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Impact of the EU Language Agenda on Higher Education: The Case of Rey Juan Carlos University in Madrid

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Abstract

Twenty years after the implementation of the bilingual programmes at school level in Spain, this study evaluates its impact on the English language proficiency of undergraduate students at Rey Juan Carlos University in Madrid through a descriptive longitudinal study (2014–2024) of enrolment data (N = 77,834) in Modern Language, a cross-curricular subject included in all second-year academic itineraries which can be validated through an official language certificate. The study examines a significant amount of information concentrating on the following variables: figures for total enrolment in Modern Language, for students who study the subject and for those who validate it, and final average validation grade in terms of academic record and CEFRL levels. Our findings evidence notable progress in the linguistic competence of undergraduates —not only has the number of Modern Language validations increased over the last decade, the average level of submitted English official certificates has improved from a B1 to a B2— suggesting a positive correlation between the implementation of the bilingual project and the language proficiency of students. This study provides insights into the effectiveness of the European Union’s language agenda and demonstrates the influence of school policies on students’ language proficiency in higher education.

Keywords: *Bilingual Education, Higher Education, English Certification, Academic Validation, Linguistic Competence*

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Introduction

The European Union’s agenda at the turn of the millennium has embraced multilingualism and multiculturalism not only as a means to promote the inclusivity of all Member States, but also

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as a tool that promotes economic development and power. In this regard, plurilingual education and foreign language learning have emerged as essential tools and challenges since “[t]he formation, establishment, and expansion of the European Union (EU) have created the condition of language needs across its [M]ember [S]tates [...] if we are to enter dialogue and economic relations with each other” (Grenfell, 2002, p. 3), and thus provide European citizens with equal opportunities to compete in the labour market (Codó, 2023; Dendrinós, 2018; Milt, 2025). This is reflected in European policies which have attempted to unify and regulate the efforts of countries throughout all educational stages with the development, launch, and implementation of a number of instruments —the Erasmus Programme (1987), the White Paper on Education and Training (1995), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001), the European Language Portfolio (2001), the Bologna Process (1999) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA; 2010), or the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (2006), among others— aimed at providing coherence through a holistic approach (Council of Europe, 2024). In parallel, ongoing institutional actions and events¹ have taken place aimed at providing guidelines, supervision and support (Makay & Martínez Garzón, 2025), although this roadmap has proved sketchy and resulted in dissimilar outcomes and levels of success (Anghel et al., 2016; Bruton, 2013; Reljic et al., 2015; Van Mesel et al., 2020). In this sense, the very same diversity that has cemented the Union while respecting the idiosyncrasies of the Member States has led to significant variations regarding the promotion of foreign language acquisition and the implementation of bilingual programmes, mainly influenced by different classroom practices and national educational policies (Amor et. al, 2023; Dendrinós, 2018; Julián de Vega & Ávila López, 2018; McCallum, 2022).

In the case of Spain, the origins of bilingual education are deeply rooted in the influence of European language policies, and its implementation was marked by a transition from traditional to contemporary teaching methods and region-specific programmes. The country’s configuration in autonomous communities, each with its own language and educational policies, has involved the development of different bilingual programmes on a regional rather than national scale. In the Community of Madrid (CAM, in its Spanish acronym), the bilingual project of education was first introduced in 2004 and has, over the last twenty years, triggered a remarkable educational reform aimed at enhancing English language proficiency and fostering intercultural competence among students (Cenoz et al., 2013; Coyle et al., 2010; Gómez-Parra, 2020; Marsh, 2013; Otto et. al, 2024). Two decades later, this paper sets out to evaluate the success of the project concerning language proficiency, and answer the following question: Has the bilingual programme of education implemented in the CAM had a positive effect on the average English language proficiency of students who access higher education?

¹ See, for example, the European Year of Languages 2001 (European Parliament, 2000), *Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: Action plan 2004-2006* (European Union, 2004) and *A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism* (Commission of the European Communities, 2005), the *Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-13* (European Union, 2006), the 2017 communication “Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture” (European Union, 2018), the 2022 Conference on the Future of Europe (European Union, 2022) or the European Day of Languages (European Commission, 2024), among many others; the list is endless.

Working with a sample of between nearly 6,800 and 9,000 students per year over a ten-year period, this paper analyses the data of second-year undergraduate students at Rey Juan Carlos University, the second-largest higher education institution in the CAM.

Evolution of the Language Agenda of the European Union

Established in 1993, The EU represents the culmination of a decades-long process of unity and integration between a growing number of European countries which began after World War II. The timeline and evolution of the process present the consolidation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, which, together with manifold collateral institutions, lay the foundations of the Union as we know it today. However, the character and scope of the project has changed over time and these organisations were established to pursue political, legal and commercial bonds that would constitute a strong economic Europe in international terms. In this context, the European Social Fund, also created in 1957, recognised the importance of social policy and occupational mobility of workers across the territories to achieve economic integration (Britannica, 2025), although it would take a further fourteen years to translate this into educational needs.

Thus, education did not have a part in the organisational chart of the EEC and was not considered a potential unifying element until 1971 with the establishment of the European Centre for Education and subsequent 1976 Resolution of the Council and of the Ministers of Education comprising an action programme in the field of education, which set out and outlined a common ground for policies and goals in general terms, and more specifically to our subject matter, issued a request to Member States to promote foreign language learning in their educational systems, albeit with uneven results (European Union, n. d.; Otto et. al, 2024; Valle, 2006). This first effort to delineate a multilingual Europe would eventually gain momentum and form in the 1990s with the White Paper on Education and Training, a text addressing the diverse linguistic needs of Europeans through the introduction of early language education and trilingualism, and a launch pad for the eventual recommendation of using English as a medium of instruction (Marsh, 2002).

