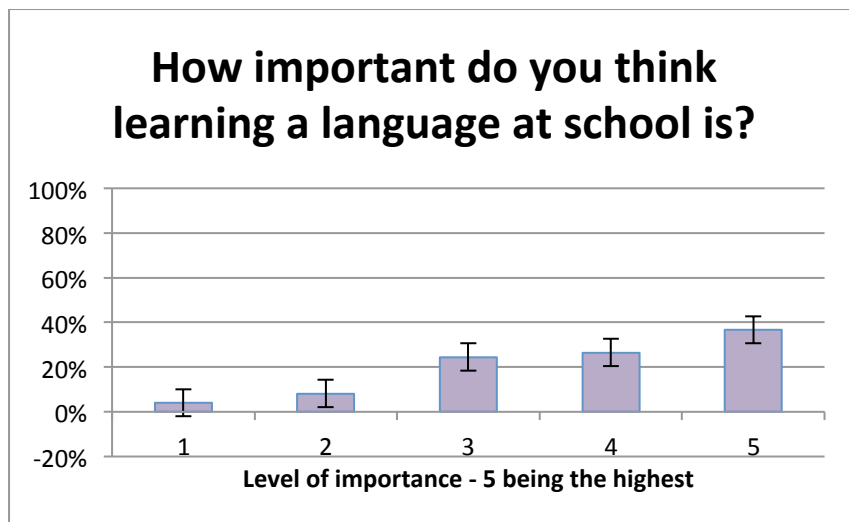


Figure 1: Graph to show how important participants thought learning a language skill was

Do you currently/have you ever taken a language course by choice?

Figure 2 shows that not many participants were completely satisfied with their experience of language study, and this may have deterred them from taking a further language course. However, as the question specified that the course may have already been completed, it could suggest that they initially took this language course by choice, but then were not entirely satisfied with the class. Despite this, it seems as if a lot of people were interested in taking a language by choice, but it isn't clear whether this was influenced by a previous positive experience.

Yes	30
No	19

Table 2: Table of N's for Figure 2

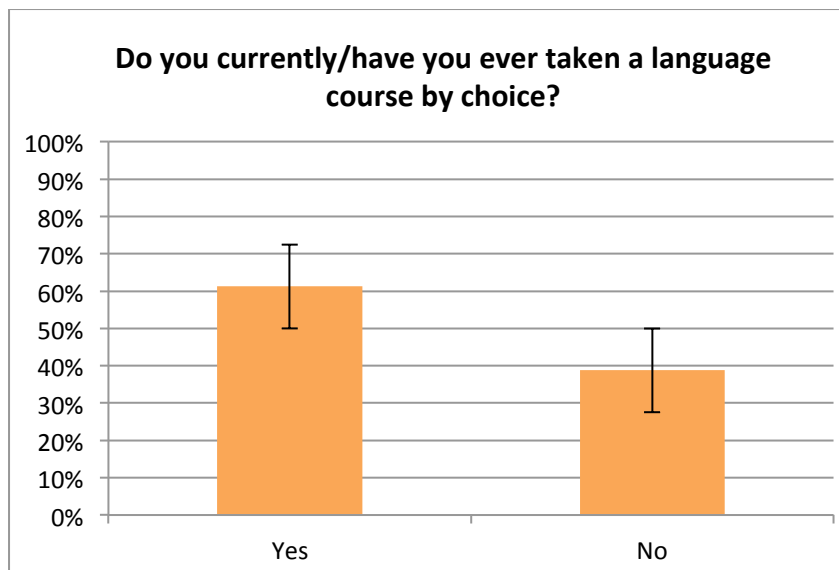


Figure 2: Graph to show whether participants have ever taken a language course by choice

Do you think the way languages are taught should change?

