

# Learning Languages

Motivation and  
influences at Year 9

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# Introduction

The British Council is an authoritative voice on language learning through our English teaching around the world and we bring an intercultural dimension to language learning in the UK through providing research and data, enabling teacher and pupil connections and mobility opportunities.

As well as teaching English all over the world, the British Council advocates for the importance of learning additional languages in the UK. A recent House of Lords report on soft power and the UK's influence reported that “a lack of foreign language skills could diminish British people's openness to cultural engagement, and creates the perception overseas that the country is unwelcoming”,<sup>1</sup> concluding that “remaining monolingual goes against the grain of how influence and engagement, and therefore power, now operate”.<sup>2</sup>

We believe that all young people in the UK should have opportunities to learn other languages and engage with international experiences and that the potential of the UK's heritage languages speakers need to be recognised: over 1.5 million British children are growing up bilingual, yet most don't enter for a GCSE or A Level in their home language and do not, therefore, develop the academic skills to use their language professionally.

Currently less than half the cohort in England choose to study languages at GCSE. The purpose of commissioning this YouGov survey to find out pupils' motivations and influences in choosing to study languages or not.

YouGov surveyed 688 young people in Year 9 and Sarah O'Neil, a PhD researcher from Queen's University Belfast, used the data to produce this report.

## Key findings

- Girls, those living in London/East of England and the socially advantaged are more likely to study a language at GCSE.
- Most pupils (53%) view languages as more difficult than other subjects.
- There are differences in uptake and attitude by sex, social advantage and geographical region. Motivational factors have been identified for each group:
  - Gender: boys are less likely than girls to be encouraged to study MFL by their parents/guardians, and less likely to enjoy languages, to see themselves as good language learners, or to view the subject as important.
  - Socio-economic: despite similarly positive attitudes, ABC1 students (i.e. those from the 3 higher socio-economic groups) are more likely to take a modern foreign language (MFL) at GCSE, see themselves achieving a high grade, to have parental support and friends who also study an MFL.
  - London and the East of England report more positive attitudes and uptake than other regions. Further research could explore why.
- Learners are influenced by sociological and psychological factors and are motivated by practical reasons for language study:
  - Learners strongly endorse practical reasons for studying MFL: careers, communication, travel/mobility.
  - Two factors were identified as influencing differences in learner motivation:
    1. Sociological: peer support; parental encouragement; school internal factors at Key Stage 3.
    2. Psychological: ‘How well will I do?’; ‘imagined futures’,<sup>3</sup> including clear practical motivations (careers; communication with native speakers; importance of travel/mobility and trips abroad).

1 [House of Lords - Persuasion and Power in the Modern World - Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence \(parliament.uk\)](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldselect/ldsoftpower/150/15004.htm)

2 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldselect/ldsoftpower/150/15004.htm>

3 See Coffey (2018)



## Implications

More motivated groups are also more likely to take up a language at GCSE (49% of total cohort). By raising motivation, would uptake also correspondingly increase?

This report highlights that pupils of different genders, socio-economic and regional backgrounds vary in their self-concept as learners, the social support they experience and the role they imagine for languages in their future.

These differences could inform the development of appropriate interventions aimed at supporting those at higher risk of opting out of languages at GCSE. These could include:

- Targeting option choices early in Year 8/9
- Peer to peer support models
- Parental advocacy
- Developing learners' 'imagined futures'<sup>4</sup>
- Capitalising on existing motivation for travel (e.g. visits, exchanges), communicating with native speakers (e.g. communicative pedagogy, school twinning, community languages, authentic materials), and careers (e.g. careers talks).
- Advocating for fair grading/assessment at GCSE.