The White Paper on Education and Training

If 1993 witnessed the concluding configuration of the UE, in 1995 the White Paper on Education and Training: Teaching and Learning - Towards the Knowledge Society by the Commission of the European Communities (1995) outlines a vision for advancing education and skills across Europe to meet the demands of a globalised world. The document materialised Europe's policies and objectives concerning education and outlined a major shift in practical teaching, turning bilingual education at all levels into a potential reality in the years to come. In theory, the White Paper deemed essential for the educational policies of Member States to procure citizens able to use two foreign languages other than their own, while facilitating student and professional mobility. In practice, the EU's commitment to multilingualism led to the structure of initiatives and guidelines that would supply the financial and practical basis for the development and implementation of bilingual programmes by national governments, with an emphasis on early acquisition of a second language at pre-school stage, transdisciplinary second language teaching in primary and secondary education, and international mobility in higher education, so that "[t]he effects of national initiatives, European Commission actions,

Council of Europe activities, and particularly grassroots demands, have resulted in the emergence of CLIL/EMILE as an educational innovation that suits the times, needs and aspirations of learners” (Marsh, 2002, p. 9). This approach was aimed at enhancing cultural understanding, economic mobility, and social integration within the EU. By addressing these priorities, the document seeks to equip European citizens with the tools necessary for lifelong learning and active participation in a diverse, interconnected society (Commission of the European Communities, 1995).

The Bilingual Project of Education in the Community of Madrid

In Spain, a quasi-federal state, and following the European agenda, bilingual programmes of primary education became a relevant issue at the turn of the 21st century, when they were gradually implemented in most autonomous communities of the country in different forms. As established in the White Paper, the aim was not only to acquire proficiency in a second language and competency in a third, but also to endorse foreign languages as vehicles for the acquisition of subject content (Lasagabaster, 2017; Pérez Vidal, 2009).

In this respect, the CAM was one of the first regions to adapt the first-year academic curriculum of 26 public primary schools to a bilingual Spanish-English methodology in the academic year 2004–2005 (Navés, 2009; Navés & Muñoz Lahoz, 2000), with a limited group of students who were then given the opportunity to promote to bilingual secondary education in 2010–2011². These initial public educational centres to integrate the Spanish-English Bilingual Programme of Education were selected after meeting certain requirements set by the regional educational authority, but the initiative became extensive over the following two decades to include most public primary and secondary centres, while subsidised and private centres soon followed suit (Jover et al., 2024; Madrid Fernández & Hughes, 2011). This has resulted in a progressive increase of bilingual Spanish-English education in the region and the figures speak for themselves; in the academic year 2023–2024, the CAM had a total of 404 public bilingual primary schools and 196 public secondary schools offering bilingual sections —i.e., the bilingual programme is now implemented in 50.4% and 64.5% of public primary and secondary educational centres respectively— and 223 subsidised and private bilingual schools of which 97 extend bilingual teaching to the secondary stage (Comunidad de Madrid, 2024). Moreover, upon completion of primary and secondary bilingual education, students take an official language certification exam. This external assessment, conducted according to the guidelines set by the relevant educational authorities, allows students to formally certify their proficiency in the foreign language of instruction and represents an advantage for their academic development and future professional opportunities. In this respect, the goal is for students to sit a B1 English-level official exam at the end of primary education and a minimum B2 level exam at the end of secondary education.

² In the academic year 2006-2007, the bilingual programme was also implemented in French-Spanish and German-Spanish in a very limited number of educational centres, often in parallel with the English-Spanish programme. In 2023-2024, 19 public secondary schools in the CAM offered a French bilingual section and only 7 a German section, in educational centres which are considered trilingual —i.e., English-French-Spanish or English-German-Spanish. It is important to note that public bilingual and trilingual secondary education centres in the Community of Madrid offer two academic sections, one that is monolingual in Spanish and one that is bilingual. A language requirement is necessary to study in the bilingual section (Comunidad de Madrid, 2024).

On the other hand, and in parallel with the implementation of bilingual programs within the Spanish educational system, the European Universities reform took place, guided by the principles of the Bologna Process. This reform sought to improve the quality of higher education, increase its appeal to people worldwide, and boost employability rates (Bautista Vallejo, 2005; Piro, 2016).

The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area

Over the last few decades, European universities have dealt with the social and economic transformations of globalisation and have been forced to redefine their role as a space for reflection and academic experience able to offer students new opportunities in training and research, mobility and knowledge transfer. Launched in 1999, the Bologna Process's main goal has been to address the new challenges of the 21st century through a coherent and competitive approach that brings together higher education systems throughout Europe. With this aim, and as its main working axis, it established the EHEA in 2010, defined by the countries which voluntarily conform it —currently 49 States. The Bologna Process and the EHEA have coordinated a major reform in higher education, consolidating a common framework of qualifications —the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the three-cycle system— and quality assurance which underpins a shift in academic criteria oriented toward employability, lifelong learning, learning mobility, research and innovation, cross-border academic cooperation and mutual recognition of study periods and qualifications earned abroad, and the social dimension of accessibility and inclusivity (European Commission, 2024). More recently, and partially in response to the coronavirus crisis, the EU has released the communication *Achieving a European Education Area by 2025*, readjusting its focus to new social requirements, sustainability, the reality of online learning and “six dimensions: quality, inclusion and gender equality, green and digital transitions, teachers, higher education, a stronger Europe in the world” (European Commission, 2020), the validation period of which is now, in 2024, drawing to a close (Makay & Martínez Garzón, 2025; Matarranz et al., 2020).

