

**Anglo-German Foundation for the
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Deutsch-Britische Stiftung für das
Studium der Industriegesellschaft**

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

2004

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December 2004

Anglo-German Foundation
for the Study of Industrial Society

CASH-IN OR CONTINUE

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To possess another language ... is to possess another soul

(Le Carré 2003: 43)

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following institutions for their generous support of this study: the Anglo-German Foundation; the University of Brighton; the British Broadcasting Cooperation; CILT, the National Centre for Languages; the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; DAAD, Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst; the Austrian Embassy; the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany; the Goethe Institut; the Association for Language Learning.

Our thanks are also due to the following people whose help in this study was invaluable: all the participants; Jenny Wootton (School of Languages, University of Brighton); Viv Bewick (School of Computing, Mathematics and Information Sciences, University of Brighton).

Researcher biographies

As Ball (1990) noted, the role of the researcher inevitably influences the kinds of data elicited in the qualitative research setting. He argues that readers of qualitative studies should have some idea of the instrument employed in the data gathering. As this study is set partly within a qualitative research framework, brief researcher biographies are included here.

Dr Catherine Watts has been employed since 1982 in the School of Languages, University of Brighton, where she teaches German, T/ESOL and aspects of Education. Her Doctorate in Education was awarded in 2002 by King's College, University of London, and her final thesis explored some of the reasons behind the decline in the number of students wishing to study modern foreign languages at degree level (Watts 2004). She is both personally and professionally concerned by the declining number of students choosing to study advanced-level foreign languages, particularly German, beyond the age of sixteen in the United Kingdom and this study was in part triggered by these concerns.

Dr Angela Pickering has been employed since 1983 in the School of Languages, University of Brighton, where she is now Course Leader for the Masters and Diploma programmes in Language Teacher Education. Her current research interests relate to the field of language teaching and learning and professional development. Her Doctorate in Education was awarded in 2002 by King's College, University of London, and her final thesis was based on a series of case studies exploring the changing beliefs and practices of novice university lecturers (Pickering 2002).

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.

1 Introduction, background and rationale

1.1 Introduction

Following the *Qualifying for Success* reforms (DfEE 1997; 1999), advanced-level (A level) examinations (which are typically taken in England, Wales and Northern Ireland over two years in the sixth form following the General Certificate Standard Examinations (GCSEs) and compulsory education) were divided into two three-unit blocks called Advanced Standard (AS) levels and Advanced Second (A2) levels. The former are typically taken in the first year of the sixth form, whilst the latter represent the full A level programme of study once completed. The main aims of dividing the full A level into two levels in this way were: to broaden the range of subjects studied in the first year of the sixth form; to provide an opportunity to gain formal credit following one year of sixth-form study; and to offer a more gradual gradient of progression between GCSE and A level study (Hodgson and Spours 2000: 6).

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.

The study reported here explores some of the reasons behind the drop out from German foreign language study between AS and A2 levels. No studies have yet investigated this specific area, although several which have informed the design of our own have explored the post-GCSE (or equivalent) decline in the number of students studying modern foreign languages. Four of these were located in England (Aplin 1991; Marshall 1998 and 1999; Fischer 2001), whilst those by McPake *et al.* (1999), Kent (1996) and O'Reilly-Cavani and Birks (1997) explored the decline in the Scottish context. This study can also be seen as a follow-on to one previously conducted for the Anglo-German Foundation (Watts 2003) which explored some of the reasons behind the decline in the take-up of modern foreign languages in the university sector. One of the final recommendations of this report suggested the exploration of some of the reasons behind the drop out from modern foreign language study between AS and A2 levels (Watts 2003: 25).

This inquiry 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 (see Section 3.3 End Word). This study aims to contribute to filling the gap in the current knowledge base by providing some initial data upon which other studies can build in the future.

1.2 Background and rationale

In order to further contextualise the study, it is pertinent to explore the trends in examination entries for modern foreign languages for the 16–19 age group in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with particular reference to German as a foreign language. Study of the trends in GCSE entries in modern language provision provides an indication of the potential number of students eligible to pursue modern languages in the post-compulsory school sectors which can be set alongside the entries for AS and A2 levels, respectively. Table 1 presents the GCSE entries for the three most commonly studied modern languages between 1999 and 2003.

Table 1
GCSE entries 1999–2003

	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999
French	332 045	338 503	347 007	341 011	335 816
German	126 021	126 220	135 133	133 662	135 158
Spanish	62 008	58 011	54 236	49 981	47 969
Total MFL	569 179	569 912	581 598	567 128	557 602

Source: CILT (2004a).

Whilst the total number of entries for GCSEs in modern languages fell by less than 1% between 2002 and 2003, the trend for German at this level is downward, with over 9,000 fewer entries in 2003 than in 1999. Whilst the number of entries for French at this level has also seen a decline, it is not as marked as it is for German. The number of entries for GCSE Spanish, however, has seen a steady rise since 1999, with 2001 being the most buoyant for all GCSEs in modern languages, coinciding with a rise in the total school population (Kelly and Jones 2003).