# Main Report

## GCSE uptake profile

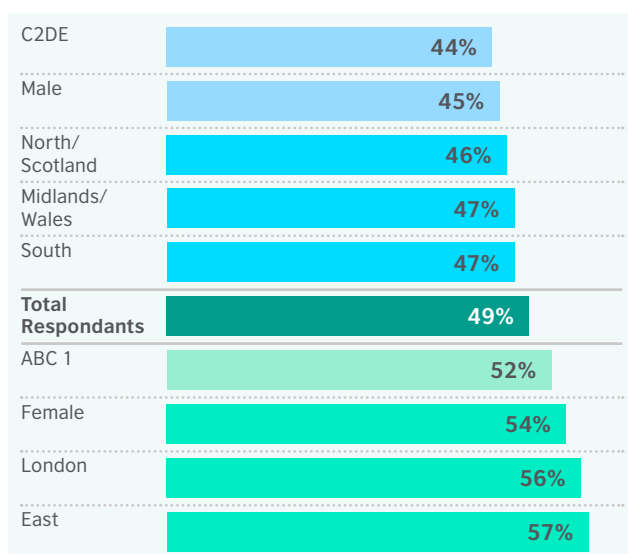
49% of all respondents said they intended to study a foreign language at GCSE (Figure 1).

Learners who are socio-economically advantaged, girls, and those living in London/East of England are more likely to study a language at GCSE.

Learners who are socio-economically disadvantaged, boys, and those living in the other regions are less likely to study a language at GCSE.

### Figure 1:

% of respondents who intend to study a language at GCSE by gender, social grade and region



## Motivations

### Learners strongly endorse instrumental reasons for learning languages

1. Languages are a useful skill to have for many future careers (72% agree);
2. Speaking other languages is an important part of being able to understand different cultures and places (72% agree);
3. Trips abroad and communicating with native speakers are an essential part of learning a language (71% agree).

### Learners have generally positive attitudes towards language learning, and strongly disagree that learning other languages is a waste of time (65% disagree).

**Subject difficulty remains an area of concern:** the only statements to which a (proportional) majority of learners responded with a negative attitude were:

- Languages are more difficult than other subjects at school (53% agree);
- Some of my friends have encouraged me to study languages at GCSE (44% disagree);
- Languages are for people with strong academic ability (35% agree).

