***“I've got a gut feeling that I'd regret not choosing Spanish”***

**A Critical Discourse Analysis of Language Option Choice Discussions on *MUMSNET* and *STUDENTROOM***

ABSTRACT

Like other Anglophone countries, the UK is experiencing a language ‘crisis’, in that fewer and fewer students opt to study a foreign language (FL) beyond the compulsory phase, and that the UK’s language skill do not match its economic needs. Despite strong statements of commitments to increase FL uptake, decline in FL uptake in the UK’s four nations persists. In a novel approach, this study investigates how key stakeholders (parents, students) discuss whether to continue with FL study beyond the compulsory phase on the internet platforms *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom*. The researchers undertook a thematic analysis of threads relevant to this topic on these platforms, in two equal sized corpora from *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom* respectively. The analysis of stakeholders’ stances towards both current, and wished for, FL policies and practices is then utilized to formulate five FL policy suggestions that respect stakeholders’ preferences and concerns, and could lead to facilitating the choice for a FL beyond the compulsory phase.

**Key words:**

GCSE Language option choices, Critical Discourse Analysis, Mumsnet, Studentroom, Language policy

**Introduction**

As elsewhere in the Anglophone world (Author 1, 2017a), language learning in the UK is ‘in crisis’. The lack of language skills costs the UK about 3.5% of its GDP (Foreman-Peck & Wang, 2014). Diverse Governmental bodies have demanded action on the language skills crisis (APPG on Modern Languages; British Academy, 2016). With fewer than 50% of students studying a language up to age 16 in the UK, educators, policy advisors and Governmental bodies agree that an increase in uptake is needed. However, uncertainties remain as to the avenues to achieve this- via national policy change or via incentivising individuals? Currently, language study is largely optionalized beyond the age of 14, across the UK, pointing towards the need to better understand -and potentially influence – what drives students and their parents to choose a language for further study - or not.

For these reasons, this study investigates how parents and students themselves discuss language option choices. *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom* sites offer data on how parents and students experience the constraints and dilemmas of ‘choosing’ language options. These forums offer bottom-up, naturally generated data that are not encumbered by a) researcher-generated sample selection and participation bias, b) limitations resulting from research focus and instruments, such as selection of variables, and preferential response biases.

*Mumsnet* and *Studentroom* discussions offer data on a larger scale than previous studies that have investigated the issue how parents and students come to decide for or against language study. The two social media sites *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom*, although not deemed fully representative of an entire student or parental body, provide a vast resource of naturalistic data. The relative safety and anonymity of forums discourses encourage openness (Jaworska, 2018). *Mumsnet* has been subject to discourse analysis, and both *Mumsnet* itself and the research community have gathered information regarding the demographics of its users: they tends to be female, -although some 16% are male-, white, middle class and University educated (Mackenzie, 2019; *Mumsnet,* 2009). In contrast, *Studentroom* data has not been subject to research so far.

The -often negative- public discourses around language learning in the UK have been described detrimental to the objective of increasing motivation in, and uptake of, language study (Graham & Santos, 2015; Author 1 & Coleman, 2017; Author 1, 2018), especially in the context of Brexit (Author 1 et al, 2018). Unlike the above, however, this study analyses discourses by ‘end user’ stakeholders. Student and parental accounts of the decision-making process for or against a language have not been analysed on a large scale to this date.

**Literature review**

*UK language learning policies*

Education in the UK is devolved to its four nations. Currently, in all four nations, foreign language (FL) study beyond age 14 is optional. 85% of all UK school students are in England, and more data is available on FL learning in England than in the other nations (e.g. British Council. 2018, 2019). In England, the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc)[[1]](#endnote-1) this is a key performance indicator measuring achievement in five core subjects, including a FL. The English Government has set the target that by 2025, 90% of pupils should achieve the Ebacc. To achieve this, England would need to double the percentage of students taking a FL up to age 16. In Wales, the study of Welsh is compulsory up to age 16, but it is considered a heritage language, not a FL. Both the Welsh (Welsh Government, 2017) and Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2012) are aiming for ‘1+2’ language education, that is to equip all students with FL knowledge in two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue. Thus, despite considerable education system differences, three of four nations (England, Scotland, Wales) aim to increase FL uptake, but all four nations make FL study facultative from about the age of 14 onwards. These considerations are important given that the data used in this study cannot –for the most part- be traced to national origin. Given the demographic distributions across the four nations, we assume that the overwhelming majority of data stems from contributors in England.