With regard to post-GCSE examination entries, it is still difficult to interpret the AS level figures with confidence as this is a relatively new qualification and patterns are still settling (Kelly and Jones 2003). However, the initial impact of the Curriculum 2000 reforms has produced an upsurge in the number of students choosing to study a foreign language in the first year of the sixth form (Kelly and Jones 2003) with over 46,000 students taking AS level examinations in foreign languages in 2003 (CILT 2004a). However, the number of entries for German at AS level, despite showing a slight increase in 2002, fell in 2003 to just over 9,000, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
AS level entries 2001–2003

	2003	2002	2001
French	21 691	22 383	19 618
German	9 143	9 974	8 667
Spanish	7 908	7 789	5 847
Total MFL	46 024	45 933	37 385

Source: CILT (2004a).

The trend for the number of students choosing to study German for the full A level (A2) examination – that is, for a standard two years in the sixth form following GCSE – shows a steady year-on-year decline, despite a modest rise in the overall total number of entries for foreign languages at this level in 2003, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3
A level entries 1999–2003

	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999
French	15 554	15 615	17 939	18 228	21 072
German	6 973	7 013	8 446	8 694	9 551
Spanish	5 896	5 573	5 530	5 636	5 782
Total MFL	35 223	34 646	37 121	38 799	42 335

Source: CILT (2004a).

This decline in the number of students choosing to study German at A2 is of great concern to the modern language teaching world in the United Kingdom in general, and in particular to those involved with teaching advanced-level German in both the school and the university sectors. It certainly raises the question of ‘why?’, especially as foreign language graduates have excellent employment prospects (CILT 2003) and graduates in German are greatly in demand among prospective employers (Matussek 2004). The broad aim of this study was therefore to explore some of the reasons behind the decline in the number of students choosing to study post-AS level German by gathering some initial data which could inform the ongoing debates in the area. The main research question underpinning the inquiry is thus: *What are the main factors influencing the decision of students who took German at AS level not to study the same at A2 level?*

1.3 Research methodology

1.3.i Population selection

Students were selected to participate in the study from across four counties in the South East of England (West and East Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire) which arguably share similar socio-economic characteristics and are located in the same geographical region. 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 and who had decided to discontinue their German studies for the full A2 level to participate in the study, either by taking part in a focus group interview or by completing a questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Thus a total of 262 schools/sixth-form colleges were targeted in the first instance.

1.3.ii Research methods

Data for this study were collected in two main stages. The first stage comprised three focus group interviews which took place in autumn 2003. Focus group interviews were selected as a means of exploring a range of the students' perspectives, with the data generated from these interviews being used subsequently to inform and validate the design and development of the questionnaire (Mullings 1985; Watts and Ebbutt 1987) which was used in the second stage of the data collection (see Appendix 1).

The three focus group discussions explored in some depth the reasons why the participating sixth-formers had chosen to drop their German language studies after AS level. A total of 13 sixth-formers took part in the three group interviews from three different types of school and college in Sussex. These were: a sixth-form college (Wetlands College: 5 participants); a private school (Westbrook College: 3 participants); and a state comprehensive (St Winifred's College: 3 participants). For reasons of confidentiality, neither the schools/colleges which took part in the study nor the individual participants are identified by their real names. The analysis of this dimension of the study is presented in Section 1.4.i.

The quantitative dimension of the study comprised a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) which was informed by the data collected from the three group interviews outlined above and then piloted in a fourth school in Sussex which has Specialist Language College status. The questionnaire was finally distributed to a total of 258 schools/colleges in the four counties of West and East Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire in February 2004. A response rate of 28% was achieved, representing returns from a total of 72 schools/colleges and yielding 71 correctly completed questionnaires. The analysis of the responses is presented in Section 2.1 of this report.

All interview data were transcribed, coded and analysed using the 'constant comparison' method of qualitative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Following each interview an initial analysis was returned to the relevant participants for their verification regarding the trustworthiness of the interpretation and for any further comments (Watts and Ebbutt 1987) in an attempt to validate the conclusions drawn. Data summaries from the questionnaire were analysed and a non-parametric test (Wilcoxon test) was applied to questions five and six. The questions requiring qualitative analysis were collated and coded using the 'open coding' process outlined above.

1.4 Questionnaire design

As already noted, the design and development of the questionnaire were informed by data obtained from the three focus group interviews.

1.4.i Focus group findings

A number of reasons for dropping German after AS level were identified by the focus group participants. Some of these were common not only to all groups, but also to all participants. The main reasons were: the difficulty of German and of the German AS curriculum; a sense that there had been an unanticipated 'jump' from GCSE to AS level; a lack of enjoyment of AS German; and tactical decision-making in relation to the need to accumulate sufficient UCAS points for university entrance.

Additional reasons raised by participants at Westbrook College, in the private sector, were linked to the tactical dimension. These participants indicated that the experience of gaining lower grades at AS than predicted had influenced their decision to drop German after AS rather than any of their other subjects, particularly as they felt German was the subject which related least closely to their intended university studies and career.

The notion of difficulty

When participants were asked to explain their perception of the difficulty of German AS study they mentioned a range of factors relating to the German AS curriculum and assessment practices. Participants talked at length about the daunting, intense and time-consuming experience of AS level German study and the degree to which the demands of the subject had impacted on the time available for other subjects. They highlighted in particular the following: the difficulty of German grammar, such as verb endings, cases, articles, compound nouns; the challenging nature of individual listening tests, oral tests and presentation tasks; the extensive required reading; the quantity of new vocabulary; the topics to be covered, such as 'the economy' and 'the environment' which they felt would have been difficult to study even in English; the demands of the essay-writing component.

