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# Influencing the perceived relevance of Modern Foreign Languages in Year 9: An experimental intervention

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## Research report

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July 2012

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## Summary

**Aims:** Testing the effect of external speakers on the perceived relevance of languages and GCSE uptake

**Participants:** 498 Year-9 pupils in three maintained schools in Yorkshire

**Methods:** Randomised controlled trial comparing two interventions; Questionnaire before (survey 1) and after (survey 2) the interventions; Pupil interviews; MFL uptake rates.

### Key findings:

#### *General trends*

- Intention to study GCSE MFL decreased over time: actual uptake was lower than intention in survey 2; intention in survey 2 was lower than in survey 1
- Between survey 1 and uptake, boys' interest appeared to decline, while girls' appeared to increase
- Enjoyment of MFL lessons, perceived competence in the language, and perceived relevance of the language were closely related

#### *Effects of the interventions*

- The type of intervention (speakers or a guest teacher) made no significant difference overall, but only the 'speaker intervention' appeared to buffer the downward trend for boys
- Boys had more positive opinions about the speakers; girls had more positive opinions about the lesson with a guest teacher
- Opinions about the interventions were linked with general attitudes to MFL lessons
- GCSE uptake was linked with opinions about the interventions, and general attitudes
- In one school, MFL uptake for pupils who took part in the interventions increased by 10.74% compared to the previous year, while for those who did not, uptake decreased by 2.63%

#### *Reasons behind MFL uptake decision*

- Pupils' perceptions of their usual MFL lessons at school predicted GCSE uptake
- Pupils opted for languages in Year 10 mainly for instrumental *i.e.* external, practical, reasons, related to university or jobs *etc.*
- Pupils chose *not* to study a language mainly due to low perceived competence, low perceived relevance, and lack of enjoyment
- Option blocks appeared to prevent some participants (particularly boys) from choosing a language
- Many participants recognised the value of knowing a foreign language, even those who did not choose a language GCSE and explained their negative choice through external factors

### Conclusions:

- At the end of our project, participants were more aware of a wider range of benefits of speaking MFLs
- External interventions helped increase perceived relevance
- There was no evidence that one type of intervention worked better than another
- Uptake appeared to depend mainly on pupils' perceptions of their usual MFL lessons at school

## 1. Project background and rationale

Foreign language skills are decreasing dramatically in the UK<sup>1</sup>, as is the uptake of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) at KS4 and beyond in the maintained sector<sup>2</sup>, particularly in the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber<sup>3</sup>. The Nuffield Inquiry<sup>4</sup> suggested that the importance of languages was not emphasised sufficiently, and studies show that youngsters fail to see the relevance of MFLs for career prospects<sup>5</sup> or for many other reasons<sup>6</sup>. Research also suggests that adolescents' motivation and interest in languages is superficial and non-sustainable when these are not perceived as directly relevant to the learners' developing sense of identity<sup>7</sup>.

Outside speakers are believed to enhance pupil interest and foreign languages uptake at Key Stage 4<sup>8</sup>, and to raise young people's general educational aspirations<sup>9</sup>. Unpublished evaluations also indicate that student ambassadors are successful in raising pupils' awareness of the importance of language study. However, no published formal experimental trials of such interventions exist and it is unclear to what extent such interventions help increase uptake of foreign languages. Our project has addressed the need for rigorous and replicable evaluations of such interventions, being particularly timely now, when the introduction of the English Baccalaureate in England, including a foreign language GCSE, is likely to compel schools to find reliable ways of stimulating student interest, which – evidence suggests<sup>10</sup> – is already happening to some extent.

## 2. Research design

Accordingly, our project aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the perceived relevance of Modern Foreign Languages for Y9 students in the participating schools?
- 2) What motivates these students to engage actively or disengage in MFL classes?
- 3) How do Y9 students decide whether or not to opt for foreign languages in Y10?
- 4) Does an intervention involving adult members of the community influence their decision whether or not to study foreign languages in Y10?

Our participants were 498 Y9 students in 3 maintained secondary schools in Yorkshire. These completed a questionnaire twice and 48 of them were interviewed in pairs, as we believed they would feel more at ease being interviewed with a friend/ peer. Criteria for school selection were MFLs optional at KS4, GCSE options submitted in Y9 and the percentage of 5 A\*-C GCSEs within  $\pm 10\%$  of the 2010 national average. Pupils participated voluntarily in all stages of the project. The anonymity and confidentiality of their responses have been strictly maintained at all times, school names being withheld for the same reasons in any reports or publications of this research<sup>i</sup>. Participation rates in the three schools were:

School	Total no. of pupils in Y9	Pupils participating in our project		Questionnaire survey x 2	Interview
A	200	pilot	106	106	6
		main study	94	94	12
B	252		252	252	20
C	155		152	152	16
<b>Total main study</b>			<b>498</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>48</b>

Table 1. *Participation rates in the three schools*

The study had a mixed-method experimental research design, using the following methods:

**Questionnaire survey (1).** In October 2011, all 498 pupils completed a 20-minute self-reported questionnaire in class, during a language lesson. The questionnaire collected information about the pupils’ attitude to language learning, the perceived relevance of languages and their intention to study a language GCSE (see Appendix A).

**Intervention (randomised controlled trial).** In December 2011, half the pupils took part in a panel discussion with 6 external speakers and half were given a language lesson with an external tutor. Each group/ set was split into two, half attending a panel discussion, half taking

<sup>i</sup> The three participating schools will be referred to as School A, School B and School C in this report and in any other report or publication resulting from this research project. Staff from each school will be able to recognise their institution by the number of participants and other similar details.

a language lesson. Other factors taken into account during the randomised matched sampling process were gender and whether the pupils intended to take a language GCSE (yes/ no/ not sure), so each group had a balanced distribution of genders and GCSE intentions.

Panel discussions consisted of a 40-minute discussion with a panel of six external speakers chaired by Florentina Taylor, followed by 20 minutes of questions from the pupils. Around 30 pupils attended one such panel discussion together and the panel was always the same: 4 male speakers (an IT consultant, a journalist, a home delivery executive, a musician) and 2 female speakers (a housewife/ former Marketing Director, an undergraduate student)<sup>ii</sup>. These six speakers were selected from a pool of 35 volunteers, based on the message they would have for Year-9 pupils about to choose their GCSE subjects and other similar information. One important criterion was that there would be a balanced mix of 'success' and 'regret' language learning histories, the speakers being able to tell anecdotes in support of their positive language learning and use experience, as well as discuss reasons why they regret not having studied one or more foreign languages. While the discussions were chaired and the speakers had been debriefed, the panel discussions were kept as spontaneous as possible.

The language lessons were taught by external tutors from the University of York (mostly native speakers). Group size was kept as close to normal as possible (around 20 pupils), as was lesson length. Each group was offered one language lesson (German, French or Spanish, depending on the languages studied already) on the theme of Christmas. The purpose of the lessons was to serve as an active control, enabling us to better test the effect of the external speakers.

**Questionnaire survey (2) + interviews.** In February 2012, all the pupils completed a second questionnaire and a large number volunteered to be interviewed. Of these volunteers, 48 were interviewed in pairs on the school premises. Just like the first time, the questionnaire collected information about the pupils' attitude to language learning, the perceived relevance of languages and their intention to study a language GCSE. In addition, it also asked pupils about

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<sup>ii</sup> Our intention was to have a balanced gender distribution, but one of the female speakers had to withdraw at the last moment due to professional commitments, therefore a fourth male volunteer who was available at the time kindly agreed to replace her.

their impression of the intervention - panel discussion or language lesson (see Appendix B). The interviews (see Appendices C and D) elaborated on some of the questionnaire answers, explored pupils' GCSE decision making process and their impression of the intervention (panel discussion or lesson with external tutor). Neither the two questionnaires nor the interview asked for information about specific teachers and no teacher name was associated with any of the participating groups/ sets.

**School uptake data.** In April – June 2012, actual uptake data were obtained from the three participating schools, as well as other schools in Yorkshire and the Humber, to allow for a better evaluation of the intervention effects.

### 3. Key findings

We will present our key findings in three main sections: 1) GCSE: From intention to uptake, 2) The role of MFL lessons in determining pupils' attitudes to languages and 3) Languages in the GCSE decision-making process.

