

DANIELA UNGER-ULLMANN

TRENDING LANGUAGES

**Course Offerings and Demand of
Traditional School Languages**

**Graz University
Library Publishing**



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1. Background

1.1. Course offerings of an academic language centre

The University of Graz founded the foreign language centre *treffpunkt sprachen* in September 2001 with the aim of promoting languages in the form of credit-based courses in the tertiary education sector and thereby providing both students and external participants with a wide range of opportunities to ensure language diversity in Austrian teaching. Within the first months of its existence, *treffpunkt sprachen* was able to establish itself as a service provider. The first course programme consisting of 40 courses in German, English, French, and Spanish was offered in winter semester 2001/02 and was very well received by the course participants. The continuous expansion of the course offerings in the following years was based on increased cooperation with the language departments (philologies) in terms of basic-level courses in high-demand languages and taking over the instruction of basic-level courses for students at the School of Business, Economics and Social Sciences. Starting from 130 language courses in the 2005/06 academic year, a total of up to 268 language courses was achieved in the 2010/11 and 2016/17 academic years. Due to the pandemic, the number of courses decreased sharply in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years and reached its lowest level of 205 courses. There has been a modest upward trend since the 2021/22 academic year, and there are currently 226 courses.

2. Course offerings and demand

2.1. Development of English courses (2007/08 to 2022/23 academic year)

English language courses are offered at *treffpunkt sprachen* in the form of semester and intensive courses. The target group includes both students as well as university staff and external participants. The courses are divided into general language courses and courses for specific purposes. General language courses are available at different levels (from breakthrough to effective operational proficiency). Courses for specific purposes are, for instance, aimed at lawyers (Legal English, Anglo-American Legal Language), scientists (English Academic Writing for Scientists), or employees of the University of Graz (English for General Staff and English for Academic Staff). The course offerings, especially in the courses for specific purposes, have been adapted again and again over the years.

Demand has generally decreased over the years and thus the course offerings have been reduced, too. The highest number of courses (36) was offered in the 2010/11 academic year (see Figure 1). Since that time, the number of courses has been reduced to 14 in the current 2022/23 academic year.

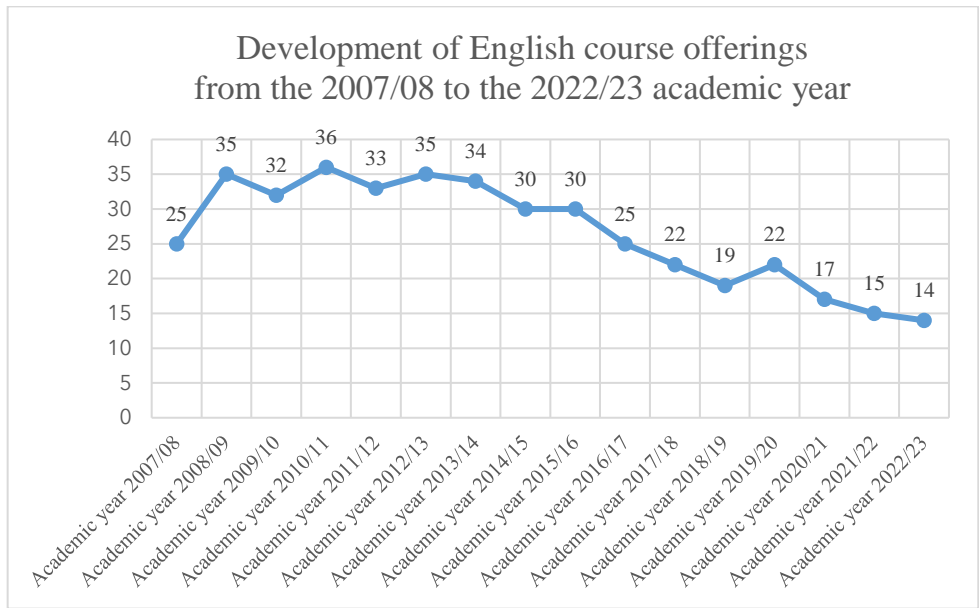


Figure 1: Development of English course offerings from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

In terms of the total number of language courses offered at *treffpunkt sprachen* (on average, 237 courses per academic year), English courses accounted for a maximum of 16% in the 2008/09 academic year and a minimum of 6% in the 2022/23 academic year (see Figure 2).

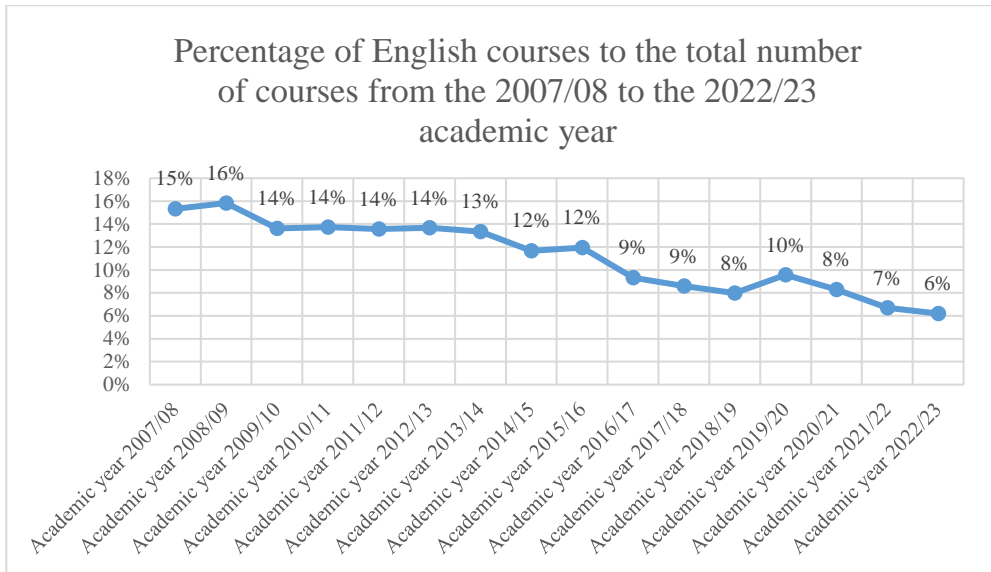


Figure 2: Percentage of English courses to the total number of courses from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

The number of English course participants increased from 455 participants in the 2007/08 academic year to 669 participants in the 2012/13 academic year (see Figure 3). From the 2013/14 academic year on, the number of participants fell to the current number of 212.

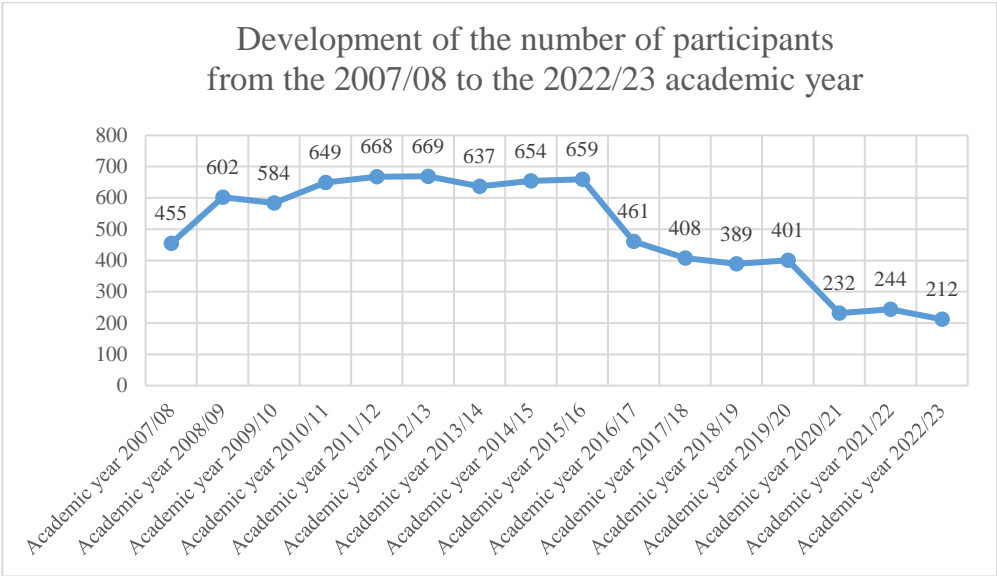


Figure 3: Development of the number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

From the 2007/08 academic year to the 2022/23 academic year, an average of 5,340 participants per academic year attended courses at *treffpunkt sprachen*. The percentage of English course participants declined from 15% in the 2007/08 academic year to the current 4% (see Figure 4).