'Jump' from GCSE to AS level

The perception of the participants was that German AS was difficult compared to the experience of GCSE German, and the move from GCSE to AS was described by participants as an unanticipated 'jump'. This experience had resulted in a lack of confidence in their German abilities and had given rise to a sense of disappointment in that participants felt that GCSE had not given them sufficient grounding to perform well and confidently at AS level. The 'jump' was seen by some to be reflected in different levels of achievement at GCSE (high) as compared with AS (low), but the 'jump' was perceived as problematic even for those who had performed well at AS.

The enjoyment factor

The notion of a 'jump' which was felt to be much greater than that for other subjects, as well as the sense of grappling with a time-consuming and difficult subject matter, affected the participants' enjoyment of their AS German. Aspects of the curriculum were

seen as difficult, but topics studied for coursework were also seen as both unappealing and time-consuming. Participants referred to the need to cope with a large quantity of new grammar and to the fact that they had little opportunity to put language learnt into everyday use in a useful and practical way. It was felt that opportunities for oral practice in particular had not been sufficient to enable students to cope in everyday communication contexts. In contrast, the experience of a German exchange visit was cited by one participant as very positive, and a number of participants felt that the best way of improving their German further (and a minority did wish to do this) would be to spend time in Germany rather than study the language formally.

Tactical decision-making

Participants' lack of confidence in their ability to achieve high enough grades in German at A2 level was a major factor in their decision to drop German after AS. Predicted grades for AS had for some participants been lower than those actually attained. There was a feeling amongst these participants, and others who had not done as well as expected in their AS, that tactically it would be wise to drop German after AS and concentrate on subjects in which they could be sure of achieving higher grades for the purpose of university entrance. Participants felt that it was more difficult to achieve good grades in languages than in other subjects and, on the basis of their experience of German at AS, they felt that German was the most challenging of the languages. When participants needed to cut down to four A level subjects, it seemed practical to drop German (rather than, for example, French). A contributory factor in such decisions was the participants' perception of the lack of relevance of German to their university studies and to their future career. While all participants felt that languages were useful in the employment market, no one thought that German would be as useful as other languages, such as French, Spanish or Chinese.

The tactical decision to drop German after AS level was largely made by the participants themselves, but was also influenced by the advice of parents and teachers. Such advice varied, with some parents advising for and some against the drop. Ultimately, however, it was the participants' perception of German as a difficult subject offering a low level of enjoyment, together with the need to choose subjects tactically, which prevailed in the decision-making process.

1.4.ii Questionnaire design

The focus group data indicated that the decision to drop German after AS was complex and affected by a number of factors. The questionnaire which was used in the main data-gathering stage (see Appendix 1) aimed not only to reflect this complexity but also to capture the diversity that might exist in a more substantial sample of students.

The key questions which emerged from and were prompted by the analysis of focus group data were:

- Where a decision was made to reduce the number of subjects studied at A2, why was German dropped rather than, say, French?
- To what extent did students experience unexpectedly low achievement in German AS compared to GCSE?
- Was there a shortfall between predicted and actual grades for AS German?

- Where students intended to move on to higher education, what proportion were intending to study foreign languages at degree level?
- To what extent were the main reasons cited by the focus group participants for dropping German after AS level also true of a wider sample?
- What other reasons could there be for deciding not to pursue German study to A2 level?

These questions are revisited in Section 2.3 of this report in light of the interpretation of the questionnaire data.

The above considerations informed the questionnaire in the following ways. *Questions 2 and 3* were included in order to gather data on subjects taken at AS and A2 level and to identify patterns in choices made. Further issues relating to the differential between GCSE and AS achievement and between the predicted and actual grades students gained at AS level were intended to be captured by *Questions 4, 5 and 6*. One of the reasons for dropping German after AS had been the participants' intended study and career plans. *Questions 7 and 8* were designed to collect data relating to future study plans, particularly the intention to study a language other than German. An open question, *Question 9*, offered respondents the opportunity to put forward their own reasons for dropping German after AS, and the final question, *Question 12*, provided space to add to this, if necessary. Complementary to these open questions, *Question 10* focused on issues raised in the focus group interviews and aimed to determine the extent to which these views were held by the wider population targeted in this study. Using participants' own phrasing where possible, respondents were offered the opportunity to agree or disagree with statements relating to the perceived difficulty of German as compared with other AS subjects, the perceived unappealing nature of the German AS experience, the perceived 'jump' from GCSE German to AS, aspects of the German AS curriculum and affective issues, such as the degree of interest in studying German at a later date, perceptions of the usefulness of German and its relevance to future careers. Finally, focus group participants had referred to a number of external influences on their decision-making and *Question 11* aimed to capture these influences.

1.5 Limitations of the study

Any conclusions drawn from this study are limited by the nature of the sample and by the fact that the data were collected during one academic year (2003/4). The sample was taken from four counties in the South East of England and it might well be the case that students in different geographical regions have different perspectives.

2 Questionnaire data analysis

2.1 The quantitative dimension (see Appendix 1)

All respondents answered 'yes' to the first question, indicating that they had been correctly targeted. Questions 2 and 3 yielded a range of subject areas but the most commonly taken subjects were *not* foreign languages, as illustrated by Table 4. Taking all subjects which received more than 20% of the responses, the most commonly studied subjects at AS level were Mathematics (37%), followed by History (31%), English Language (20%) and English Literature (20%). Using the same criteria, at A2 level the most commonly studied subjects were Mathematics (35%) and History (30%).