The majority of people agreed that the way languages are taught *should* change, as seen in Figure 3. This suggests that although languages were made compulsory, there were problems with how they were introduced, such as teachers not being properly trained, or an unengaging curriculum. It seems as if the introduction of compulsory language learning was not successful in the way languages were taught. We tested this through a frequency comparison test⁸ which discovered that the data in Figure 3 is statistically significant: $\chi^2 = 9.58606$ when $p < 0.01$, when the answer was 'yes'. There were also people who didn't know whether it should change, at 23%, compared to thinking it shouldn't be changed, at 14%. This may be because it had been a few years since they studied a language, and so they aren't sure how languages are now taught.

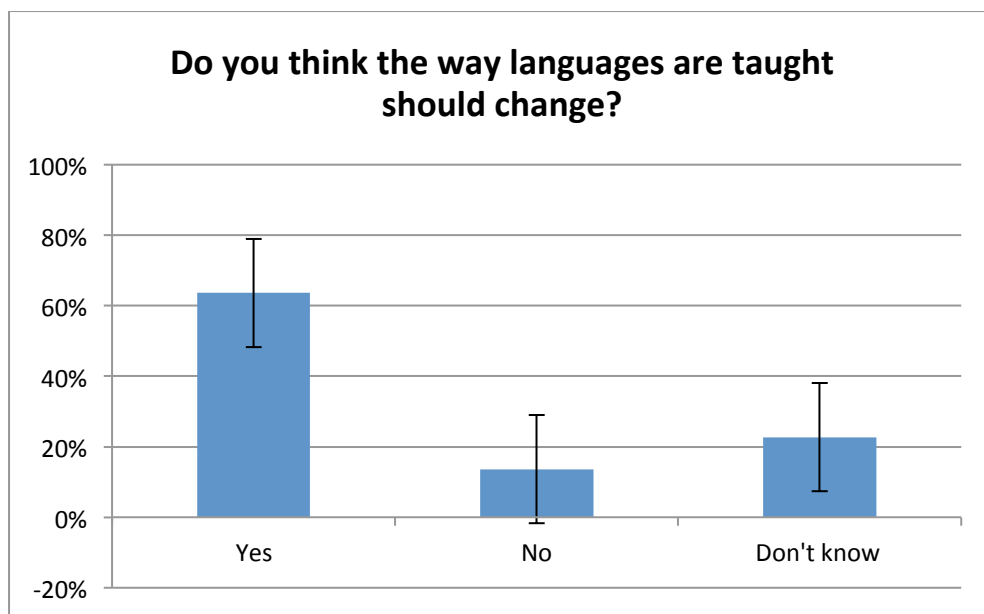


Figure 3: Graph to show whether participants thought the way languages are taught should change

yes	14
no	3
don't know	5

Table 3: Table of N's for Figure 3

Why do you think the way languages are taught should change?

There were mixed answers from the participants reasoning for whether language teaching should change. However, several answers were similar and there was some crossover with why. It seemed important to some people to not just learn the language, but get a more rounded experience, by being *“taught more about the culture and history behind the language”*. This would have provided a range of different activities which could have improved the learning experience. There were several people who agreed that the teaching style was not of a high quality, with one participant directly saying that they experienced *“poor quality teaching.”*

Generally, it seemed that too much emphasis was put on passing exams, rather than preparing students for practical use of the language, with one participant saying they were *“taught to get through exams, not to understand the language”*. Many students thought that they were encouraged to just memorise words, instead of understanding what they were saying.

Several people suggested that the teaching style could be improved by putting emphasis on different aspects of the language. This could include speaking, rather than just writing, as there was an *“over emphasis on writing”* and that more teacher contact would

help to improve the learning experience. Although the data shows that there are clear ways to improve learning languages, it should be noted that teaching styles do differ across the country, so a complete conclusion cannot be made about whether teaching styles should change.

It must be noted that one participant did consider the way language was taught to be “useful”, but they did go on to clarify that they didn’t “believe that was an overly common opinion amongst my classmates.” This shows that there are some people who thrived in the learning environment that they experienced. It is important to consider that some people didn’t know how languages were taught, and so could not say whether language teaching should change.