The last two decades have therefore witnessed the evolution of university systems across Europe in a challenging process which questions and affects the traditional conceptions of teaching and learning, as well as the practicalities of their structures and curricula contents, including linguistic knowledge. In this respect, proficiency in a second language, usually English, has become a key element for successful mobility and employability, and higher education institutions have worked on the integration of specific subjects focused on its acquisition, while adapting their academic offer to include study programmes in English to attract international students. On the whole, as a logical continuation of bilingual education at school level and in line with the EHEA, university systems have taken charge to offer different EMI —English as a Medium of Instruction— programmes more suited to the new linguistic level and needs of its students, in settings where English is the *lingua franca* for academic communication (Dearden, 2014; De Wit & Merckx, 2023; Julián de Vega & Ávila López, 2018; Macaro et al., 2018). In Spain, and although it is down to the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities to supervise the language policies and academic offer of universities, each institution determines its specific procedures, outcomes, and requirements.

Modern Language at Rey Juan Carlos University of Madrid

In consonance with the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, Spanish universities put into practice different curricular implementations to meet language requirements (European University Association, 2023). In the case of Rey Juan Carlos University (URJC), the second largest university in the CAM, the institution decided to introduce in 2007 a six-credit cross-curricular academic subject, Modern Language (in Spanish, Idioma Moderno), that would equip all students with an official certificate in the language of their choice —English, French, Italian or German— by the end of their studies (Rey Juan Carlos University, 2024). In these 15 years, the subject has changed little, retaining most of its initial idiosyncrasies and characteristics.

Idioma Moderno thus became part of the second-year academic itinerary of all URJC degrees, regardless of whether they are taught in Spanish or English, although students can choose to postpone its study to later years. They can also validate the subject with a minimum B1 official certificate —according to the CEFRL— in any of the four languages offered, since the subject itself consists of a preparation course for an official exam —the TOEIC test in the case of English, the TFI test for French, the CILS test for Italian, and the Goethe Zertifikat Deutsch for German— which students have to sit and pass with a minimum B1 level. This means that all URJC students finish their degree with an official language certificate which they can then use to find employment or, in some cases, study abroad. English has consistently been chosen by between 95% and 97% of Idioma Moderno students over the last 10 years.

Methodology

In agreement with previous literature which acknowledges the value of university education as a platform for the study of sociolinguistic realities (Bellés-Fortuño & Ferrer Alcantud, 2016; Hewitt, 2012; Soler & Gallego-Balsà, 2019), our research focuses on a particular public university in the CAM to analyse the accomplishments of European language policies in the region of Madrid, specifically in connection with the evolution of students' knowledge of English after the introduction of the bilingual programme of primary education in 2004 and its extension to public secondary education in 2010. Working with a sample of all students enrolled in the compulsory and cross-curricular subject of Modern Language at Rey Juan Carlos University of Madrid over a ten-year period —with numbers which fluctuate between 6,727 and 8,977— and two variables —those who validate the subject with an official language certificate and those who actually take the subject— the methodology chosen to conduct our research follows a descriptive and longitudinal approach to analyse students' evolution in relation to language level (Thomas, 2023).

In this sense, a longitudinal methodology allows the collection and analysis of large volumes of numerical data to describe the specific characteristics of a section of the population or phenomenon over a prolonged time period (Bisquerra, 2022; Creswell, 2014; Gayle & Lambert, 2020). This approach provides a detailed panorama of the analysed data and variables through a retrospective study, which yields graphical and numerical representations of results (Babbie, 2020). According to several authors, this methodology is particularly effective to identify patterns and trends, enabling researchers to gain insight into the cause and effect of social phenomena in general and educational policies in particular (Flick, 2018; Hernández Sampieri et al., 2018; Thomas, 2023). Furthermore, its observational and structured nature

ensures greater reliability in data measurements and validity of results, and this prepares a foundation for further potential and more complex research (Creswell, 2014; Guevara et al., 2020).

The application of this methodology has allowed us to identify and evaluate results in relation to academic processes based on evidence and key indicators, such as the percentage of official language certificates accepted to validate a subject, and the grade obtained according to their level, and this offers an empirical panorama of the evolution of a representative part of the population in terms of foreign language acquisition. Our discussion section reflects on the causes behind this evolution.

Context, Participants and Timeframe

Founded in 1996, URJC is the youngest university in the CAM, although it has quickly grown to become the second-largest public university in the region in number of students, with enrolment numbers which have fluctuated little over the last years. With between 37,000 and 40,000 students at degree level in the last decade, URJC represents around 21% of the population at public universities in the region (Statistics Institute, 2025; URJC, 2024).

As previously mentioned, the subject Modern Language is part of the second-year academic itinerary of all undergraduate students at URJC, with enrolment numbers which have fluctuated between roughly 6,800 and 9,000 students per year over the last ten year-period. This timeframe has been chosen for two reasons. The first takes into account the academic timing of the first generation of students to study at Spanish-English bilingual centres in the CAM, who accessed higher education in the academic year 2016–17, in numbers which progressively grew over the following years. In this way, we have the opportunity to compare the average English-language level of students before and after the introduction of the bilingual programme in the CAM, as well as the latter's impact, evolution and projection. The second reason has to do with the validity of the analysis, since the timeframe together with the dimensions of the data involved combine to provide a unique platform of opportunity, a valid sample in terms of significance and representation, to evaluate the evolution of students' knowledge of English in the CAM and therefore assess the impact of the bilingual project of education in English language development.

Instruments and Data Collection

In terms of instruments, we have collected data from two online platforms of the URJC Modern Language subject. The first is the Modern Language application, where students enrolled must formalise their registration to study the subject and choose a language. Both students and professors teaching the subject have access to the application and to limited relevant information they need to satisfy their academic duties³. Access, however, as administrator⁴ opens up a scope of data that goes back ten years and involves detailed information of students enrolled in the subject. The final Excel sheets produced from the Modern Language application have been downloaded by academic year of enrolment to include number of students, semester of study in the subject, campus, chosen language, timetable group, exam details, and final

³ Available at <https://gestion3.urjc.es/imoderno/jsp/alumno/inicio.jsp> and <https://gestion3.urjc.es/imoderno/jsp/profesor/index.jsp> using URJC username and password.