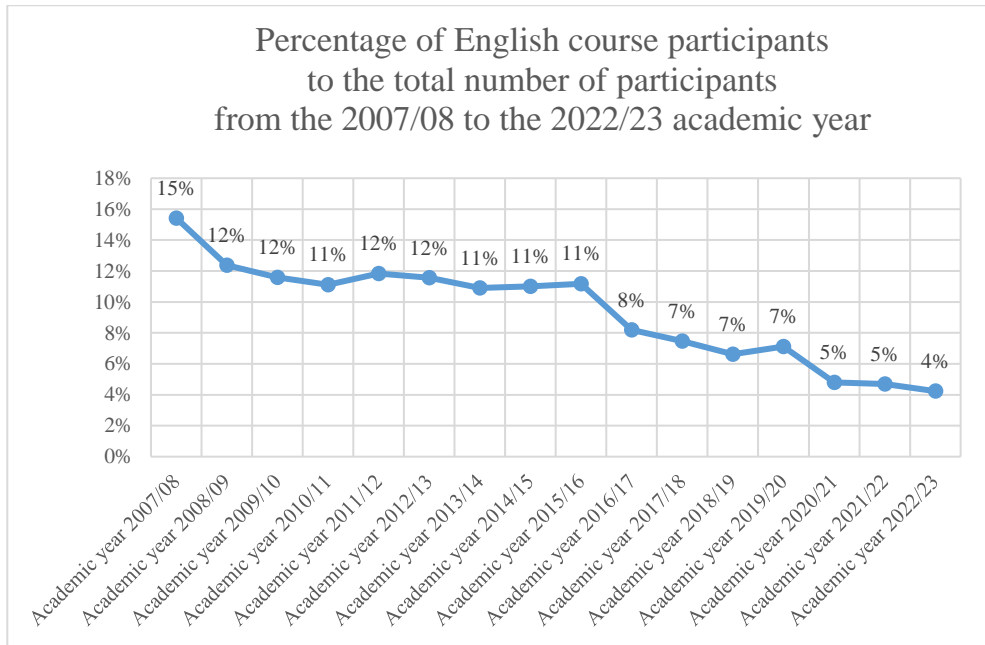


Figure 4: Percentage of English course participants to the total number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

In summary, it can be stated that the demand for English courses has fallen sharply from the 2007/08 academic year to the 2022/23 academic year, and the course offerings have been reduced or adapted accordingly. Utilisation of the courses offered remained high from 2007/08 to 2019/20 at more than 90% and is currently at 79%.

2.1.1. Reasons for attending or not attending English courses

With regard to the fact that the course offerings and thus the related number of participants have decreased sharply since the 2016/17 academic year and that this situation cannot be attributed directly to the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020, it is necessary to examine more closely the reasons why students are not attending courses.

If we take the ten most widely spoken languages by the total number of speakers as a percentage of the world's population according to the *CIA World Fact Book* (cf. 2022), then English is ranked first with 18.8% speakers, followed by Mandarin Chinese with 13.8%. Hindi is in third place with 7.5%, followed by Spanish (6.9%) and French (3.4%). Besides the roughly 373 million native speakers, an estimated 1.08

billion people speak English as a second language (cf. Ethnologue 2022). English largely owes its status as the world language to the cultural and economic dominance of the United States of America. The worldwide distribution of English-language films, TV shows, and music and its relatively simple grammar also make English more accessible than many other languages.

While “English is the most spoken language in the world” and “English is quick and easy to learn” could be good reasons for attending an English course, the author is of the opinion that these are not the main reasons. In view of the reduction in the course offerings and the continuously falling number of participants at *treffpunkt sprachen*, it seems reasonable to assume that students think they have already acquired sufficient English proficiency at school and thus do not feel it necessary to complete a general English course. It seems more likely that the focus is on acquiring specialist vocabulary, as the following table from the 2022/23 academic year shows:

WS 2022/23

I am attending an English course at *treffpunkt sprachen* for the following reason:

	Studies	Career	Personal interest	Other	Total
English	35	9	22	2	52
%	67%	17%	42%	4%	

Table 1: Reasons for attending an English course (WS 2022/23) © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

SS 2023

I am attending an English course at *treffpunkt sprachen* for the following reason:

	Studies	Career	Personal interest	Other	Total
English	20	11	29	0	40
%	50%	28%	73%	0%	

Table 2: Reasons for attending an English course (SS 2023) © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

Studies and career as the reasons given for attending an English course are entirely in line with the expectations of Austrian economic policy. According to former Chamber of Commerce President Christoph Leitl, the standards for foreign language learning should have already been significantly raised back in 2007 (cf. *Der Standard* 2007). “English should be the second language in Austria from kindergarten to retirement,” demanded Leitl. “English is the number one language when it

comes to business” (*Der Standard* 2007). “However, soft skills are also required, i.e., knowledge of intercultural communication to avoid misunderstandings,” said Dorothea Sulzbacher, former Vice-President of Human Resources at OMV AG (*Der Standard* 2007).

Besides studies and career, personal reasons also play an increasing role: While 42% of participants in winter semester 2022/23 stated that they were attending an English course out of personal interest, this percentage rose to 73% in summer semester 2023.

A survey conducted among 520 students in summer semester 2019 and winter semester 2019/20 at *treffpunkt sprachen* (cf. Brameshuber 2021: 196–199) showed that more and more learners are learning a foreign language for personal, cultural, or reasons of enjoyment. A quantitative data collection using questionnaires and qualitative individual interviews with students were used to evaluate the survey (see Appendices 1 and 2). The paper and pencil questionnaires were handed out in a total of 39 courses. Participants of all levels were surveyed. There were no restrictions in terms of the foreign language. The evaluation of the 520 responses regarding the students’ interest in languages resulted in the following ranking:

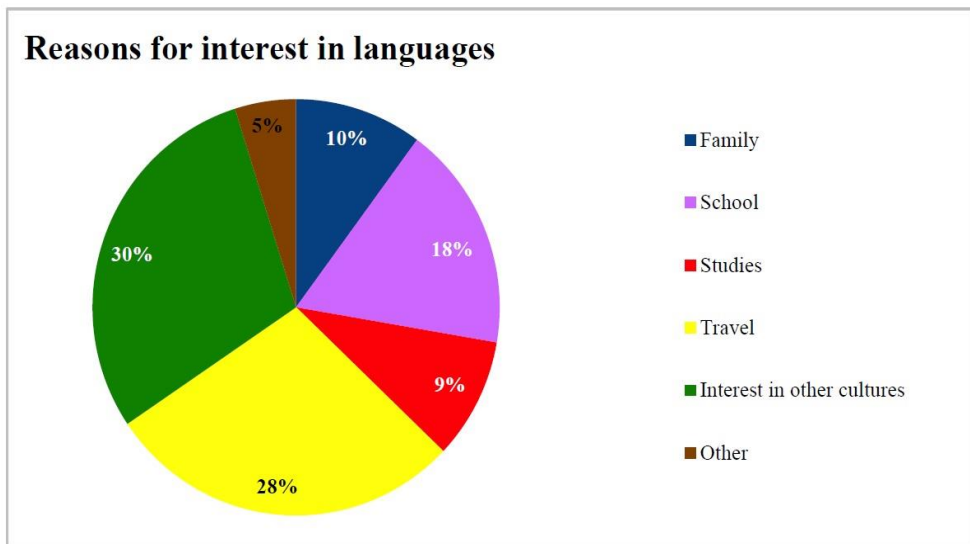


Figure 5: Reasons for interest in languages © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

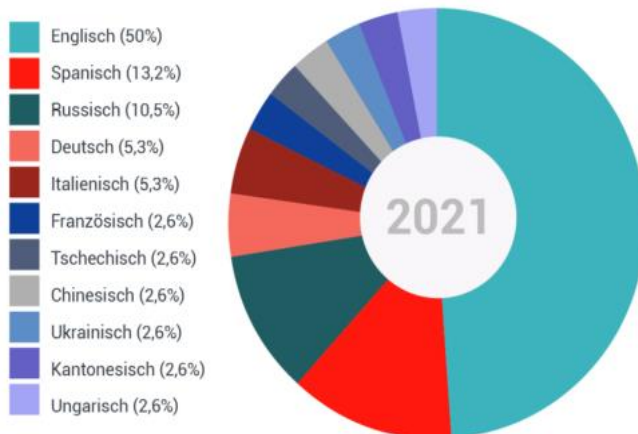
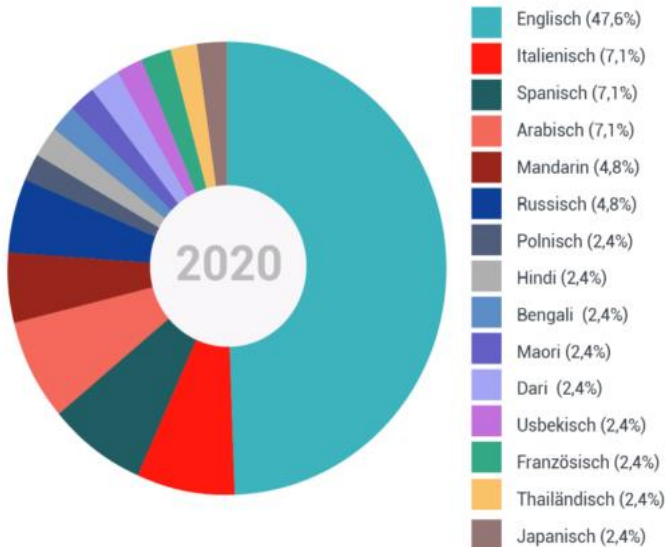
30% of students attributed their interest in languages to the opportunity to get to know other cultures that comes with learning a foreign language, and 28% to their plans to travel abroad. In fact, personal reasons predominated among the respondents, with a total share of 58%. The data collected suggests that students enjoy studying foreign languages alongside their main course of study and see taking a language course as an enrichment of their personal life.