Table 4
Breakdown of the most commonly studied subjects at AS and A2

	Mathematics	History	English language	English literature
AS	37%	31%	20%	20%
A2	35%	30%	×	×

It was also evident that most of the respondents had experienced a substantial drop in their grades for German between GCSE and AS level, as illustrated by Table 5: 78% of the respondents to question four had been awarded either an A* or an A grade for their German GCSE. A further 21% had gained a grade B at this level, whilst 1% had obtained a grade C. At AS level (question five), the majority (65%) of the participants had achieved either a grade C (24%), a grade D (24%) or a grade E (17%). A further 17% had gained an A grade at this level, 13% had achieved a grade B and the remaining 5% had been awarded grade U (unclassified).

Table 5
Results obtained for German at GCSE and AS levels

	GCSE (%)	AS (%)
A*	37	×
A	41	17
B	21	13
C	1	24
D	×	24
E	×	17
U	×	5

Questions five and six asked the respondents for their *actual* grade for AS level German (question five) and their *predicted* grade for the same subject (question six). A non-parametric test (Wilcoxon test) was applied to these two data sets where both figures were provided to establish whether there was a significant difference between these two grades. The test gave a *P value* of 0.000, indicating a highly significant difference between the grade predicted and the actual grade obtained by students of German at AS level. As shown by Figure 1, twenty four (34%, 95 per cent confidence interval (C.I.) of 23% to 45%) of the

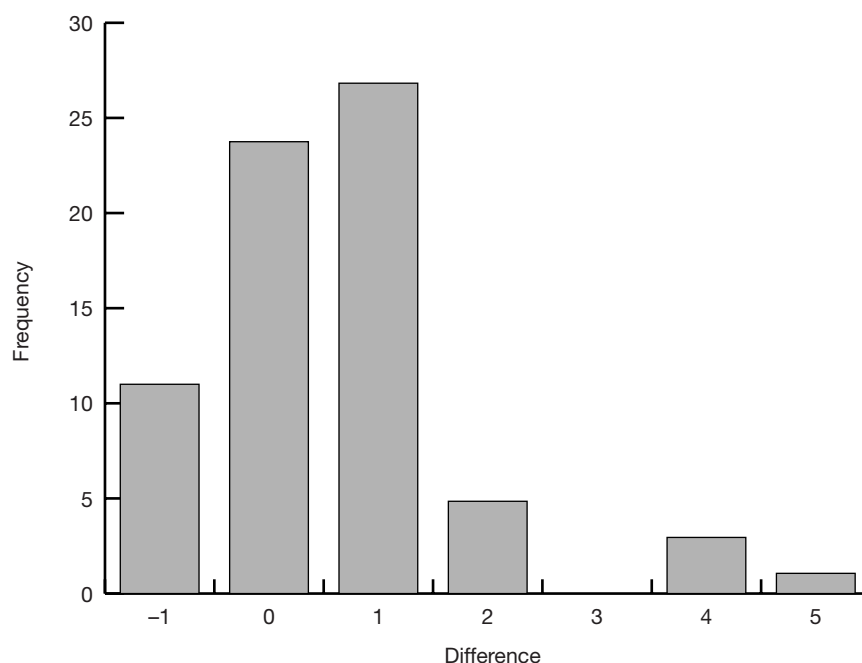


Figure 1
Histogram of differences between the frequency of predicted grades and the actual grades achieved

predictions were correct in that the students obtained the predicted grade for their AS level German examinations. However, whilst eleven teachers (15%, 95% C.I. of 7 to 23%) predicted a lower grade than that actually achieved, a total of 36 (51%, 95% C.I. of 39 to 63%) of the predictions were too high, by at least one grade, compared with the actual grades achieved. The implications of these findings are discussed later in the report (see Section 3.2).

Nearly all (94%) of the respondents were planning to continue their studies into higher education (question seven), but only six respondents (9%) aimed to study a degree-level foreign language, either as a single honours subject or as joint honours with a non-language subject, as shown by Table 6. Eighty-six per cent were thus planning to study a non-language subject at degree level, whilst the subject choice for the remaining 5% of respondents was undecided (question eight). Question nine was analysed using qualitative research methods as outlined previously and the findings are presented in Section 2.2 along with the responses given to question twelve.

Table 6
Main area chosen for degree-level study

Subject area	% of respondents
Languages (joint/single honours)	6
Languages (joint with a non-language subject)	3
Non-languages	86
Undecided	5

Responses to the first question in section ten (10a) were inconclusive in that 22 respondents (31%) agreed with the statement that they had enjoyed their AS level German studies, 21 (30%) felt neutral about them, whilst 20 (28%) disagreed with the statement. A further 8% strongly disagreed with the statement, whilst 3% strongly agreed with it.

The second question in this section yielded a more conclusive response. A total of 59 respondents (83%) either agreed or strongly agreed that there had been a big jump between GCSE and AS level German, leaving 11% who felt neutral about this issue and 6% who disagreed.

Sixty-four per cent of the respondents either agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (25%) that the German grammar at AS level was off-putting (section 10c), whilst equal numbers (18%) either remained neutral or disagreed with this statement. Table 7 illustrates the breakdown of these figures.

