**Chapter 5**

**Choosing language options at secondary school in England: Insights from parents and students**

*Ursula Lanvers, University of York*

*Christopher Martin, University of Wolverhampton*

**Abstract**

This chapter reports on the uptake of language study in upper secondary schools (age 13/14) in England, when language study becomes optional. Against a backdrop of continuous decline of language study past the compulsory phase over the last three decades, many secondary schools in England face the problem that they would like to increase the uptake of language study at age 14+, but do not necessarily want to force students to do so. Across the UK, language study beyond the compulsory phase is marked by sharp socio-economic divided, in that students from more advantaged background are much more likely to study a language. Furthermore, some studies suggest that parental language skills, and parents’ attitude to language study, influence students’ choice for or against a language, but little is known about this precise interplay. In an unprecedented demarche, this chapter analyses two types of data to compare parental and student attitudes towards language study choices: parental and student online discussion forums (*Mumsnet* and *Studentroom*), and dyadic interviews with parent and child. Results reveal that, while parents are overall more critical towards schools provision of languages, their schools’ language pedagogy and policy, etc, children tend to echo their parents’ opinions on the relative merit of language study. The chapter concludes that any attempts to seriously increase language study beyond the compulsory must address the repetition of such intergenerational patterns, and actively facilitate uptake in students from families where language uptake has hitherto not been part of their cultural or social capital.

**Keywords:** language option, motivation, parent-child dyads, Mumsnet, Studentroom

**Introduction**

In the context of Brexit, language competencies in the UK matter more than ever before (Holmes, 2018). Currently, the UK is performing, along with Ireland, the worst in Europe in terms of language competencies among the general population, costing the UK economy the equivalent of 3.5% of Gross Domestic Product (Foreman-Peck & Wang, 2014). Post-Brexit, there will be an even greater need for foreign language skills in order to communicate with nations for whom English is not an official or recognised language in their country (Lanvers et al, 2018). There is thus an urgent need to address the continual decline in languages other than English (MFL) learning in UK secondary schools, which is in its third decade now, and well-documented via annual Governmental reports (latest: British Council, 2019). However, we have little understanding of how the many factors leading to the decline, such as multiple policy and curriculum reforms, and student and parental attitudes, may interact. Past studies have highlighted the importance of parental attitudes towards MFL on their child’s language learning experience (Bartram, 2006;). Studies also revealed links between parent and child motivation towards learning a foreign language (Martin, 2019), parental socio-economic status and child uptake of languages: students who choose not to study a MFL beyond the compulsory phase tend to come from families with low socio-economic status (Lanvers, 2017). Furthermore, parents unable to support their child with MFL homework are less supportive of their child to choose a MFL (Costa & Faria, 2017). Thus, we know that parents play a pivotal role in both the uptake of, and perceived importance of, MFL study, but we know very little about the mechanisms of these influences. Therefore, this chapter examines parental influences and opinions on MFL study in greater detail, drawing on two different datasets. Before doing so, our next section sketch our current knowledge on the MFL motivational crisis among learners in the UK, and parental influences on MFL study. Subsequent sections will present the data, methodology, and findings, and then conclude with a contextualisation of our findings within the Anglophone context.

Before discussing learner motivation and parental influences, a word about the UK education system: education policy is devolved to the four UK nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with England’s Secondary students making up 85% of the UK Secondary school population. Currently, in all four UK nations, a) MFL study is compulsory up to age 14, and students may choose to (dis)continue a MFL beyond this age, b) students sit high stake exams at the age of 16 in all subjects they studied to this age (in England and Wales: *General Certificate of Secondary Education*= GCSE), and c) the Government’s aim to increase MFL uptake beyond age 14.