How aware of the 2011 legislation change were you?

Figure 4 shows that the majority of participants were not aware of the legislation change, at 73%, and only one participant was fully aware of the change. The fact that some students were unaware of the change could have led to some resistance to the idea of compulsory language learning. Perhaps if there had been earlier notice about the change, students may have been happier to begin language learning, and there may have been more overall satisfaction.

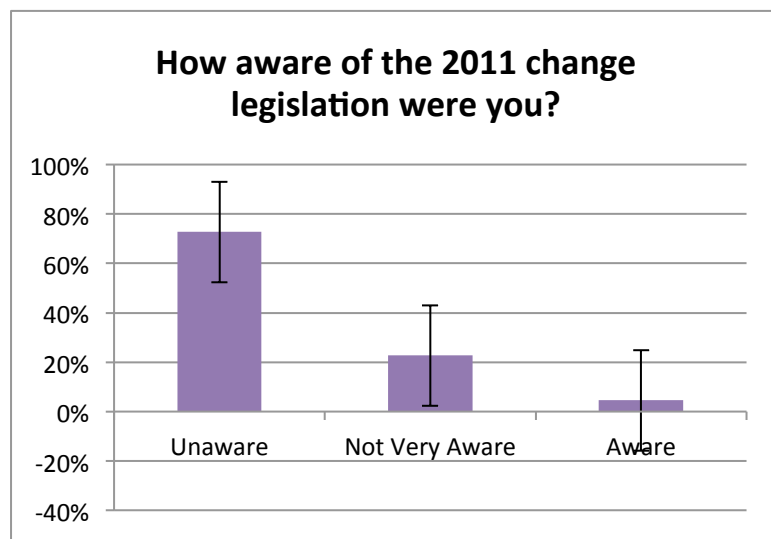


Figure 4: Graph to show how aware the participants were of the legislation change

Unaware	16
Not very aware	5
Aware	1

Table 4: Table of N’s for Figure 4

Were you aware that you qualified for the English Bacallaureate?

Figure 5 shows that 59% of participants were aware that they qualified for the English Bacallaureate. This is in comparison to Figure 4, which shows that most participants were unaware of the legislation change. Frequency Comparison tests⁸ found that the data in Figure 4 was statistically significant: $\chi^2 = 18.78867$ when $p < 0.001$. This could link to why students are unhappy with the levels of teaching they received. Within the data, two samples were taken, one from a participant who graduated sixth form in 2015 and completed the English Bacallaureate, and one in 2017, who was affected by the legislation. Figure 6 shows that the participant who completed the English Bacallaureate continued to study language to a higher level than the participant who was affected by the legislation.

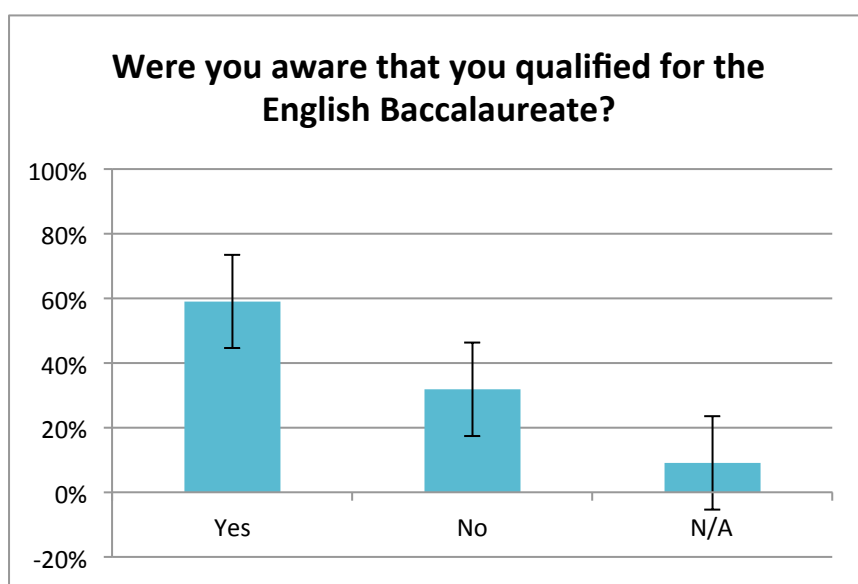


Figure 5: Graph to show whether the participants were aware that they qualified for the English Bacallaureate