Table 7
Percentage breakdown of responses to sections 10a, b and c

a) *I enjoyed studying German at AS level*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3%	31%	30%	28%	8%

b) *I found a big jump between German at GCSE and at AS level*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
39%	44%	11%	6%	0%

c) *The German grammar at AS level was off-putting*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
25%	39%	18%	18%	0%

Regarding question 10d, 34% of the respondents felt that the topics they had had to study for German AS level were interesting, whilst 48% felt neutral about this statement, and 18% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. However, 74% felt that German at AS level was the most difficult of all the AS level subjects taken (section 10e), whilst 6% felt neutral about this issue and 20% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. These figures are presented in Table 8.

Table 8
Percentage breakdown of responses to sections 10d and e

d) *The topics we had to study for German at AS level were interesting*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6%	28%	48%	14%	4%

e) *German at AS level was the most difficult of all my AS level subjects*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
39%	35%	6%	14%	6%

Fifty-three per cent of the respondents either agreed (35%) or strongly agreed (18%) that they would consider studying German again at a later date (section 10f), whilst 23% felt neutral towards this issue and 24% disagreed with it. Eight respondents (11%) disagreed that German is as useful as other foreign languages as something to offer potential employers (section 10g), whilst 20% felt neutral about this issue. However, 69% either agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (23%) with it. The final question in section 10 asked respondents to consider whether doing German at A2 would have lowered their overall grades for university entrance: 69% either agreed (41%) or strongly agreed (28%) that it would, 12 participants (17%) felt neutral about this issue and 13% either disagreed (10%) or strongly disagreed (3%) with it. One per cent of the respondents did not answer this question. Table 9 presents the breakdown of these figures.

Table 9
Percentage breakdown of responses to sections 10f, g and h

f) *I would consider studying German again at a later date to keep my skills up*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
18%	35%	23%	20%	4%

g) *German is as useful as other foreign languages as something to offer potential employers*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
23%	46%	20%	11%	0%

h) *Doing German at A2 would have lowered my overall grades for university entrance*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
28%	41%	17%	10%	3%	1%

Question eleven sought to determine who had been most influential in the student's decision to drop German post-AS level. It emerged from the responses that the individual students themselves were held most responsible (69%), whilst 8% said it was their careers advisor at school and a further 10% ticked the 'other' category. Thirteen per cent did not respond to this question.

2.2 The qualitative dimension

A total of 136 comments were collated in response to question nine of the questionnaire which asked the respondents to list their two main reasons for choosing not to study German at A2 level. A description of the main reasons cited is presented below. Almost one-third (45) of these responses mentioned the perceived difficulty of the subject at AS level as being a key reason for discontinuing the subject at A2 level. This category encompassed the notions of the subject being time-consuming compared to other subjects and also the big jump from GCSE to AS level, which some respondents found demotivating. A further 24 responses referred to the lack of subject enjoyment as a key factor, whilst 21 responses highlighted the fact that their decision to drop German at A2 level had been a tactical choice with a view to accumulating the highest possible points score for university entrance. Sixteen responses referred to the fact that a low AS level grade had either been predicted or obtained and that this had influenced the decision to discontinue German studies at A2 level. An equal number of responses highlighted the perceived lack of relevance of more advanced level German study either to future careers or to planned university degrees. These comments mirror those obtained from the analysis of the focus group data, as presented in Section 1.4.i.

Question twelve of the questionnaire asked for any other comments and 26 participants responded. Their comments added further details to some of the categories developed in response to question nine outlined above, such as: subject difficulty; tactical choices; lack of relevance to future career.

The notion of the difficulty of German at AS level was a recurrent theme throughout these additional comments. Sometimes it was a straightforward comment to this effect, such as 'I do believe that German is a very difficult A level' (S43). More often, the respondents detailed the nature of the difficulty they had experienced. Most frequently this concerned the unexpected step up from German at GCSE and the perceived intensity of the workload demanded by the AS level German curriculum, as evidenced for example by the following two comments: 'I felt that doing German with three other subjects was too much of a workload' (S20) and 'the workload was quite high. I felt the language was too advanced compared with what I had before. There was an awful lot to cover topic wise' (S70). (S23) reinforced the latter comment by saying that there was 'so much to cram into a short space of time'.

Both the listening and the speaking components were cited by some participants as being particularly difficult, for example 'The aural (*sic*) was a big step up from GCSE. Being asked to lead a conversation on subjects which you had to research was a tough task. The listening part of the exam was a daunting prospect because the dialogue was spoken at such speed' (S58). Other respondents highlighted the amount of new vocabulary required as a demotivating factor, whilst others commented on the perceived difficulty of the

grammatical knowledge demanded at AS level and of the reading and writing tasks which were felt by several participants to be 'far too difficult without the use of a dictionary' (S24). One further respondent mentioned in particular the 'over-complicated' nature of the topics such as 'German politics/human rights' which 'were not relevant to my personal interests' (S55). Three respondents mentioned the stress and pressure they felt this difficulty in general caused them, although one of these still felt s/he would like to 'continue studying German in my own time to keep my skills up because it is very useful' (S47).

The nature of the German AS level examination itself was criticised by several respondents as being exam-based and not involving coursework or modules, with the structure being much harder than that at GCSE level. This meant for one person that 'it is hard to prioritise reading, listening, speaking and writing' (S15). In comparison with other AS levels, one person thought that German at this level was 'more complicated than French at AS' (S24), whilst another felt that 'it is harder to get good grades in languages than other subjects' (S23).