⁴ At <https://gestion3.urjc.es/imoderno/jsp/admin/index.jsp>

grade. These Excel sheets have allowed us to ascertain that, over the studied ten-year period, between 95% and more than 97% of Modern Language students chose English, in accordance with EU policies that promote the language, and this has enabled us to focus the corpus of study and discard information for other languages.

In parallel and as an alternative, students enrolled in Modern Language may choose to validate the subject with a minimum B1 official language certificate, and they can do this by uploading necessary documentation on an online URJC platform available for this purpose⁵. A number of voluntary professors of Modern Language also have access to the platform as experts⁶ in order to authorise or deny students' validation of the subject after examination of relevant documents⁷. Again, access as administrators to this platform⁸ allows the authors to download Excel sheets that provide data on the numbers of validations, chosen language, and final grades obtained in academic records. And once more, the validations submitted reflect such high percentages in English—between 96% and 98% in the last ten years—that it has been possible to reasonably dispose of validations in other languages for the purpose of this study.

Treatment and Analysis of Data

The subsequent historical data for the ten-year period (2014–2024; N = 77,834) was thus collected from both digital platforms (N = 48,889 in the Modern Language application; N = 28,945 in the validation platform) and then anonymised to prepare the sample for analysis. This sample includes all students enrolled in the obligatory and cross-curricular subject of Modern Language at URJC between academic years 2014–15 (N = 7,215) and 2023–24 (N = 7,682).

A longitudinal analysis was conducted employing descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends in the students' knowledge of the English language. The analysed variables include the percentage of students who chose English as their language of study, the number of validations with an official certificate, and their recorded final grades. In this regard, our results show the progress in students' linguistic competence of the English language.

In order to ensure the data's reliability and validity, verification procedures were implemented to detect and correct possible errors in the recording, consistency, and/or completion of the information. Any potential bias derived from the choice of language and/or the validation of official certificates were also considered and controlled. The use of official platforms and data obtained directly from institutional sources guaranteed the validity of the study's information, which has been anonymised to delete personal details, such as names, surnames, identity numbers, and percentages of disability.

The sample obtained from these two platforms encompasses the volume of students enrolled in the cross-curricular subject Modern Language, as part of the official second-year academic itinerary of all URJC degree students, with figures that fluctuate between nearly 6,800 and 9,000 students per year enrolled in English over the last decade. The idea that underpins the

⁵ At <https://gestion2.urjc.es/convalidacionesmanuales/>.

⁶ At <https://gestion2.urjc.es/convalidacionesmanuales/experto/solicitudes-pendientes>.

⁷ The list of official qualifications valid for the validation of Modern Language and their respective grades according to the CEFRL is published on the URJC Intranet and based on the qualifications accepted by the Conference of Spanish University Rectors and the Association of Language Centres in Higher Education.

⁸ At <https://gestion2.urjc.es/convalidacionesmanuales/admin/home>.

study is that a longitudinal analysis of the data will project an evolution in students' average English-language level in Madrid, as evidence of the failure or success of the bilingual project of education ten years after its implementation, and in the context and year of the EU Achieving a European Education Area by 2025.

Results

To begin with, it is perhaps relevant to position the results of our investigation and institution in the wider framework of the CAM. As indicated earlier and despite its youth, URJC has accounted for between approximately 20% and 22% of undergraduate students at public university in the region over the last ten years, as evidenced in the table below.

Table 1

Percentage of URJC Undergraduate Students in the CAM per Year

Year	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24
CAM	168,360	175,282	179,805	182,064	184,429	184,416	183,333	177,165	174,215	174,35
URJC	33,998	36,987	36,677	38,799	40,717	40,595	39,490	38,350	37,171	37,390
%	20.19	21.10	20.40	21.31	22.08	22.01	21.54	21.65	21.23	21.44

Sources: Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, n.d.; Statistics Institute, 2025; URJC, 2024

As can be observed, URJC numbers reflect the fluctuations in undergraduate population in the autonomous community, with a steady increase, peaks in academic years 2018–19 and 2019–20, and a progressive decline to the initial numbers for the studied period. In relation to URJC undergraduate representation in the region, the percentages have changed little, although it is interesting to note that they reached their highest point in the same academic years. However, on a regional and institutional level, the variations in student volumes over the ten-year period are small, and this suggests that enrolment figures have remained more or less stable. This stability is crucial to our assessment of students' language skills, as it implies that the changes observed as a result of our analysis may be a direct consequence of the bilingual programme rather than connected to demographic or enrolment factors. In any case, these figures and percentages justify the validity of our research and the soundness of our data in the broader educational setting of the region, since the university accounts for around a fifth of the CAM's undergraduate population.

In relation to our research questions, the results of our investigation shed light concerning improvement in the average English language proficiency of students enrolled in Modern Language at URJC over the last decade, as discussed in the next section of this paper. This observation is derived from a set of indicators obtained from an analysis of Modern Language enrolment information, including figures for students registered to study the subject as opposed to those who validate it through the provision of an official language certificate, and evolution of validation numbers and grades in terms of academic record and CEFRL levels.

The following table and graph establish an initial classification and visual representation of figures for total enrolment in Modern Language, for students registered to study the subject and students who validate the subject during the ten academic-year cycles.