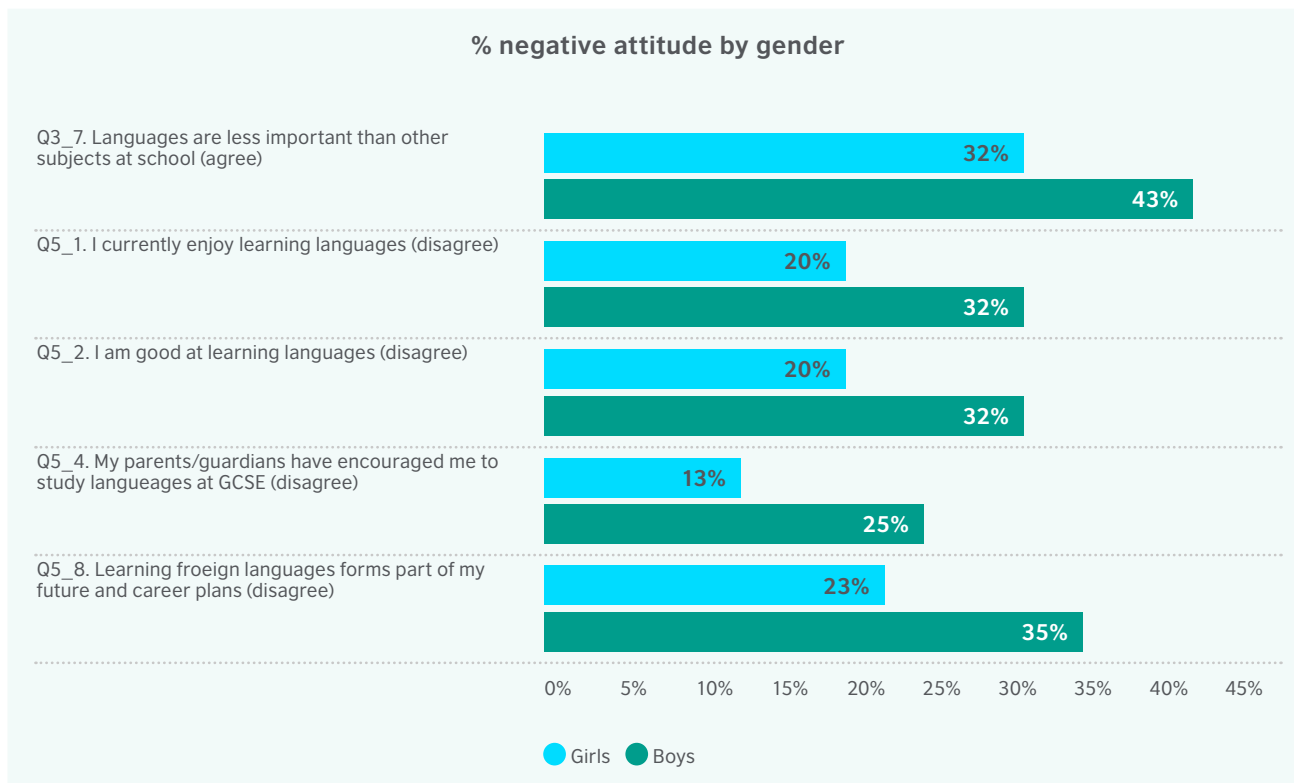
## Gender disparities

Boys are more likely to drop languages at GCSE than girls. A range of motivating factors have been identified for potential interventions aimed at boys.

There is a strong and long-standing gender gap in languages uptake<sup>5</sup>. However, both girls and boys strongly reject the notion that 'languages are more of a girls' subject than a boys' subject'. This survey found that boys score more highly across a range of demotivating factors:

5 Powell (1986), Mills and Tinsley 2020).

**Figure 3:**  
Statements eliciting strongest difference in response by gender



These findings suggest that factors internal to the school may be important for recruiting boys, such as how languages are promoted relative to other subjects, fostering learner enjoyment and sense of success. Parental advocacy may be more important for boys. In addition, it may be effective to target interventions earlier in KS3, given the trend for boys in Year 9 to be more decisive than girls about their study plans.<sup>6</sup>

### Socio-economic disparities

There is remarkable similarity in attitudes between advantaged/disadvantaged students, but in practice disadvantaged groups tend to have higher numbers not choosing a language.

Although languages uptake is consistently depressed among disadvantaged groups in the UK<sup>7</sup>, this survey found that C2DE students were just as positive as ABC1 learners about the enjoyability of languages and viewing themselves as good language learners. However, ABC1 students are more likely to see themselves achieving a high grade at GCSE, to have future travel plans involving languages, friends who intend to study a language at GCSE, and stronger parental encouragement (Figure 4).