Some respondents said that they simply did not enjoy German at AS level, whilst one person said that although s/he *did* enjoy studying German, 'it took up too much of my work time for what I gained from it' (S52). This notion of German study at AS level being time-consuming was mentioned by several respondents, who also mentioned the detrimental effect this had on their other AS level subjects: for example, 'to study German would have been extremely time-consuming. Consequently my other A level grades would have suffered' (S9) and 'it was very difficult and the extensive (*sic*) extra work interfered with my other subjects' (S1).

Comments such as the latter two underline the notion of a tactical choice made by many participants which was linked to the perceived subject difficulty. Three respondents linked this choice to their own personal ability and/or the grade obtained in German, as illustrated by (S36) who said 'if I had been better and had gained a higher grade then I may have continued'. Others made a tactical decision based on the perceived difficulty of other subjects, as evidenced by (S53) who said 'as I was taking French, I wanted to concentrate more on my French than German at A2 as I felt that I could achieve a higher grade', and (S6) who said 'I felt I had made life hard by choosing to take two languages and I struggled with them, so I decided to drop one so I could concentrate on the other. I dropped the one I did worst in'.

All the comments made in response to question twelve contributed to the respondent's decision to discontinue their German studies post-AS level and added further details to the responses collected under question nine. An unexpected dimension to the qualitative data obtained in this study comprised comments from the teachers themselves which were attached to the returned questionnaires (either completed or otherwise). These comments supported many of the issues raised by the student participants, examples of which are presented in Appendix 2 using some of the categories to emerge from the analysis of the students' data.

2.3 Summary

The key questions which emerged from and were prompted by the analysis of the focus group data and underpinned the design of the questionnaire (see Section 1.4.ii) are revisited in this section in light of the questionnaire findings. The final section of this report (Section 3) reflects on some of the issues raised by the study with regard to the post-AS level study of German as a foreign language and considers it in light of current initiatives which target the post-16 age group in particular.

The focus group data raised a number of questions. First, where a decision was made to reduce the number of subjects studied at A2, in a number of cases German had been dropped rather than another modern language. However, questionnaire data indicated 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 the most popular subjects. A second issue which emerged from the focus groups concerned the extent to which students experienced unexpectedly low achievement in German AS compared to GCSE. This tendency was later confirmed by questionnaire respondents, who had experienced a substantial drop in their grades for German between GCSE and AS level. Focus group participants referred also to a shortfall between predicted and actual grades for AS German. Interestingly, questionnaire data revealed no *shortfall* between predicted and actual grades for AS German, but rather the opposite, with more than half of the predictions being too high by at least one grade (95 per cent confidence interval of 39 to 63%) compared with the grades actually achieved.

A further issue prompted by the focus group data concerned student plans for higher education, particularly their intention to go on to study subjects other than languages. Questionnaire data indicated that where students intended to move on to higher education – and this involved 94% of the respondents – only 9% were intending to study foreign languages.

The main reasons identified by the focus group participants for dropping German after AS level (see Section 1.4.i) were largely mirrored by the findings which emerged from the questionnaire data: a sense of the difficulty of the German AS curriculum, the jump from GCSE to German AS level, and the need to make tactical decisions in relation to university entrance. With regard to subject enjoyment at AS level and topics studied, questionnaire results were inconclusive, but 83% of respondents agreed that there had been a big jump from GCSE to AS level in German; 64% of the respondents 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. Although 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, an equal number of respondents (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.

Several miscellaneous comments emerged from the questionnaire data which were not mentioned by the focus group participants. These referred to either problems with German provision in individual schools, the fact that German was not seen as “useful for

future degrees/careers" (S19) or, for one individual, the inappropriacy of literature to their needs.

To sum up, data from both the focus groups and the questionnaire 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. Additional factors raised by the focus groups alone included the lack of subject enjoyment at AS level, as well as the perceived lack of relevance of German to future career/study paths.

3 Discussion and conclusions

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore some of the main factors influencing the decision of students who took German at AS level not to study it at A2 level. It involved two main stages of data collection and the results are summarised in Section 2 of this report. This final section considers some of the key issues which emerged from the data collected and considers them in light of current initiatives which are aimed particularly at the 14–19 age group.

3.2 Summary of issues raised and discussion

One of the key findings which emerged from this study was the notion of the difficulty of studying German at AS level. This is reflected in the perceived unexpected jump from GCSE to AS level experienced by 83% of the questionnaire respondents and reflected in the substantial drop in grades between the two levels, with 99% of the questionnaire respondents achieving an A*, A or B grade at GCSE for German and then 64% achieving a C, D or E grade at AS level in the same subject. This is perhaps a disappointing finding, given that AS levels were only introduced into the curriculum relatively recently (see Section 1.1), partly in an attempt to offer a more gradual gradient of progression between GCSE and A level study (Hodgson and Spours 2000). All aspects of AS level German study were highlighted by the participants as being difficult and by implication off-putting in terms of taking German at A2 level. In comparison with their other AS level subjects, German at AS was deemed more time-consuming and difficult by many respondents, as well as by some of their teachers (see Appendix 2). This perception was borne out most recently by findings from the University of Durham (Tymms and Coe 2004) which indicate that there is strong evidence of differential difficulties in relation to A level courses and that A levels were graded 'more severely' in modern languages (and mathematics and science) than other subjects. As the report indicates, this differential difficulty is 'a powerful force discouraging the take up of "more severely graded" subjects' (Tymms and Coe 2004).