#### 3.1 GCSE: From intention to uptake

##### 3.1.1 Declared intentions compared to actual uptake

One of the questions that we asked pupils in survey 1 (see Appendix A) was whether they intended to choose a Modern Foreign Language for GCSE. The question was repeated in survey 2, after the intervention, and the responses were finally compared to actual uptake data kindly provided by the participating schools. The results can be seen in Table 2 below.

It is quite clear from Table 2 that between October 2011 and March 2012 pupils' intention to study a language in Year 10 decreased, the number who actually chose to do so being lower still. The opposite trend is visible for those who did not intend to choose a language GCSE.

MFL GCSE	Survey 1	Survey 2	Actual uptake
yes	63.1	60	53.6
no	29.9	36.3	46.4
not sure	7	3.7	-

Table 2. GCSE intentions and actual uptake (%)

Scrutinising these figures in more detail, we can see that different participant groups manifested different trends. Two examples can be seen in Table 3 (figures split by gender) and Table 4 (figures split by school).

MFL GCSE	Survey 1		Survey 2		Actual uptake	
	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls
yes	57.2	69.8	49.4	71.2	43.3	64.6
no	35.4	24	46	25.9	56.7	35.4
not sure	7.4	6.2	4.6	2.8	-	-

Table 3. GCSE intentions and actual uptake (%), split by gender

We can see in Table 3 that, as boys lost some of their interest in languages, girls gained more interest, although fewer girls did actually choose a language than expressed an intention to do so in survey 2. (One possible explanation, as discussed below, could be option blocks restrictions.)



MFL GCSE	Survey 1			Survey 2			Actual uptake		
	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
yes	70.9	57.4	68.1	73.4	54.4	62	68.1	48.8	52.6
no	24.4	36.8	21.3	25.3	41.5	33.6	31.9	51.2	47.4
not sure	4.7	5.8	10.6	1.3	4.1	4.4	-	-	-

Table 4. GCSE intentions and actual uptake (%), split by school

With the exception of School A, a clear downward trend in pupils’ interest in languages is visible from survey 1 to actual uptake. In School A, while interest increased between study 1 and study 2, actual uptake is slightly lower than study 2 intentions (again, perhaps due to option blocks).

### 3.1.2 Uptake in the two intervention groups (panel vs. lesson)

These differences may underline the influence of various local factors on pupils’ GCSE decision making process. Interestingly, when we analyse these figures based on whether the pupils were assigned to the panel discussion or the lesson with an external tutor during our intervention, we can see (Table 5) that the group to which the pupils were assigned did not appear to influence the existing trend.

MFL GCSE	Survey 1		Survey 2		Actual uptake	
	panel	lesson	panel	lesson	panel	lesson
yes	62.5	63.7	60.6	59.3	53.8	53.4
no	30.6	29.1	35.8	36.8	46.2	46.6
not sure	6.9	7.2	3.5	3.9	-	-

Table 5. GCSE intentions and actual uptake (%), split by intervention group

It is quite intriguing that uptake in the panel and lesson groups was almost exactly the same. At a superficial glance, this would mean that our intervention did not have any effect on uptake at all. However, a more detailed look reveals another interesting pattern. Table 6 shows the

figures in the previous table expressed in % differences from survey 1 to survey 2 and from survey 2 to actual uptake.

MFL GCSE	Difference survey 1/ survey 2		Difference survey 2/ uptake	
	panel	lesson	panel	lesson
yes	-1.9	-4.4	-6.8	-5.9
no	+5.2	+7.70	+10.4	+9.80
not sure	-3.4	-3.3	-	-

Table 6. GCSE intentions and actual uptake (% differences), split by intervention group

Looking at the data from this perspective, it appears that our panel discussions have acted as a buffer to the existing downward trend, more than the lessons did. From survey 1 to survey 2, fewer pupils gave up the intention to study a language in the panel group than in the lesson group – a trend visible both in the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ responses. Again, between survey 2 and GCSE option submission, the differences appeared to be ironed out.

### 3.1.3 Key gender differences

Repeating this analysis of per cent differences with boys vs. girls and panel vs. lesson groups, we obtain the following figures (Table 7):

MFL GCSE	Difference survey 1/ survey 2				Difference survey 2/ uptake			
	panel		lesson		panel		lesson	
	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls
yes	-7.7	+3.40	-8.1	-0.3	-5.8	-7.9	-6.3	-5.6
no	+8.4	+2	+12.9	+2	+9.9	+10.90	+11.5	+8.2
not sure	-0.7	-5.4	-4.9	+1.5	-	-	-	-

Table 7. GCSE intentions and actual uptake (% differences), split by intervention group and gender

As Table 7 shows, the downward trend in boys' interest in languages appeared to be ameliorated by the panel discussion – a tendency that is visible in all three response options and in both transitions (survey 1/ survey 2 and survey 2/ uptake). For girls, the picture is mixed, with the panel apparently increasing intention to study a language in the first stage (yes ↑, not sure ↓) but eventually being superseded slightly by the lesson in actual uptake.

The fact that, for boys, the panel discussion led to higher uptake than the lesson, while for girls the language lesson with an external tutor led to higher uptake than the panel, is also visible in Figures 1 and 2 below.

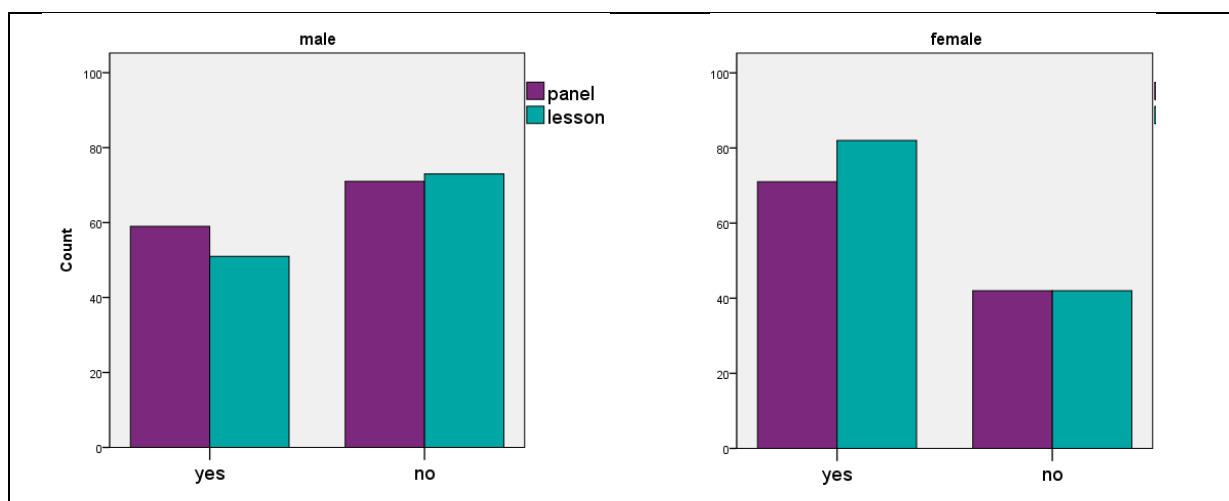


Figure 1. GCSE uptake by intervention group (statistically non significant)

As we can see, overall more boys in the panel group took up a language GCSE than those in the lesson group – a trend that is reversed for girls. The picture becomes much more nuanced when analysing the potential influence of the intervention by group, school and gender (Figure 2).

### 3.1.4 Change from study 1 to uptake

In Figure 2, we compared the declared GCSE intention that pupils gave us in survey 1 ('yes, I intend to choose a language'/ 'no, I don't intend to choose a language') to their actual GCSE options. Excluding the 'not sure' and missing answers, we then had four situations: pupils who said they would choose a language and indeed chose one (yes > yes); pupils who said they

would choose a language but did not (yes > no); pupils who did not intend to take a language and indeed did not (no > no); and those who declared they would not choose a language but actually did (no > yes). These four categories can be seen in Figure 2, which is split by group, school and gender. While the analysis is not statistically significant (probably because there were too few participants in each of these layered categories), interesting contextual differences become visible, as detailed below.