A key reason for the declining demand for English courses could be the increased use of social networks. Since the advent of streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Disney+ for films and series and Spotify for music, young people, in particular, have little difficulty in accessing content in other languages or from far away countries. It seems likely that students think that regular engagement with content in English is a good alternative for improving their English skills. This is clearly confirmed by data from Preply, an online language course provider, which, among other things, has looked at the ranking of languages in Netflix films and series in Austria (2020 vs. 2021):



DIE SPRACHEN DER ZUKUNFT

Netflix-Filme in Österreich 2020 vs 2021



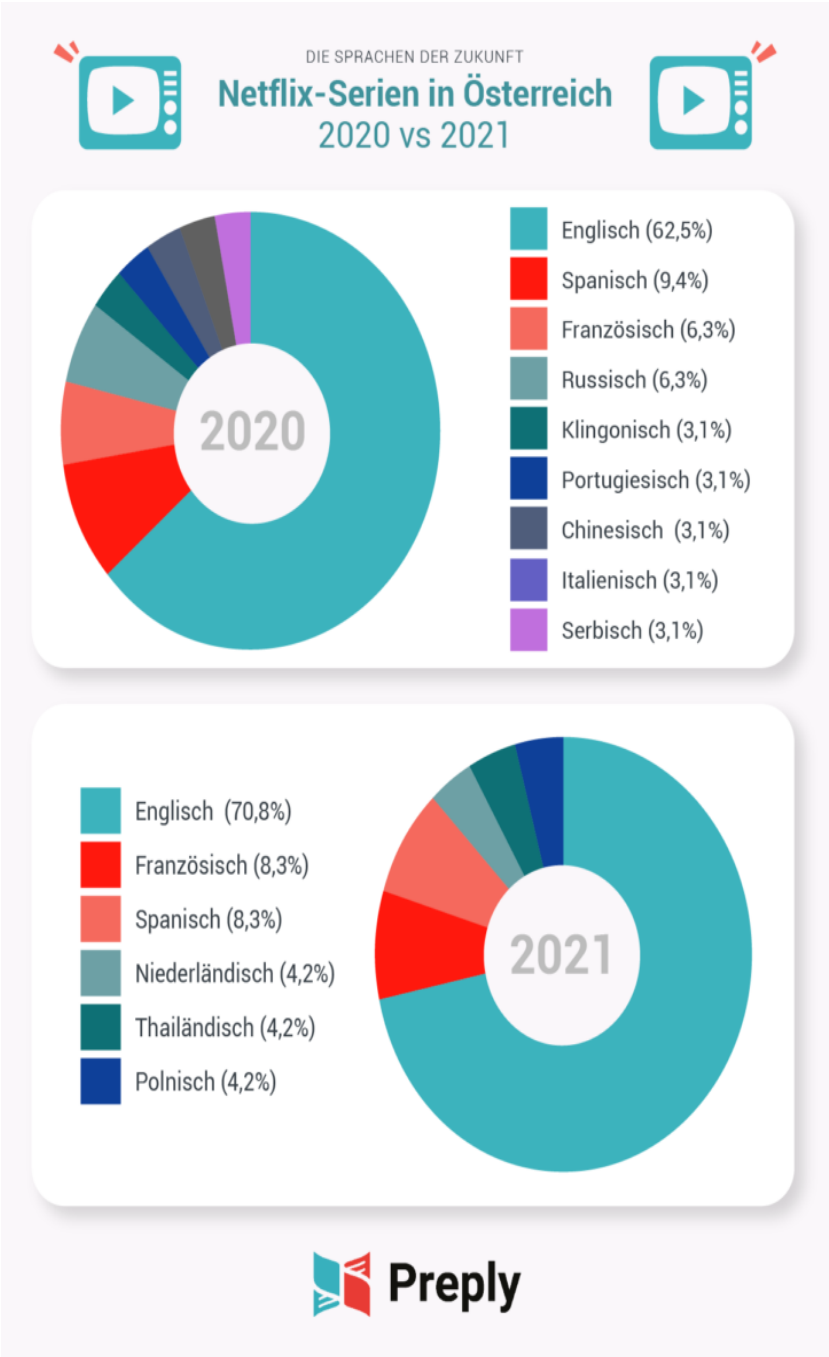


Figure 6: Netflix films and Netflix series in Austria © Preply.

English is clearly ranked first in both Netflix films and Netflix series, with up to 50% and more than 70% respectively. Followed by Spanish with 13.2% for films and 8.3% for series (cf. Mykhalevych 2021). The influence of streaming services on the interest in languages should definitely not be underestimated and should be taken into consideration when developing course offerings. Languages are either hyped or ignored depending on the younger generation's pattern of use. Young people have the power in an unconventional way to influence global language learning and thus the language offerings and the demand for them at language institutions.

2.2. Development of French courses (2007/08 to 2022/23 academic year)

The French language courses at *treffpunkt sprachen* take the form of semester and intensive courses. The target group includes both students as well as university staff and external participants. The courses are divided into general language courses and courses for specific purposes. General language courses are offered at different levels (from breakthrough to vantage). From 2007 to 2017, there was a choice of four-hour general language semester courses. Students thus had the possibility to complete Breakthrough 1 and 2 in the winter semester and Waystage 3 and 4 in the summer semester. Special general language courses for university employees and external participants were also offered until 2017. After these courses were discontinued, university staff and external participants have had the possibility to attend student courses since winter semester 2017/18. The range of courses for specific purposes has also been adapted over the years. Since the 2008/09 academic year, there have been preparatory courses designed specifically for students of Romance Studies and Translation Studies. From 2009 to 2017, the range of courses for specific purposes also included four-hour courses for students of the social and economic sciences.

The course offerings have been subject to various fluctuations in line with demand and the needs of the course participants. The highest number of courses (26) was offered in the 2010/11 academic year (see Figure 7), and the lowest (14) in the 2022/23 academic year.

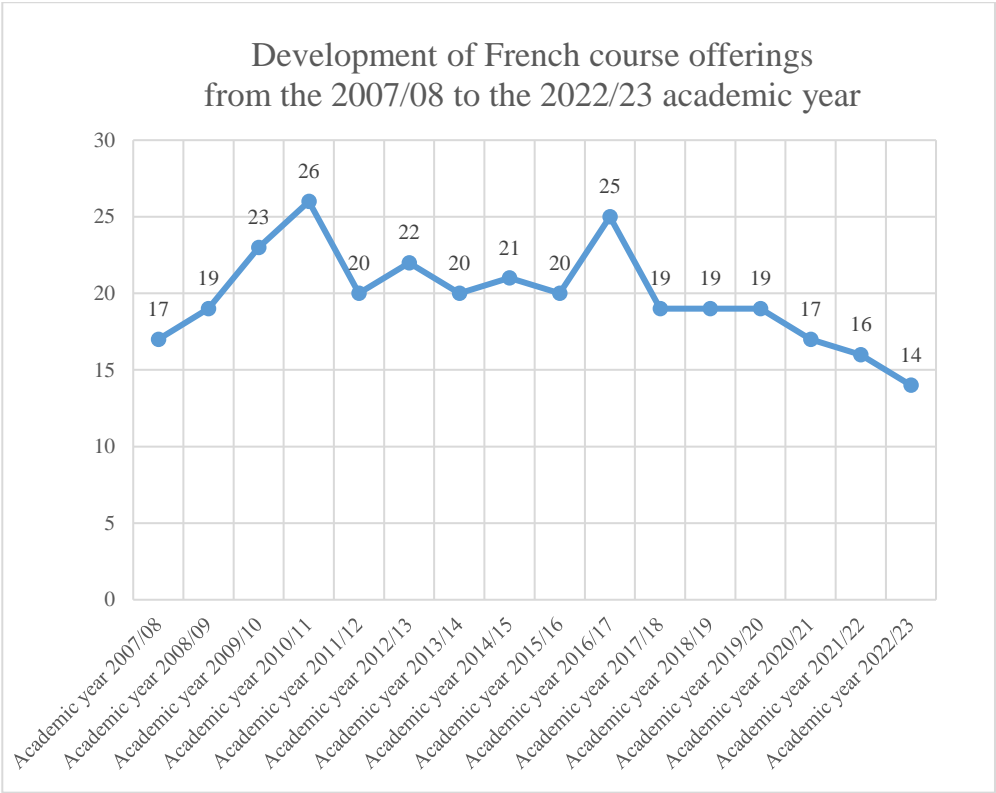


Figure 7: Development of French course offerings from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

The total number of language courses offered at *treffpunkt sprachen* amounted to an average of 237 courses per academic year in the period from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year. The percentage of French courses to the total number of courses was at its highest (10%) in the 2007/08, 2009/10, and 2010/11 academic years and at its lowest (6%) in the 2022/23 academic year (see Figure 8).