Table 2

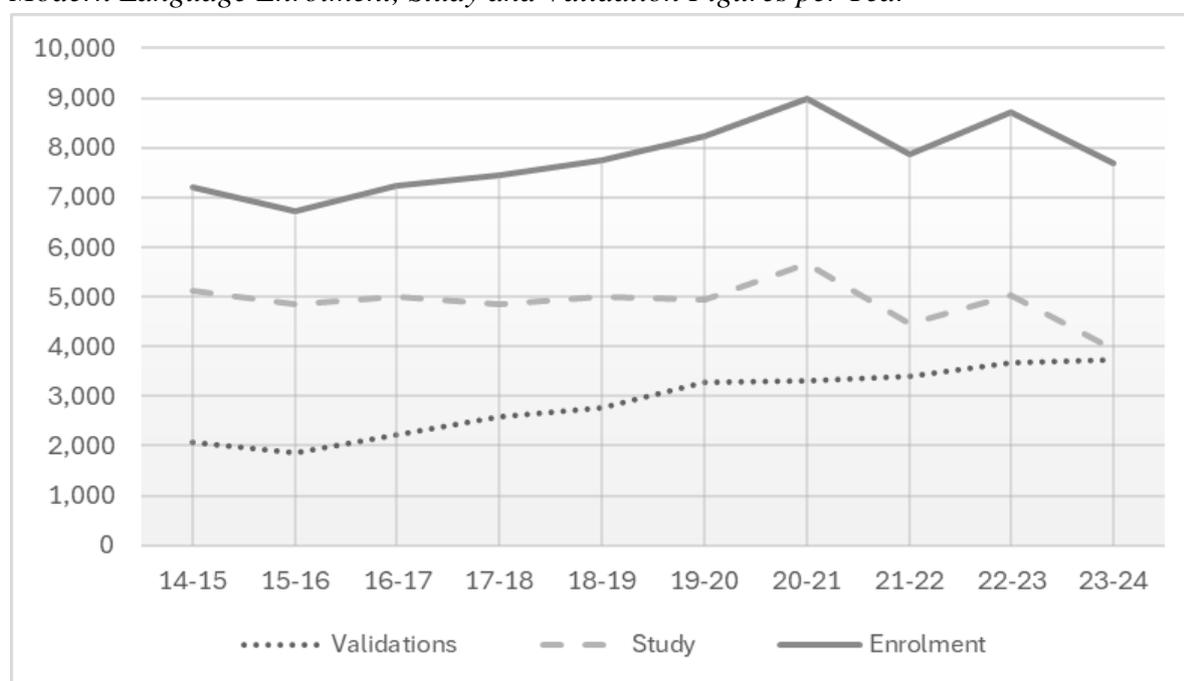
Classification of Modern Language Enrolment by Study and Validation of the Subject per Year

Year	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24
Total enrolment	7,215	6,727	7,239	7,444	7,757	8,225	8,977	7,860	8,708	7,413
Study	5,136	4,851	5,005	4,865	4,994	4,938	5,661	4,452	5,048	3,939
Validation	2,079	1,876	2,234	2,579	2,763	3,287	3,316	3,408	3,660	3,474

Sources: Modern Language application and subject validation platform (URJC, 2024)

Figure 1

Modern Language Enrolment, Study and Validation Figures per Year



Sources: Modern Language application and subject validation platform (URJC, 2024)

Similarly to data for undergraduate population at URJC and the CAM, Modern Language enrolment figures have grown slightly over the last ten cycles —with a minimum of 6,727 students and a maximum of 8,977 students. Starting at 7,215 undergraduates in 2014–15, the data presents a fairly stable trend —with the exception of 2015–16, when the figure fell to 6,727 students— which culminates in academic years 2019–20, 2022–21 and 2022–23 with numbers between 8,000 and 9,000. The trend drops in 2023–24 to 7,413 undergraduates, a figure which is only 2.7% higher than that of the starting-point year of the last ten cycles.

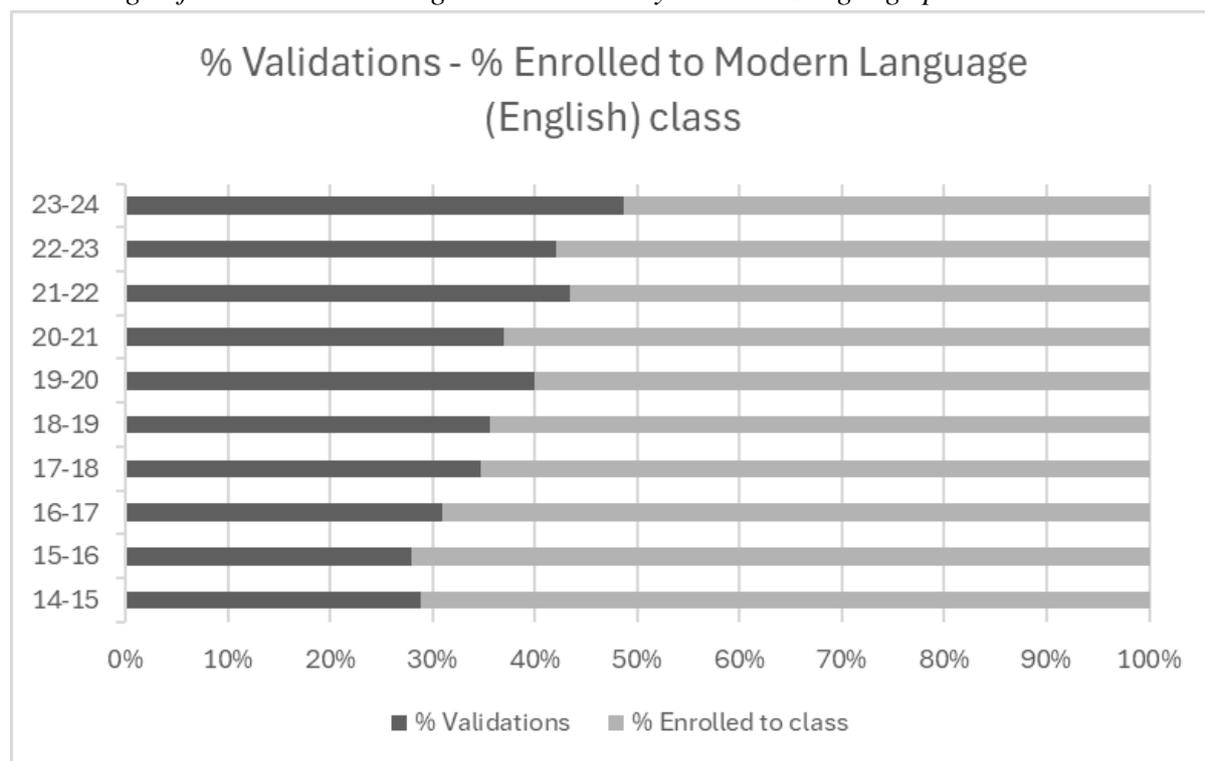
However, if we focus on the data for students who register to study the subject versus those who validate it, the table and graph set out more valuable results. Over the ten-year period, the trend line for students who register to study Modern Language clearly mirrors that of the total number of enrolments in the subject —with coinciding peaks and dips— but with significant differences. Although the trend remains relatively stable during the first six cycles, it is downward, and this tendency gains force in the final year, 2023–24, with practically 1,200