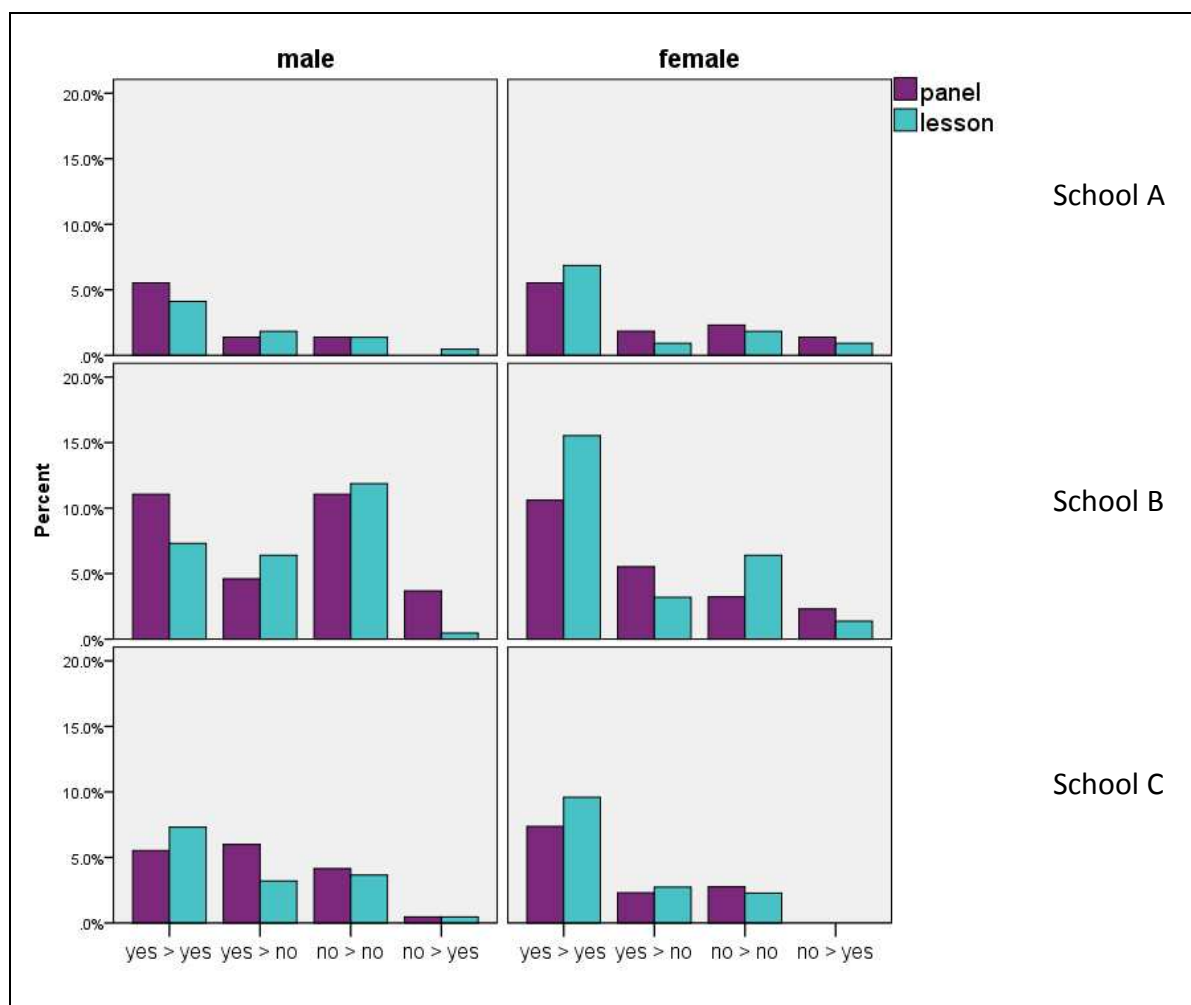


Figure 2. GCSE uptake intention (survey 1) compared to actual uptake by school, gender and group ('not sure' and missing answers excluded; statistically non significant)

**School A.** More boys were likely to maintain their positive intention (yes > yes) from the panel group, and more girls remained positive up to the uptake stage in the lesson group. Slightly more boys switched from yes to no in the lesson group, while slightly more girls switched from

yes to no in the panel group. Slightly more girls in the panel group maintained a negative attitude to languages but also slightly more switched from no to yes in the panel group compared to the lesson. These differences would appear to reinforce the insight discussed above – that boys tended to favour the panel discussion, whereas girls appeared to prefer the language lesson with an external tutor.

**School B.** The same trend is very clearly visible: more boys were likely to maintain their positive choice in the panel group than in the lesson group, whereas for girls the lesson was more successful than the panel in maintaining a positive intention up to GCSE choice submission. More boys in the lesson group and more girls in the panel group switched from yes to no, but the panel is overall related to more changes from no to yes, both for boys and for girls. The panel was also less likely to maintain a negative attitude (no > no) than the lesson, both for boys and for girls, but especially for the latter. Overall, it would appear, again, that boys responded better to the panel and girls to the lesson, but the lesson appeared to maintain a negative attitude overall, whereas the panel appeared to encourage a switch from a negative to a positive attitude overall.

**School C.** In School C, the lesson with an external tutor appears to have led to maintaining a more positive attitude (yes > yes) than the panel, both for boys and for girls, while the panel seems to have led to more switches from yes to no for boys. While the figures are very similar and the difference is not statistically significant, it would appear that the lesson was marginally more successful than the panel in School C.

### 3.1.5 Reactions to the intervention

The boys' inclination to respond better to the panel, while girls responded better to the lesson (at least in Schools A and B) is also visible in the overall reaction participants had to the two intervention groups (Figure 3).

While the effect of the intervention group on GCSE uptake (Figures 1, 2 and 3) was not statistically significant and very contextually nuanced, an effect that was statistically significant

is that on the reaction that the students had to either the panel discussion or the extra language lesson offered. This significant effect can be seen in Figure 4 further down.

While an unequivocal explanation of these gender differences is not possible on the basis of the data collected, it does appear that boys tended to react better to the panel discussion and girls to the language lesson offered by an external tutor.

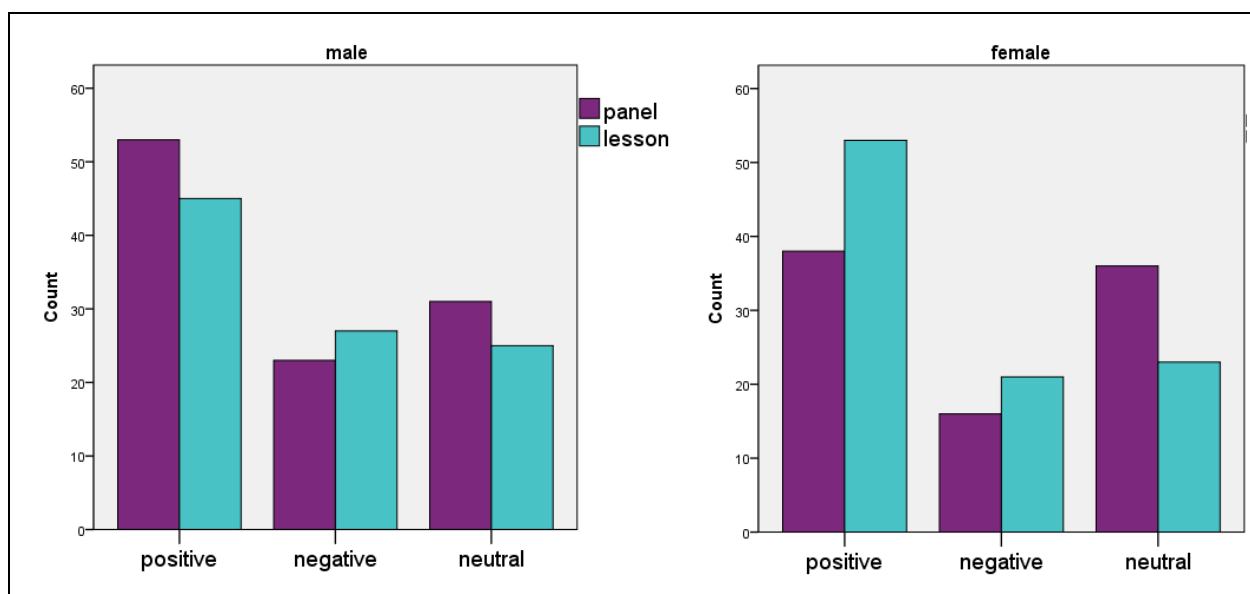


Figure 3. Reaction to intervention group (close to statistical significance for girls)

Two possible explanations could be the boys' need for male role models in language learning<sup>11</sup> (bearing in mind that four of our panel speakers were male and two female, and all language tutors were female, as no male tutor was available in the area<sup>iii</sup>); and perhaps girls responding better to language lessons in an environment where they feel competent and in a society that still perpetuates the more or less explicit stereotype that 'girls do languages and boys do science'<sup>12</sup>.