Linked to the perception of 'difficulty' in the students' decision to drop German after AS is the system of predicting grades (around Easter time: the actual results become available, of course, only in late summer) in an attempt to help students decide which subjects to continue at A2 level, for which teaching often starts in May, before the summer holiday. In this study it emerged that more than half of the predicted grades for German at AS level were too high by at least one grade compared with the actual grade achieved. This is an interesting finding as, despite being inaccurately high in many cases, the grades predicted were evidently lower than the students wanted (perhaps underlined by the relatively high grades obtained at GCSE for German only nine months previously)

and, by implication, lower than the predicted grades for other subjects. It is easy to envisage a scenario in which students make the decision to drop German for A2 based on their predicted grade, which is for the individual disappointingly low, only to have the decision reinforced as reasonable when the actual grades are published later in the summer. The whole area of predicted grades is topical and it could be argued perhaps that the imposed climate of point scoring and tactical decision-making to navigate a path through the sixth form into higher education could fruitfully be re-evaluated.

One further contributory factor highlighted in this study concerns the nature of the German curriculum at AS level (compared to that at GCSE): 64% of respondents found German grammar at AS level off-putting and several participants criticised the nature of the AS level examination itself as being too exam-based. Many other participants referred to the intensity of the workload at AS level, as well as the demanding nature of all four skills and the amount of vocabulary to be learned. These comments are particularly pertinent in light of the recently published 'Tomlinson Report' (DfES 2004) which advises on the reform of curriculum and assessment arrangements for the 14–19 age group. The report proposes that the existing system of qualifications taken by 14–19 year olds should be replaced by a new framework of diplomas at four levels, with the number of assessments across AS and A2 (or the proposed renamed A1 and A2) being reduced from six to four by 2007 (DfES 2004: 164). This, it is mooted, would relieve some of the burden of assessment on learners (and teachers) and enable students to explore subject areas in greater depth through, for example, extended projects (DfES 2004: 13 and 162). It is also proposed in the report that the content of some subject specifications should be realigned to address concerns about overcrowding content at AS level (DfES 2004: 164). These recommendations would appear to tie in with some of the participants' perceptions presented in this study, as, in theory, study programmes would be less exam-focussed and workloads would become more appropriately staggered, which, in turn, might lead to greater subject enjoyment by relieving some of the perceived study pressure.

The report also promotes the modification and adaptation of current public qualifications to fit into the proposed new diploma (DfES 2004: 162). It would thus appear that the time is indeed ripe for full consideration to be given to the *content* of the current German curricula, including topics studied and public examinations between the ages of 14 and 19 and to implement necessary changes to these systems. This would hopefully achieve a more balanced progression in terms of course content at these levels and make the post-16 study of German appear less daunting and consequently less off-putting.

Given that only 9% of respondents in this study wanted to study foreign languages at degree level, either as single or joint honours, it is pertinent to suggest that continued efforts be made by the modern language teaching world in general to promote the advantages of foreign language study post GCSE and beyond, as well as continuing to emphasise the employability of foreign language graduates in the workplace. The indications from this study are that it is the individuals themselves who make key decisions about what to study at A2 and their subsequent careers in the context of an increasing range of study options. Consideration could thus be given to how further to target individual students as well as institutions and sixth forms with messages regarding the advantages of advanced-level foreign language study. Many excellent efforts have already been made in this area and several exciting initiatives have recently been initiated, such as the 'Languages Work' campaign (CILT 2004b) which targets careers advisers, language teachers and language learners, as well as 'The Voyage' project which

aims to promote the take-up of German in UK schools (The Voyage: British German Connection 2004).

3.3 End word

It appears from the findings of this study that the decision-making process behind discontinuing the study of German post-AS level is complex, with several contributory factors. Whilst this study paints a somewhat gloomy picture, as it is largely concerned with the notion of 'demotivation' rather than the opposite, some heart can be taken by the modern language teaching world in general. It is clear from the participants' responses that the messages regarding the employability of foreign language graduates are being heard to a certain extent and also that more than half (53%) would consider studying German again at a later date (although not at degree level). Perhaps the latter fact reflects the growing popularity of the institution-wide language programmes offered by many universities (Pilkington 1997; Kelly and Jones 2003). The recent 'Tomlinson report' (DfES 2004) proposes extending the current statutory 'entitlement' of all 14–16 year olds to study at least one modern foreign language to the 16–19 year old age groups (DfES 2004: 45) which has significant implications for the design of various study programmes post-14. The same report supports the development of a graded 'language ladder' (DfES 2004) to support skills progression across one or more foreign languages (DfES 2004) and mentions the importance of modern language ability to the increasingly internationalised business environment (DfES 2004: 44).

However, it could be argued that *graduates* in foreign languages are also needed nationally in order to provide an adequate supply of specialists in languages and cultures to meet the demand for the future teachers, translators, interpreters, language engineers and cultural experts needed nationally (Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000). This means that continued efforts must be made to attract students specialising in modern languages into the sixth form and retain them throughout the post-compulsory education sectors. It is hoped that the comments and views of the participants reported in this study may go some way towards informing decisions about the most effective ways of promoting a positive sixth-form German learning experience, thereby influencing subsequent retention rates. With the 14–19 curriculum currently under review, there is room for hope that German and other foreign languages could still form a central part of the educational experience for this age group, as is the case in many other European countries. This would enable younger generations to be empowered by both linguistic ability and intercultural awareness to play a full role in the global economy of the twenty-first century.

