

An Anglo-German Foundation Report

**Cash-in or continue?
An exploration of the drop out
from German foreign language study
between AS and A2 levels**

Catherine Watts and Angela Pickering

Executive Summary

Following the *Qualifying for Success* reforms (DfEE 1997; 1999), sixth-form study in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, typically lasting two years, was divided into two three-unit blocks called Advanced Standard (AS) levels and Advanced Second (A2) levels. It was hoped by the language-teaching world in general that these reforms would encourage the post-16 take-up of foreign language study and reverse the decline of such study which had been in evidence since 1992 (Marshall 1998). Summer 2002 saw the first cohort complete the full A2 level foreign language examinations. Current figures (CILT 2004a) indicate that, whilst the academic year 2001/2 saw a rise in the number of students taking post-16 modern foreign language public examinations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, entries at the full A2 level in the same subject area were down, the biggest drops being for French and German. This drop has serious implications for the provision of advanced-level modern foreign language study across the post-compulsory educational sectors, including degree-level foreign language study and teacher education.

This study is set against the backdrop of the government's recent strategy to discontinue the study of modern foreign languages in the compulsory curriculum in England after Key Stage 3 (at the age of fourteen), with effect from September 2005 (DfES 2002), and the number of new initiatives and proposals which target, among others, the 14–19 age group (for example, DfES 2004). The main aim of this study was to explore some of the reasons behind the drop out from German foreign language study between AS and A2 levels in England, using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Data were collected in two main stages. The first stage comprised three focus group interviews held in autumn 2003 which were used to inform the design of a questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was distributed to a total of 258 schools/colleges in the four counties of West and East Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire in February 2004. All

Heads of German in all schools/sixth-form colleges in the four counties were sent a letter asking those students who had taken an AS level in German during the academic year 2002/3, but who had decided to discontinue their German studies for the full A2 level, to complete the questionnaire. A response rate of 28% was achieved, representing returns from 72 schools/colleges and yielding 71 correctly completed questionnaires.

The qualitative dimension of the study highlighted the following reasons as key determiners in the decision to discontinue German language study at A2 level: the difficulty of German and the German AS level curriculum (encompassing the notions of the unexpected 'jump' between GCSE and AS level German and the time-consuming nature of the subject); tactical decision-making regarding the need to accumulate the highest possible points score for university entrance; low AS level grades; the perceived lack of relevance of German to future career/study paths; the lack of subject enjoyment at AS level.

Consideration of the study's quantitative dimension added further details on a larger scale. It was found that the most commonly studied subjects alongside German at AS level were not other foreign languages. This was also the case at A2 level, where Mathematics and History were most popular. Nearly all (94%) of the respondents were planning to continue their studies into higher education, but only 9% aimed to study a foreign language at degree level. Although all of the respondents had dropped German following AS level, 53% said that they would consider studying German again at a later date and 69% thought that German was as useful as other foreign languages as something to offer potential employers.

With regard to studying German at AS level, most respondents had experienced a substantial drop in their grades for German between GCSE and AS level. Regarding predicted grades at AS level, more than half of the predictions were too high by at least one grade (95 per cent confidence interval of 39 to 63%) compared with the grades actually achieved. Results concerning subject enjoyment at AS level and topics studied were inconclusive, but 83% of respondents agreed that there had been a big jump from GCSE to AS level in German. Furthermore, 64% of the participants found the German grammar at AS level off-putting and 74% felt that German at AS level was the most difficult of all the AS level subjects taken. Significantly, 69% believed that doing German at A2 would have lowered their overall grades for university entrance, whilst the same number (69%) said that they alone had been mainly responsible for their decision to drop German post AS level.

In light of both the findings emerging from this study and the recently published 'Tomlinson report' (DfES 2004) which targets the 14–19 age group, it is suggested that the time is now ripe to consider the content of German curricula for this age range in some detail and to explore further ways of improving the quality and content of the learning experience, thereby boosting take-up rates of advanced-level German (and other modern foreign languages) in the post-compulsory education sectors.

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Notes to the editor:

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