Irrespective of gender, however, one aspect that appeared to influence pupils' GCSE language uptake is their reaction to the intervention (panel or lesson). As can be seen in Figure 4, students who reacted positively to the panel or lesson were more likely to choose a language

<sup>iii</sup> A fact that is, in itself, quite telling.

for GCSE, whereas those who reacted negatively were less likely to do so. Having a neutral reaction to the panel also led to higher MFL uptake.

Of course, it is possible that pupils who reacted positively to the intervention were pupils who already had a positive attitude to language learning and who intended to take up a language anyway. That is, any influence that our intervention may have had could have been less important than the learners' previous experience and language learning histories.

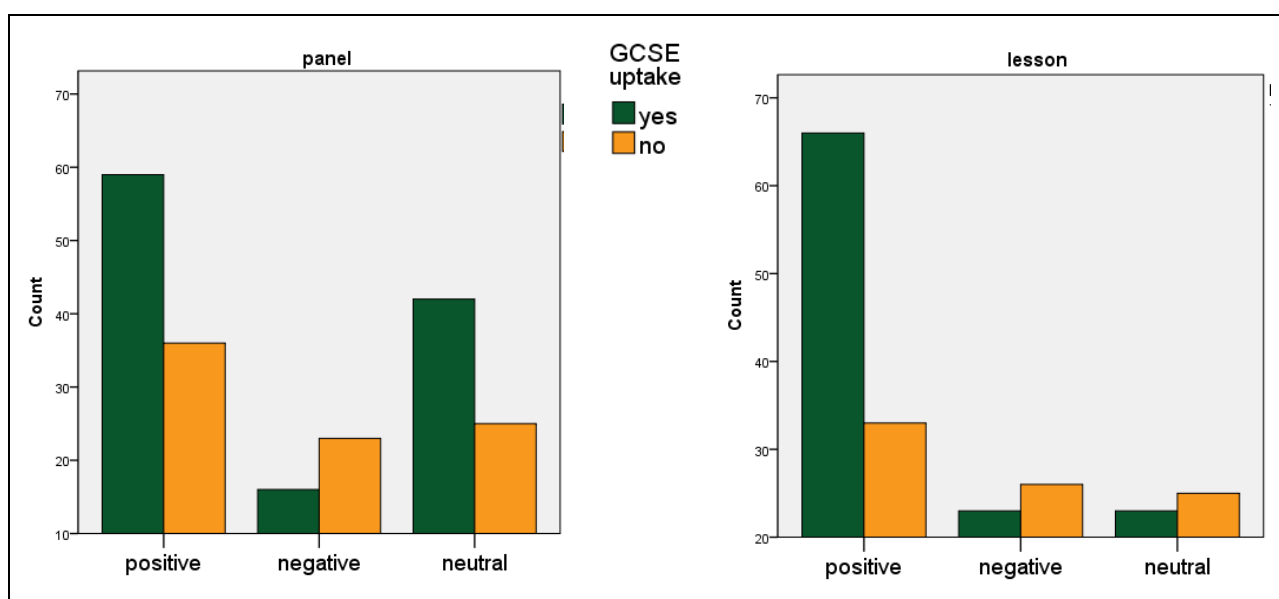


Figure 4. GCSE uptake by reaction to the intervention (statistically significant)

Indeed, a very strong, statistically significant, effect on uptake was that of the previous language lessons – discussed in the next section.

### 3.1.6 School A: Crucial support for the intervention

Finally, an interesting situation regarding MFL uptake was offered by School A, where of a total of 200 Year 9 pupils, 106 took part in the instrument pilot beforehand and 94 took part in the intervention. A comparative look at the recent MFL uptake in the participating schools, split by pilot and main study participants for School A, can be seen in Table 8.

School	2008-2009/ 2009-2010	2009-2010/ 2010-2011	2010-2011/ 2011-2012	
A	-11.37	+11.44	total	
			total	+3.65
			pilot	-2.63
			intervention	+10.74
B	-12.62	+11.43	+4.83	
C	-3.56	+10.01	+11.54	

Table 8. Recent evolution of MFL GCSE uptake in the participating schools (% difference)

Table 8 shows a clear difference (13.37%) in School A uptake for pupils who took part in our intervention compared to those who did not. This difference can also be seen in Figure 5. Given that intervention participants appeared to respond similarly to our panel discussions and language lessons with an external tutor (active control), these pilot participants in School A now represent an invaluable non-active control and, as such, a persuasive indication of the effectiveness of our intervention (both panel and lesson).

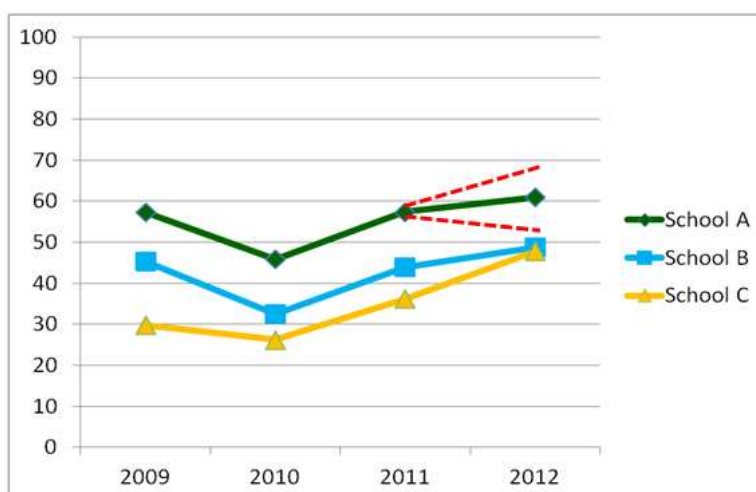


Figure 5. GCSE uptake in recent years (green line = average uptake in School A; upper dotted line = uptake in intervention participants; lower dotted line = uptake in pilot/ non-intervention participants in School A)



It is perhaps unfortunate that we were unable to have such non-active control groups in the other two schools, but we believe it would have been unethical to deprive more participants of our intervention. While segregating a number of pupils and not giving them any ‘treatment’ at all would have provided a stronger comparison and support to our experiment, this was clearly not an option, as it was very important to us that we offered something to every pupil in the three participating schools.

As we have seen earlier, there are indications that our intervention may have buffered an already existing downward trend in some participant sub-groups. It is possible that, without our project, uptake of languages in the three schools would have been lower. We do not have any unequivocal evidence for that in Schools B and C, where we did not have any non-active controls. The 106 pilot participants in School A, however, do suggest that our intervention has made an important difference.

### **3.2 The role of MFL lessons in determining pupils’ attitudes to languages**

If the effect of the intervention was contextually nuanced, one influence that was strong, unambiguous, statistically significant and present in all schools, with both genders, was the influence of the pupils’ usual language lessons at school both on the general attitude to languages and on actual MFL GCSE uptake. This insight is supported both by the questionnaires and the interviews.

#### **3.2.1 From MFL lesson perceptions to GCSE uptake**

In both surveys, we asked pupils to rate their perceptions of their language lessons on so-called semantic differential scales, in which the participant places a cross closer to the pole that better represents his or her opinion. The scales, included in both questionnaires, can be seen in Figure 6 below.

In foreign language 1 (please write the language below)  _____	I have fun.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I get bored.
	I learn a lot.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I don't learn much.
	I feel engaged.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I feel disengaged.
	It's easy for me.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for me.

Figure 6. *Semantic differential scales asking for participants' opinions of their language lessons at school*

Where two languages were studied, students were asked to give two different answers to these questions, keeping the languages separate. In this analysis, we will use their responses related to the first language studied. At no time did we ask the pupils to comment on individual teachers and at no stage of the project did we collect teacher names or were able to associate a particular teacher with a particular group. To ensure complete anonymity, we will also avoid referring to particular languages and particular schools, especially as we believe that these findings provide helpful insights that all the participating schools can benefit from.