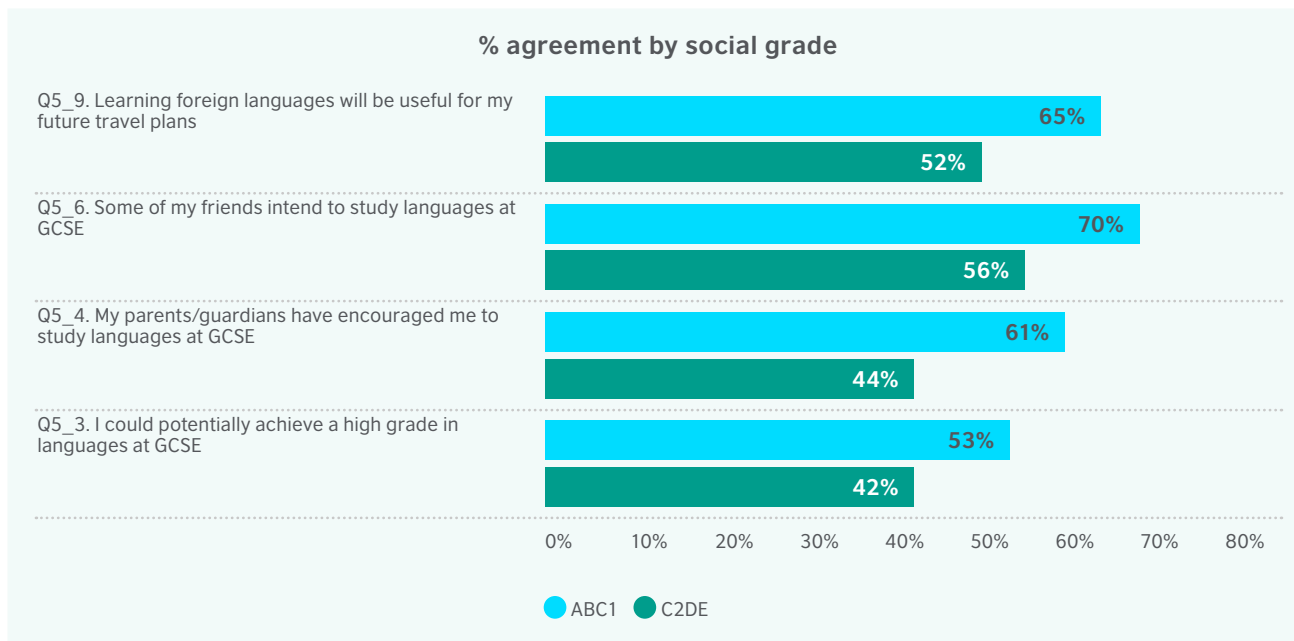
These findings suggest that sociological factors matter, such as parental support, having learning peers, and learners’ ‘imagined futures’.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Boys were less likely than girls to be undecided when it came to the role of languages in their future study and careers (23% boys; 32% girls) and whether to take a language at GCSE (21% boys; 27% girls).

<sup>7</sup> Collen (2020, 2021), Tinsley (2019), Henderson and Carruthers (2021).

<sup>8</sup> See Coffey (2018)

**Figure 4:**  
Statements eliciting strongest difference in response by social grade



### Regional disparities

London and the East of England report more positive attitudes and uptake than the rest of the country. Further research could explore why.

The regional data indicate that learners in different parts of the country may have different experiences of language learning.

### Future directions

This report highlights that pupils of different genders, socio-economic and regional backgrounds vary in their self-concept as learners, the social support they experience and the role they imagine for languages in their future.

**These differences could inform the development of appropriate interventions aimed at supporting those at higher risk of opting out of languages at GCSE.**

It is clear that both sociological and psychological factors are at play. In supporting these learners into languages, we must consider the social environment in which pupils find themselves and the messages of encouragement which they may or may not receive from peers and parents, in addition to their learning experiences and what opportunities for travel and language use are available to them beyond the confines of the classroom.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1:

### Sample

This survey was conducted by YouGov on behalf of British Council between 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> November 2021. 1,062 young people aged 13-14 years old were randomly selected from the base sample and invited by e-mail to participate in an online interview. This report presents an analysis of the responses from those who were in Year 9 at the time of the survey (n=688) by gender, social grade and region (see Table 1). Figures have been weighted to provide a representative reporting sample.

**Table 1:** Number of participants according to gender, parent/guardian's social grade and region.

Categories	Sub-Groups	Number of respondents in Year 9 (weighted base)
Child's Gender	Male	358
	Female	329
Parent/Guardian's Social Grade	ABC1	459
	C2DE	229
Region	North/Scotland	193
	Midlands/Wales	127
	East	72
	London	116
	South	180

## Appendix 2:

### Analysis

Learner responses were profiled as a percentage of total responses according to gender (male/female), social grade (ABC1/C2DE) and region (see Table 1). The survey consisted of 23 items, including 19 Likert-type items asking respondents to decide to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a statement. These responses were combined into three nominal categories (net agree, net disagree, neither agree nor disagree) for the purposes of analysis. What follows are the results of a descriptive analysis, which considers the responses within each category which differed least or most strongly from the total average.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The range of responses between the sub-groups of each category and the distance from the total average was calculated for each Likert-type item. The results were grouped in percentiles. Responses falling at or below the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile and at or above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile (least and greatest absolute distance from the total average) are reported here. This is not a measure of statistical significance.