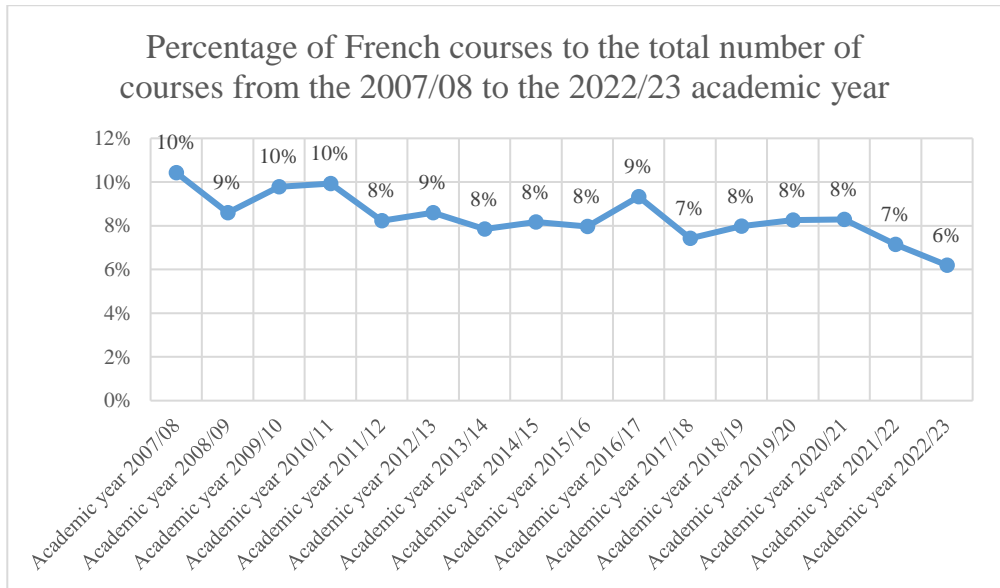


Figure 8: Percentage of French courses to the total number of courses from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

The highest number of French course participants to date (493) was recorded in the 2016/17 academic year (see Figure 9). Although 6 courses fewer were offered in the following 2017/18 academic year, it was still possible to reach a total number of 418 participants due to the very high level of utilisation (100%). This number rose to 428 participants in the 2018/19 academic year and dropped to 284 in the following academic years.

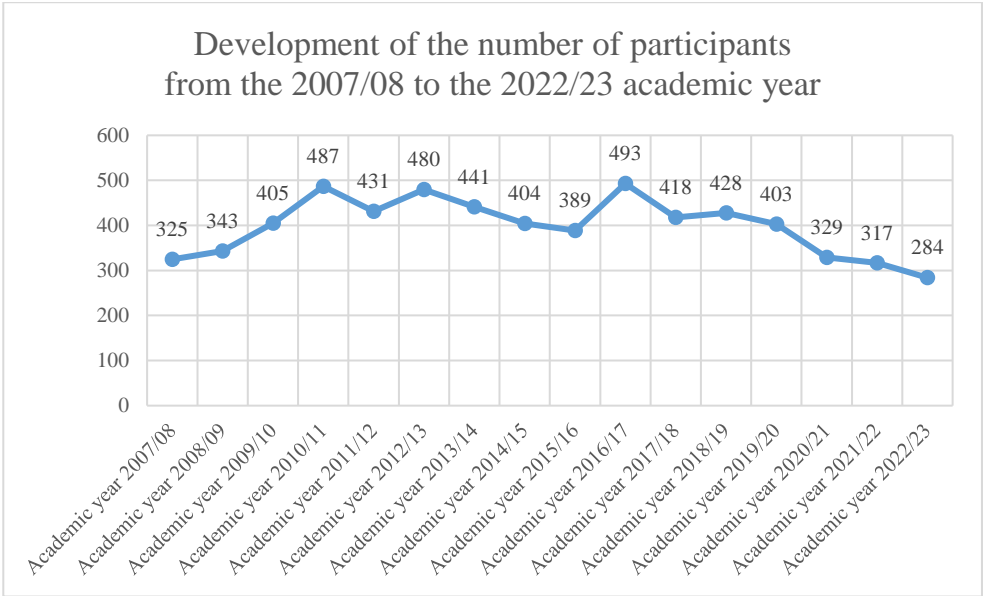


Figure 9: Development of the number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

An average of 5,340 participants per academic year took part in courses at *treffpunkt sprachen* from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year. The percentage of French course participants fell from 11% in the 2007/08 academic year to the current total of 6% (see Figure 10).

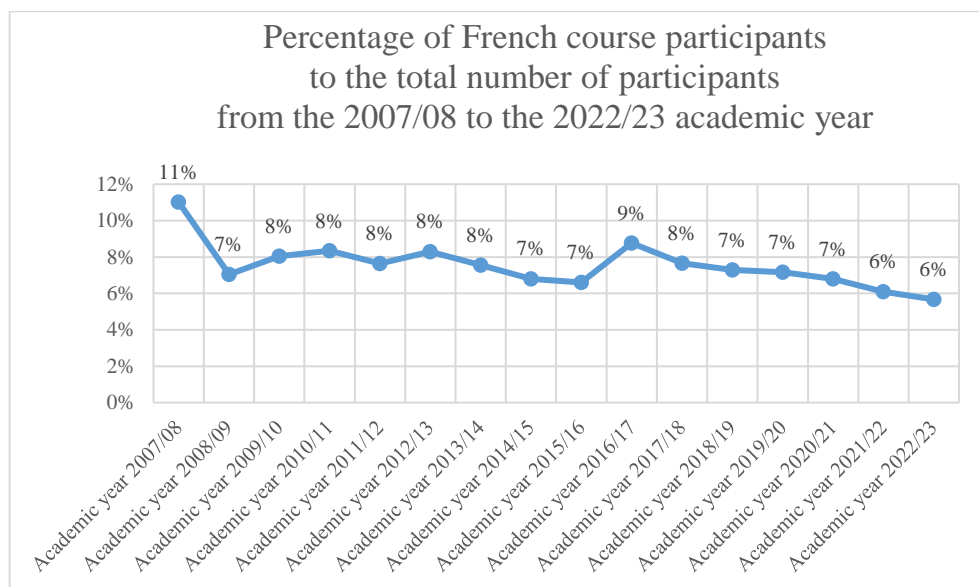


Figure 10: Percentage of French course participants to the total number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

In summary, it can be stated that the development of the French course offerings has been subject to more fluctuation compared to the development of the English course offerings and no clear upward or downward trend was recognisable until the 2016/2017 academic year. However, since the 2017/18 academic year, a successive reduction in the number of courses and participants has become apparent.

2.2.1. Reasons for attending or not attending a French course

The development of French courses witnessed a dramatic decline in the number of participants between the 2016/17 and 2017/18 academic years. Whereas the number for the 2016/17 academic year reached the all-time high of 493 participants, the number in the following academic year dropped to a modest 418 participants. Since that time, the numbers have not recovered. French is becoming less and less important to students, although according to the Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, there are good reasons for learning the language:

- French is spoken by 300 million people around the globe. After English, it is the most commonly learned foreign language and is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world.

- As the fifth largest economic power, France is attractive to foreign investors, researchers, and students.
 - French is the language of cooking, fashion, theatre, visual arts, dance, and architecture.
 - With 87 million visitors in 2017, France is the world’s top tourist destination.
 - French is both a working language and an official language of the United Nations, the European Union, UNESCO, NATO, the International Olympic Committee, the International Red Cross, and many international courts.
 - After English and German, French is the third most common language on the Internet, still in front of Spanish. An ability to understand French provides access to an alternative view of the world and allows you to follow [...] news from the leading French-language international media.
- (Ministère de l' Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2023)

The benefits of learning French cited by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs are reasonable and correspond in part with the attitude of students, whose reasons for attending a course are as follows: French as a working language and an official language of the UN, the European Union, UNESCO, and NATO (studies and career: WS 47% / SS 47%), and travelling and getting to know French culture, which is reflected in cooking, fashion, theatre, the visual arts, dance, and architecture (personal interest: WS 75% / SS 71%). According to the student responses gathered by *treffpunkt sprachen* every academic year as part of its course evaluations, personal interests clearly predominate with 75% and 71% respectively.

WS 2022/23

I am attending a French course at *treffpunkt sprachen* for the following reason:

	Studies	Career	Personal interest	Other	Total
French	39	3	67	1	89
%	44%	3%	75%	1%	

Table 3: Reasons for attending a French course (WS 2022/23) © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

SS 2023

I am attending a French course at *treffpunkt sprachen* for the following reason:

	Studies	Career	Personal interest	Other	Total
French	25	3	42	1	59
%	42%	5%	71%	2%	

Table 4: Reasons for attending a French course (SS 2023) © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

Reasons for the declining demand for French courses could be related to the students' history with learning the French language. During the interviews conducted with students at *treffpunkt sprachen* in summer semester 2019 and winter semester 2019/20, the respondents addressed their negative experiences with language learning (cf. Brameshuber 2021: 211–212). The students described earlier experiences at school that left a negative impression on them. Being forced to learn and pressure at school were perceived as being negative, as were problems communicating and pronunciation difficulties. It was frequently stated that, as a result of such experiences, they no longer had any desire whatsoever to continue learning the foreign language. Their interest and enthusiasm for learning came back of its own accord only later during their university education. French is the second most common foreign language at Austrian schools; therefore, the negative learning experience the students had during their school days could very well be decisive in choosing a foreign language course.

It is often claimed that French is a difficult language to learn and that it requires a certain degree of discipline and precision to learn. There are countless rules in French that simply must be memorised. The *cédilla* (ç) or the accents on *é*, *è*, and *ê* could cause difficulties, as well as the pronunciation with its nasal sounds, which do not occur in German. Moreover, there is its complex grammar with its verb and tense forms as well as the gender of each noun and the corresponding form of adjectives. Students must accept and consistently learn numerous exceptions.

In these fast-moving times characterised by “getting a quick taste of something”, students are not very interested in devoting the necessary precision and analytical thinking, especially when there are many translation apps available that allow them to participate in discussions without any problems in terms of language issues.

