Adult participation in foreign language learning 2009

Acknowledgements

[We are grateful to colleagues at the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), who commissioned and managed the research, supplied the data and supported the production of this report].

This report is based on the NIACE Survey of Adult Participation in Learning 2009.The survey, undertaken for NIACE, by RSGB, interviewed a weighted sample of 4,917 adults, aged 17 and over, in the UK in the period 18 February –1 March and 11–15 March 2009. A range of questions was asked about adult participation in learning. The headline findings report, which focuses on recent and current learning participation rates and future intentions to take up learning, has been published by NIACE[1] and additional reports will be published on the full range of data throughout the year.

This report is mainly concerned with the findings concerning adult participation in foreign language learning. We hope to find out the percentage of respondents who currently study or who recently studied foreign languages[2] in the last three years and whether they attended a foreign language course in the last 12 months. If the respondent studies/studied foreign languages as the main subject or the only subject currently/in the last three years, we will also look at their motivation for taking up the learning and any benefits or changes that they feel have happened as a result. See Appendix for relevant questions and the routing for the questionnaire.

Preliminary findings:

- Foreign languages seem to be popular among adult learners to a limited extent in the context that the overall participation rate in learning among adults is not high[3].
- There seem to be differences in levels of participation in foreign language learning between different groups of adults, such as between different socio-economic groups and between those in different employment situations.
- Respondents learning a foreign language are less likely to attend courses and are more likely to study independently.
- Respondents study foreign languages mainly out of interest or for personal development purposes rather than for career or other practical considerations.
- Consequently, the benefits that have happened as a result of learning, if there are any listed, are associated with personal development.

Note that any percentages calculated on small bases should be treated with caution

[1] Aldridge, F. and Tuckett, A. 2009. *Narrowing participation: The NIACE Survey on Adult Participation in Learning 2009.* NIACE.

[2] 'Foreign languages' refer to languages other than English, excluding Welsh.

[3] Aldridge, F. and Tuckett, A. 2009. *Narrowing participation: The NIACE Survey on Adult Participation in Learning 2009.* NIACE.

as they may be subject to wide margins of sampling error. This is particularly true where the base comprises less than 100 respondents. The findings should, therefore, be viewed as indicative rather than representative of participation in foreign language learning both currently and in the past three years.

1. Adult participation in foreign language learning

When asked whether they are currently studying a foreign language or whether they studied a foreign language in the last three years, 122 respondents out of weighted sample of 4,917 adults answered yes, accounting for 2 per cent of the weighted base and representing 6 per cent of current and recent learners[4]. This, compared to other subjects, roughly indicates that foreign languages seem to be one of the most popular subjects among current and recent learners, although subjects such as computer skills are far more popular than foreign languages (Table 1, 2 and 3).

Table 1: Recent and current adult learners by subject (in descending order, % of current and recent learners)

Subject	weighted respondents	% of current and recent learners	% of total sample
11: Computer skills\information technology\using the Internet	389	20%	8%
21: Health and medicine: including nursing and first aid	259	14%	5%
06: Business studies\administration\management	166	9%	3%
19: Foreign languages (excluding Welsh)	122	6%	2%
18: English language\literature	93	5%	2%
29: Science\maths\statistics	92	5%	2%
16: Engineering (electronic\mechanical\construction)	90	5%	2%
02: Arts	87	5%	2%
Other subjects		<5%	
Total: all subjects	**1915**	**100%**	**39%**

* Current and recent learners: 1,915 (weighted);
* Total sample: 4,917 (weighted)

Table 2: Current adult learners by subject (in descending order, % of current learners)

Subject	weighted respondents	% of current learners	% of total sample
11: Computer skills\information technology\using the Internet	169	19%	3%
21: Health and medicine: including nursing and first aid	113	13%	2%
06: Business studies\administration\management	82	9%	2%
29: Science\maths\statistics	67	8%	1%
19: Foreign languages (excluding Welsh)	67	8%	1%
18: English language\literature	63	7%	1%
Other professional qualifications	61	7%	1%

[4] 'Current learners' refer to those respondents who are currently participating in learning. 'Recent learners' refer to those respondents who participated in learning in the last three years.