and/or 23.3% less students who register in the subject than in 2014–15. On the other hand, the number of validations increases more or less consistently over the period, with a significant surge in figures if we compare the first and last analysed academic years —2,709 and 3,474, an increment of nearly 1,400 students and/or almost 18%.

That is, there has been a significant decrease in the amount of students who study the subject and an obvious growth in those who validate. This means that the relative percentage of students who validate the subject has risen constantly during the ten-cycle period while the percentage for those who register in the course has decreased, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Percentage of Validations vs. Registration to Study Modern Language per Year



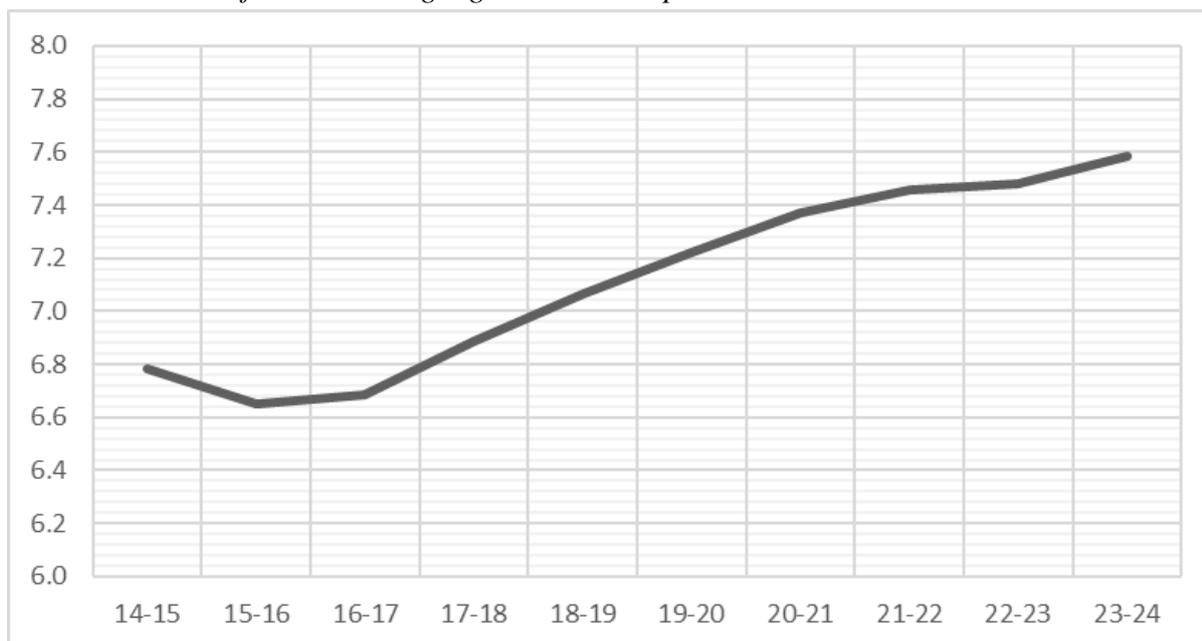
Sources: Modern Language application and subject validation platform (URJC, 2024)

In this regard, the relative amount of students who validate the subject has escalated from 29% in 2014–15 to 47% in 2023–24 —with dips in the tendency which we will discuss later— and, in contrast, the percentage of students studying the subject has dropped accordingly.

These data verify a steady increase in the number of Modern Language validations over the ten-year period. However, in order to confirm and support that this rise is not related to URJC undergraduate figures, it seems relevant to analyse the evolution of validations in terms of certified language level and final recorded grade. This information has nothing to do with the number of validations but rather with the actual English proficiency of students in possession of a recognised language certificate. In order to obtain this key indicator, we have calculated the average grade recorded in the subject for all validations per year, dependent on the level and grade of submitted and approved language certificates. In this regard, over the ten-year period, and as shown in Graph 3, the average grade rose from 6.8 in 2014–15 to 7.6 in 2023–24.