In one analysis, we coded the scales seen in Figure 6 into dichotomous variables – for example, if the respondent placed a cross in the first three boxes of the first item, we coded the response as 'fun'. If they selected one of the last three boxes, we coded their response as 'bored'. The results of this analysis can be seen in figure 7.

It can be seen quite clearly that if pupils felt they were having fun during their foreign language lessons, if they felt engaged, if they felt they learnt or made progress and that the lesson was reasonably easy, they were far more likely to choose a language for GCSE. The very large, statistically significant, difference was present in all participant sub-groups (all schools, both genders). It is important to emphasise, however, that these are self-reported pupil perceptions, which need to be interpreted with caution. First of all, self-reported attitudes and opinions may not always be an accurate representation of what the respondent really believes<sup>13</sup> and, second, evaluating a lesson needs to take into account many more factors than how students feel about that lesson. Year 9 pupils cannot be aware of all the factors that influence methodological decisions and all the pressures and constraints that a teacher needs to balance in the classroom

(e.g., assessment standards, curriculum and syllabus, time constraints, class size, student abilities, student engagement levels).

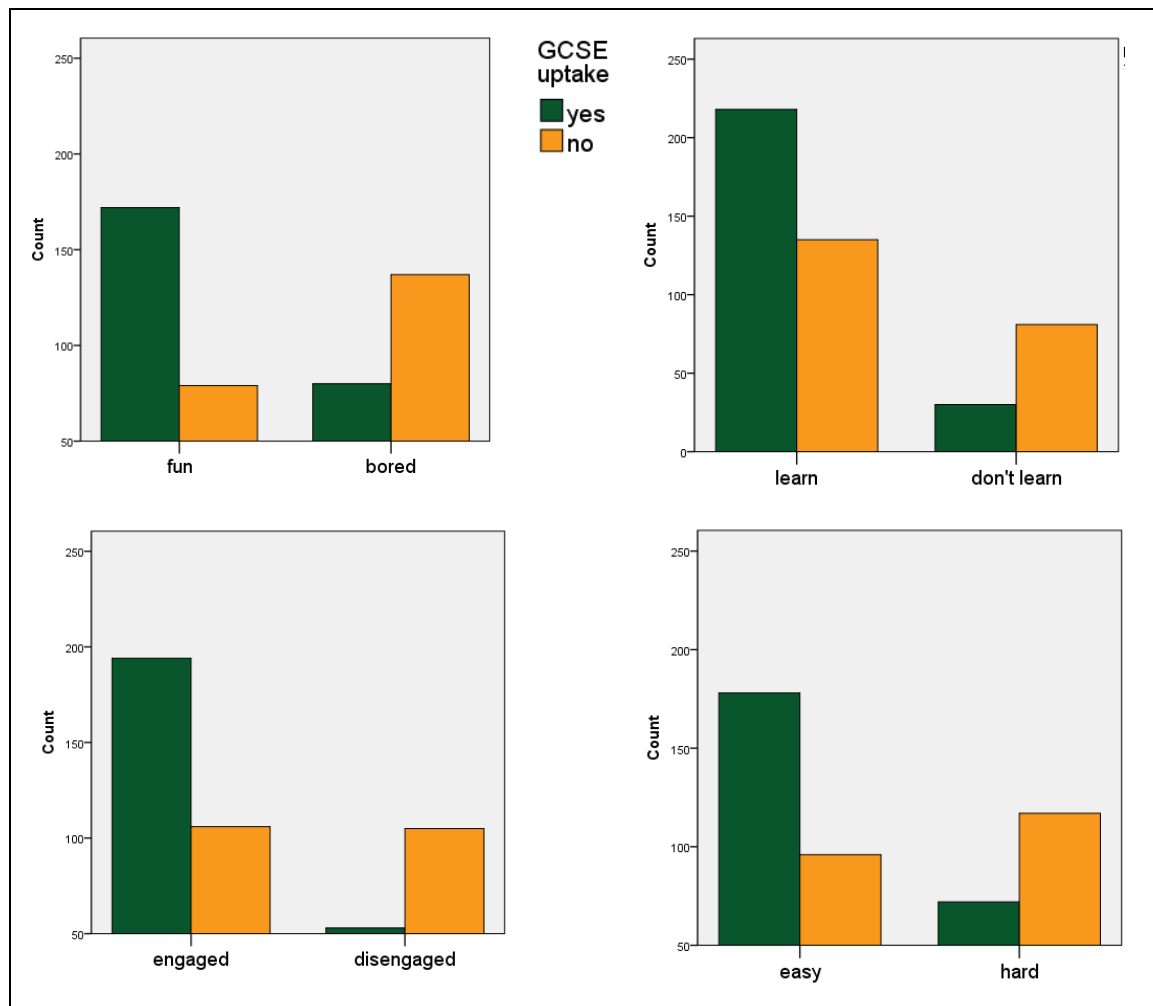


Figure 7. GCSE uptake by perception of MFL school lessons (statistically significant)

Nevertheless, it is encouraging to notice that there are also pupils who took up a language for Year 10 even if they felt that the language was hard or they felt 'bored' in class. It is also quite telling that the highest MFL GCSE uptake is associated with a sense of learning in the language class, which is an indication that these pupils do not take GCSE options too lightly and do not simply opt for whatever subject offers them most entertainment in the classroom. However, the fact that almost no one who felt disengaged during the MFL lessons chose a language GCSE is important and will be discussed in more detail later.

The interviews we conducted with 48 of our Year 9 participants also indicate that they have quite a good intuitive understanding of teaching methodology and often, perhaps surprisingly, even research-supported Second Language Acquisition theory.

### 3.2.2 What pupils would change in their MFL lessons

Based on previous MFL uptake statistics<sup>14</sup> and the low interest in languages identified in the UK by previous research as well as various reasons for dissatisfaction with language lessons<sup>15</sup>, we hypothesised that pupils will have suggestions for making language lessons more attractive to them. The suggestions that they gave in survey 1 with regards to the first language studied can be seen in Figure 8. (Only the first reason given was coded.)

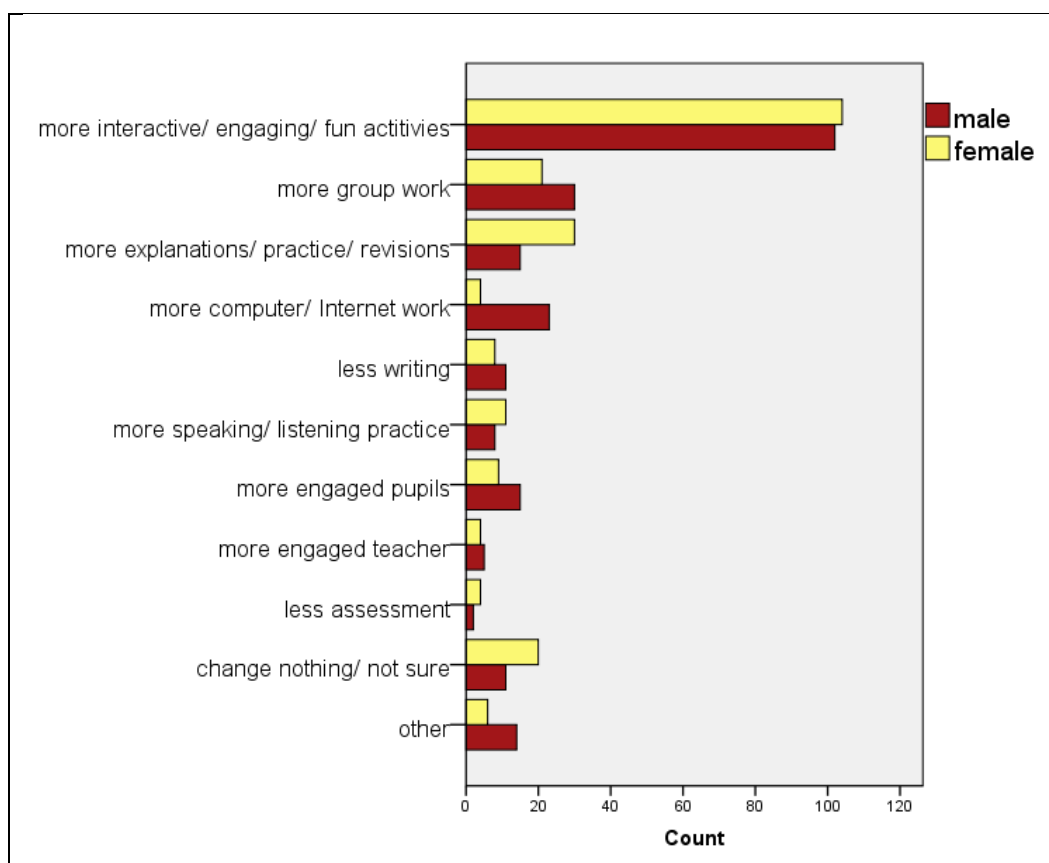


Figure 8. Changes that pupils would make to their MFL lessons at school

While some gender differences are noticeable (e.g., more boys would increase the time spent on the computer/Internet; more girls would keep the lessons as they are), overall the two genders agree clearly that more interactive/ engaging/ fun activities would be welcome. This is

a very important insight, as the interviews clearly link lesson enjoyment with perceived competence and perceived relevance of the language.