Discontinuing language study at age 14 can impact on academic trajectories. For instance, achieving the Ebacc qualification at age 16 can facilitate access to Russell Group universities, a group of research-intensive universities[[2]](#endnote-2). Thus, the introduction of the Ebacc increased the stakes of students’ and parents’ decision for or against a FL at age 14.

Current national policies suggest that the decision to take a FL past the age of 14 occurs at the level of the individual student. However, schools also determine their own language policies. De facto, ‘choices’ of language options are mitigated by a) the way schools might ‘block’ certain subject options together for timetabling purposes (‘option blocks’), b) school recommendations for individual students to choose certain subjects, and c) whole school policy (Parrish, 2017; X & Author 1, 2019). For instance, the UK currently experiences a shortage of FL teachers, and private (fee paying) schools tend to have fewer problems recruiting FL staff. Nearly all private schools make FL learning compulsory beyond age 14. In contrast, in most state schools, large cohorts of students are blocked from choosing a language as schools select students for this option on grounds of predicted grade (British Council, 2018, 2019). De facto, not de jure, individual schools manage admissions to FL study in their own way (X & Author 1, 2019). Many state schools select high-performing students to continue with a FL, other schools make all students take one up to age 16, and in other schools still, access to FL study is blocked for the majority of students at age 14 (British Council, 2019). The practice to select only higher academic achievers to study a language age 14+ contributes to the reputation that FLs are ‘hard’. In fact, language exams are persistently marked one grade harder than other subjects (Joint Council for Qualification, 2014). If, however, schools decide to make languages compulsory for all up to age 16, they incur systemic disadvantages. Schools’ achievements are measured in ‘league tables’, compiled of overall results of students’ exams results at age 16. Thus, making languages compulsory beyond age 14 has detrimental effects on a school’s performance measures.

As a result of a plethora of school-based policies, neither researchers, nor policy makers, have a clear oversight into how exactly ‘choice’ is construed or experienced by end users, that is students themselves, and their parents. Many variables at the level of the individual (such as socio-economic background, gender, overall academic achievement, enjoyment of FL, parental and peer influence, see Author 1, 2017a), and at school level (such as type of school and type of governance of the school, geographical region, size of FL department, teacher recommendations, see British Council, 2018, 2019) are known to influence uptake of a FL past the age of 14. In order to develop evidence-based recommendations for both Governments and schools to reach the desired uptake increases, a clearer picture is needed, of how students and parents currently experience the ‘choice’ for FL, and how they reach the decisions regarding FL.

*The social divide in language learning*

One distinctive characteristic of the UK language learning crisis is its social skewedness, in that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to engage in any FL beyond the compulsory phase than those from advantaged backgrounds (Author 1, 2017a). Generally, a social skewedness in educational achievement is well documented, globally (Economic Policy Reforms, 2010) as well as in the UK (Pickett & Vanderbloemen, 2015). However, educational achievement differences along SES divides are high in the UK (as a whole), compared to countries similar to the UK (Machin, McNally & Wyness, 2013). The ‘elitification’ in foreign language (FL) learning is now further advanced than in any other school subject (Author 1, 2017a). As a logical consequence, any attempts to increase FL uptake would simultaneously need to widen the SES access to FL study.

Despite a lack of large scale studies on the influence of parental background on decisions for or against FL study, several studies report on SES as an important variable. For instance, Gayton (2013) found that students largely echoed parental opinions on FL when asked to explain their choice for/against a FL, and that parental opinions on FL were strongly related to their education levels and SES. Similarly, Parrish (2017) describes strong intergenerational influences for or against a FL which replicate social divides in FL study, and Coffey (2016) expands the discussion by offering a Bourdeuian framework for this phenomenon, whereby language study is construed as social and symbolic capital coveted by parents (and students) from higher SES backgrounds. Schools, for their part, actively co-create this symbolic capital: Author 1 (2018) has shown how schools’ rationalize their particular policy on FL study with references to the SES intake of their school.

**This study**

This study investigates how the stakeholders - parents and students themselves - discuss language option choices on the social media sites *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom*. The overarching aim of this study is to investigate how stakeholders’ stances towards both current, and wished for, FL policies and practices could be utilized to formulate FL policies that respect their preferences and/or concerns.