Other subjects		<7%	
Total: all subjects	**873**	**100%**	**18%**

* Current learners: 873 (weighted);
* Total sample: 4,917 (weighted)

Table 3: Recent adult learners by subject (in descending order, % of recent learners)

subject	weighted respondents	% of recent learners	% of total sample
11: Computer skills\information technology\using the Internet	216	21%	4%
21: Health and medicine: including nursing and first aid	133	13%	3%
Other professional qualifications	89	9%	2%
06: Business studies\administration\management	82	8%	2%
19: Foreign languages (excluding Welsh)	56	5%	1%
16: Engineering (electronic\mechanical\construction)	54	5%	1%
34: Study skills\'return to learn' courses\access courses	48	5%	1%
Other subjects		<5%	
Total: all subjects	**1041**	**100%**	**21%**

* Recent learners: 1,041 (weighted)
* Total sample: 4,917 (weighted)

2. A profile of current and recent adult foreign language learners

In Aldridge and Tuckett (2009)[5], the following learning participation trends were revealed among the total 4,917 respondents:

- Respondents in the highest socio-economic groups – ABC1s – are far more likely to be learning than those in the poorest, groups DE.
- People in full-time and part-time work are more likely to report current or recent participation in learning than unemployed people, and far more likely than people who are not in paid employment or who are retired.
- People who continued in initial education at 21 or later are more than twice as likely to take up learning as people who left at the first opportunity.
- Adults with no Internet access are three times less likely to take part in learning than adults with any internet access.
- A slightly higher proportion of women in the data reported participating in learning than that of men although no statistical significance was found between the two groups.
- Overall ethnic minority adults report higher current and recent participation than white adults.
- The older you are the less likely you are to take part in learning.

A demographic analysis of the 122 (weighted) recent and current learners studying foreign languages points to similar directions with regard to socio-economic groups

[5] See footnote 1.

(Table 4), employment status (Table 5), terminal education age (Table 6) and Internet access (Table 7), but shows somewhat different patterns in respect of aspects such as gender (Table 8), ethnicity (Table 9) and age (Table 10).

- As for the group of all respondents, it is people in the highest socio-economic groups who are most likely to be studying a foreign language currently and or to have studied one recently, but the difference between group C1 and C2 is not huge for foreign language learners, as shown by the data, whereas the disparity between these two groups for all respondents is quite obvious. (Table 4)

Table 4: current and recent participation in learning, by socio-economic groups

	Foreign language learners		All learners		Weighted
	Respondent numbers	%	Respondent numbers	%	base
AB	57	6%	508	53%	962
C1	36	2%	710	48%	1472
C2	17	2%	341	33%	1022
DE	12	1%	356	24%	1461
Total	**122**	**2%**	**1915**	**39%**	**4917**

- Looking at all respondents, people in employment are more likely to participate in learning than unemployed people and are far more likely to do so than those who are not working and who are retired. The data for foreign language learners, on the other hand, only seems to show that people in employment are in general more likely to learn a foreign language than those who are not in employment and who are retired. The difference between the unemployed and not working/retired people is not manifest as in the group of all learners. (Table 5)

Table 5: Current and recent participation in learning, by employment status

	Foreign language learners		All learners		Weighted
	Respondent numbers	%	Respondent numbers	%	base
Full-time Employment	56	3%	913	47%	1960
Part-time Employment	16	3%	315	49%	639
Unemployed	5	1%	127	40%	315
Not working	10	2%	150	27%	559
Retired	23	2%	192	16%	1215
Total	**122**	**2%**	**1915**	**39%**	**4917**

- As for “All learners”, respondents who remained in education until the age of 21 or older are far more likely to study a foreign language currently or to have studied a foreign language in the last three years. (Table 6)

Table 6: Current and recent participation in learning, by terminal education age

	Foreign language learners		All learners		Weighted
	Respondent numbers	%	Respondent numbers	%	base
<=16	36	1%	690	26%	2626
17-18	20	2%	376	46%	821
19-20	3	1%	121	41%	292
21+	52	6%	491	55%	899
Total	**122**	**2%**	**1915**	**39%**	**4917**

- Like ”All learners”, respondents with Internet access are far more likely to be learning a foreign language. (Table 7)

Table 7: Current and recent participation in learning, by Internet access

	Foreign language learners		All learners		Weighted
	Respondent numbers	%	Respondent numbers	%	base
No	14	1%	206	15%	1367
Yes	109	3%	1709	48%	3549
Total	**122**	**2%**	**1915**	**39%**	**4917**