### 3.2.3 The enjoyment-competence-relevance triangle

One of the questions that the pupils were asked in the interview was how they had decided what GCSE subjects to choose and their reasons for choosing/ not choosing a language. While acknowledging that qualitative data cannot be quantified and qualitative interviews have other purposes than identifying trends, most – if not all – interview participants appeared to equate enjoying a language/ language class with being good at it and the language being very relevant for their future. These three notions appeared to form a *virtuous circle* whereby providing one element appeared to also ensure the other two. This was also true when one element was missing, transforming the set into a *vicious circle*. While all three elements appeared to be of crucial importance in influencing the pupils' attitudes to languages, lesson enjoyment did seem to represent the top factor, and one that had the ability to influence perceived competence and perceived language relevance. A graphic representation of this interaction can be seen in Figure 9.

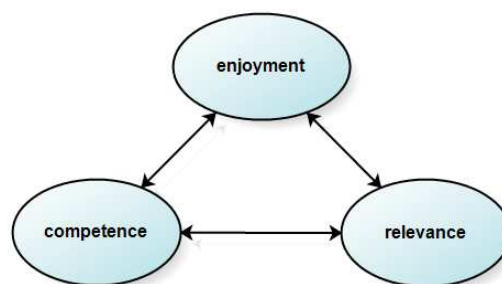


Fig. 9. *The enjoyment-competence-relevance triangle*

Perhaps this interaction can best be illustrated by two case studies representing two interviewees from different schools. These can be found on the next two pages.

**Student X** (a boy) showed a very negative attitude to languages, which he thought were ‘boring and frustrating’. He was randomly assigned to the panel group and his opinion of the panel was equally negative: he found the speakers ‘boring’ and ‘intimidating’, with the exception of one male guest whose job was similar to what X would like to do in the future. Later in the interview, he confessed that he found languages really hard, especially when the teacher gave instructions in the foreign language and he did not understand what he was supposed to do, or when he felt the teacher was ‘picking on pupils who don’t know how to say it in [the language]’.

Asked what could get him more interested in languages, X answered: ‘If I could do it, it would be better. If I could understand it more, I think it would get more interested’ [sic]. He declared he was doing his best in the classroom, but found the lessons too hard: ‘Well, I try to concentrate. But it just gets really confusing and you just lose concentration because you don’t know what you’re doing. (...) There are some which you get quite intimidated at. Because there’s just loads of [language] on the screen. And you don’t know what they are saying.’ He believed he would do much better with ‘a bit more support’, ‘more role play’ and ‘smaller classes where you get more attention’.

In a different part of the interview he even confessed that the panel discussion had been interesting and it had showed him that language learning ‘could be useful’. He gave examples of situations when it would be good to know a foreign language, such as when going on holiday to a different country. He added: ‘And if you just meet somebody, [nationality], or a different language, it would be – and then you could talk back to them. That would be quite an interesting conversation.’ However, low perceived competence pushed him to make a pragmatic choice: ‘But I just don’t want to waste it on a GCSE. Because I don’t think I’ll get it in GCSE.’

**Student Y** (a girl) declared in study 1 that she intended to choose a language GCSE, maintained her intention in study 2 and indeed selected a language for Year 10. She explained that, when deciding what subjects to opt for, she thought about her future and about what would be ‘fun’ for her to do, as well as ‘what universities would want’. Asked about her reasons for choosing a language GCSE, she answered: ‘Ehm, it’s something new and it’s quite interesting as well, and you also get to explore different things and different languages and it just might come in handy one day.’ Y had also been assigned to the panel and spoke with enthusiasm about the anecdotes she heard from the external speakers, giving concrete examples and explaining how they had influenced her current views of language learning.

Asked to describe a motivating language lesson, Y said that, for her, a motivating lesson is one where the teacher ‘constantly speaks in [the language] and have like someone foreign come in to speak to them and to teach them about the language and things that you bring a bit in a language, and always make things fun, ‘cause a lesson with just writing is not fun for anyone (...) and always have a fun teacher as well, like someone who can joke with you as well as help you in your studies’. She went on, explaining afterwards that this is exactly what her teacher was like, whom she called ‘the perfect teacher’: ‘ask opinions of the students ‘cause it’s mostly about them, you’re just kind of like a prop to them, cause it’s their future that’s on the line. So talk to your students about what is fun for them to do as well as learning, and don’t be strict.’

Y believed her language teacher was ‘all around a really good teacher’, who ‘knows how to set the boundaries’, ‘helps pupils in everything’ and makes things seem ‘easy, just easy’. She then illustrated her point: ‘Like with GCSE, I was really scared because it’s a really foreign language to me, [language] is not something I’m accustomed to, but the way [the teacher] explained it (...) it sounded like the easiest thing ever (...) just basically told us [he/she] would help us in anything, and... like you just know that [there]’s someone there, because other teachers can come across as quite intimidating and, you know, not someone who’s there for you.’

There are several similarities, but also significant differences, between Student X and Student Y. They both feel uncertain of their linguistic ability and their levels of confidence and perceived competence are low. They are both heavily influenced in their attitudes to language learning by their language teacher, and they can both feel easily 'intimidated' by teachers and the language learning experience. It is intriguing that they both used the same word – intimidated/intimidating – to describe inaccessibility in language learning: for X, the language lessons that he did not understand were intimidating, and so were the panel speakers who talked confidently about how positive language learning can be; for Y, teachers who are not 'there for you' – presumably, who do not show the empathy and understanding that her teacher showed – are also intimidating for not making their expertise accessible to a struggling pupil. It is clear in both cases, including X, that these pupils are interested in language learning, are curious about it and are aware of the benefits it can bring, as well as the intrinsic fascination that language learning can offer (certainly in Y's case). But it is also clear that they feel vulnerable, unconfident and 'intimidated' by a territory that they perceive to be inaccessible<sup>16</sup>. Y has an incredibly understanding teacher to help her along. In the perceived absence of such understanding and support, X has resorted to a defence mechanism that allows him to protect his self-worth: he tells us (and very probably to himself) that is not interested in languages because they are 'boring' and 'frustrating', not because he cannot understand them<sup>17</sup> (although he does make it clear in several places during the interview that he would love to).

### 3.3 Languages in the GCSE decision-making process

Most interviewees, when asked how they had decided which subjects to choose for GCSE, including languages, answered 'what I enjoy, what I'm good at and what is useful for my future' (or variations on the same theme)<sup>iv</sup>. When pupils who had not taken a language GCSE were asked to explain their decision, most answered: 'It's boring, I'm not good at it, and I'm never going to use it anyway' (or something similar). The enjoyment-competence-relevance triangle

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<sup>iv</sup> It may not be a coincidence that one of the schools advised their pupils to ask themselves these three questions when deciding what GCSE subjects to choose. However, the school advised that competence should take priority over enjoyment.



(Figure 9) was very visible in most of the 24 interviews we conducted, with particular emphasis placed on enjoyment.

### 3.3.1 Reasons for choosing/ not choosing languages

The second questionnaire also asked pupils to explain their intention to choose or not to choose a language for GCSE. Their answers can be seen in Figure 10, split by gender and GCSE uptake.