Figure 3

Recorded Grade of Modern Language Validations per Year

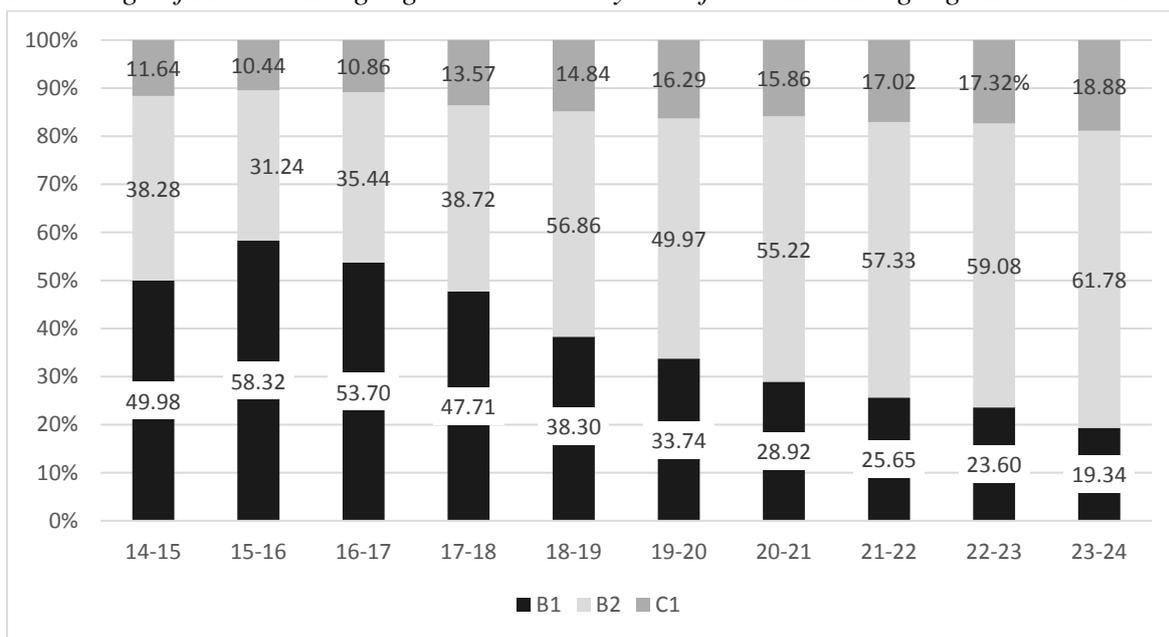


Sources: Modern Language application and subject validation platform (URJC, 2024)

In relation to university academic records, the average grade of students who validate Modern Language has gone up by nearly 0.9%. With regard to language level, this means that their average English language level has improved from a B1 —just below 6.8— to a B2 — 7.6 in URJC grade. If we go further and disaggregate validations by percentage of certified CEFR level for each year in the period, we obtain the following graphs, results and visual evolution:

Figure 4

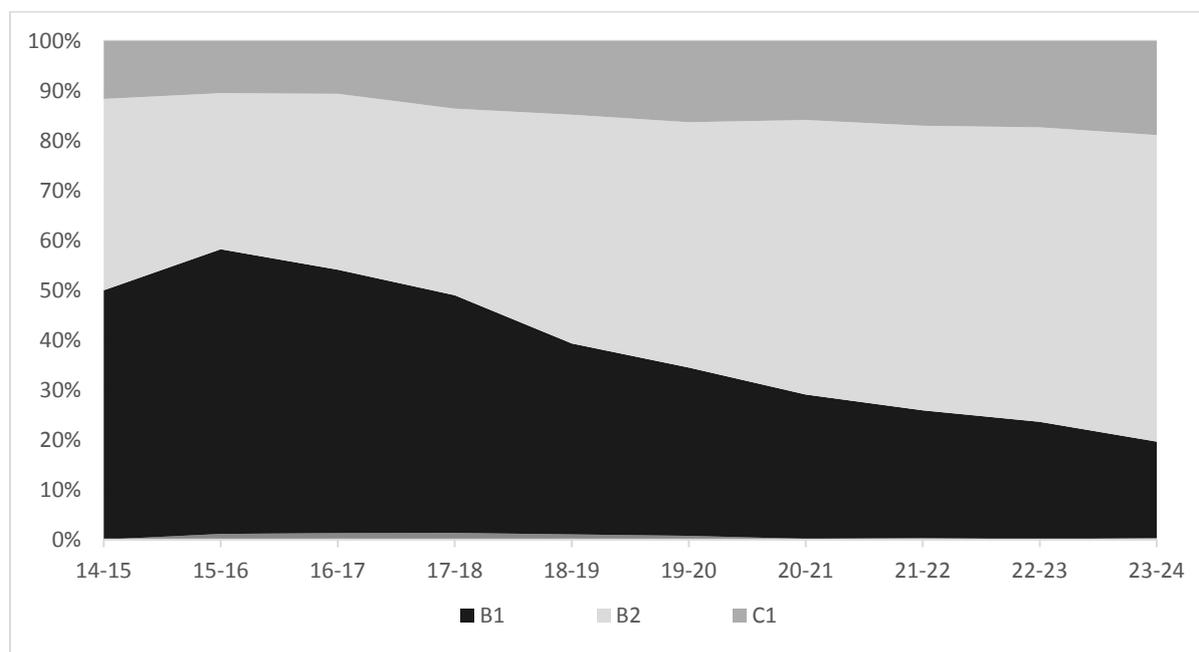
Percentage of Modern Language Validations by Certified CEFR Language Level and Year



Sources: Modern Language application and subject validation platform (URJC, 2024)

Figure 5

Evolution of Percentages of Modern Language Validations by Certified CEFRL Language Level and Year



Sources: Modern Language application and subject validation platform (URJC, 2024)

That is, while in the first year of the period practically 50% of students validated the subject with a B1 official certificate and 38.38% with a B2, more than 61% of students did so with a B2 level in the last year. In consonance with these results, B1 validations have decreased to only 19.34% in 2023–24 and C1 validations have increased from 11.64% to nearly 19%. The growth in B2 and decline in B1 validations is not consistent —there is a clear variation in the tendencies for year 2015–16— and will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide clear and statistically supported evidence of a sustained and significant increase in English language proficiency among URJC undergraduate students over the past decade. This improvement is reflected in the growing number of students who opt to validate the subject Modern Language at URJC through international official English language certifications, as well as in the steady rise in the average scores achieved in these external examinations, implying overall progress in the academic performance of entry-level students.

