

# High school reform and territorial language teaching in France

The challenges of Act 2019-791 of 26 July 2019  
"pour un école de la confiance",  
the so-called "*Blanquer Act*".



Public Office for the Breton Language (OPLB)

## A story strewn with difficulties<sup>1</sup>

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France is one of the richest countries in Europe in terms of languages, something most French (and European) people are unaware of. Nevertheless, the history between the Republic and the languages of its inhabitants has not been, to put it mildly, a love story.

The issue of the historical languages of France, excluded from state education since the **Ferry Act** of 1882, was handled in a radical manner in 1925. The Minister of State Education, **Anatole de Monzie**, wrote at that time that French children had quite enough with the mastery of the national language not to linger on "old dialects or *patoisantes* (...)".

Nearly 70 years later, there was a notable change of course: in 1951, the Republican Assembly passed the only law ever voted on specifically concerning the teaching of "local languages and dialects", a bill put forward by MP **Deixonne**, establishing the possibility of teaching some of these languages. It has therefore been theoretically possible to learn Basque, Breton, Catalan and Occitan since 1951; Corsican since 1974 and the regional languages of Alsace and the Moselle since 1992.

At the end of the last century, on 7 May 1999, France signed the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, but one month later, on 15 June 1999, the Constitutional Council stated that several clauses of this text were contrary to the constitution. As a consequence of this, the prospects of ratification of the Charter, which would have allowed greater protection of regional languages, were postponed indefinitely. A further setback.



<sup>1</sup> The French version of this article is available on [NPLD.eu](http://NPLD.eu)

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However, the defenders of France's linguistic diversity had not yet had their last word. On 8 July 2013, the law of orientation and programming for the re-founding of the school of Minister **Vincent Peillon** was published. Article L 312-10 of the Education Code declares that "the teaching of the regional languages and cultures belonging to the heritage of France is favoured as a priority in the regions where they are in use (...)".

Since then, the teaching of regional languages has received a significant boost up to the present day.

The controversial Law 2019-791 *for a school of confidence*, promoted by Minister **Jean-Michel Blanquer** and adopted by the National Assembly on 4 July 2019 at the end of a tortuous legislative process, represents the greatest threat to the fragile recovery of France's historical languages.

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## Principles and implications of the reform on territorial language teaching

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### Organisation of the education system in France

In France, the law institutes compulsory education from the age of 3 to 16. The education system is centralised and managed by the Ministry of National Education. So-called 'family' education is nevertheless legal but chosen by a small minority. From 2020, education between the ages of 16 and 18 will be compulsory (this may involve schooling, apprenticeships, vocational integration or civic —community—service). There are more than 65,000 schools, most of them under the authority of the Ministry of Education; only 15% (primary schools) and 20% (secondary schools), respectively, of pupils are enrolled in private schools.

Today, there are two types of regional language teaching. National education allows the learning of regional languages in state schools, as it does in the case of a modern foreign language. In some regions, however, associational schools are more advanced and choose to offer 'immersive' teaching.

In these structures, French is only gradually introduced into education after the regional language. In France, there are five networks of associational and immersive schools: **Seaska** in the Basque Country, **Bressola** for schools in Catalan, **Diwan** for Breton, **Calandreta** for Occitan, and **ABCM Zweisprachigkeit** in Alsace (since 2017). At the beginning of the 2018 academic year, there were a total of 15,000 pupils enrolled in the schools of these five networks.

By law, these schools have a sub-contract of association with the state: education is provided in accordance with the rules and programmes of the National Education system. In return, these schools receive operating grants from the state, and their teachers are paid by the national education system.



## A new teaching structure

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The reform of the **General Baccalaureate** of 16 July 2018<sup>2</sup>, which came into force at the beginning of the 2019 academic year for first-year pupils, **abolishes the existing academic itineraries** (economic and social, literary and scientific). This removal **reduces the provision of modern language teaching**, from which the so-called regional languages benefited<sup>3</sup>. Some courses such as the **Advanced Modern Language 2 (LV2)**, offered in the literary academic itinerary, which is attractive both from a pedagogical point of view (the aim is to reach B2 level) as well as in terms of the coefficient for grading (20% of the final mark), are thus abolished.

The reform modifies the architecture of the education system. In the first and last years of secondary school, the courses are now divided between:

- **The basic contents common to all students, including 2 Modern Languages A and B (4.5 hr per week for the 2 languages in primary, 4 hours in the last year).**
- **Teaching specialities: 3 compulsory subjects to be chosen by the students in the first year (4 hours per week), 2 of which must be the same in the last year (6 hours per week). One of these academic itineraries is devoted to languages: languages, literature and foreign and regional cultures (LLCER).**
- **Optional courses, including Modern Language C (LVC, 3 hours per week): 1 in the first year and 2 in the last year<sup>4</sup>.**

**For the general itinerary**, regional languages<sup>5</sup> can be taught as **LVB or LVC**, but not as LVA. This means a step backwards for pupils enrolled on bilingual programmes since the choice of studying the regional language as LVB will entail renouncing the study of a second foreign language.

