

Top tips on increasing student engagement with languages

Despite students' desires to communicate and develop their language skills, the latest [House of Commons Library Briefing](#) revealed just **47% of pupils** were studying GCSE languages - so still some way to go to meet the **Government's 2025 target of 90%**. Language teacher (and lover of languages), Alicia Blanvillain, shares her top tips on ways to turn this around.

1. Encourage a risk-taking mindset

Languages are widely perceived as difficult to study. As teachers we all recognise that choosing GCSEs, A levels or university studies can be stressful. The fear of failing is real and valid – it also stifles learning progress. In the schools I've worked in, we've encouraged more of a risk-taking mindset to help tackle this issue.

Lessons are about building confidence: continually expressing the importance of mistakes to learn and grow; never singling someone out for an error; building learners' resilience and esteem as they try, perhaps fail, try again, and progress.

2. Take a student-centred approach

Make space for students to showcase their interests in lessons. By making the subject feel more relevant to them, the language classroom becomes far more inclusive and less alienating for all learners.

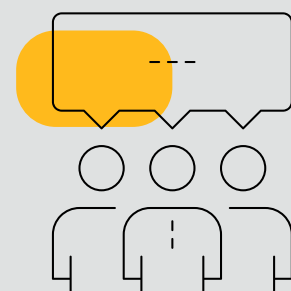


3. Reduce class size

It can be useful to try and reduce class sizes in order to increase the amount of individual feedback you can give. I have seen first hand the positive impact this has had on student confidence in their abilities, minimising anxiety – though I recognise such a step may not be possible for all schools.

4. Showcase cultures and lifestyles

Earlier this year, Pearson's research revealed that **39% of young people** would be motivated to continue their language learning journey if they were taught about different cultures and lifestyles. That resonates with what can be done to open up our focus in languages – spotlighting the people and places behind the words; the exciting opportunities languages bring. Music is just one great way to highlight this. You can play songs from Francophone and Hispanophone countries for the students' enjoyment. In doing this, I have seen their interest expand as favourites are shared with peers outside class, spreading through the cohort, strengthening their sense of connection to other cultures.





5. Extend through homework

All these approaches extend to homework, to increase motivation for students to study independently, celebrating the leaps that they are making as a result – not least the increases in their completion rate.

Altogether, these steps help explain the increase seen in language uptake at schools I've worked in. In contrast to national trends, whilst at Regent Park High School, we had to start an extra class for French and Spanish at GCSE because of the growing number of students wanting to study it!

Even more encouragingly, students that learn to love language at GCSE stay engaged in languages past exams too. Thanks to their experiences in class, a number of my students have been inspired to visit French and Spanish-speaking countries. Many headed to France post-GCSE this year to put the skills they learnt into practice and to experience cultural immersion. This is an initiative they are taking with friends and families and a sign that their passion for languages is already expanding their future – which, for me as for most teachers, is the ultimate goal. It's what motivates us as educators, and what matters to all of us now.



Alicia Blanvillain, former Head of French at Regent High School.