2.3. Development of Italian courses (2007/08 to 2022/23 academic year)

Italian courses are offered at *treffpunkt sprachen* in the form of semester and intensive courses. The target group includes both students as well as university staff and external participants. The courses are divided into general language courses and courses for specific purposes. General language courses are available at different levels (Breakthrough 1 to Waystage 4). The course offerings vary in the winter and summer semester and are continuously being adapted. For instance, from winter semester 2009/10 to summer semester 2017, there were Italian courses for specific purposes for students of the social and economic sciences. Since winter semester 2008/09, preparatory courses have been offered for students of Romance Studies, and since winter 2011/12, these courses have also been available to students of Translation Studies who have yet to achieve the A2 beginners' level. In terms of general language courses, the course offerings have been adapted in line with demand.

Demand has generally decreased over the years, and thus the number of courses has been reduced accordingly. After having established various new courses from the 2008/09 to the 2011/12 academic years, the number of Italian courses on offer reached its interim peak at 23 courses. The number of courses started to decline beginning with the 2012/13 academic year. In the current 2022/23 academic year, only 12 courses are now offered (see Figure 11).

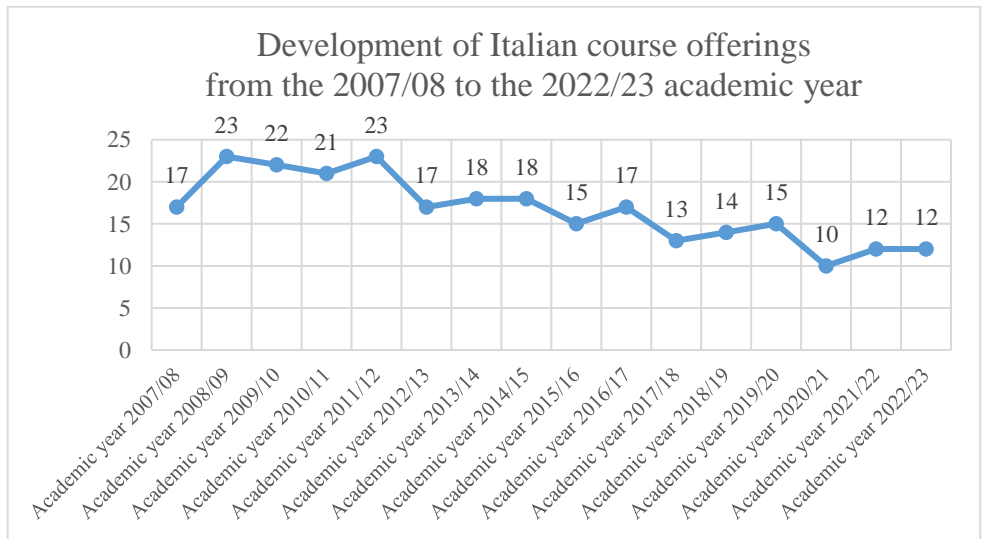


Figure 11: Development of Italian course offerings from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

In terms of the total number of language courses offered at *treffpunkt sprachen* (on average, 237 courses per academic year from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year), Italian courses accounted for a maximum of 10% in the 2007/08 and 2008/09 academic years and a minimum of 5% in the 2017/18, 2020/21, 2021/22, and 2022/23 academic years (see Figure 12).

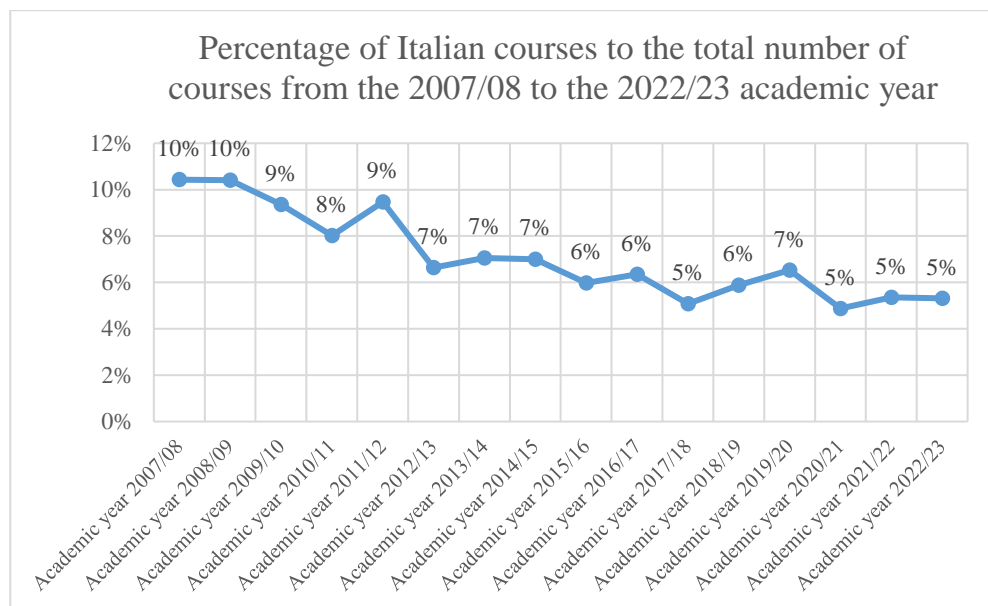


Figure 12: Percentage of Italian courses to the total number of courses from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

The number of Italian course participants decreased from 334 in the 2007/08 academic year to 220 in the 2022/23 academic year (see Figure 13). The number of participants has varied over the years in line with the range of courses on offer. The highest number of participants so far (421) was recorded in the 2011/12 academic year. From that point on, the numbers have declined, with a sharp drop to 122 participants in the 2020/21 academic year due to the pandemic.

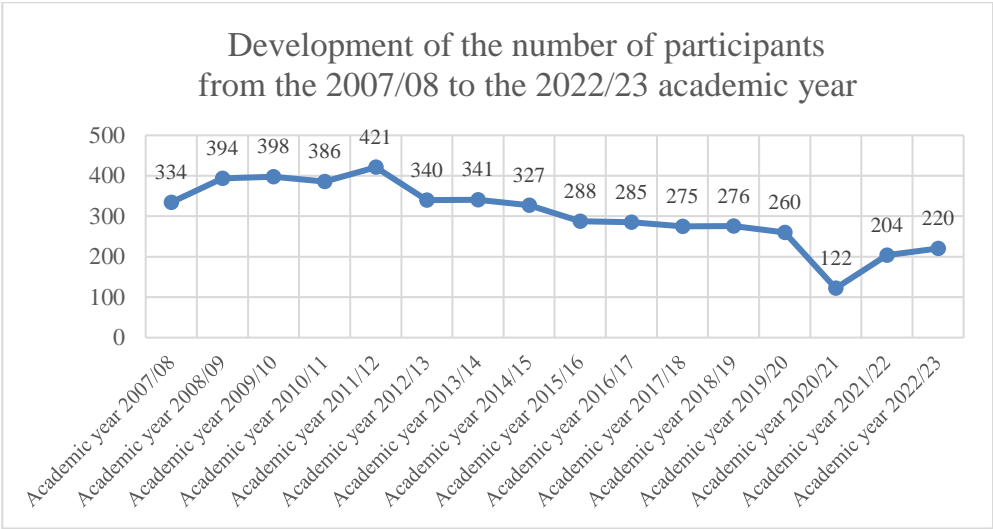


Figure 13: Development of the number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

An average of 5,340 participants per academic year took part in courses at *treffpunkt sprachen* from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year. The percentage of Italian course participants fell from 11% in the 2007/08 academic year to the current total of 4% (see Figure 14).

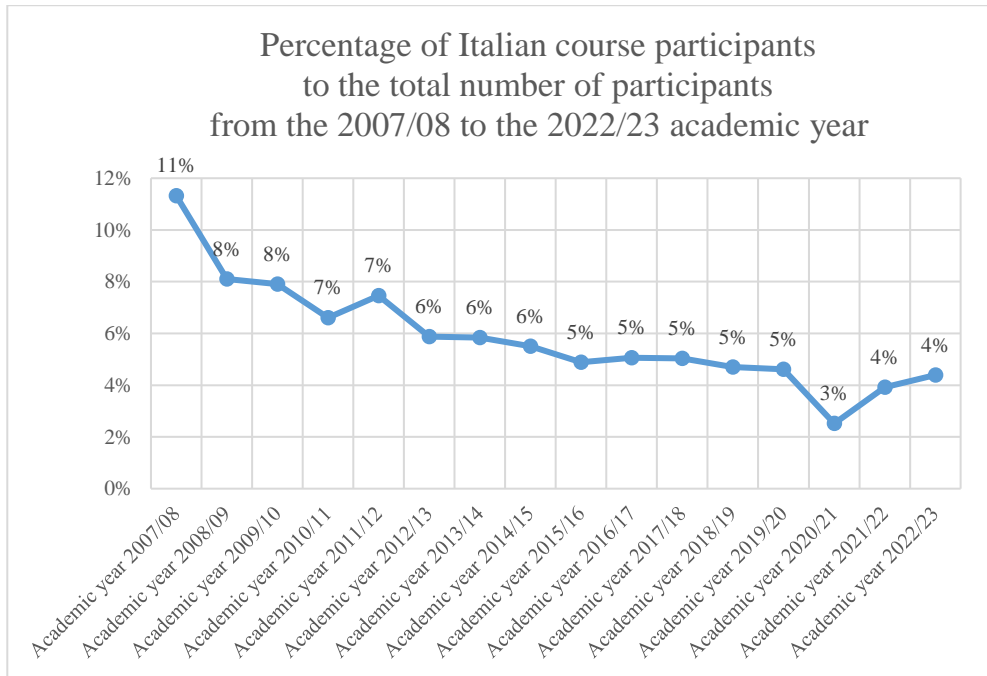


Figure 14: Percentage of Italian course participants to the total number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

In summary, it can be stated that the demand for Italian courses has declined from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year and that the course offerings have had to be reduced or adapted accordingly. Utilisation of the courses offered, however, remained consistently high between 80% and 90% from the 2007/08 to the 2019/20 academic year (with the exception of the 2020/21 academic year: 59%).

