

St. Joseph’s R.C.

High School

**Top Tips for parents on how to offer help and support with Languages homework and independent practice.**

Modern Languages is a subject area which many conscientious parents fret about. At Parents’ Evenings we, the teachers, regularly hear things like: “I worry because I just can’t help him with his Spanish like I can with other things.” Here are some thoughts on how you **can** help. Language learning should be viewed a little like learning an instrument; your child will need time, space and encouragement to practise regularly. Indeed, the occasional opportunity to perform will be a huge motivator too.

1. **Test them on their vocab and verb endings** – there is no way around it, vocabulary needs to be learnt. There are a host of ways to learn vocab: using flash cards, sticking post-it notes around the house, grouping words by gender, listing them alphabetically or thematically, making excel spreadsheets and hiding columns. You can test them regularly, sharing the journey to learn new words yourself and helping them find their most effective way to learn.
2. Once they believe they have grasped the formation of a new tense, **get them to teach it to you** and explain how it compares in form and use to English. As well as the educational benefits associated with explanation, it will be motivating for them to hear you struggle over the pronunciation. This will help you share the journey as you are inspired to learn with them. You can follow [Duolingo](https://www.duolingo.com/) on your smart phone or invest in a suitable grammar book and progress with them with some healthy competition!
3. **Encourage them to speak the language as much as possible**. When the question: “How was school today?” is greeted with a teenage grunt, take another approach such as: “Tell me 3 things you did at school today in French.” Get them to tell you and confirm what they’ve said in English. Similarly, to practise the future tense, a question every Sunday evening might be: “Tell me 5 things you are going to do at school this week.”
4. Invariably, teachers will create targets for students to work on in order to improve their next piece of work. It might be something like “To improve, check: adjective agreement, include more opinions and use more infinitive expressions.” Over tea, before your son or daughter embarks on their latest Spanish homework, **ask them what the areas for improvement from last time were** and how they are going to attempt to address these areas.
5. **Support smart use of resources**. Before setting about a homework for Languages, students need all of their resources to hand – vocab book, dictionary (traditional or online), as well as their exercise book and course book where appropriate. You can help to promote sensible use of online dictionaries. **Simply inserting lumps of text into Google Translate is not developing any linguistic skills** and, invariably, it will be obvious to the teacher, either because the language is incongruent with other language produced or because the words have been translated too literally and are completely out of context. Similarly, when using an online dictionary, you can help them to realise that it is no use inserting conjugated verbs (e.g. drinks), but rather you need to have the infinitive (to drink) after which they can apply the rules of conjugation learnt in lessons.
6. **Provide opportunities for them to use the language for real purposes to build confidence**. This may be choosing to take your family holiday in the country where the language is spoken, spending time in places where English will be less prominent. Alternatively, it could be a family meal at an authentic restaurant where all the staff are from the country. Other creative and beneficial ways of using the language for real purposes could include watching a French version of a film on Netflix; listening to the news on an authentic Spanish radio station, or even sponsoring a child in Spanish-speaking Central America or Francophone African nations, through various charities, and having regular communication.
7. **Attend cultural events and performances associated with your child’s foreign language(s) whenever you can**.
8. **Tap into their interests by encouraging them to listen to music in the foreign language**. They can find the lyrics on Google and follow them whilst listening and join in. Look if the language being learnt is an alternative setting on their favourite DVDs or Netflix, they can watch them again with you in the foreign language with English subtitles. You’ll be surprised how much extra language they pick up.
9. Be nostalgic through **purchasing the** [**foreign language version of a story book**](https://www.little-linguist.co.uk/) **your child used to enjoy as a toddler**. Such books are excellent. Your child will already know the story and will be able to make useful deductions on vocabulary and, invariably, such books are excellent to see the past tenses in context.
10. **Place a strong emphasis on discussion and debate of various topics**. For success at GCSE, your child will need strong opinions on areas such as school uniform, healthy living, the environment and friends vs. family. Ultimately, they need to have opinions on things and this is of wider importance for their education. They can watch [TED talks](https://www.ted.com/talks?sort=newest&language=es) (preferably with subtitles in the language they’re learning) and read a quality newspaper.
11. **Follow the Modern Languages Department Twitter** @Joeys\_MFL **and Instagram** joeysmfl **accounts**. Here we share news and current affairs from the countries where our languages are spoken (both in English and in the foreign language). We also give updates on news linked to language learning. You can also keep up-to-date with any trips taking place.
12. Where possible, **support school trips which are tailored to enable students to embrace the foreign language and its cultures**. These are experiences which will provide a springboard to inspire further learning.