3.4 Avenues for further research

In terms of useful avenues for further research, the following areas could be usefully explored. First, a study similar to the one presented here could be conducted in a different geographical region of the United Kingdom in order to confirm (or otherwise)

the findings emerging from this study and to extend further the academic debate surrounding the reasons for the decline in advanced-level German study.

Second, a study which sought to establish whether there are key differences between the perspectives of students studying post-GCSE German in state schools compared to those in the private sector in relation to the research question underpinning this inquiry could also be useful. Such a study could perhaps also incorporate a comparison between the views of those students who *did* continue to A2 with their German studies in terms of, for example, grade comparisons, perceptions of AS level German study and overall (de)motivation.

Third, it would also be a fruitful line of study to explore in some detail the views of a wide range of German language teachers in the United Kingdom to collect further insights into some of the reasons behind the decline in popularity of advanced-level German language study (see Appendix 2).

Appendix 1

Student questionnaire

Thank you very much for agreeing to complete this questionnaire
(Please answer the questions below by following the instructions given)

1. Did you take a German AS level in 2003? YES NO
(Please circle either YES or NO)

2. Which other subjects did you take for AS level?
(Please list these below)

3. Which subjects are you taking now for A2?
(Please list these below)

4. What grade did you get for German at GCSE?
(Please write the grade on the line alongside) _____

5. What grade did you get for German at AS level?
(Please write the grade on the line alongside) _____

6. What was your predicted grade for German at AS level?
(Please write the grade on the line alongside) _____

7. Are you planning to go to university? YES NO
(Please circle either YES or NO)

8. If you answered YES to question seven above, what main subject
are you planning to study at university?
(Please write the subject on the line below)

9. What were your two main reasons for choosing not to study German at A2 level?
(Please write your reasons in the space below)

10. Here are some comments made by other people who also chose not to study German at A2 level. To what extent do you agree with them?
(Please indicate your answer by circling the number which comes closest to your opinion)

a) *I enjoyed studying German at AS level*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

b) *I found a big jump between German at GCSE and at AS level*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

c) *The German grammar at AS level was off-putting*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

d) *The topics we had to study for German at AS level were interesting*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

e) *German at AS level was the most difficult of all my AS level subjects*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

CASH-IN OR CONTINUE

f) *I would consider studying German again at a later date to keep my skills up*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

g) *German is as useful as other foreign languages as something to offer potential employers*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

h) *Doing German at A2 would have lowered my overall grades for university entrance*

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5

11. When you were choosing what subjects to study at A2 level where did your main careers advice come from? *(Please tick one box only to indicate your answer)*

- careers advisor at school
- parents
- yourself
- other (please explain) _____

12. Is there anything else you would like to say about why you dropped German after AS level? *(If so, please write in the box below)*

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

WITH ALL GOOD WISHES FOR YOUR FUTURE
Dr Catherine Watts (University of Brighton, School of Languages)
Dr Angela Pickering (University of Brighton, School of Languages)

Appendix 2

Teachers' comments: an additional data source

An unexpected source of data consisted of written comments made by teachers at the schools targeted in the questionnaire survey. These comments either accompanied questionnaire returns (comments from a total of 36 schools) or were sent to explain why no questionnaires had been completed (comments from a total of 31 schools). These data have been analysed in relation to a number of the key dimensions which emerged from focus group and questionnaire data. Examples of comments are presented below.

Key dimensions	Teachers' comments
Difficulty of German curriculum	<i>German is too difficult and demanding</i> <i>It's too academic</i> <i>Without a doubt, and with some justification, German is perceived as 'difficult' – certainly by our curriculum deputy</i>
'Jump' between German GCSE and AS level	<i>The gap between GCSE and AS German is very large, whereas the gap in Geography, for example, they find to be very small</i> <i>The gap between GCSE and AS (German) is too big. Many of them have sailed through GCSE without doing any work, and are shocked by how much they have to learn and how large the ... workload is</i> <i>There is no doubt a very challenging jump from GCSE to AS German</i>
Lack of enjoyment of AS level German	<i>Students enjoy speaking German but don't like the gloomy academic essays about politics and unemployment</i>
Tactical decision-making for university entrance	<i>Languages are not an easy option and unless students are particularly keen on languages per se they tend to go either to sciences or the 'ologies' at A level which are considered to be easier when it comes to grades</i> <i>I find the demands made of students by the Philosophy AS/A2 exams are far more modest than those made by the German AS/A2 exams and there is no doubt in my mind that German is (correctly) perceived as a disproportionately difficult AS/A level course</i> <i>I am getting more and more indications from students that German A level is just too difficult an option compared to many other subjects that students can choose these days. The argument is that an A grade in Photography or Media Studies gives you just as many university points as an A grade in German, but there is no comparison in terms of work involved</i>
Other issues raised	Teachers' comments
Popularity of other languages	<i>Another trend is the popularity of Spanish at GCSE for obvious reasons and this is likely to be at the expense of German rather than French</i>
Availability of options	<i>We can't really compete in a complex options situation where everybody does what everybody wants and there are appealing options like ... PE, ICT, Drama</i>

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