2.3.1. Reasons for attending or not attending an Italian course

In terms of the list of languages by the total number of speakers, Italian is ranked 29th with 65 million native speakers and 3 million second-language speakers (cf. Ethnologue 2022). Geography, history, and tourism play an important role in Austria when it comes to learning Italian. Austria and Italy share a 430 km long border, which comprises the federal provinces of Tyrol and Carinthia in Austria and the regions of Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia in Italy. The geographic proximity and the fact that Italy has been the most popular tourist destination for people living in Austria are likely obvious reasons for learning Italian. Based on the average number of Google searches per month, the online language

course provider Preply (cf. Mykhalevych 2021) places Austrians in first place when it comes to interest in learning Italian:



Figure 15: Languages of the future: Austrians want to learn Italian © Preply.

Google search queries reflect, in particular, the personal interest in a language. The positive ranking corresponds well with the motivations of students attending an Italian course at *treffpunkt sprachen*: In winter semester 2022/23, 73% of students stated that they decided to take an Italian course out of personal interest. In summer semester 2023, this percentage rose all the way to 88%. Studies and career played more of a secondary role, with 42% in winter semester 2022/23 and 47% in summer semester 2023.

WS 2022/23

I am attending an Italian course at *treffpunkt sprachen* for the following reason:

	Studies	Career	Personal interest	Other	Total
Italian	22	1	40	1	55
%	40%	2%	73%	2%	

Table 5: Reasons for attending an Italian course (WS 2022/23) © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

SS 2023

I am attending an Italian course at *treffpunkt sprachen* for the following reason:

	Studies	Career	Personal interest	Other	Total
Italian	23	4	50	0	57
%	40%	7%	88%	0%	

Table 6: Reasons for attending an Italian course (SS 2023) © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

Reasons for the decreasing demand for Italian courses could be – similar to French – related to the students' history with learning the Italian language. As part of a didactic project dealing with the first language (L1) German as a fundamental competence for learning other foreign languages, it was demonstrated that a sound and reflective command of one's first language is the basic prerequisite for successfully learning other languages (cf. Leitner 2021). The written survey of a total of 239 students, in which essential knowledge of grammatical phenomena was tested, revealed that many students have large knowledge gaps (cf. Leitner 2021: 154). To substantiate the findings of the student survey, eight language teachers (two teachers each of Latin and Italian, and three teachers of Spanish and one teacher of French) at *treffpunkt sprachen* were also asked for their opinions. The evaluation of the interviews led to the conclusion that the majority of students have serious gaps in their knowledge of terminology and are not familiar with the exact terms nor with the functions of individual parts of speech (verb, noun, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, conjunction, numeral, article, and interjection) (cf. Leitner 2021: 156–157). This also suggests that they lack knowledge of the relevant grammatical categories (for instance, in relation to verbs: person, number, tense, mood, voice; in relation to nouns: case, number, gender, etc.), which is indispensable for learning a new language. The use of Latin terms is confusing for many students and forces teachers to fall back on terms that students learned in primary school (for instance, “doing-word”, “how-word”, “thing word” or noun, etc.). A lack of

knowledge regarding the function of individual parts of a sentence and an ignorance of basic linguistic concepts (the difference between a vowel and a consonant or accent and apostrophe) top off the pronounced deficit in prior linguistic background in the area of one's first language (cf. Leitner 2021: 157). The circumstance that the competence-oriented school-leaving examination in German (L1) focuses more on text production that meets the standards of the respective text type in terms of structure and content and less on grammatical correctness is detrimental to university foreign language teaching and leads to students struggling in vain despite their personal interest in learning a foreign language and ultimately to them deciding to quit the language course of their choice or not even attend it at all.

2.4. Development of Spanish courses (2007/08 to 2022/23 academic year)

Spanish language courses are offered at *treffpunkt sprachen* in the form of semester and intensive courses. The target group includes both students as well as university staff and external participants. The courses are divided into general language courses and courses for specific purposes. General language courses available at different levels (breakthrough to threshold and vantage). From 2007 to 2017, the language course programme included four-hour general language semester courses. Students thus had the opportunity to attend Breakthrough 1 and 2 in the winter semester and Waystage 3 and 4 in the summer semester. Special general courses were also offered for university employees and external participants until 2017. Following the discontinuation of these courses, university staff and external participants have had the possibility to participate in student courses since winter semester 2017/18. The offerings in terms of courses for specific purposes have also been adapted over the years. Since the 2008/09 academic year, special preparatory courses have been offered to Romance Studies and Translation Studies students. From 2009 to 2017, the range of courses for specific purposes also included four-hour courses for students of the social and economic sciences.

The course offerings have fluctuated in line with demand. The highest number of courses (36) was offered in the 2009/10 academic year (see Figure 16). After only 28 courses were offered in the 2012/13 academic year, the range of courses remained stable from the 2013/14 academic year to the 2018/19 academic year with an average of 31 courses on offer. A clear downward trend has been evident since the 2020/21 academic year. There are currently 22 courses on offer.



Figure 16: Development of Spanish course offerings from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

The total number of language courses offered at *treffpunkt sprachen* amounted to an average of 237 courses per academic year in the period from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year. The percentage of Spanish courses to the total number of courses was at its highest (15%) in the 2008/09 and 2009/10 academic years and at its lowest (10%) in the 2022/23 academic year (see Figure 17).

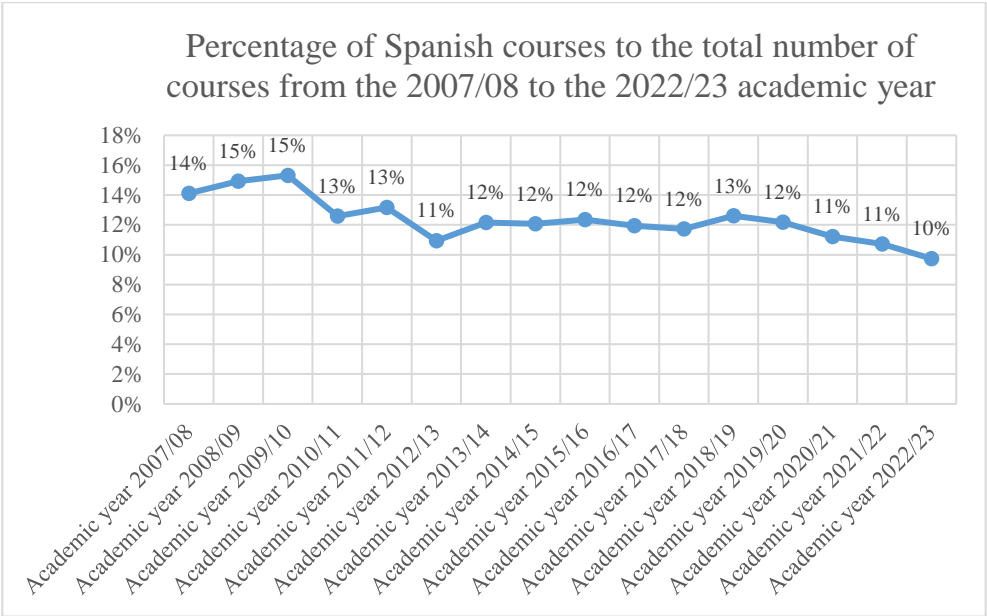


Figure 17: Percentage of Spanish courses to the total number of courses from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

The highest number of Spanish course participants to date (747) was recorded in the 2009/10 academic year (see Figure 18). From the 2013/14 to the 2018/19 academic years, the number of participants remained consistent at 600. The number of participants has continued to decrease from the 2019/20 academic year and is currently at 449.

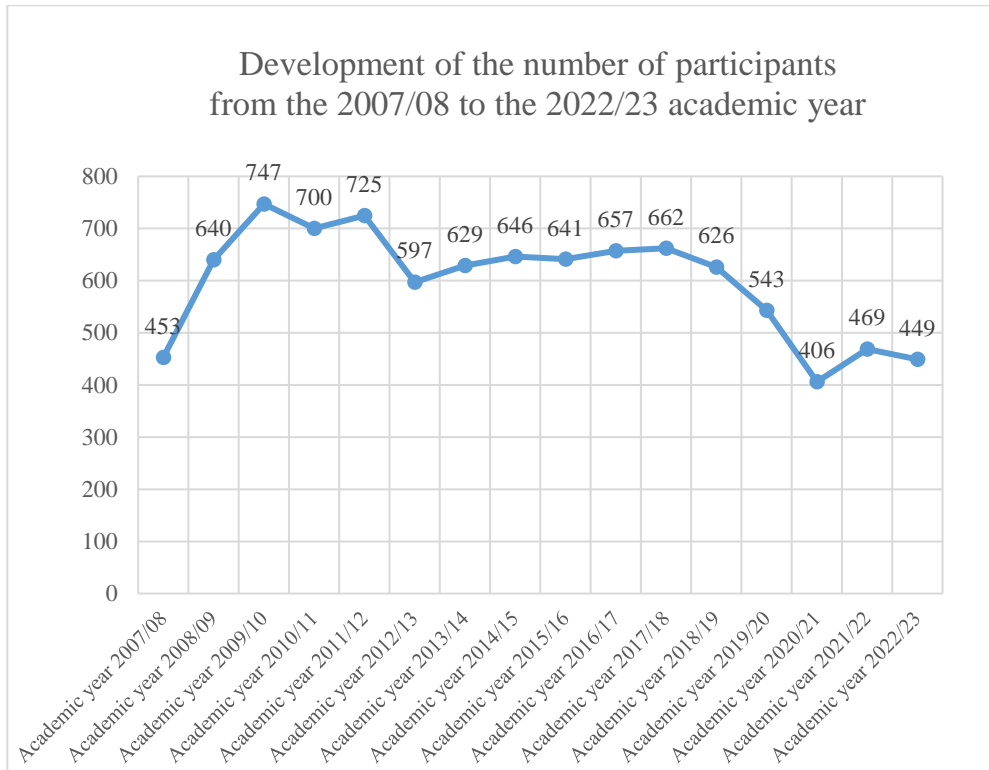


Figure 18: Development of the number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

An average of 5,340 participants per academic year took part in courses at *treffpunkt sprachen* from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year. The percentage of Spanish course participants fell from 15% in the 2007/08 academic year to the current total of 9% (see Figure 19).

