

Want more students to learn languages? Win over the parents, research suggests

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Children's attitudes towards learning languages and their willingness to see themselves as 'multilingual' are influenced far more by the views of their parents than by their teachers or friends, new research indicates.

The finding implies that parents may have an important part to play in reversing the national decline in language-learning. The authors of the study, which was led by researchers at the University of Cambridge, say that efforts to increase uptake in these subjects would benefit from involving families, as well as schools.

Entry rates for modern languages have [declined steadily](#), at both GCSE and A-Level, since the early 2000s. GCSE [entry data](#), for example, show that the combined total number of pupils taking French, German, Spanish and other Modern Languages last year was almost half that of 2001.

The new study surveyed more than 1,300 Year 8 [students](#), aged 12-13, to understand what makes them self-identify as 'multilingual': as capable learners and users of other languages. The responses revealed that their parents' beliefs about languages had almost twice as much influence as the opinions of their teachers, and were also significantly more influential than the views of their peers.

Specifically, parental attitudes help students who are still forming a view about languages work out whether these subjects matter personally to them. In general, the study shows that they are more likely to consider themselves 'multilingual' if they identify with languages at this personal level and see them as relevant to their own lives. Simply learning languages at school and being told that they are useful appears to make less difference.

Professor Linda Fisher, from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, said: "Students' personal commitment to languages is determined by their experiences, their beliefs, and their [emotional response](#) to speaking or using them. Slightly surprisingly, the people who feed into that most appear to be their parents."

"This can be a positive or [negative influence](#) depending on the parents' own views. Its importance underlines the fact that if we want more young people to learn languages, we need to pay attention to wider social and cultural attitudes to languages beyond the classroom. Waning interest in these subjects is a public communication challenge; it's not just about what happens in schools."

Some language-learning specialists argue that most people are fundamentally "multilingual". Even if they do not speak another language fluently, they may know assorted words and phrases, or another kind of 'language': such as a dialect, sign language, or computer code.

Recognizing that they have this multilingual capability appears to [strengthen students' self-belief](#) when they encounter [modern languages](#) at school. There is also evidence that students who self-identify as multilingual [perform better](#) across the school curriculum, including in non-language subjects.

The study explored what leads students to see themselves in these terms, and whether this varies between different groups—for example, those who have 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL), and typically speak another language at home.

In the survey, students were asked to state how strongly they agreed or disagreed with various statements, such as: "Learning other languages is pointless because everyone speaks English", and: "My parents think that it's cool to be able to speak other languages." They were also asked about their own experience with languages, and how multilingual they considered themselves to be. The researchers then developed a model showing the relative importance of different potential influences on their self-identification as language-learners.

Although some influences—such as that of peers—differed for EAL and

non-EAL students, that of parents was consistently strong. Across the board, the relative impact of parents' attitudes on students' willingness to see themselves as multilingual was found to be about 1.4 times greater than that of their friends, and almost double that of their teachers.

The researchers suggest that encouraging more parents to recognize their own multilingual capabilities would positively affect their children's own language-learning. "In an ideal world we should be encouraging adults, as well as children, to see themselves as having a repertoire of communicative resources," Fisher said. "It's remarkable how quickly attitudes change once you start asking: 'What words do you already know, what dialect do you speak; can you sign?'"

More broadly, the study found that young people are more likely to see themselves in these terms if they are exposed to meaningful experiences that involve other languages—for example by hearing and using them in their communities, or while traveling abroad. This, along with their personal and emotional response to the idea of languages, informs the degree to which they self-describe as multilingual.

The researchers argue that this raises questions about recent Government reforms to language GCSEs, which are meant to help students "grow in confidence and motivation". The new measures focus narrowly on so-called linguistic "[building blocks](#)": for example, requiring students to learn 1,700 common words in the target [language](#). Head teachers' bodies have already criticized them as "[prescriptive and grinding](#)" and liable to alienate pupils further.

The new study similarly indicates that encouraging more [young people](#) to learn languages requires a broader-minded approach.

"There's no evidence that if you just focus on the mechanics—phonics, grammar and so on—you're going to motivate students or, for that

matter, teachers," Fisher said. "Students need to discover what languages mean to them, which means they also need to learn about culture, identity and self-expression. Simply drilling verb forms into them will only persuade a swathe of the school population that these subjects are not for them. That is especially likely if their parents don't value languages either."

The research is published in the *International Journal of Multilingualism*.

More information: Language experiences, evaluations and emotions (3Es): Analysis of structural models of multilingual identity for language learners in schools in England., *International Journal of Multilingualism* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/14790718.2022.2060235](https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2022.2060235)

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