An in-depth analysis of URJC institutional data reveals a parallelism between the overall number of enrolments in Modern Language and the number of students registering to study the subject, albeit with key inflection points during specific academic years —namely, downturns in 2015–16, 2021–22, and 2023–24, and notable peaks in 2020–21 and 2022–23. While total enrolment figures at the start and end of the analysed period remain relatively stable, the trend for students actively registering to study the subject is evidently declining. There has been a 23.3% drop in registrations over the period, amounting to approximately 1,200 fewer students. In contrast, and of particular significance, the number of validations has shown a steady upward trajectory, following a brief initial decline in 2015–16, and culminating in an 18% increase by

the end of the series. This divergence between declining subject registration and rising validations provides a strong indicator of systemic changes in language acquisition pathways and educational preferences.

A crucial contextual factor in the interpretation of this development is the introduction and progressive expansion of the CAM's bilingual education programmes, which began producing university-ready graduates in 2016–17. This cohort, educated within a framework of increased English language exposure from early stages, has grown substantially in size—in 2023–24, 64.5% of public secondary schools in the region offered bilingual instruction. Most of these students arrive at university already in possession of certified English language credentials, typically at the B1 or B2 level of the CEFRL. Therefore, the reliability of validations as a measure of the impact of bilingual education becomes particularly relevant from 2016–17 onward. The data suggest that the bilingual initiative has been effective in preparing students with the necessary linguistic skills to bypass university-level instruction in Modern Language, opting instead for immediate validation.

A further reinforcement of this interpretation is the upward trend in the percentage of students opting for validation, which increased from 29% in 2014–15 to 47% in the most recent academic year. This sharp rise occurs in a broader educational context where total enrolment in Modern Language rose only marginally (2.7%), while the number of students registering for the course decreased by nearly a quarter. The implication is clear: an increasing portion of the student population is arriving at URJC with a minimum certified B1 level of English, and often higher, enabling them to validate the subject without further instruction.

The qualitative improvement in English language proficiency is underscored by academic performance indicators. The average grade of students validating the subject increased from 6.8 in 2014–15 to 7.6 in 2023–24, marking a full-point improvement equivalent to a shift from B1 to B2 CEFRL levels. Complementary to this is the observed redistribution of CEFRL levels among validated students: in the early years of the study, nearly 50% of validations were at the B1 level, whereas by 2023–24, over 61% of validations presented B2 level certificates. Importantly, during this time, no major changes were introduced to the format or evaluation standards of the official English certification exams. This consistency suggests that the upward trend in results reflects an authentic progression in language proficiency rather than changes in assessment methodology.

This pattern of development cannot be sufficiently explained by broader increases in university enrolment or demographic shifts alone. Instead, it aligns more convincingly with the systemic implementation of bilingual education at primary and secondary levels across the region of Madrid. The integration of EMI and CLIL pedagogical models has promoted more immersive and context-rich environments for second-language acquisition in all educational settings. These findings resonate with a substantial body of scholarly research that has demonstrated the pedagogical efficacy of bilingual and CLIL education in fostering higher-order skills and academic performance across disciplines with a special emphasis on language acquisition (Bruton, 2013; Dallinger et al., 2016; Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Gough & Coyle, 2018; Heras & Lasagabaster, 2015; Lorenzo et al., 2009; Madrid & Julius, 2020; Pires et al., 2024). Our findings validate the success of the EU agenda since they reflect both a quantitative and qualitative increase in undergraduate students' certified language competence, which may well be interpreted as a direct consequence of European investment in bilingual programmes at

compulsory levels of education and the CAM's commitment to implement its educational guidelines and recommendations.

Conclusion

The results of this research point to a clear and consequential relationship between bilingual education initiatives and measurable gains in English language proficiency at university level. As demonstrated, the growing number of students entering URJC with validated English language skills —most commonly certified at B1 and B2 CEFRL levels— can plausibly be attributed to the widespread implementation of bilingual programmes at primary and secondary levels of education in the Community of Madrid over the past two decades. These programmes, developed as part of a broader European Union agenda to promote multilingualism, social mobility, and employability (Coyle et al., 2010; European Commission, 2024; Fortanet-Gómez, 2013; Marsh, 2013; Nieto Moreno de Diezmas, 2016), appear to be achieving their intended outcomes.

In practical terms, our findings underscore the strategic importance of bilingual education as a vehicle for both academic success and labour market competitiveness and partly fulfills a research need for longitudinal studies at national and regional level in this regard (Durán-Martínez & Fernández-Costales, 2025; Van Vu et al., 2023). Students who participate in bilingual programmes acquire a foundational linguistic competence that not only enables them to perform better in formal language assessments but also reduces the need for university-level remedial language instruction. This, in turn, allows higher education institutions to allocate more resources to advanced or specialised academic content, thereby increasing the overall efficiency and quality of university education.

From a policy perspective, the observed outcomes strongly support the continued investment in and expansion of bilingual education at both national and international levels. The model implemented in the Community of Madrid can serve as a reference point for similar initiatives across Europe and beyond. The positive correlation between early bilingual instruction and language validation at the university level is a persuasive argument for embedding multilingualism as a core objective of educational reform.

Finally, it is essential to recognise that in today's globalised world, English language proficiency has become a prerequisite for academic mobility, professional development, and global citizenship. Universities, as central institutions for the development of human capital, depend on the linguistic readiness of incoming students to meet the challenges of internationalisation and labour market demands. The results of this study affirm that bilingual education is not merely an educational trend but a transformative policy tool capable of delivering tangible outcomes in student preparedness and institutional effectiveness.

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