# MFL FAQs from Parents:

1. **My child struggles with English. Wouldn’t it be better for him/her to concentrate more time on getting better at his/her first language?** Learning a foreign language is an essential core entitlement for all of our students and we wouldn’t see a relative weakness in any subject area as a suitable reason to deprive any student of their right to learn a foreign language. All students are capable of learning a foreign language and doing anything to make them believe otherwise is unhelpful. In fact, language lessons can provide less confident students with a real boost as they are often all beginning with a similar level of knowledge. The fact that we develop many skills in language learning that are essential for progress in other subjects, such as memory, problem-solving and thinking skills means that learning languages contributes much to the child’s overall ability of learning. It is not simply a matter of the foreign language words they acquire.
2. **English is the most widely spoken language in the world. Why does my child need another language as well?** English is a very important world language still in the 21st century but it definitely isn’t enough. It is still the case that only 6% of the world’s population speak English as a first language and that 75% don’t speak any English. Perhaps even more important than this is that anyone who goes to school in countries where English is not the first language spends a significant time learning it. That means that our young people increasingly have to compete with those from other countries who have at least one language in addition to English. Perhaps it’s ironic but nowadays the fact that everyone has English makes it even more important that our young people learn foreign languages.
3. **My child did a different language at primary school and feels behind everyone else in the class. Couldn’t s/he have more of a different subject instead?** This can be the perception at first and I can understand that your child feels a little worried. But in fact there are several children in each class who didn’t have the opportunity to learn any languages at their primary school and they are beginning from scratch. Your child has the advantage of having developed some of the essential skills involved in learning a foreign language, for example, attentive listening, noticing, memory and pattern-finding. These will transfer extremely well to his/her language learning here at secondary school. The teacher is aware that classes have mixed experience and will compensate for this in the early stages by revising the basics too. Soon after starting at St. Joseph’s High School we are confident that your child will feel happy that s/he knows at least as much as everyone else
4. **I wasn’t very good at languages at school myself and I can’t help my child with his/her homework. S/he is getting very worried about language lessons and I wonder if s/he should have to do a language anyway?** The best support that you can give your child is your enthusiasm and encouragement. For that no language knowledge is needed. Anxiety is contagious but if you are positive and supportive, reassuring him/her that s/he will be fine and advising him/her to seek the support of the teacher with homework, this will be all that is needed. If you have the time to spend a few minutes sitting alongside and going through the words s/he has to learn, this would be incredibly beneficial too. It is hard in the early stages for students to know for themselves when they know the words or not, and having someone who can test them provides the reassurance that they need, not to mention the fact that it’s far more fun to learn like that. Just as you worked with your child on tables and spellings, you can do the same routine with language vocabulary. If you are unsure about pronunciation then you just say the English – you’ll be able to recognise if your child is saying the correct foreign word back to you. If you would like to be able to pronounce the foreign words, then why not try some of the websites we have recommended.
5. **My son/daughter already knows that s/he wants to be a plumber. Why does s/he need to learn a language?** At your son/daughter’s age we all planned to be something we are probably not! One important thing to mention is that our hopes and plans can change as we get older and we should not, at this early stage in education, close down any avenues that might be useful to us in later life. And of course, whilst it is great for young people to have plans and aspirations, it is also a fact that many of the jobs that our children will end up doing as adults do not yet exist. The world is changing rapidly and the best that education can do for its young people is equip them with skills rather than knowledge; skills that they can employ in any new situation. Language learning has a significant role to play in developing generic skills that will stand young people in good stead to meet the challenges an ever-changing world will present them with. For example, language learning develops the skills of memory, attention to detail, noticing, pattern-finding, creative thinking and reasoning. It is difficult to imagine any jobs that wouldn’t require these skills.
6. **My child can’t remember spellings in English so how is s/he going to manage a foreign language?** Achievement in languages is measured in terms of performance in four skills and these are assessed separately. These are listening, speaking, reading and writing. The ability to spell accurately is only assessed in one of these four skills: writing. Those learners who do not spell well can excel in other aspects of language learning, such as speaking and understanding. Obviously, there are speakers of French, German, Spanish and every other language who do not spell well and this does not prevent them from speaking their language well. Furthermore, your child is beginning his/her foreign language learning at a different stage in his/her educational development and may find that s/he is now much more able to remember spelling patterns than when learning English spellings in primary school. Foreign language learning can sometimes be a second chance at acquiring a certain skill set. And because all learners are at a similar early stage in their foreign language learning, teachers are able to focus explicitly on memory strategies to improve accuracy in spelling and these skills can be transferred across into other subjects, so in fact you may find that the work your child does in languages actually helps improve the accuracy of his/her English spelling.