### Appendix 3:

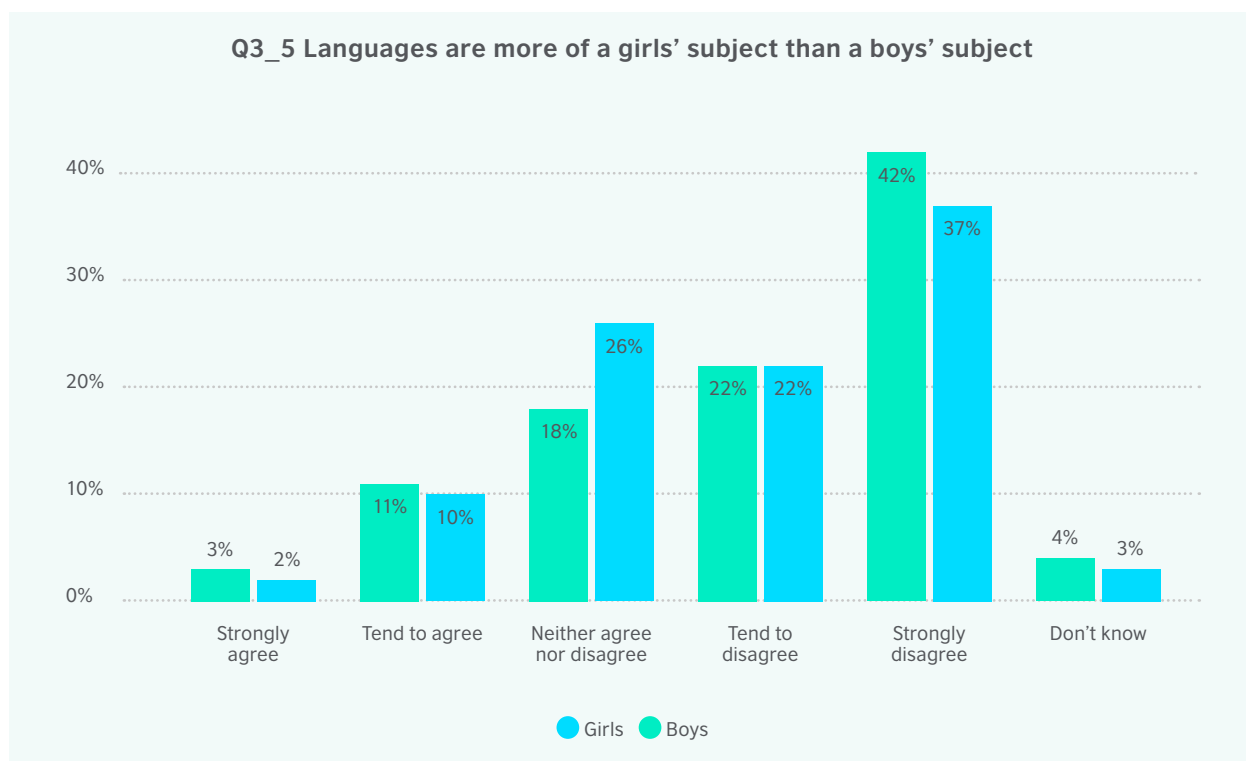
Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with 19 statements (Likert-type items). The seven statements ranked in Table 2 represent the five most popular responses, each achieving a total consensus of 60% or greater.