**For the technological itinerary<sup>6</sup>**, all students can theoretically choose a regional language in LVB. The optional LVC course is only offered in the academic itinerary "Sciences and Hospitality and Restaurant Technology" (STHR). In practice, there is still little chance for teaching regional languages in the technological field, both before and after the reform.

<sup>2</sup>Relative to the general baccalaureate examinations from the 2021 academic year onwards.

<sup>3</sup>Name adopted by the official texts.

<sup>4</sup>Note that the optional Ancient Languages and Cultures courses of Latin and Greek can be chosen in addition to these two courses.

<sup>5</sup>The list of regional languages is set out in Article 3 of the decree of 16 July 2018: "The regional languages that may be susceptible to be evaluated through a compulsory test are the following: Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Creole, Melanesian languages, Occitan-Oc languages, Tahitian, Wallisian and Futunian. In addition to the languages listed in the previous paragraph, the following may be chosen by the candidate as part of the evaluation of optional courses: Gallo, the regional languages of Alsace, the regional languages of the Moselle countries.

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted that the decree of 16 July 2018 concerns the general baccalaureate; the technological baccalaureate remains unchanged.



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The teaching of **regional languages** was initially **excluded** from the academic itinerary Languages, Literature and Foreign Cultures (LLCE)<sup>7</sup>. Those were included, by a decree of 22 February 2019, thanks to the action of local elected representatives and associations. Students may choose to specialise in regional languages<sup>8</sup>, **provided they also follow modern languages B or C**. However, this “inclusion” is only a theoretical possibility. In practice, very few schools take the decision to offer a territorial language as a speciality (in Brittany, only 2 schools out of 175 were offering it at the beginning of the 2019 academic year). **It is not purely a specific speciality itinerary** that is different from foreign languages: a pupil who chooses English language (LLCE) cannot do so in combination with a regional language. Taking into account the delay in the offer of this itinerary and its competition with foreign languages, only 87 first-year pupils throughout France chose this itinerary in 2019 for Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican and Occitan, i.e. only **0.13%** of the student population<sup>9</sup>. We are yet to know how many students will decide to choose this itinerary in the final year of secondary school.

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## Implementation of regular monitoring and devaluation of the LVC

The reform modifies **the assessment of pupils** by incorporating a system of **continuous monitoring**. **40%** of the final mark depends on this continuous assessment:

- **10% of the final grade is obtained from the school report cards** (average scores in the first and last year)
- **30% of the final mark is obtained from the common continuous assessment tests (E3C)**. Modern languages A and B, which are part of the common curriculum, as well as the teaching of specialities not retained in the final year of secondary school, and therefore potentially the regional language speciality, are assessed in the E3C: the LVB and the teaching of specialities thus account for approximately 6 points out of 100 of the final mark
- **60% of the final mark is obtained from the final exams; the teaching of the speciality retained in the final year of secondary school is evaluated in these final exams, with a very high coefficient of 17 points out of 100 of the final mark**

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<sup>7</sup> Pupils can choose from German, English, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese on an experimental basis as foreign languages of specialisation.

<sup>8</sup> The decree of 22 July 2019 set out the list of regional languages that can be chosen: “The test is based on the choice of the following regional languages: Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Creole, Occitan-Oc or Tahitian”.

<sup>9</sup> Out of a total of 65,737 students enrolled in their first year (source: Studyrama reform of the 2021 Baccalaureate, the favourite specialities of high school students in 2019).



In addition, optional courses, including the LVC, are now assessed solely using continuous assessment with the marks obtained during the first and final years of secondary school: **a value of 1 point out of 100** is attributed to the LVC in the final mark of the baccalaureate (this value was 5 out of 100 before the reform).

Moreover, in the former baccalaureate system, only above-average points were taken into account for optional itineraries<sup>10</sup>. This **bonus system** has been **removed** for the LVC, but maintained for the ancient languages<sup>11</sup>, which also benefit from a higher coefficient (3 points in the final mark). The government chose to grant protective status to the ancient languages while denying it to the territorial languages.

However, at secondary school, **the majority of pupils follow optional territorial language teaching** (LV3 until the 2020 baccalaureate, now LVC). In fact, the offer of territorial language teaching as a second language is extremely scanty at the lycée. Moreover, positioning local languages as a second language (currently LVB) forces pupils to abandon a second foreign language. Giving up this second language is a disadvantage in their post-baccalaureate orientation. Indeed, the new organisation of assignments in higher education set up by Parcoursup<sup>12</sup> is more selective, and the choice of teaching methods used by secondary school students has become strategic and has serious consequences. As the indigenous languages of France have no legislative status, they cannot compete with English or Spanish.