***Research question***

1. What constraints, preferences and arguments for or against FL study do a) students b) parents discuss on the social media sites *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom*? How do they differ?

***Method***

*Theoretical Framework*

In this study, critical discourse analysis (CDA) serves as theoretical framework to investigate how the dynamics within an educational ‘problem’ manifest themselves through language. CDA rests on the basic assumption of a dual interaction between language and communities, whereby language both creates communities, and is constrained by the nature of a given community in which it is used (Fenton-Smith, 2007). Thus, CDA would stipulate the relations between authorship, readership and the ‘talked about’ topics and stakeholders to carry high significance, making it a particularly suitable method for the analysis of media texts, including social media. Unlike other text analysis approaches, CDA is concerned with revealing not just textual understanding but the relation between the representations of themes and the socio-political contexts in which they emerge. Thus, CDA views the ideological positioning of text production and consumption as linked. One analytical tool of CDA is macro-semantic, or topical, analysis (Van Dijk, 1993:272). Topical analysis can reveal issues of group identity and ideological beliefs (Van Dijk, 1998), especially if combining textual and contextual information. The approach, including quantification of macrothemes, is a well-established approach in the analysis of public discourse (e.g. Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2008).

The analysis of social media discourses of educational topics is a relatively novel but fast-growing area of research. Researchers interested in negotiations and allocation of agency and power in educational processes recognise the value of CDA as a method of assessing, framing and negotiating agency in educational processes (Rogers et al, 2005).

*Procedure of analysis*

Three coders read the same sample of transcripts independently to identify important themes within the first data set obtained (*Mumsnet*), inductively developing and refining codes as they emerged from the data. Then all three coders met to agree on an initial coding system. This system was used by two coders to code both data sets (*Mumsnet* and *Studentroom*). A mid-point check meeting was organised to discuss other emerging themes during the data process, after which small changes were made: four codes were deleted as they occurred fewer than four times, three were added to differentiate better between comments made regarding the national state of FL teaching and learning. All transcripts were then re-coded, where necessary, using this final framework. We also double blind-coded a sample (c.1,600 words) from each dataset, and communicated to resolve any disagreements. The final coding system is presented in Table 2, and also lists frequencies of codes from both datasets. Codes were grouped as pertaining to either national/UK wide policy or opinions, to the student’s school, or to the student’s individual circumstances.

*Data*

*Studentroom* is UK based and the world’s largest student web community, with 30 million page views and 4.5 million unique users each month (Corrazza et al, 2014). Its focus is on peer study support, but also offers advice on university courses, careers, revision, as well as hobbies, entertainment and chats. *Mumsnet* is also a UK based community site, for peer parental support. It also hosts an *Influencer* network for professional bloggers, vloggers and social media influencers. As discussed above, an existing body of linguistic and social sciences research using *Mumsnet*, as well as *Mumsnet*’s own data, permit insights into their user profile – which is typically middle-class. By contrast, only one academic publication (Corrazza et al, 2014) has harvested *Studentroom* data so far; thus, we have less information regarding the demographics of *Studentroom* user profiles, but the overall site content, including the data used here, suggests that the vast majority are indeed young school and university students. Furthermore, we might surmise that the strictly educational nature of the topic at hand in our study (as opposed to the non-academic content also covered in *Studentroom*, see above) might attract a somewhat unrepresentative sample, i.e. students with an above-average interest in their education and educational trajectory.

Both *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom* discussion boards offer archives that are fully searchable, using key terms. In order to post or start a new discussion thread in *Mumsnet*, posters need to register with the platform, but archives can be read without registering. Threads in *Studentroom* are only accessible once an online identity is created.