**Table 2 :** Five most popular responses (60% or greater)

Ranking	Statement	% of total responses
=1	Q3_10. Languages are a useful skill to have for many future careers. AGREE	72%
=1	Q3_1. Speaking other languages is an important part of being able to understand different cultures and places. AGREE	72%
2	Q3_2. Trips aboard and communicating with native speakers are an essential part of learning a language. AGREE	71%
=3	Q3_3. Learning other languages is a waste of my time. DISAGREE	65%
=3	Q5_6. Some of my friends intend to study languages at GCSE.	65%
4	Q3_5. Languages are more of a girls' subject than a boys' subject. DISAGREE	62%
5	Q5_9. Learning foreign languages will be useful for my future travel plans.	61%

### Appendix 4:

**Figure 2:** Q3\_5 by gender





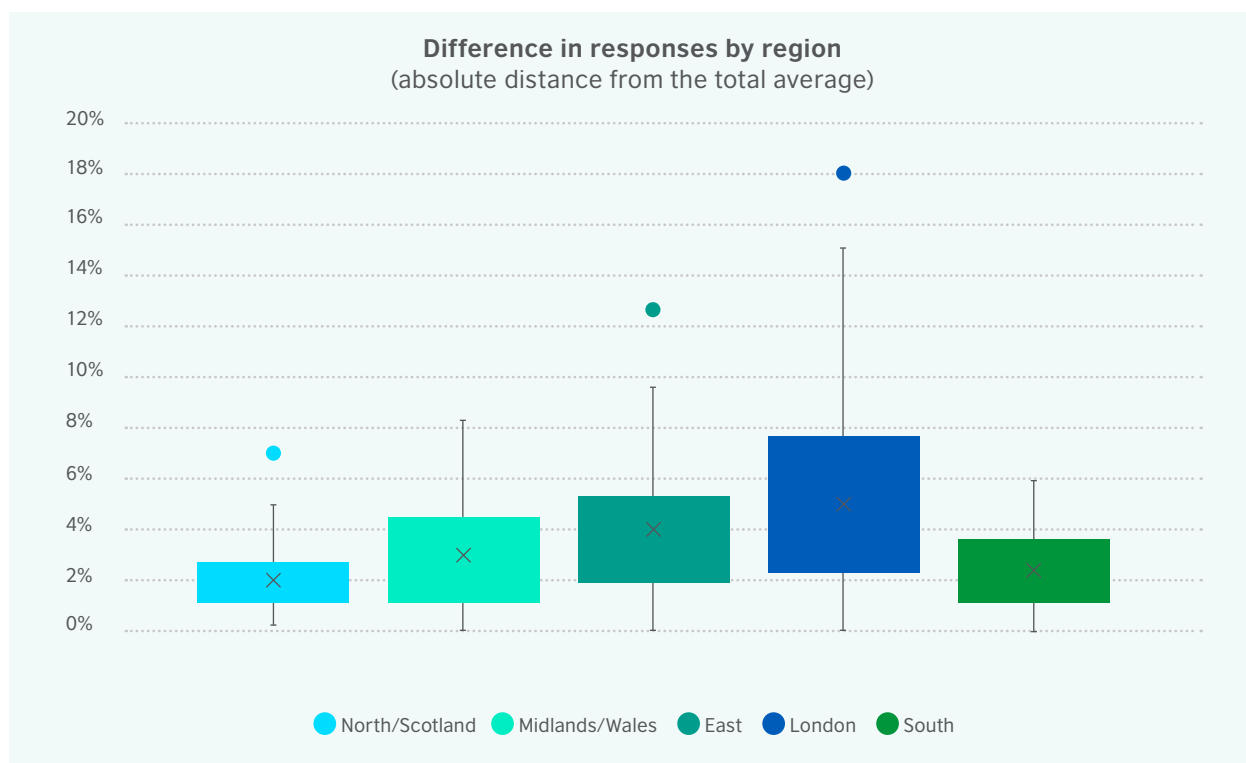
## Appendix 5:

**Table 3:** Similar responses by social grade

		ABC1	C2DE
I am good at learning languages	net agree	46%	43%
	net disagree	26%	26%
I enjoy learning languages	net agree	52%	48%
	net disagree	27%	24%
Languages are for people with strong academic ability	net agree	36%	33%
	net disagree	32%	36%
Languages are more difficult than other subjects at school	net agree	54%	51%
	net disagree	18%	17%