Figure 10 is based on the students' intention expressed in survey 2 compared to actual post-survey uptake data. The questionnaire (please see Appendix B) asked them whether they intended to take a language GCSE and to provide their reason for intending (not) to do so. The response categories that can be seen in Figure 10 represent our coding<sup>v</sup> of the completely open responses that the students gave. Only the first reason provided was coded for this analysis. As the figure shows, the reasons they gave for their choice in study 2 predicted final MFL uptake quite well, with only minor exceptions. (The analysis, however, is not statistically significant.) The negative responses in the first row (reasons for choosing a language) and the positive answers in the second row (reasons for not choosing a language) are explained by the fact that Figure 10 compares the reasons pupils gave us for their intentions in survey 2 (February) with their actual uptake decisions (February-March), indicating that a small number of pupils changed their minds between study 2 and GCSE option submission.

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<sup>v</sup> Examples of instrumental reasons pupils gave: *to get into a good university, I need languages in my future job, for travelling* etc. Examples of intrinsic reasons: *it's an interesting language, I love learning languages, I am enjoying it* etc.

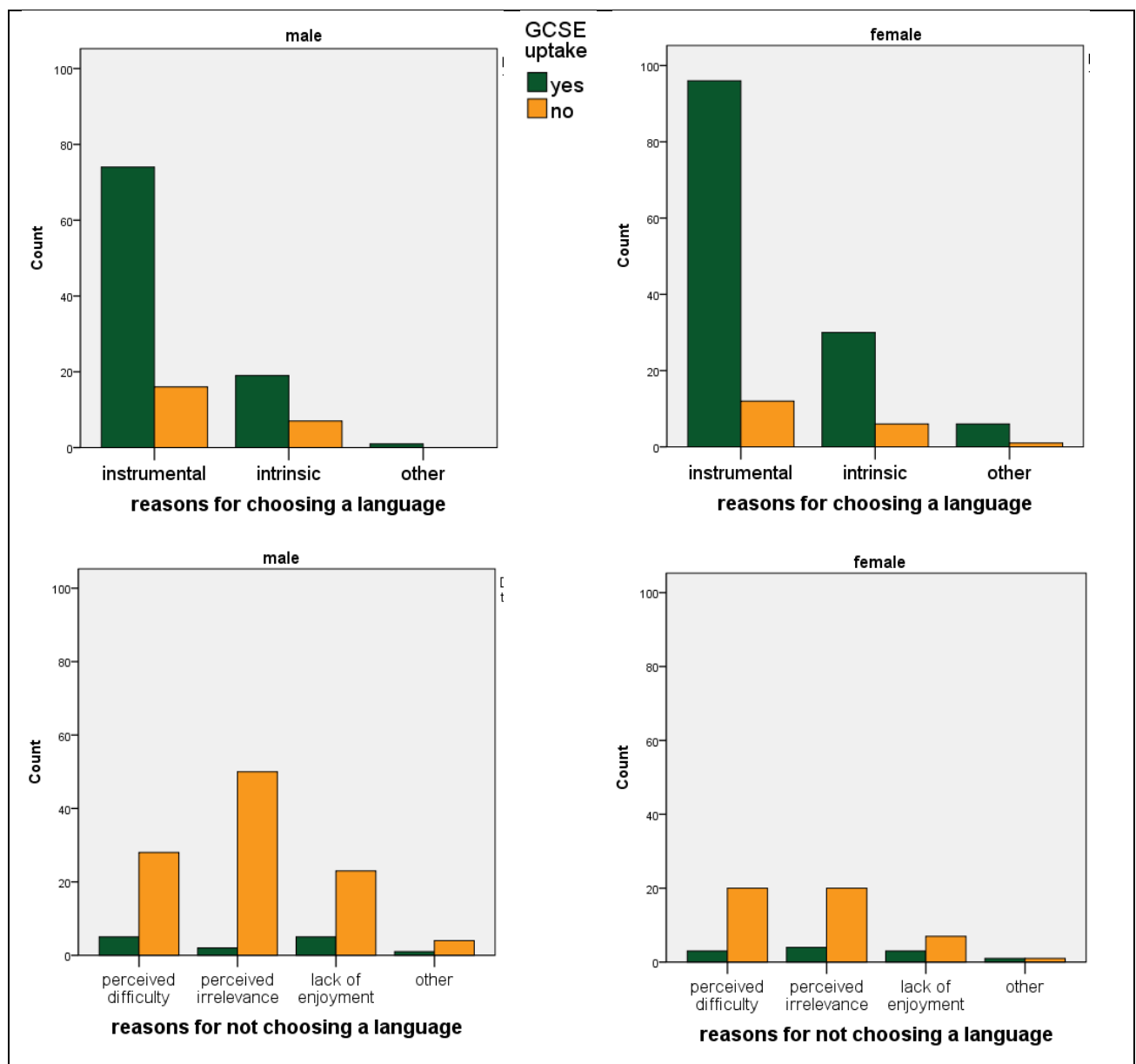


Figure 10. GCSE uptake by the pupils' reasons for their intention (statistically non significant)

### 3.3.2 Option blocks restrictions

One reason for this change could be option blocks, which restricted pupils' choice and determined some of these participants to give up languages in favour of other subjects<sup>18</sup>. This was mentioned by 7 out of the 48 interviewees, but, as this was not a question we asked specifically, it is possible that many more pupils felt constrained in their choice by the lists on which subjects appeared. Option blocks restrictions were explained quite clearly by one of the boys (!):

*[Will you choose a foreign language for GCSE?] I hope I will. But it doesn't fit in with the sheet. I would like to do languages, but it's not on the sheet, so I might not be able to.*

Another boy (!) declared that the panel discussion made him think about languages more, but in the end he still decided not to choose a language:

*[What did you think of the panel discussion?] It was quite interesting, it did make me think a lot more about taking a language, ehm, but I still decided not to but it made me think a lot more about taking one. [Why did you decide not to take a language in the end?] It was partly to do with the blocks that we had, I couldn't take some of the subjects that I really wanted to do, if I thought it was German.*

Yet another boy (!), in a different school, explained:

*[Why did you decide not to do a language GCSE?] Because the option blocks, the things I needed for the future mainly they were in the same box as the languages so I couldn't drop anything for any of the foreign languages.*

If these pupils' views are accurate, this could represent a serious problem, particularly for boys, who appeared to find option blocks more problematic than girls. If boys find it more difficult to fit a language into their career-oriented GCSE choices, then interventions such as ours will stand little chance of convincing them to study a language.

### 3.3.3 Instrumentality and possible face-saving tactics

As regards the reasons why pupils did not intend to take a language, we can see the enjoyment-competence-relevance triangle at play again. It is interesting to note that most boys claimed they would not take a language because 'it's useless'. One wonders whether this is not a face-saving attributional shift<sup>19</sup> like the one we believe Student X above experienced, whereby avoidance is attributed to an external reason (lack of relevance/ usefulness) rather than an internal cause (low confidence and perceived competence).

It is interesting to note that pupils who intended to choose a language GCSE in study 2 did so mainly for instrumental reasons, which may emphasise a perceived utilitarian value of languages at the expense of an intrinsic interest in language learning in the schools we worked with. This is also supported by the finding that instrumental factors such as perceived relevance of languages for one's career (question 6 in questionnaire 2 – Appendix B) did predict GCSE uptake, that is, pupils who chose a language for GCSE believed languages would be more useful for their future job (mean = 3.69 out of 4) than pupils who did not choose a language (mean = 2.52 out of 4)<sup>vi</sup>. The aggregated mean value of the attitudes to language learning scale (questionnaire 2 – question 7, see Appendix B) also predicted GCSE uptake: not surprisingly, pupils who had a more positive attitude to languages (mean = 57.8) were more likely to choose a language for GCSE than pupils who had a less positive attitude (mean = 44.56)<sup>vii</sup>. Once again, this emphasises the crucial importance of pupils' attitudes to language learning which, as we have seen, may be rooted in classroom practices but can be influenced by more attention given to languages through activities involving visitors (in our experience, both external speakers and an extra language lesson with a different teacher being similarly helpful).

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<sup>vi</sup>  $t = 8.68, p < 0.001, d = 0.90$

<sup>vii</sup>  $t = 12.91, p < 0.001, d = 1.26$

## 4. Conclusions

The gist of our findings is that, overall, our participants were aware of the benefits of speaking foreign languages. Whether in order to please foreign tourists by speaking their own language in the UK, to show respect to the local shopkeeper when on a holiday abroad, to boost one's CV or simply because languages are interesting and personally enriching, these pupils do want to learn foreign languages. Many factors may interfere with this wish, however, as our discussion below has shown very briefly. We are concluding this project with our trust in adolescents reaffirmed, but also more aware of the fragile balance between what these pupils (think they) need and what schools and teachers are able to offer, given timetabling and other restrictions.