For both sites, the following search terms were entered into the search engine:

* GCSE MFL
* GCSE language
* GCSE choice
* Language MFL
* French GCSE
* German GCSE
* Spanish GCSE
* Option choice
* Option block

The order of *Results Display* was set to ’Relevance’. Thread headings with subjects fitting the topic of ‘FL choice or not’ were identified and the full threads downloaded, starting with the most relevant threads. We ceased data harvesting once the overall words reached 17,500+ in each dataset, to keep the overall amount of data manageable. In order to achieve parity in size and relevance of both datasets, the *Mumsnet* data needed to cover a larger time span than *Studentroom* data, indicating a larger amount of site traffic covering our topic on the latter site. Overall, all efforts were made to keep selection criteria and procedure, and size of data selected from both sites as similar as possible. Nonetheless, we cannot exclude the possibility that parental and student voices are not completely equally represented in this data. For instance, two threads in the *Studentroom* data were started by parents (and coded as such), but then continued by students themselves. Individual postings and the overall length of threads vary greatly in length, from short phrases, single emoticons to several hundred words, and extended debates between individuals. However, the dynamics at the level of interactional discourse individuals are not part of the focus in this study. This analysis focuses on the concerns, arguments and opinions that individuals in the two stakeholder groups voice when making a decision regarding FL.

**Table 1: The Data insert somewhere here**

*Limitations of the data*

As discussed in the Introduction, little is known of the representativeness of *Mumsnet*, and *Studentroom* data in particular. To the extent that posting may or may not represent a silent majority, we need to treat the policy recommendations to increase uptake, based on the postings, with caution. It is noteworthy, however, that relatively fewer postings from ‘undecided’ parents were found than from ‘undecided students: students use their online forum more often for genuine information gathering and opining building than their parents. From this we conclude that insights into the *students’* discussions of the arguments for and against a FL, and our recommendations building on these, would reach greater effectiveness in increasing uptake, than relying on parental data alone.

*Ethical procedures*

Both *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom* sites are considered in the public sphere since they are not password protected, have a large number of registered users, and are open for anyone to register. Ethical permission to download and analyse discussions on these sites was first applied for and granted at the researchers’ university, under the following conditions:

* All data will be completely anonymised: no usernames will be used.
* The researchers will download only threads pertaining to the research questions.
* The researchers will not participate in any way, or ‘lurk’ on the forum sites.
* All downloaded data will be deleted upon completion of the project.
* All data will be kept respecting GDPR rules, following a data management plan.
* All data will be kept on university computers in lockable rooms, and on PCs which are password protected.

Then, Communications Officers of both sites were approached to obtain ethical permission, detailing the above conditions. Permission from *Mumsnet* was obtained swiftly and without further conditions. Permission from *Studentroom* was granted after several telephone conversation. In addition, as part of the consent agreement from *Studentroom*, the researchers vouched to share results with the *Studentroom* Communications team as soon as they are available.

**Results**

**Table 2: codes and their frequencies in both datasets insert somewhere here**

Table 2 shows the frequencies with which the different themes were evoked in both datasets, and (if relevant) if a topic is mentioned as positive/affirmatory, negative/contradicting, or in a neutral tone. The next sections discuss results concerning comments on national or UK level, school level, and individual level, each time comparing discussions in the two datasets. All spellings are left as found in original source. Emoticons are replaced by explanations in brackets. Citations are numbered by thread (see Appendix 1): the thread number is given after each citation. Citations were selected for entry into this article based on the following criteria: a) each citations serves to clearly exemplify one code, b) two citations to exemplify one code are used only if once citation alone does not render the code meaning fully. All usernames are removed, and no replacement code is given to individual posters. Both sites, especially *Mumsnet*, use conventionalised abbreviations, which are listed in Appendix 2.

***Discussions about FL at UK and national level***

Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents have overall more to say on language education at national level than students, and most of it highly critical. Parents frequently vent their negative assessment of language education in the UK, as the following example illustrates:

 “No government has ever seen MFL as important enough to invest the money needed to improve teaching enough to ensure that there is a pool of people in the population with the language skill to help the next generation (…).” (*Mumsnet*, 4)

By far the most common reasons cited for the damning assessment are the syllabus and teaching methods,

“1) It's generally agree the present sylabus doesn't teach you to speak the language. 2) The immersive method our Comp and DFs expensive private school use in Y7 leaves a lot of children utterly [emoticon <sick>] DD2 had done a bit of French, but in German she hadn't and still hasn't in Y8 a clue. 3) The quality of language teaching is very mixed and has been for decades.” (*Mumsnet*, 15)

and in particular the nature of exam requirements:

“The current MFL GCSE is little more than a memory test. No language skills required.” (*Mumsnet*, 15)

A small number of comments laid the blame on UK mentality and attitude generally, sometimes comparing language learning in the UK with that in other countries,