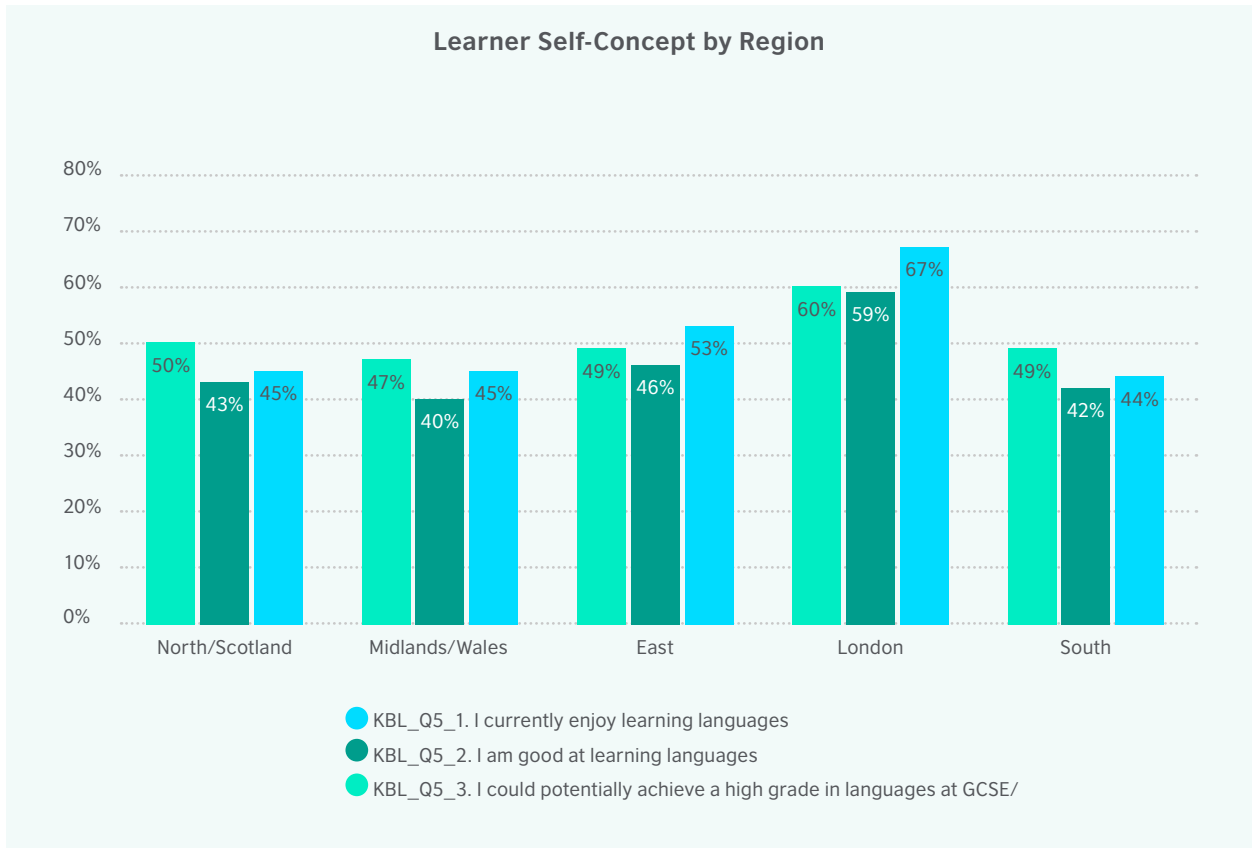
## Appendix 6:

**Figure 5:** Differences in response by region (absolute difference from the total average)



As seen in Figure 5, learners from London showed the greatest difference in response to the general population, and these responses tended to be more positive than the average. Pupils in London were more likely than others to affirm that languages are both relevant to their lives right now (52%) and form part of their future career and study plans (49%). Their self-concept as learners was also markedly stronger than that of pupils in other regions (Figure 6). They are more likely to enjoy languages (60%), see themselves as good language learners (59%) and as someone who could achieve a high grade at GCSE (67%). It is therefore unsurprising that London was one of the regions with the strongest uptake of languages at GCSE (56%).

Figure 6: Learner Self-Concept by Region



# References

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