Yes	13
No	7
N/A	2

Table 5: Table of N's for Figure 5

Participant 35	Participant 48
18-25	18-25
University undergraduate	University undergraduate
Business management	Audio Engineering
2017	2015
GCSE	A Level
Some vocabulary	Fluent
4	4
Little satisfaction	Little satisfaction
Yes	No
To be able to speak abroad. Looks good for employers	
French and Spanish	French
Yes	Yes
Taught to get through exams not to understand the language	Students could be taught more about the culture and history behind the language to make learning it more engaging
	This is good but students should be able to choose which language
Unaware	I wasn't aware until now
N/A	I did not particularly enjoy learning French at the time however on reflection it could be beneficial to learning
	I did
Yes	Yes but it did not seem useful
Would have taken a language anyway but the scheme encouraged my friends to take a language	At the time yes but it has not made much of an impact

Figure 6: Table to show comparison between two samples from the survey

4 Comparing our Results to our Literature Review

After completing our survey and analysing our data, we compared our findings to that of the readings we explored prior to our research. We hoped to uncover some correlations in our data and the data had already been collected.

Wade et. al's research explored the awareness of the legislation in schools. They stated that 92% of Primary Schools teach a foreign language, including all state schools, and some private or public schools, due to the legislation. 100% of our respondents studied a language at some point in their school careers, with 96% of students studying a language into secondary school or higher, meaning only 4% did not progress with language past primary school. The Language Trends report stated that entries for GCSE dropped between 2014-2015 and that all A levels in Modern Foreign Languages were down. Our research agreed with this, showing how 59% of respondents studied a GCSE, compared to only 20% studying a language at A Level.

Wade et. al also stated that 22% of schools were not aware of the 2011 legislation. Although teachers were given access to an online teaching resource they were still not prepared to teach languages with the new regulations. One of our participants suggested that language learning in school is *'too reliant on self-teaching'* and therefore, languages need more *'teacher contact.'* Wade et. al's research is comparable to the 72% of students who we surveyed who were not aware of the legislation. 60% of the 2017 Sixth Form graduates from our data were not aware of the legislation that affected them.

One of our respondents thought children should learn languages earlier; thinking it would create a greater interest in the subject, whilst another stated that language learning *'should be introduced into the English schooling system earlier'*. Worton expressed that many students, parents and academics prefer STEM subjects, however our research found that 58% of our respondents studied humanities, to only 22% of STEM. Despite this, we also found that only one of our participants had taken a Modern Foreign Language to degree level, but had decided to drop this subject to study a STEM subject instead. This participant stated that their impression of language learning at school was *'less than stellar'* but their decision to continue with a language was due to their *'love for the associated culture.'* This research does correlate with Worton's discussion on how language departments felt unrecognised by the government.

Levitt explored the responses that businesses and schools have to students with language skills. He concluded that businesses like languages; particularly French, German and Spanish. The Born Global Report agreed that these are the top languages looked for by businesses. Our research found that 64% of students learnt one of these languages, even though our participants wished they had had more language options. One participant explained how they believed that the teaching of languages is done in a way to *'suit the needs of the school system'*; and not taught to gain practical language skills. Levitt emphasised the point that Modern Foreign Languages are vulnerable subjects; something that Worton discussed and is reflected in our results due to the lack of students taking

languages. However, if the new legislation stands, languages could lose their status for helping individuals be more desirable to employers.