“It boils down to the fact that languages aren't respected. Many people think learning French/Spanish/German is pretty pointless as everyone speaks English. Native English speakers on the whole are very lazy and unmotivated when it comes to learning another language.” (*Mumsnet*, 17)

and aspiring to compete with global educational achievements:

 “(...) knowledge of at least one MFL is widely seen as a marker of a rounded education. Why would British pupils want to be exempted from a global standard of educational achievement?” (*Mumsnet*, 15)

Others also point out the language teacher shortage and vicious circle of supply and demand regarding language tuition, and, relatedly, the stark differences between state and private schools, in that the latter are often in a better financial position to attract more FL staff:

 “MFL became so devalued in the state system that it was fast becoming te preserve of the independent sector, where generally at least one MFL is still compulsory.” (*Mumsnet*, 2)

Criticism about the increasing privatisation of language education is also linked to an aspirational humanistic view of education generally:

“(…) to have a broad education, a bright child should include an MFL. If fewer and fewer children take them, fewer and fewer schools will offer them and this is already happening. There is a reason why the most competitive university’s MFL courses have many privately educated children on them. There’s little competition from state educated pupils. Everyone gives up!” (*Mumsnet*, 11)

Some parents also share their visions for improved delivery:

“Schools need to offer a wider range of modern foreign languages like Polish, Urdu, Japanese or BSL. I believe that BSL would suit many dyslexic people as it is not written down. Prehaps we could do with a qualification in european studies which gives a taster of lots of different languages for SEN kids.” (*Mumsnet*, 15)

In the *Studentroom* data, many shared their experiences and concerns over exams, marks and marking systems, often passing on information to fellow students in a neutral tone, or, as in the following, in a more upbeat manner:

“They mainly mark based on advanced vocabulary and if the jist of it makes sense. They won’t mark down for say a misspelling or wrong accent (if it’s occasional). They only get critical at a higher level. You can dash in a few idioms and big words and you can get pretty high marks!” (*Studentroom* 19)

Students are also aware of the grading differential to other subjects (see Introduction):

“Is it marked severely? I've heard some sites online say that languages are tough because of severe marking” (*Studentroom,* 19)

Students generally report in a more upbeat manner on exams:

“(…) I took German GCSE in 2018. Most people thought they would fail. Around half my class (including me) got less than a 4 in the mock exams. Our teacher kept having a go at us and how we were going to fail. It turns out no one actually failed GCSE German and the majority of us got a 7 or higher. It turned out we were better than we thought we were.”(*Studentroom*, 21)

In sum, parents vent a lot of negativity about the state of FLs, and cite various reasons for the UK’s poor FL learning record. Many comments relate to general UK culture and mentality, often coupled with positive comparators to other countries. More frequently still, parents blame the syllabus and exam system, but also teaching methods. By contrast, students who, by their posts, could be identified as currently attending school or university, hardly commented at this level: on closer inspection, authors of contributions about the national state of language learning in *Studentroom* revealed themselves as adults, sometimes with a professional stake in education. School students -if identifiable as such by the content of their posts- mostly tend to share advice and reassurance regarding exams procedures and learning tips, emphasising their ‘do-ability’. It is nonetheless possible that a small number of negative postings at national level, concerning e.g. British attitudes to FL, or comparisons to other countries, are also from school students.

***Discussions about FL at school level***

Parents are more concerned than students that school choices are restricted due to staffing shortages,

“The school my twins go too has stopped offering Spanish as they can't get a teacher. They had real trouble getting the kids to exam standard last year when the Spanish teacher left.” (*Mumsnet*, 13)

or that their school selects on ability,

“Top 2 sets in Spanish have to take it as an option. Sets below can choose whether they do or dont. He is in the second set, hates it, doesn’t think he should be in that set anyway as he struggles.” (*Mumsnet*, 14)

or that timetabling, and the way subject choices are ‘blocked’ together into options, restrict choices:

“One of the things which seems to me to mitigate against students choosing languages is a very constrained list of options. If a child has only 2 or 3 options, then languages may well lose out. If they have 5, then a language (or 2) is more likely to be included. Neither of my DCs are 'gifted linguists', but both have done 2 languages to GCSE because, with 5 options to play with, that didn't prevent them ALSO doing all the other subjects that they wanted to.” (*Mumsnet*, 14)

Parents frequently criticise the practice of forcing a FL upon a student for the sake of improving school league tables,

‘“The school are pressuring your DD to take an MFL because one of the factors in the league tables is how many students get the (entirely meaningless outside of league tables) ebacc. ” (*Mumsnet*, 15)

Parents report equally often negatively or positively on the school policy of compulsory languages for all up to age 16.