*The MFL motivational crisis in the UK*

In 2004, MFLs were made optional for students aged 14-16 in England, and the number of students taking a MFL exam age 16 (GCSE) went into a steep and unpredicted decline. The discontinuation of compulsory languages has led to a continual drop in those learning languages beyond the compulsory phase. The last three years have seen the percentage of students age 16 with a language qualification stagnating around 42% (British Council, 2019), Governmental initiatives to incentivise students to choose a MFL voluntarily beyond the compulsory phase largely failed (Lanvers, 2011), most likely because students themselves are demotivated by their MFL school experience (Lanvers et al., 2016), in particular boys (Courtney et al., 2017). These studies demonstrate a motivational crisis for MFL, starting as soon as students enter Secondary school at age 11, and deteriorating further from then on (Lanvers & Chambers, 2019). Reasons for this decline include perceived lack of importance, poor pedagogy, perceived academic difficulty, high-stakes examinations, and severe grading. MFL delivery at Primary level is characterised by problems around teacher shortage and skills, and transition problems to Secondary schools (White Paper, 2019).

In England, the Government set hope on the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc), in 2011, to increase MFL uptake. The Ebacc qualification consists of ‘good’ pass grades in five core subjects, including a MFL. However, the Ebacc did not lead to the expected increase, because the educational benefit of receiving this qualification remains unclear (Lanvers, 2020), and because other higher stake school performance measures conflict with the aim of offering the Ebacc to most students.

*MFL Study Choices and School Policies*

Individual schools may determine their own language policy beyond the age of 14, determining which MFLs to offer to which students. These post-14 policies vary vastly. For timetabling reasons, schools may offer ‘choices’ of GCSE subjects in block combinations of certain subjects (option blocks), rather than by single subject. Schools’ ‘option blocks’ are markedly different, depending on the social mix of a school’s intake. Many state schools constrain access to language study to better performing students (British Council, 2019). As a result of a plethora of different school practices, neither policy makers, nor researchers, have a clear overview of the actual ‘choice’ students have to study MFL. Furthermore, in many private schools, and state schools that select students on grounds of their ability (Grammar schools), languages are compulsory up to age 16, whereas in schools performing below average, few students continue with a language beyond age 14 (Lanvers, 2017). In many schools, it is common practice for students to be selected to study MFL due to their capabilities and predicted outcomes in terminal examinations. Thus, ‘choice’ to study a MFL is de facto often beyond control of the individual student.

There has been much controversy over the relatively harsh marking of MFLs at GCSE, compared to other subjects (British Council, 2019). The harsh marking of languages led to a reputation of MFLs as ‘difficult, often deterring all but the very able or confident students from choosing further language study. A recent Governmental announcement in England to adjust grades in French and German (grading for other MFLs were deemed within range of other subjects and therefore not adjusted) to those achieved in other subjects was much welcome, but the effect on uptake remains to be seen.

*Parental Influences of MFL Study Choices*

Globally, and across all subjects, parental socio-economic status influences learner outcome (Allen & Vignoles, 2007). In this respect, the significant correlations we find, between parental socio-economic status and MFL learner outcomes (for England, see Lanvers, 2017) are not surprising. However, students’ study *choice* for or against a MFL is also strongly related to parental socio-economic status (Lanvers, 2017). The precise mechanisms leading to this remain poorly understood. Martin (2019) showed that parents who had a positive experience of language study themselves supported MFL study in their child, and that parents who had not studied a particular language felt unable to support their child studying a different language. Students with parents who have language skills themselves are also keener (often, also financially more able) to expose their child to target languages and cultures via travel and other contacts. In this way, some children are encultured into valuing language skills as ‘cultural capital’ in a Bourdieuan sense (Coffey, 2018) from an early age, some are not.

**Research questions**

1. How do a) parents and b) students discuss the choice for or against a MFL? What arguments and constraints affecting the choice do they mention?
2. (How) do parental and student views differ?
3. Do research-generated data (interviews) and naturally generated data (online forums) yield different data?

**Method**

We present data from two different, complementary, sources, one small dataset, researcher-generated (interviews with parents and students), the other large dataset using existing data from the two online forums *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom*. Both data types were analysed using thematic analysis in order to gather in-depth thoughts and experiences of MFL learning and subject choices from two key stakeholders: students and parents. The scope and nature of the datasets were as follows:

*Mumsnet /Studentroom data*:

The forum *Studentroom* is a large UK based student web community for peer support, with 30 million page views and 4.5 million unique users each month (Corrazza et al., 2014). *Mumsnet* is also a UK based community forum, offering parental peer support. *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 tend to be female, -although some 16% are male-, white, middle class and University educated (Mackenzie, 2019). In contrast, *Studentroom* data has not been subject to research so far. The existing body of research using *Mumsnet*, as well as *Mumsnet*’s own data, permit insights into their user profile – which is typically middle-class (Mackenzie, 2019). By contrast, only one academic publication (Corrazza et al, 2014) has harvested *Studentroom* data so far, and we have no information regarding the demographics of *Studentroom* user profiles. The overall site content, including the data used here, suggests that the vast majority are indeed young school and university students. 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[[1]](#footnote-1) 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’. We ceased data harvesting once the overall words reached 17,500+ in each dataset (see Table 1), 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. Our analysis focuses on the concerns, arguments and opinions that individuals in the two stakeholder groups voice when making a decision regarding MFL.

## **Table 5. 1 Mumsnet and Studentroom data**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number of threads | Number of postings | Total words | Time span |
| *Mumsnet* | 17 | 800 | 17,546 | 1/2/2013-28/2/2019 |
| *Studentroom* | 21 | 285 | 17,623 | 1/8/2015-28/2/2019 |

Two coders (author 1 and independent researcher) read the same sample independently to identify important themes within the first data set obtained inductively developing and refining codes as they emerged from the data. Coders met to agree on an initial coding system. A mid-point check meeting was organised to discuss other emerging themes during the data process, after which small changes were made. All transcripts were then re-coded, where necessary, using this final framework. The coders also double blind-coded a sample (c.1,600 words) from each dataset and communicated to resolve any disagreements. The final coding system, as well as frequencies of codes from both datasets, are is presented in Table 2. We only report on comments regarding students’ individual circumstances and preferences: comments on national or school policy are not reported.

## **Table 5.2: Codes for Mumsnet and Studentroom data**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| +agreeing/affirming comment  -disagreeing/contradicting comment  = neutral comment | | |
|  | **Mumsnet** | **Studentroom** |
| Student inclined to choose MFL | 6+  9-  1= | 82+  42-  5= |
| Student should choose (e.g. on predicted grade)  (+good practice, -bad practice, = neutral comment) | 42+  8-  2= | 1+  7= |
| Conflict 1: student wants no MFL, parent does want MFL | 8 | 1 |
| Conflict 2: student wants no MFL, school does want him/her to do so | 8 | 15 |
| Peer influence: +for MFL, -against MFL, =neutral comment |  | 7+  6-  1= |
| Student liking MFL | 8+  15- | 40+  7-  4= |
| MFL difficulty (including getting good grade) + easy, - difficult, = neutral comment | 12+  18-  1= | 20+  34-  7= |
| Useful qualification | 26+  18-  2= | 28+  14-  2= |
| Useful skill | 40+  12- | 10+  4-  =1 |
| Intrinsic value of MFL (e.g. cognitive advantages, learning how to learn, raising cultural awareness..) | 36+  1-  1= | 25+  -6  =1 |
| MFL useful for academic trajectory (including Ebacc) | 91+  68-  19= | 33+  12-  6= |

*Interview data*

A small (6 parent-student interviews) cross-sectional sample of participants was chosen from a larger study (n=602) in order to represent diversity in school types (state, independent, percentage of disadvantaged students), school profile of MFL, family socio-economic background, student gender[[2]](#footnote-2). Ethical approval was sought from the Headteacher (state schools), or Chair of the Board of Trustees (independent school). A case study approach was used to interpret dyadic interviews (parent and student). Interviews took place using, offering participants maximum flexibility and comfort.

The sample consists of six dyads made up of the mother and student (3 males, 3 females) in Year 8 (12 years old) i.e. at the time of choosing whether to continue with a language or not. Such dyadic discussions allowed the researcher to observe power dynamics in family discussions around the issue of choosing to continue the study of a MFL. The data were analysed thematically, and codes developed in a combination of inductive and deductive processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibbs, 2018). The coding was mainly deductive and was guided by the coding grid from the forum data (Table 3). Code frequencies for each case study (Tables 5-10) are listed in the Results section.