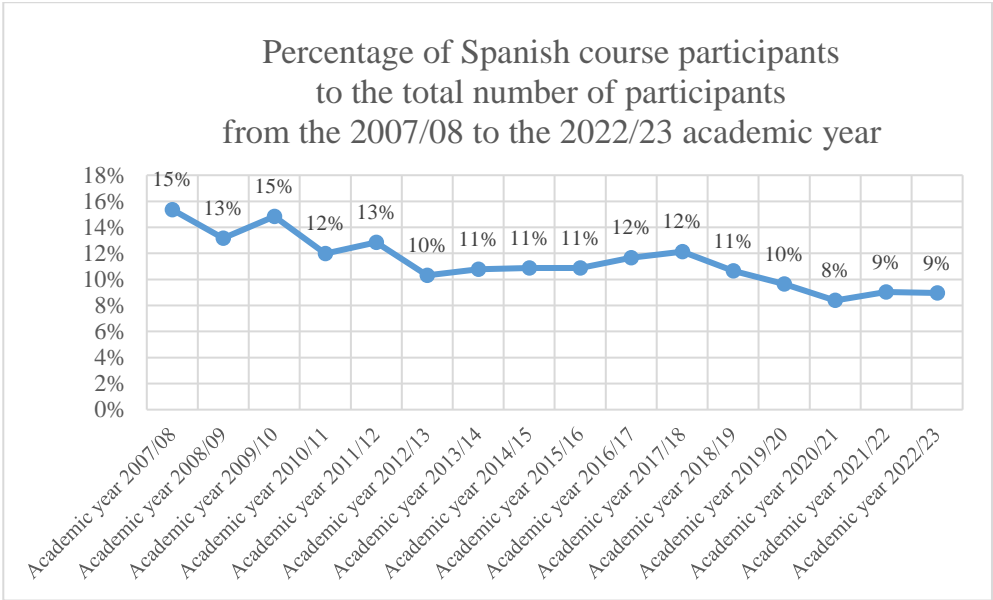


Figure 19: Percentage of Spanish course participants to the total number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

In summary, it can be stated that the development of the Spanish course offerings from the 2013/14 academic year to the 2018/19 academic year did not fluctuate much. The number of courses offered remained virtually unchanged up to that point, and the number of participants as well as the utilisation (averaging 97%) could be kept consistently high. It wasn't until the outbreak of the pandemic in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years that the number of courses and thus the number of participants began to decrease.

2.4.1. Reasons for attending or not attending a Spanish course

According to a study by the online language learning provider Preply, Mandarin, Spanish, English, and Hindi will be the four most widely spoken languages in the world by 2050 (cf. Stettner 2021). All these languages will have an increase in native speakers, with English and Spanish increasing the most by 44%. With nearly 700 million native speakers, Spanish remains in the lead, followed by English with more than 500 million. French and Italian, on the other hand, are only growing slowly

and will increase at most by 7% and 2% respectively. While Mandarin will be spoken by nearly 1.2 billion native speakers by 2050, it will only grow by 27% due to its aging population and decreasing birth rate.

According to the world language encyclopaedia *Ethnologue* (cf. 2022), Spanish is ranked fourth among world languages, with 475 million native speakers and 74 million second-language speakers. Spanish provides access to many countries in Latin America. It must also be taken into account that the population of the USA is changing significantly: While the percentage of the Spanish-speaking minority (Hispanics) was only 6% in 1980, it is estimated to increase to 29% by 2060 (cf. Tricarico 2016).

In view of the rapid growth of the Spanish-speaking population, it is not surprising that the students' personal interest in Spanish and Spanish-speaking countries is extremely high. Both in winter semester 2022/23 and summer semester 2023, the percentage was 86%.

WS 2022/23

I am attending a Spanish course at *treffpunkt sprachen* for the following reason:

	Studies	Career	Personal interest	Other	Total
Spanish	32	5	113	5	132
%	24%	4%	86%	4%	

Table 7: Reasons for attending a Spanish course (WS 2022/23) © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

SS 2023

I am attending a Spanish course at *treffpunkt sprachen* for the following reason:

	Studies	Career	Personal interest	Other	Total
Spanish	28	5	88	3	102
%	27%	5%	86%	3%	

Table 8: Reasons for attending a Spanish course (SS 2023) © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

As part of the abovementioned survey by Brameshuber (cf. 2021: 209–212), 520 students were given a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) that asked about the reason why they took a course at *treffpunkt sprachen*. The students’ responses on the reasons for attending a foreign language course are shown in the following figure:

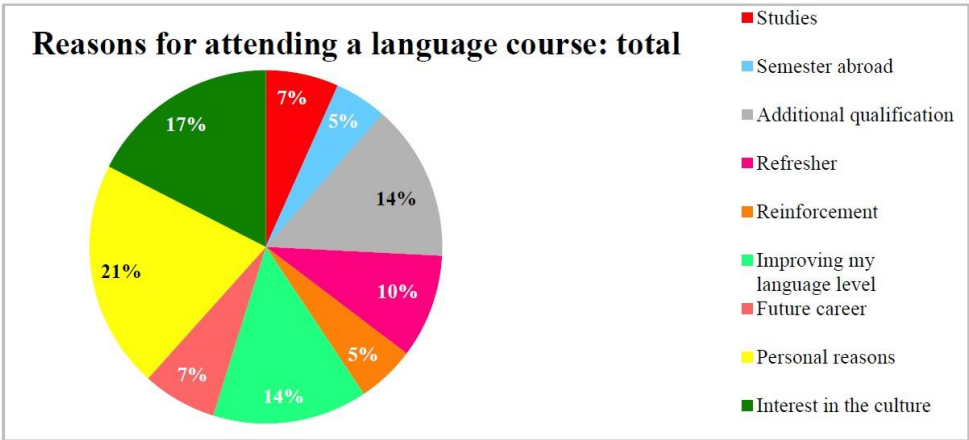


Figure 20: Reasons for attending a language course: total © *treffpunkt sprachen*.

When it comes to the decision to attend a language course, the students surveyed predominantly cited personal reasons. During one-on-one interviews, the students stated that one of the main motivation factors was the joy of being able to understand the content of foreign language media such as series, music, and books. In terms of reading books, they are encouraged in a positive way to look up certain words that they do not understand immediately. Very good experiences are also based on trouble-free communication with fellow international students or on trips abroad.

Regarding interest in foreign cultures, the students mentioned the importance of foreign languages within the family. This was reinforced, for example, by trips abroad together or the students coming from bilingual homes. The influence of parents or family members as well as the related desire to understand a language properly and thus to engage with a language privately outside the course were of key importance to the students. Thus, it is also understandable that personal interest and getting to know foreign cultures are always ranked at the top. In third place, with 14% each, are improving one’s language level and the additional qualification. Besides one’s personal development, students see the continuous expansion of

their language skills as a big benefit, both in terms of their studies as well as their future career.

One reason why students decide not to attend a Spanish course could be due to the richness and the complexity of the Spanish language: particularly in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Students find it difficult to use the *subjuntivo* properly. The Spanish subjunctive is used to talk about feelings and wishes or to express opinion or doubt. It can be in different tenses and usually follows certain signal words. *Word order* in Spanish follows the SPO pattern (subject – predicate [verb] – object). However, the subject does not always have to be overtly expressed because it is often implied by the conjugated verb. Besides the definite and indefinite articles that are placed before nouns and indicate gender (masculine or feminine) and number (singular or plural), it is particularly the *special characters* that present problems to students. They are confronted by the question: When do I have to use them? When not? What is their significance? Austrian students are probably also unfamiliar with the inverted question mark (¿). In Spanish, the inverted question mark is used at the beginning of an interrogative sentence and the normal question mark at the end. For example, ¿Qué tal? Compared to other languages, Spanish pronunciation does not seem to be a big obstacle to students, especially since there are rules for the pronunciation of certain letter combinations which are easy to memorise. There is no doubt that grammar is particularly demanding in Spanish. Willpower and discipline are therefore important, as it is not easy to learn a new language at the beginning.

3. Summary and outlook

In summary, it can be stated that the course offerings and the number of participants in the traditional school languages of English, French, Italian, and Spanish have declined sharply at *treffpunkt sprachen* – Centre for Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics over the last 16 years. The increasingly low demand has led to a development in the number of courses on offer, which is reflected in less encouraging figures.