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# FAQs at KS4/GCSE

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1. **My son/daughter has decided what s/he wants to do in the future and it doesn’t need a language so why should s/he have to keep doing one?** It is very difficult to be sure these days that learning a foreign language won’t be either necessary or useful to a chosen career path. There are some jobs where it is an integral part, some where it is a useful bonus and others where it is just an advantage because it indicates a general ability level and open outlook. One thing that you can be sure of – it is never a disadvantage to have studied a language.
2. **My son/daughter says that languages are the most difficult subject and s/he doesn’t feel that s/he is any good at them. Why should s/he use up an option choice on a language?** In today’s world we think learning a foreign language is something that should be seen as much an essential skill for life as say, driving or ICT skills. It is always something that you would want to write on your CV, regardless of the job you are applying for. It says something about the individual’s outlook; that s/he is flexible, adaptable and open to new challenges. But more than this, there are two key things that make language learning essential rather than optional: first, it remains the case that 75% world’s population speaks no English and second, the fact that most young people who are non-native English speaking are ensuring that they learn it, means that English is no longer a significant advantage to any British person entering the job market. If all those competing for the better jobs in a country can speak English, then those with other languages will have the edge.
3. **My son/daughter hasn’t enjoyed languages at KS3. How is KS4 different to KS3?** Languages get more enjoyable as you get better at them. Your son/daughter should find that as s/he is able to express him/herself better on a wider range of topics s/he gets more of a sense of achievement and appreciates what s/he is able to do independently with the language. Also, the GCSE course now offers much more choice and flexibility in terms of the main topics that s/he will concentrate on for speaking and writing so s/he will find it interesting.
4. **I have read somewhere that languages are the most difficult subject to do well in at GCSE. Why should my son/daughter do a language if s/he could get better grades in a different subject?** I am not sure that languages are the most difficult subject to do well in – I think a lot depends on the learner of course. However, it is true that, relative to other GCSEs, language GCSEs are more difficult than most. But if languages are perceived as difficult, they may also attract greater recognition from Higher Education providers and employers – it stands to reason that they will be valued more highly due to the perceived difficulty. And in addition to the academic value, we should not forget that learning a foreign language is a life skill, akin to ICT skills or driving a car.

**5. I don’t think my son/daughter will get a pass (4/5) or above at GCSE in a language so what’s the point of him/her carrying on?** It is very difficult to predict GCSE grades before the student has even started the course. If the data indicate that your son/daughter will most likely achieve a certain grade, this is by no means a given. Such data should at best be viewed as helpful in predicting overall achievement for a whole cohort of students but are far less accurate when applied to individuals and individual grades. This is because they do not factor in motivation or effort. In our experience, these are the greatest variables in achievement in all subjects, but certainly in languages, where raw talent or ability is just one part of the picture. And as to the question of whether a grade lower than 4/5 in a language is worthwhile, we have to consider how foreign languages are perceived by Higher Education providers and employers. We are convinced that it is never a disadvantage to a young person’s career prospects to have studied a language at GCSE.

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# Remember that…

1. **Languages are a life skill**: Knowledge of a foreign language is not just another GCSE grade – it is a concrete and demonstrable life skill, like being able to drive a car or touch-type, and it is a skill highly valued by employers.
2. **Languages teach you communication skills and adaptability**: Learning how to interact with speakers of other languages means you are less likely to be stuck in one mode of thinking. It can help you see things from a range of perspectives, develop your problem-solving skills, and make you more adaptable, resourceful and creative.
3. **Languages teach you cultural awareness**: The ability to operate cross-culturally is becoming just as valued by employers as straight language skills.
4. **Languages give you a sense of achievement**: Learning a language combines the intellectual with the practical as no other subject does. You need to be able to think on your feet, but when you can find exactly the right foreign word or phrase, you get a real sense of achievement.
5. **Languages are a social skill**: Languages are very sociable. If you enjoy being with people and communicating with them, the chances are you will enjoy being able to do this in a foreign language too.
6. **Languages give you the edge in the job market**: Today there is a global market for jobs. It is not necessary to be completely fluent in a foreign language to be an asset to any potential employer. Knowing how to meet and greet people from other countries and cultures is a valued skill.
7. **Learning languages gives you greater opportunities to travel and work abroad**: There are many opportunities to travel or work with organisations abroad where some knowledge of a foreign language is a clear advantage.