## **Table 5.3 – Coding Grid for Interviews**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Code** | **Number of comments** |
| Parental experience of language learning | 11 |
| Parental encouragement and engagement | 16 |
| Student enjoyment of MFL | 10 |
| Intrinsic value of MFL (cognitive, cultural awareness) | 6 |
| Perceived usefulness – travel and tourism | 19 |
| Perceived usefulness – career progression | 30 |
| Perceived difficulty of learning a MFL | 16 |
| Options and timetabling restrictions | 32 |
| Teaching approach in MFL lessons | 20 |
| Impact of Brexit | 5 |

Regarding information on the participating schools (Table 4), we include Free School Meals (FSM), the school policy regarding MFL study age 14-16, and the percentage of students continuing with a MFL at that age. FSM gives the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals on grounds of economic deprivation in a given school, and thus an indicator of a school’s socio-economic mix. The England mean average percentage for FSM in the state secondary schools is 12.4% (2018 figure, DfE, 2018). The participating state schools have slighter above average percentages of FSM. Regarding school policy, unusually for the independent sector (see *Introduction*), our participating independent school makes MFL study beyond the age of 14 optional. The participating state schools follow the common practice in this sector to select higher ability students for MFL study age 14-16 (see Introduction), and both schools have a higher participation rate in this respect than the England average of 42%. Two of our state school students are selected for this pathway, one is not.

## **Table 5.4. Demographic and School Information**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Dyad** | **School information** | **Parental Information: age, prior MFL study, occupation** | **Student Information** |
| 1 | (Independent)  0%FSM  GCSE MFL optional. Average uptake 10%. | Mother; 35-45; studied French GCSE; self-employed; Finance. | Male; studies French |
| 2 | Mother; 46-55; studied French GCSE, Spanish A level; part-time employed; Book-shop owner. | Male; studies French |
| 3 | Mother; 46-55; studied English and Arabic to A level; full-time employed; Teacher of Mathematics. | Female; studies French |
| 4 | (State 1)  19.4% FSM; GCSE MFL compulsory for selected students (65% GCSE MFL) | Mother; 35-45; studied German GCSE; full-time employed; Adult Learning and Skills. | Female; studies French, selected to continue MFL |
| 5 | Mother; 35-45; studied German GCSE; undergraduate student in Nursing. | Male; studies German, not selected to continue MFL |
| 6 | (State 2)  23% FSM; GCSE MFL compulsory for selected students (77.6% GCSE MFL) | Mother; 35-45; studied French, Italian and Spanish GCSE; full-time employed; Administration. | Female; studies French, selected to continue MFL |

Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix) were conducted with all dyads, asking questions aimed to elicit parental experiences of language learning at school, their perceptions of language learning in schools today, student views and enjoyment of their MFL lessons, perceived usefulness of MFL as qualification and skill, and influence on the choice for or against a MFL at GCSE level.

*Ethics*

Ethical approval was granted by the respective researchers’ institutions. In addition, for the interviews, we sought approval from parents and students, Headteacher (state schools), or Chair of the Board of Trustees (independent school). Interviews took place using, offering participants maximum flexibility and comfort. As the forum data from the two discussion forums are deemed to be in the public domain, individual consent from forum contributors was not sought. Approval from forum organisers was given under GDPR conditions such as anonymisation of usernames, downloading only comments which were relevant to the research questions, and active research participating in the relevant discussion threads.

In the following, we present results concerning parental issues around MFL choices, and inter-generational differences (Questions 1 & 2), in order to then discuss inter-generational differences and (Question 3) and review the results more generally.

**Results:Forum data*[[3]](#footnote-3)***

The presentation of the forum data results is organised as follows: all codes (see Table 2) showing significant controversies either within one user group (within *Mumsnet* or *Studentroom*) or between the forums serving different generations, are discussed, and exemplified by one or two citations. The number after a citation indicates the thread it can be found in.

In the forum designed for students, *Studentroom*, posters tend to share their intention to choose a language (or not) (code: student inclined to choose MFL) and request recommendations and inside comments from current or past 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[[4]](#footnote-4))

Most students do not over-problematise the option restrictions of their schools, neither in choices between different languages, nor a language versus another subject. Regarding past achievement, students mention less than parents that their choice is influenced by the grade they achieved in their language so far. Parents, however, often caution others that languages are marked more harshly than other subjects:

“(…) 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)

However, students discuss the difficulties of achieving good grades in language more than parents. Here, comments remarking on the relative difficulty (c. 60%) outweigh those reporting relative ease (c. 40%) (Table 2, code used: MFL difficulty).