Despite this, students are choosing to take language courses alongside their degree courses, with the University of Manchester alone offering 66 courses for 18 different languages. Our study showed how 60% of students have taken a language by choice during their education. Our qualitative data explored how some respondents wished that the languages which were taught had had more of a cultural emphasis, and this could have influenced them to study a language further. Many students also saw the importance of speaking multiple languages for future work opportunities, with one saying, *'learning a language means I could have an international job'*.

The Born Global Report explored the effect of language learning on small and medium business enterprises. The report highlighted that 58% of SMEs would hire someone with language skills over someone without. The report also suggested that the most sought-after languages are Spanish, French, and German. It is therefore not a surprise that they are top taught languages, with 32% of our participants having studied French. Almost 80% of businesses agreed that languages should be compulsory for students, and this idea seemed to influence the respondents. 37% of participants agreed that learning a language was highly important, and 27% thought it was important. This means that only 36% of participants either did not think it was important, or that other things were more so.

5 Evaluating Individuals

Our research involved comparing and evaluating two separate legislations: the English Baccalaureate and the 2011 legislation. The best way to study the differences was to compare a random sample of participants who had graduated Sixth Form at different times. This included participants who graduated Sixth Form in 2015 and completed the English Baccalaureate, versus those who graduated in 2017, and were affected by the legislation. This exploration showed some interesting correlations between the ages. In our example, both respondents agreed that students should be taught more about the history of the language, and they felt they were only really taught to pass exams.

The comparison shows how both respondents we sampled were aware of the English Baccalaureate, but neither was aware of the legislation; despite the 2017 graduate being affected by the changes. It should be considered that the student from 2015 took a language to A Level and were considered fluent; whereas the student from 2017 was only considered to have 'some vocabulary.'

6 Conclusions

Our research was about how the 2011 legislation affected the decisions and opinions of students with regards to language learning. We created a questionnaire for students to complete, and this data was analysed and compared to other literature. There appeared to be a lack of support for many teachers, who were not properly trained. This lack of training

was presented to students as a lack of enthusiasm for the subject, leading a lack of enthusiasm in students in turn.

We also researched whether the English Baccalaureate or the Gove legislation had yielded different results for the students. Responses from participants found that students who had been part of the English Baccalaureate went on to progress further with language subjects. However, those students also expressed a desire for the new legislation to have been in place for them.

This study is highly relevant as it highlights recurring issues that exist in the language education system. We discovered in different literature how teachers were given little support, and our research supported this, as well as the idea that businesses believe that language skills are highly important. However, if language skills become more common, this may no longer become desirable to employers.

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8 Appendix

Questionnaire:

What is your age?

Under 18	1
	4
18-25	2
26-35	4
36-45	0
46 and over	2
t	49

Figure 1

What is your current level of Education?

Secondary School Graduate	1
Sixth Form Graduate	5
University	
Undergraduate	34
University Graduate	5
University	
Postgraduate	4
t	49

Figure 2

How do you feel about your language learning during education?

Complete Regret	5
Some Regret	7
Little Regret	2
Neither Regret nor Satisfaction	5
Little Satisfaction	11
Some Satisfaction	14
Complete Satisfaction	5
t	49

Figure 3

If you are a student at University, what are you studying?

Languages	1
Humanities (excluding languages)	21
STEMM	8
Arts and Media	5
Other	1
t	36

Figure 4

What Year did you graduate sixth form (or similar) study?

Before 2014	5
2014	3
2015	15
2016	19
2017	5
2018	1
t	48

Figure 5

To What Level at school did you study a language to?

Never studied a language	0
Primary School	2
Secondary School	6
GCSE	29
A Level	10
Degree	2
t	49

Figure 6

On a scale of 1 -5 (5 being the highest), how important do you think learning a language at school is?

1	2
2	4
3	12
4	13
5	18
t	49

Figure 7

How do you feel about your language learning during education?

Complete Regret	5
Some Regret	7
Little Regret	2
Neither Regret nor Satisfaction	5
Little Satisfaction	11
Some Satisfaction	14
Complete Satisfaction	5
t	49

Figure 8

Do you currently/have you ever taken a language course by choice?