This **devaluation of the LVC**, in direct competition with other options and suffering from a discriminatory treatment compared to the ancient languages, has resulted in an accelerated decline in secondary school enrolment. As an example, the number of students with Breton as an optional subject fell by 20% overall at the start of the 2019 academic year. This reform also has an impact on the bilingual programmes. A significant drop in the rate of pupils continuing from second year to first year has been observed in Brittany, as the choice of speciality and optional courses has forced more pupils to leave the bilingual stream, particularly those who are going on to scientific careers. The number of pupils opting for Occitan as an option also fell sharply at the start of the 2019 academic year: **-45%** in total (and **-70%** in the first year) in the schools of Toulouse.

**In view of the introduction of evaluation through continuous assessment**, the possibility of choosing a language in LVC is thereby conditional on the student following the corresponding course in the institution or at the National Centre for Distance Education (CNED<sup>13</sup>). The choice of territorial languages is therefore impossible if they are not taught at the lycée (i.e. in the vast majority of lycées). In Brittany, for example, only 7% of lycées offer the teaching of Breton. For the other lycées (i.e. 93% of schools), one has to turn to the CNED. However, this organisation

<sup>10</sup> Known as a *bonus option*, a score below the average would not penalize the students.

<sup>11</sup> Teaching of Ancient Languages and Cultures (LCA) in texts.

<sup>12</sup> Parcoursup is an online platform designed to collect and manage the interests of future students in French higher education since 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Article 5 of the decree of 16 July 2018.



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does not offer the teaching of local languages in its training courses! **Consequently, the reform removes the possibility to apply as an individual candidate. This excludes all students who speak a territorial language, who could potentially have it count towards the baccalaureate, but who do not have the chance to study it in their school.**

Finally, a memorandum drawn up by the Ministry of National Education in preparation for the beginning of the 2019 academic year made it possible to switch the order of languages between LVB and LVC when registering for the baccalaureate. However, a new note published in December 2019 removed this possibility. Many pupils were unable to choose to take the regional language tests in LVB instead of LVC, thus depriving them of the opportunity to enhance their academic career.

## Recommendations

- To grant a **derogatory status** to territorial languages by a new ministerial decree not making them compete with foreign languages as was previously the case (territorial language + 2 foreign languages) and reassigning an attractive coefficient for the LVC equivalent to that attributed to the classical ancient languages (Latin and Greek).
- To generalise the provision of education in the local language to all schools and lycées.
- To **extend the CNED's distance education provision to local languages.**
- To introduce a **specific academic itinerary** on “local languages, literature and culture”, separate from the itinerary on languages, literature and foreign cultures.
- To create a **specific LVB bis**, particularly for pupils enrolled on bilingual programmes, to enhance the value of their bilingual background.
- To create the possibility of studying territorial languages as an LVA. //

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# Summary

## Before the reform

Itineraries	Regional language	Tests	Level	Coefficient and % final grade
Literary (L)	LV2	Written + Oral	B1	4 or of the order of 10.25 % final mark
	LV2 advanced (speciality)	Written + Oral	B2	4 (+4) or 20.50% final mark
	LV3 (speciality)	Oral	A2	4 or 10.25 % final mark
Economic and Social (ES)	LV2	Written + Oral	B1	2 or 5.5% final mark
Scientific (ES)	LV2	Written + Oral	B1	2 or 3.8 % final mark
All the academic itineraries + STHR <sup>1</sup>	First option with bonus	Oral	A2	2 Only points above 10 are retained. They are multiplied by two
All the academic itineraries + STHR	Second option with bonus	Oral	A2	1 Only points above 10 are retained
Technological	LV2	Oral in CCF <sup>2</sup> + written in last year	B1	2 Or 5% of the final mark
Possibility of being an independent candidate **	Choice upon registering for the baccalaureate	According to the choice made		According to the choice made

## After the reform

Itinerary	Regional languages	Tests	% final grade
General education	Common education LVB	E3C	About 6% of the total
	<b>Suppressed</b>		
	<b>Suppressed</b>		
	Common education LVB	E3C	About 6% of the total
	Common education LVB	E3C	About 6% of the total
	Optional education LVC Continuous assessment. <b>Devaluation:</b> about 1% of the final mark <b>Suppression of the associated bonus</b>		
	<b>Suppressed</b> (maintained exclusively with the bonus for ancient languages with a coefficient of 3)		
Technological education	Common education LVB	Continuous assessment	5% of the final mark
Possibility of being an independent candidate	<b>Suppression</b>		

Source: FELCO (Federacion dels Ensenhaires de Lengua e Cultura d'Oc)

<sup>1</sup>Sciences and Hospitality and Restaurant Technology

<sup>2</sup>Contrôle en cours de formation



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