We have seen above that participating in our intervention appeared to result in a higher MFL GCSE uptake than not participating – a distinction that was very clear in School A, where we had a 'treatment' group (panel discussion), an active control group (lesson with external tutor) and a non-active control group (instrument pilot). While, overall, the reaction to the intervention appears to have made a difference to uptake, and certain participant sub-groups appeared to react better to either the panel or the lesson, we have not found any robust evidence that one type of intervention is clearly better than the other. Our data indicate that both types of language promotion are successful and it may not matter much exactly what extra activity a school is offering, as long as the profile of Modern Foreign Languages is raised, pupils are given more opportunities to think about languages and they react positively to the activities offered.

However, no external intervention can have much success if pupils fail to see the relevance of their day-to-day classroom activities or they believe that language learning is too hard for them. As discussed briefly above, we believe that pupils' attitudes to language learning are firmly rooted in their MFL classes and transforming a positive reaction to an intervention into actual GCSE uptake would appear to depend, first and foremost, on whether pupils enjoy their MFL lessons and feel competent enough to handle them – two factors which appear closely related to perceived relevance of languages. The role of the classroom teachers is, once again, shown to be crucial, as clearly is the full support of the school.

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- <sup>2</sup> Department for Education, *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper* (London: TSO, 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> CILT, *Language Trends* (London: The National Centre for Languages, 2010), [http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/research\\_and\\_statistics/language\\_trends\\_surveys/secondary/2010.aspx](http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/research_and_statistics/language_trends_surveys/secondary/2010.aspx).
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- <sup>8</sup> C. Filmer-Sankey and H. Marshall, *Languages at Key Stage 4 2009. Evaluation of the Impact of the Languages Review Recommendations: Findings from the 2009 Survey*, (DfE Research Report 052) (London: DfE, 2010).
- <sup>9</sup> R. Passy and M. Morris, *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Learner Attainment and Progression. Final Report* (Slough: NFER, 2010), [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2010/rd15\\_10/rd15\\_10.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2010/rd15_10/rd15_10.pdf).
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- <sup>12</sup> J. Carr and A. Pauwels, *Boys and Foreign Language Learning: Real Boys Don't Do Languages*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); C. S. Dweck, "Is Math a Gift? Beliefs That Put Females at Risk," in *Why Aren't More Women in Science? Top Researchers Debate the Evidence*, ed. S. J. Ceci and W. M. Williams (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 47–55.
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<sup>16</sup> E. L. Deci and A. C. Moller, “The Concept of Competence: A Starting Place for Understanding Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determined Extrinsic Motivation,” in *Handbook of Competence and Motivation*, ed. A. J. Elliot and C. S. Dweck (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 579–597; C. S. Dweck, *Self-theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality and Development* (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 1999).

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School: \_\_\_\_\_

Set/ group: \_\_\_\_\_

### Attitudes to Modern Foreign Languages Questionnaire

**1. What foreign language(s) are you studying at the moment, and how do you feel about your lessons, in general?**

Please write the language on the left and then place an X in the box that best represents your opinion (for example, |\_|\_|\_X\_|\_|\_|\_|\_| or |\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_X\_|)

In foreign language 1  
(please write the language below)

\_\_\_\_\_

I have fun.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I get bored.
I learn a lot.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I don't learn much.
I feel engaged.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I feel disengaged.
It's easy for me.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for me.
It's easy for my classmates.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for my classmates.

In foreign language 2  
(please write the language below)

\_\_\_\_\_

I have fun.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I get bored.
I learn a lot.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I don't learn much.
I feel engaged.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	I feel disengaged.
It's easy for me.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for me.
It's easy for my classmates.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for my classmates.

**2. How would you improve your language classes if you could?**

Foreign language 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Foreign language 2: \_\_\_\_\_

**3. If you had a choice, what foreign language(s) would you like to study? Why? (If you wouldn't like to study any, please write 'none' and the reason why.)**

1<sup>st</sup> choice \_\_\_\_\_ Because \_\_\_\_\_

2<sup>nd</sup> choice \_\_\_\_\_ Because \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Are you planning to choose to study a foreign language in Year 10?** Please tick  Yes or No and answer the following question(s).

Yes  → Which language? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

No  → Which language? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Can you think of any situation(s) in the future when knowing a foreign language might be good for you?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Please turn over.

**6. In your opinion, how important is it to learn foreign languages?** Please tick  one box and tell us why you think so.





School: \_\_\_\_\_

Set/ group: \_\_\_\_\_

### Attitudes to Modern Foreign Languages Questionnaire (2)

**1. What foreign language(s) are you studying at the moment, and how do you feel about your lessons, in general?**

Please write the language on the left and then place an X in the box that best represents your opinion (for example, |\_|\_|\_X\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_| or |\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_X\_|\_|)

In foreign language 1 (please write the language below)  _____	➔	I have fun.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	I get bored.
		I learn a lot.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	I don't learn much.
		I feel engaged.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	I feel disengaged.
		It's easy for me.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for me.
		It's easy for my classmates.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for my classmates.

In foreign language 2 (please write the language below)  _____	➔	I have fun.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	I get bored.
		I learn a lot.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	I don't learn much.
		I feel engaged.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	I feel disengaged.
		It's easy for me.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for me.
		It's easy for my classmates.	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	It's hard for my classmates.

**2. Are you planning to choose to study a foreign language in Year 10?** Please tick  Yes or No and tell us why.

Yes  ➔ Which language(s) ? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

No  ➔ Which language? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**3. If you had a choice, what foreign language(s) would you like to study? Why?** (If you wouldn't like to study any, please write 'none' and the reason why.)

1<sup>st</sup> choice \_\_\_\_\_ Because \_\_\_\_\_

2<sup>nd</sup> choice \_\_\_\_\_ Because \_\_\_\_\_



8. In December, some pupils in your school took part in a panel discussion with external speakers, and some pupils attended a language class taught by an external tutor. Which one did you attend? Please tick  **ONE** box:

- a panel discussion with external speakers
- a language lesson with an external tutor
- neither (absent?)

Please tell us what you thought of this by completing **ONE** of the columns below. (If, and only if, you were absent on the day, you do not need to complete this section.)

What did you think of the **panel discussion** with external speakers? (Please give details of why you had that impression.)

**OR**

What did you think of the **language lesson** taught by an external tutor? (Please give details of why you had that impression.)

9. Are you a  boy or a  girl? (Please tick  one box.)

10. What is your full name? \_\_\_\_\_

(This is necessary only so we can match your answers with other data we collect on the project. We will not mention your name in any reports of this research and we will not show your answers to anybody outside the research team.)

If you would like to participate in a short interview on this topic together with a classmate, please tick

this box:

**Thank you very much for your help!** 

*Appendix C: Interview schedule – panel discussion*

*two pupils interviewed together*

*interview length: approximately 20 minutes*

(Thank you very much for agreeing to share your opinions with us.)

When are you submitting your GCSE options? How did you decide which subjects to take?

Will you choose a foreign language? Why/ why not? Please explain your reasons.

In December you took part in a panel discussion with external speakers – remember? Can you remember any of the things that were said? What did you think of that?

Did any parts of that panel discussion make you think about languages in a different way? Which? Why/ why not? Please explain.

What do you think would make you really interested in languages?

What kind of situations can you think of when speaking a foreign language could be useful?

If you were a language teacher, what would you do to motivate your pupils to get involved?

How would you describe your ideal language class? (Has this ever happened?)

Anything to add?

(Thank you very much for your help.)

*Appendix D: Interview schedule – lesson with external tutor*

*two pupils interviewed together*

*interview length: approximately 20 minutes*

(Thank you very much for agreeing to share your opinions with us.)

When are you submitting your GCSE options? How did you decide which subjects to take?

Will you choose a foreign language? Why/ why not? Please expand.

In December you were given a language lesson with an external tutor – remember? Can you remember any of the things that happened in that class? What did you think of that?

Did that make you think about languages in a different way? Why/ why not? Please expand.

What do you think would make you really interested in languages?

What kind of situations can you think of when speaking a foreign language could be useful?

If you were a language teacher, what would you do to motivate your pupils to get involved?

How would you describe your ideal language class? (Has this ever happened?)

Anything to add?

(Thank you very much for your help.)