- Unlike ”All learners”, men seem to be slightly more likely to study a foreign language than women. (Table 8)

Table 8: Current and recent participation in learning, by gender

	Foreign language learners		All learners		Weighted
	Respondent numbers	%	Respondent numbers	%	base
Male	61	3%	917	38%	2383
Female	61	2%	998	39%	2534
Total	**122**	**2%**	**1915**	**39%**	**4917**

- White respondents seem to be slightly more likely to have studied a foreign language in the past three years. (Table 9)

Table 9: Current and recent participation in learning, by ethnicity

	Foreign language learners		All learners		Weighted
	Respondent numbers	%	Respondent numbers	%	base
White	113	3%	1686	38%	4402
Minority Ethnic	10	2%	218	44%	495
Total	**122**	**2%**	**1915**	**39%**	**4917**

- Certain age groups (17-19 and 55-64 years old) seem to be more likely to have studied a foreign language in the past three year years whereas for ”All learners”, the participation rate decreases with age. (Table 10)

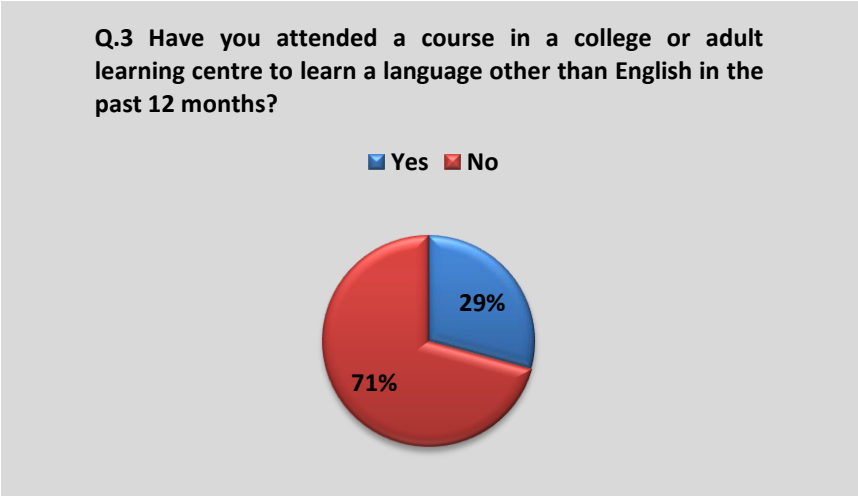
Table 10: Current and recent participation in learning, by age

	Foreign language learners		All learners		Weighted
	Respondent numbers	%	Respondent numbers	%	base
17-19	10	5%	168	78%	215
20-24	9	2%	250	61%	406
25-34	17	2%	384	45%	845
35-44	21	2%	386	42%	911
45-54	18	2%	335	42%	788
55-64	32	4%	244	31%	782
65-74	12	2%	89	18%	505
75+	3	1%	59	13%	464
Total	**122**	**2%**	**1915**	**39%**	**4917**

3. Ways of learning a language

We asked those who reported having studied a foreign language in the past three years and those who are currently studying a foreign language (a total of 122 weighted respondents) whether they have attended a course in a college or adult learning centre to learn a language other than English in the past 12 months. Two thirds of them answered no (Figure 1).

Figure 1



To get more information from the survey as to how learners study foreign languages, we looked at those learners who reported having only or mainly studied foreign languages during the past three years and their chosen ways of learning. 17 out of 31 learners who mainly or only studied foreign languages in the last three years attended courses whereas only 9 out of 24 learners who are only or mainly studying foreign language reported currently attending courses. On the contrary, while among recent learners, only 11 out of 31 reported learning independently either by themselves or with others, 15 out 24 current learners reported independent

learning.

Table 11: Ways of foreign language learning

	Current learners	Recent learners
	Respondents	Respondents
Through a publicly funded institution	9	17
Through local facilities	2	2
Online	1	2
Independently	15	11
Through work	0	2
Weighted base	**24**	**31**

* Weighted base: Learners who are only studying foreign languages or who are mainly studying foreign languages currently and those who did so in the past three years.
* Publicly funded institutions include e.g., university, college, adult education centre, school.
*Local facilities include e.g., voluntary organisations, churches, libraries and leisure club.
* Independently: to study the language independently either by oneself or with others.