An analysis of the course offerings has shown that the number of traditional language courses and the corresponding number of participants from the 2007/08 to the 2022/23 academic year has always been subject to fluctuations. The offer of English courses has decreased from 25 to 14 courses, and the number of participants has fallen from 455 to 212. The highest number of courses offered was 36 in the 2010/11 academic year, and the highest number of participants was 669 in the 2012/13 academic year. The situation is similar in the Romance languages: At the

beginning, in the 2007/08 academic year, there were 17 French courses, 17 Italian courses, and 23 Spanish courses. The number of courses on offer has been reduced to 14 (French), 12 (Italian), and 22 (Spanish) by the 2022/23 academic year. The number of participants fell from 325 to 284 (French), from 334 to 220 (Italian), and from 453 to 449 (Spanish) persons. At first glance, the development of the course offerings does not appear to be a cause for concern, but this article has pointed out that there were peaks in certain academic years that need to be reached again in the future: 26 courses (2010/11) in French, 23 courses (2008/09 and 2011/12) in Italian, and 36 courses (2009/10) in Spanish. Regarding the number of participants, the highest number of participants in French courses was 493 in the 2016/17 academic year, 421 in Italian courses in the 2011/12 academic year, and 747 in Spanish courses in the 2009/10 academic year.

Different factors, depending on the language, have been discussed as reasons for attending or not attending a traditional language course:

The declining demand for English courses is probably related to the school education of Austrian students, who do not consider it expedient to complete a general English course due to their good knowledge of English. Students seem more interested in attending an English course for specific purposes. Besides studies and career, personal reasons also play a role in learning English, which were examined in more detail as part of a study conducted at *treffpunkt sprachen* with 520 students. The numbers analysed suggest that more and more learners are learning a foreign language for personal, cultural, and reasons of enjoyment. The students' personal interest in learning English is reflected in the increased use of streaming services, making it easier for young people to access content and improve their English in an unconventional way.

Regarding the motivations for attending a French course, the benefits of learning French mentioned by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs were compared with the attitude of students at *treffpunkt sprachen*. The comparison showed that the decisive factors for students were, for example, French as a working language and official language of the UN, the European Union, UNESCO, and NATO, as well as traveling and getting to know French culture.

Reasons for the declining demand for French courses could be related to the students' history with learning French. In the course of the abovementioned survey, the students surveyed described their negative experiences with language learning and referred to earlier experiences at school that left a negative impression on them. Being forced to learn and pressure at school were perceived as being nega-

tive, as were problems communicating and pronunciation difficulties. Another reason mentioned for not attending a French course was French grammar, the complexity of which requires from students a certain degree of discipline and precision which they do not feel capable of achieving.

Geography, history, and tourism play an important role for students when it comes to attending an Italian course. The geographical proximity and the fact that Italy has been one of the most popular vacation destinations for Austrians for many years are probably obvious reasons for learning Italian. Google search queries reflect, in particular, these reasons and are consistent with the personal interests of students.

Reasons for the declining demand for Italian courses could be related – similar to French – to student experiences with learning Italian. In the course of a didactic project dealing with the first language (L1) German as a fundamental competence for learning other foreign languages, it was demonstrated that a sound and reflective command of one's first language is the basic prerequisite for successfully learning other languages. The evaluation of the data led to the conclusion that the majority of students have serious gaps in their knowledge of terminology and are not familiar with the exact terms nor with the functions of individual parts of speech. Accordingly, students also lack knowledge of the relevant grammatical categories, which is essential for learning Italian.

When it comes to deciding on attending a Spanish course, the students surveyed most often mentioned personal reasons. During one-on-one interviews conducted as part of the survey, the students stated that their main motivation was the joy they experienced in being able to understand content of foreign language media such as series, music, and books. They also emphasised the high value placed on foreign languages at home. The influence of parents or family members as well as the related desire to understand a language properly and thus to engage with a language privately outside the course were of key importance to the students.

One reason why students decided not to attend a Spanish course could be the richness and complexity of the Spanish language: particularly with regard to vocabulary and grammar.

In view of the fact that for all the languages analysed, the students' personal interest comes before their professional ambitions as the motivation for attending a language course, it is advisable to include the factor of intrinsic motivation in future course planning and to promote students' curiosity and openness to other cultures with special offers. The focus should be on intercultural dimensions such as knowledge of the country and its rules and customs, *dos and don'ts*, cultural pitfalls,

university life, and interesting facts about living in the respective country or city, to assist the students' learning process in line with their personal interests and to take away a certain reluctance to making mistakes when learning a language. Only by offering new and innovative courses can university language centres avoid the risk of their course offerings being deemed insufficient or obsolete by the rectorate and sooner or later the continued existence of the service institution being put up for discussion.

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Appendix 1

Fragebogen

Sprachkurse

Kurstitel: _____

treffpunkt sprachen
ZENTRUM FÜR SPRACHE,
PLURILINGUALISMUS UND FACHDIDAKTIK



Angaben zur Person

Alter: _____

Geschlecht:

☐ weiblich ☐ männlich ☐ divers

Nationalität: _____

Angaben zur Ausbildung

1. Ich studiere an der ...

☐ GEWI ☐ NAWI ☐ REWI ☐ SOWI
☐ Theologie ☐ URBI ☐ Sonstiges: _____

2. Derzeit betreibe ich mein/e ...

☐ Bachelorstudium ☐ Master-/Diplomstudium ☐ Doktoratsstudium
☐ Habilitation ☐ kein laufendes Studium.

3. Ich befinde mich im ...

☐ ersten ☐ zweiten ☐ dritten ☐ vierten ☐ fünften Studien-
jahr.

Angaben zum Spracherwerb

4. Ich spreche bereits ...

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ mehr als 3

... Fremdsprachen.

5. Diese Sprachen sind: _____

6. Mein Interesse an Fremdsprachen wurde durch ...

☐ Familie ☐ Schule ☐ Studium ☐ Reisen

☐ Interesse an anderen Kulturen ☐ Sonstiges: _____

... geweckt.

7. Ich besuche diesen Fremdsprachenkurs aus den folgenden Gründen:

☐ Studium ☐ Auslandssemester ☐ Zusatzqualifikation
☐ Auffrischung ☐ Vertiefung ☐ Erhöhung des Sprachniveaus
☐ Zukünftiger Beruf ☐ Persönliche Gründe ☐ Interesse an der Kultur

Vielen Dank für Ihre Unterstützung!

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Appendix 2

Fragenkatalog – Interviews

1. Angaben des Fragebogens: Alter, Herkunft, Geschlecht, Fakultät, Studium, Studienjahr, wie viele Fremdsprachen, welche Fremdsprachen, Gründe für das Interesse an Sprachen, Gründe für den Kursbesuch.
2. Welchen Sprachkurs besuchen Sie derzeit am *treffpunkt sprachen*?
3. Was hat Sie dazu bewegt, eine neue Sprache zu erlernen, und warum war es genau diese Sprache?
4. Wann und wie kam es zu Ihrem ersten Kontakt mit Fremdsprachen?
5. Beschreiben Sie positive sowie negative Erfahrungen in Ihrem bisherigen Leben bezüglich des Fremdsprachenerwerbs (Schule etc.).
6. Sind Sie der Meinung, dass Frauen ein größeres Talent für Sprachen besitzen und im Allgemeinen über eine höhere Kommunikationsfähigkeit verfügen als Männer?
7. Ist es Ihrer Ansicht nach überhaupt möglich, Mehrsprachigkeit auf Talent zurückzuführen?
8. Welche Erfahrungen oder Eindrücke konnten Sie diesbezüglich im Fremdsprachenkurs sammeln, den Sie gerade selbst besuchen?
9. Bestimmt Ihrer Meinung nach das weibliche Geschlecht die Fähigkeit, eine neue Sprache zu erlernen?
10. Sind Sie der Meinung, dass Stereotypen eine Rolle in dieser Thematik spielen, oder gibt es möglicherweise andere Gründe?
11. Ist das Sprachenlernen Ihrer Auffassung nach eine Sache der persönlichen Vorlieben oder gibt es dafür historische Gründe (natürliche Eignungen)?
12. Wie beurteilen Sie die Relevanz des sozialen und kulturellen Umfelds bezüglich des Erwerbs einer neuen Sprache?
13. Ist für Sie eher das Geschlecht einer Person oder ihr soziales Umfeld für den Spracherwerb ausschlaggebend?
14. Was sind Ihre persönlichen Beweggründe diesbezüglich? Beeinflussten Sie Freunde, Reisen bzw. kulturelle Vorlieben oder standen berufliche Ambitionen bei Ihnen im Vordergrund?

Vielen Dank für Ihre Unterstützung!

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Interest in traditional school languages such as English, French, Italian, and Spanish has changed considerably in the tertiary education sector over the last few years. While the number of courses in “small-” and “medium-sized” languages is increasing and a tentative trend is emerging, particularly in Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, the traditional languages often advocated by the European Union are losing importance. Based on the example of the University of Graz’s Centre for Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics, the development of the “main languages” of English, French, Italian, and Spanish is shown for the period from the 2007/2008 academic year to the 2022/2023 academic year. An in-depth analysis of the course offerings and demand enables conclusions to be drawn about students’ behaviour in terms of foreign language learning and leads to considerations concerning what the primary motives are for learning or not learning a foreign language.