Yes	30
No	19
t	49

Figure 9

Q1 – If you studied a language from GCSE onwards, what language was it?

Subject	responses
English	1
French	8
German	4
Italian	2
Ancient 18reek and Latin	2
Spanish	4
N/A	5
t	26

Figure 10

Q3 - Why?

Responses
<p>Students could be taught more about the culture and history behind the language to make learning it more engaging</p> <p>Learning an Ancient Language at degree level has been an easier experience than French at GCSE. The idea that languages must be bright, colourful and 'relatable' at GCSE comes across arrogant and patronising to the intelligence of high school students. I firmly believe a more methodical approach that is optional to children would yield greater comprehension and enthusiasm.</p> <p>It should be introduced into the English schooling system earlier</p> <p>?</p> <p>I feel there is an over emphasis on writing when learning foreign languages and feel that speaking the language would be a better way to learn it,</p> <p>It's too reliant on self teaching, it requires a lot more teacher contact to make sure you are learning correctly.</p> <p>Languages are taught in schools in a way that suits the needs of the school system - that students will pass their exams, but does not prepare students for the real life applications of language. As language is our most inherent and complex form of expressing ourselves, this needs to be reflected and nurtured in the school system, rather than forcing students to jump through hoops.</p> <p>depends on the teacher and styles.</p> <p>Taught to get through exams not to understand the language</p> <p>Not adequate</p> <p>Depends on age group</p> <p>France and German are fine maybe spanish</p>

I couldn't have a conversation in French, it was more memory than linguistics
 They're not introduced as a fun or interesting subject, and are almost forced at high school rather than introduced as an opening to endless possibilities across the world.
 I myself found the way language was taught useful, but I don't believe that was an overly common opinion amongst my classmates
 languages should be taught more from a younger age
 Because they focus too much on vocabulary and not enough on the fundamentals of grammar.
 Not sure how languages are taught
 Poor quality teaching and geared towards holiday use only
 Important to learn about other cultures
 Wasn't very useful

Figure 11

Q5 – How aware of this legislation were you?

	Responses
unaware	16
not very aware	5
aware	1
t	22

Figure 12

Q6 - Do you wish that this legislation had been in place when you were in compulsory education?

	responses
yes	14
no	4
unsure	3
t	21

Figure 13

Q8 - Were you aware that you qualified for the English Bacalaureate?

	responses
yes	13
no	7
N/A	2
t	22

Figure 14

How would you rate your current level of learnt language skill?

Fluent	5
Passable	13
Some Vocabulary	23
Non-Existent	7
Don't Know	1
t	49

Figure 15

Do you wish that this legislation had been in place when you were in compulsory education?

yes	14
no	4
unsure	3
t	21

Figure 16

Did you think this scheme of learning influenced you to take a language?

Yes	9
no	8
unsure	2
N/A	1
t	20
Figure 17	

Test result: $\chi^2 = 18.78867$ ***
 difference is **significant at $p < .001$** (crit. 10.82757)
 Confidence interval: **[37.35% ... 84.42%]**
 (two-sided, 95% confidence, Sample 1 > Sample 2)
 Sample 1 data: **16** out of **22** = **72.73%** (relative frequency)
 Sample 2 data: **1** out of **22** = **4.545%** (relative frequency)

Figure 18 – Frequency Comparison of ‘How aware of the Gove Legislation were you’

Test result: $\chi^2 = 9.58606$ **
 difference is **significant at $p < .01$** (crit. 6.63490)
 Confidence interval: **[18.08% ... 70.91%]**
 (two-sided, 95% confidence, Sample 1 > Sample 2)
 Sample 1 data: **14** out of **22** = **63.64%** (relative frequency)
 Sample 2 data: **3** out of **22** = **13.64%** (relative frequency)

Figure 19 – Frequency Comparison of ‘Do you think the way languages are taught should change’