“In dc's school it is compulsory and I am very happy with this. Though GCSE French doesn't make you bilingual it is still a foundation to build on.” (*Mumsnet*, 4)

Mostly, however, parents report neutrally on this school policy.

The policy of compulsory FL up to age 16 is also frequently referenced by students, and equally often in a neutral or negative tone:

“I’m not allowed to drop a GCSE! Please help me, I’m extremely stressed” (*Studentroom*, 21)

, and usually evaluated negatively because it is not applied consistently:

“The option blocks are my school are set out so that a language is encouraged, however you could work your way around the blocks so that you don't study one.” (*Studentroom*, 19)

Some even endorse the policy, and confess that if they would have dropped the FL if permitted:

“A language is compulsory still at my school, but I'm glad as otherwise I don't think I'd have chosen French.” (*Studentroom*, 12)

“When I started French (it was compulsory), I hated it, but now I love it and am doing A Levl.” (*Studentroom*, 12)

Students are knowledgeable about a better level of choice in the private system:

“State schools in general are very unhelpful to students who want to drop subjects.” (*Studentroom*, 19)

The following exchange from *Studentroom* thread 13 is cited because it captures three tensions at once: between a) choosing FL for enjoyment versus for academic profile, between b) accepting school policy and revolting or tricking your way out of them, and c) between surface learning and learning for life skills. This extract also illustrates the extent to which postings in *Studentroom* tend to reflect person-specific moods and situations, as opposed to more argumentatively discursive postings found in *Mumsnet*.

“Some schools do make it compulsory.

That's a stupid move if so.

At my secondary school it was split up into like 3 sections/ groups. If you were in the top section you were forced to do a language. And in quite alot of schools people are forced to do languages. I did latin.

The option blocks are my school are set out so that a language is encouraged, however you could work your way around the blocks so that you don't study one. I currently do French just because it'll look nice on my profile(I'm aiming for A/A\*). (*Studentroom,* 1)

Finally, students report more than parents to be directly influenced by teachers, either for or against a FL:

“it was just my teacher that limited me. I would say the teacher can affect your interest and grade in the language “(*Studentroom*, 1)

In sum, discussions about the factors that influence FL choice at the level of school show parents more preoccupied with options and option block restrictions, timetabling, and staffing than students. For students, the most important factors at school level influencing FL choice seems to be the teacher. Students reporting negatively on their school’s policy of compulsory FL up to age 16 did so mainly because they felt disadvantaged compared to other schools.

***Discussions about FL at the level of the individual***

Students tend to share their intention to choose a FL (or not), hoping for recommendations and inside comments from current or past FL learners.

“My school only offers French and Spanish, so another language is out of the question, but I really need to choose one” (*Studentroom*, 11)

As observed above, most students do not over-problematise the option restrictions of their schools, neither in choices between different FLs, or a FL versus another subject.

Regarding past achievement, students mention less than parents that their choice is influenced by grades they achieved in their FL so far. As FLs are marked more harshly than other subjects (see Introduction), parents often advise against a FL:

“(…) if they are determined they don't want to do a certain subject, then they are probably better getting a good grade in another subject, and one GCSE here and there doesn't matter IMO if you have a fairly broad range of traditional subjects in there.” (*Mumsnet*, 4)

“Well if she isn't going to get a C at GCSE there is no point taking it even if universities did want it.” (*Mumsnet*, 5)

However, students discuss the difficulties of achieving good grades in FL more than parents. Here, comments remarking on the relative difficulty outweigh those reporting relative ease about 3:2.