Together with the result of Question 3, this seems to indicate that learners are less likely now than in the past three years to attend courses and more likely to study independently for their foreign language learning. . We should bear in mind, however, that this is far from conclusive because of the very limited data and information obtained from the survey.

3. Motivations and outcomes of language learning

With regard to motivation for learning a language, and outcomes among current and recent adult learners, we can only refer to those learners who have only or who have mainly studied foreign languages during the past three years[6]. There are altogether 55 (weighted) respondents in this category.

Among the 55 learners, a majority of them reported that the main reason for their studying foreign languages was that they were interested in them (almost half of the 55 respondents), they enjoyed learning and they hoped to develop themselves as a person through learning of foreign languages. In contrast, few of them were reported studying foreign languages for reason of career considerations.

[6] See Appendix: Relevant questions and routing for the questionnaire

Table 12: Reasons for taking up foreign language learning (in descending order of respondent numbers)

	Respondents
I'm interested in the subject/personal interest	27
I enjoy learning/It gives me pleasure.	19
To develop myself as a person	12
To meet people	4
To improve my self confidence	3
To help me get onto a future course of learning	2
To make my work more satisfying	2
To get a job	1
To support my children's schooling	1
To help in my current job	1
To get a rise in earnings	1
As a result of another learning activity	1
To get a job with a different employer	0
To change the type of work I do	0
To get a recognised qualification	0
To get a promotion	0
Weighted base	**55**

Benefits or changes that the 55 respondents have experienced as a result of the learning are more varied then they might have expected, but similar to motivation. Personal development is still the aspect in which the learners felt they derived the most benefit as a consequence of the learning experience. For example, 19 of them (55 respondents) felt that their communication skills had improved, 10 of them reported having met new people and made new friends through learning foreign languages and 8 of them felt that they had developed as a person. It is also noteworthy that 16 of the 55 respondents reported that they have not yet experienced any benefits or changes as a result of the learning.

Table 13: Benefits/changes learners have felt as a result of foreign language learning (in descending order of respondent numbers)

	Respondents
My communication skills have improved	19
I have not yet experienced any benefits/changes	16
I have met new people\made new friends	10
I have developed myself as a person	8
My self-confidence has improved	6
I enjoy learning more	5

I have got\expect to get a recognised qualification	4
My children\family have become more interested in learning	3
Don't know	3
I have got/expect to get a job	2
I have more control of my life	2
I now make a more active contribution to the community	1
I have found a new partner	1
Family relationships have improved	1
I have a greater understanding of my child's\children's schooling	1
I have got\expect to get a promotion or a rise in earnings	1
I am more involved in local events and issues	1
I have got/expect to get a job with a different employer	0
I have changed\expect to change the type of work I do	0
I have been helped\expect to be helped in my current job	0
My work has become\I expect my work to become more satisfying	0
I have moved\expect to move onto a further course of learning	0
Weighted base	**55**

Appendix 1: Relevant questions and routing for the questionnaire

Q.1 Which of the following statements most applies to you?
01: I am currently doing some learning activity now
02: I have done some learning activity in the last 3 years
03: I have studied\learnt but it was over 3 years ago
04: I have not studied\learnt since I left full time education

Q.2 (If the respondent answered 01 or 02 in Q1) What are you currently learning about?/ What have you recently been learning about? (A range of subjects were listed including 19: foreign languages excluding Welsh).

Q.3 (If the respondent answered 01 or 02 in Q1 and 19 in Q2) Have you attended a course in a college or adult learning centre to learn a language other than English in the past 12 months?
01: Yes
02: No

Q.4 (If the respondent studies more than one subject currently) What are you currently MAINLY learning about or studying?
Q.4 (If the respondent studied more than one subject in the last 3 years) What have you MAINLY been learning about or studying in the last 3 years?

(If the respondent studied foreign language only or mainly currently or in the past three years) Q.6 which of the following best describes the reasons you started this learning?
Q.7 Can you identify any changes or benefits that have happened as a result of your learning?

Appendix 2:
Current and recent learners by Government Office Region of respondents

North East	3	1%
North West	10	2%
Yorks and Humber	5	1%
East Midlands	4	1%
West Midlands	5	1%
Soutth West	19	5%
East of England	10	2%
London	14	2%
South East	31	5%
Not known	22	3%
	122	2%