Some parents insist that students should do a FL regardless of ability:

“I don't think our children should be allowed to throw in the towel on learning a language just because it is difficult.” (*Mumsnet*, 15)

and often evoke a range of intrinsic reasons for the benefits of FL study generally:

“I feel learning another language can open another world and make her more open-minded and accepting of other people and cultures.” (*Mumsnet*, 4)

“To me, it isn't so much about what future employers will ask for: it is about expanding your mind and understanding that British/American culture isn't the only one out there, that different people think differently.” (*Mumsnet*, 4)

A near-similar amount of students made arguments about the intrinsic values of FLs:

“I wish there was more enthusiasm around MFL as I do feel it is important to learn languages in order to connect with the cultures of other countries (esp. due to brexit) (*Studentroom*, 14)”

On the other hand, parents voice the opinion more often than students themselves that students should be able to choose what they enjoy:

 “There's a lot of pressure to be taking a 'broad' range of GCSE's and many kids and parents become stressed and loose sight of what the individual (the young person) actually *likes* doing.” (*Mumsnet*, 4)

Regarding intergenerational conflicts between student and parental wishes, parents do report that their wish for a FL choice is not shared by their child:

“I agree having MFL is a sign of all-round skills (I did 3 at O level and loved them) and I think if you apply for arts or humanities degrees it will look really, really odd not to have done one, but my DS argues that computer science will be more use to him than French because he wants to do computing or a related subject.” (*Mumsnet*, 2)

In *Studentroom*, the few reported conflicts of this nature seems to come to amicable resolutions:

“I was dead set on geography until my dad brought Spanish back up, and now that I think more about it, I've got a gut feeling that I'd regret not doing Spanish.” (*Studentroom*, 19)

Both parents and students discuss the instrumental benefits studying a FL for academic trajectories and qualifications, as a useful skill to have, but with the marked difference that parents are much more interested in long term academic trajectories:

“I think Cambridge will notice [the absence for a GCSE FL]. Oxford medical students have an average of 10 GCSEs at A\* so don't give any reason to Cambridge to turn her down. They may not state an MFL but it is a gap if you don't have one.” (*Mumsnet*, 17)

“(…) excluding yourself from any university courses (or putting yourself at a potential disadvantage for some) at the age of 13/14 seems a bit silly. A child of that age might think they want to study maths at York or physics at Nottingham (for which the lack of MFL would make no difference) but later change their mind and want to do history at Oxford etc for which the lack of MFL would be more significant.” (*Mumsnet*, 5)

Students spend considerably more time than parents discussing the (dis)merits of learning specific languages:

“I find people usually find French easier because in my era they used to have an extra year of study.”(*Studentroom*, 3)

“The language [Spanish] is okay in places however it has many tenses and rules which I didn't get on with.”(*Studentroom*, 7)

Finally, (at times, heated) debates on dyslexia and language learning broke out on *Mumsnet*, with parents of dyslexic children often lamenting the disadvantaging their child experiences in FL study, and other parents strongly refuting this:

“England has the worst language skills in Europe. I am sure that there are plenty of dyslexic children in Europe. In Europe children with special needs are made to learn a foreign language. The difference is that their parents and teachers see learning a language as an asset.” (*Mumsnet*, 15)

Students, for their part, have less to say on this and give pragmatic advice, e.g. that Italian might be better for dyslexics, or how to get out of FL study:

“Ask for a dyslexia assessment - that’s usually the easiest way to drop a language!” (*Studentroom*, 21)

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The results have given novel insights into the way the two key stakeholders parents and students make choices regarding language options. The implications of our findings for the overall aim to increase FL uptake will be discussed below. First, we will sketch out and interpret the nature of both discourses.

As observed elsewhere (Gambles, 2010), *Mumset* is a site of ‘personalised public’ where ideological battles are fought, often with strong personal investment. Unlike in *Studentroom*, *Mumsnet* discourses reveal a parental sense of empowerment to critique current policies and practices. Parents also use the political to advance a personal agenda, or the personal to share their political views: the debates on dyslexia, intrinsic benefits of language learning, and the lamented UK ‘anti-language mentality’ are evocative examples of this. To some extent, the complaints echo the negative public debates observed on language learning in the UK elsewhere (Author 1 et al, 2018). *Mumsnet* is also an active generator of this discourse, and in this sense contributes to the vicious circle of a poor reputation of FL tuition, poor uptake and poor self-efficacy in learners. As expected from the participant demographics (see Introduction), parents are very academically ambitious on behalf of their children and often politicise any feelings of unfairness or inequality regarding FL tuition of their child. Unlike students themselves, parents are concerned over possible restrictions of their children’s academic trajectory in relation to FL tuition, and achieving the Ebacc. In sum, *Mumsnet* contributors tend to use their discursive powers to change the minds of others in their own interest (van Dijk, 1993).

In contrast, *Studentroom* postings tend not to concern themselves with critique of policies and practices. Students seek genuine help in their decision-making, as well as strategic and ‘survival’ tips, and share experiences for the benefit of their peers. Choice restrictions due to school administrative constraints such as option blocks were not a major concern for students, who often adopted a pragmatic view of what their school could realistically offer. And what of students simply ‘liking’ the subject- or not? Conceding that we have a self-selected sample of posts from students debating the *option* of choosing a FL, we nonetheless observe that both enjoyment of the subject, and a range of intrinsic motivations for learning a language, are relatively frequently mentioned, by both parents and students. A surprising finding from both datasets is that intergenerational conflicts are very rarely reported, and if so, tend to be resolved amicably.

Based on these stakeholders’ concerns and preferences, what policies to increase FL uptake - at national or school level - might be welcome, or at least not unwelcome, by these stakeholders? We shall conclude with a discussion the strengths of evidence for, and relative merits of, different recommendations. Before doing so, a word about why the Ebacc is not included in our recommendations: the introduction of the Ebacc, in 2010, in England, has made little difference to FL uptake. As long as the importance of having the Ebacc qualification for future academic trajectory remains unclear, it remains an unpromising pathway towards increasing FL uptake, in particular since the England government has shown little commitment to actively pursue its aim that of 90% of students should achieve the Ebacc by 2025.

We have found some, albeit weak evidence that the following three policy changes could somewhat increase inclination to choose a FL, or at least not be as unpopular as might be feared:

***Compulsory FL for all up to Age 16***

The policy of a compulsory FL for all up to age 16 was abolished in 2004 in England. A re-introduction would guarantee FL uptake, and a way of reaching the ambitious targets England (Ebacc), Scotland and Wales (“1+2 policy, see Introduction) have set. Parental and student reaction to this move indicate that parental views remain relatively balanced on this. Students, if they complain, mostly do so because the perceived unfairness in the unequal application of this rule- an objection that would become obsolete if the policy became comprehensively applied.

***Addressing the poor Quality and Reputation of FL Tuition in the UK***

Dealing with the (often justifiably) poor reputation of FL teaching and learning in the UK would address the parental concerns, and their decisions not to insist on a FL for their offspring: currently, parents often conclude that the balance of learning effort and ultimate outcome works against a choice for a FL, and more in favour of another option. Parents often base this assessment on international comparisons. Students, for their part, often report that they experience FLs as less well taught than other subjects. Addressing any reputational damage would have to go beyond a PR exercise and aim to improve quality of teaching and outcomes as well. In England, the Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy review (2018) and National Centre for Excellence in Language Pedagogy (NCELP[[3]](#endnote-3)) aim to achieve this.

***Opening Pathways for dual (or more?) Linguists***

A minority of students and parents lament that they/their child needs to drop one language they studied hitherto, or is forced to decide between languages. Schools could ensure that ‘option blocks’ are systematically designed to allow the study of more than one FL.

The last two recommendations are based on stronger evidence from our forum data, either more posts overall, or more unison opinions among the stakeholders.

 ***Ensuring Grade equity with other Subjects***

Students, and even more their parents, are concerned that the harsher grading in FL could disadvantage them/their offspring in their academic trajectory, including university choice. Applying marking schemes that ensure parity with grades in other subjects would address this concern.

***Diversifying FL Offers***

Students, even more than their parents, express interest in a range of FLs not offered to them. A greater range of target language options would also address the problem that current FL offers do not match the nations’ needs for languages (British Council, 2018).

To conclude, this study has used a novel approach to identify policy pathways to boost FL uptake, are based on stakeholders’ own discussions of policy and practice preferences. The national level recommendations have in common that they demand (modest to high) resource but promise relatively certain increase of uptake. In contrast, both cost, feasibility and effectiveness of the school-based recommendations are subject to considerable between-school variation. However, the success of English as global lingua franca has led to decline in FL learning in most Anglophone countries (see Introduction), and ‘English is enough’ beliefs, which cannot be altered with policy changes alone: along with persistent problems of staff shortages, poor pedagogy, and poor student self-efficacy, ‘English is enough’ attitudes, will need addressing in Anglophone countries facing these FL challenges.

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**Acknowledgements**

To follow

1. See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc. Core Ebacc subjects: mathematics, English, sciences, humanities, a language. The EBacc does not exist in Scotland. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://ncelp.org/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)