Some parents insist that students should do a language regardless of ability (code used: intrinsic value of MFL):

“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 language 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)

A near-similar number of students and parents made arguments about the intrinsic values of languages:

“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 (sic)) (*Studentroom*, 14)”

Parents voice the opinion more often than students themselves that students should be able to choose (code: student should choose) whatever 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 (sic) 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 language choice is not shared by their child (code: conflict 1):

“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)

Students, for their part, hardly report on such intergenerational conflicts, and if they do, they seem 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)

Students are more concerned that their school wants them to do a MFL GCSE, against their will (code: conflict 2).

Both parents and students discuss the instrumental benefits (codes: useful skill, useful qualification) studying a language 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 language]. 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)

As evident in Table 2, students discussing the usefulness of a language qualification spend considerably more time than parents discussing the (dis)merits of a specific language:

“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* (code: MFL difficulty), with parents of dyslexic children often lamenting the disadvantaging their child experiences in language 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 the MFL difficulty for different groups of learners. Instead, students tend to give pragmatic advice on how to best ‘play the system’. For instance, some volunteer that Italian might be better for dyslexics, or give advice on how to get out of language study altogether:

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

**Discussion of Forum data**

Considering the dismal state of language learning in the UK (see Introduction), a first observation concerns the wide range of intrinsic benefits of MFL that both parents and students mention. Against the backdrop of public negative discourses on the British as tongue tied, lazy, etc. (Lanvers, 2017), many posters in both forums cite a pleasingly wide range of benefits of MFL that go beyond instrumental and extrinsic benefits. Having said this, parents, with a longer-term view on their child’s education than students themselves, worry more about the relative merits of a MFL qualification of their offspring’s future career, including their future university study. Students, for their part, are more concerned about the immediate implications of a MFL choice. Here, the perceived difficulty of the subject, and potentially poor grades, are a source of worry, and peer support posts in *Studentroom* in particular exemplify exquisitely how some students aim to boost their peer’s self confidence in taking a MFL, alleviating their doubts. Somewhat surprisingly – given that students articulate their interests in a specific language more than parents –, students are less critical than parents overall of the schools’ offers of languages. They seem to consider that schools operate under difficult timetabling and resource restrictions, and focus mainly ‘surviving in the system’, which can include choosing an ‘easier’ language, a language more suited to dyslexics, or tips on how to ‘get out of it’ altogether. However, given the vast age difference in the forum users of *Mumsnet* and *Studentroom*, the most striking finding in this data is the near-total absence of intergenerational conflict, suggesting that families tend to share similar views on MFL.

**Results: *Interviews*:**

This section reports on the salient codes (as per frequencies) mentioned in each dyad. Space permitting, three sample citations serve to illustrate the salient topics in each dyad. We first present the dyads from the independent school, then those from the 2 state schools.

*Case Study 1*

## **Table 5.5. Coding frequencies for Dyad 1**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **code** | **Student** | **Parent** |
| Parental experience of language learning | 1+ | 1+ |
| Parental encouragement and engagement | 2+ | 2+  1- |
| Student enjoyment of LOTE | 1+ | 2+ |
| Intrinsic value of LOTE (cognitive, cultural awareness) | 1+ | 0 |
| Perceived usefulness – travel and tourism | 2+ | 1+ |
| Perceived usefulness – career progression | 3+  1= | 3+ |
| Options and timetabling restrictions | 1+ | 1+  1- |
| Teaching approach in LOTE lessons | 2+ | 0 |

Both student and parent are generally positive towards learning a foreign language. This dyad appeared to be aware of the perceived usefulness for career progression and aspirations, with both participants commenting positively on how MFL can support one’s career:

“I think it opens doors for the students more later in life which job or career route they want to go down. It gives them an extra...” (Parent)

The student shared the positive view of his parent in that MFL are important if someone is to have a good career after their studies. Additionally, both agreed that parental encouragement are pivotal in supporting students to secure good outcomes in language learning:

“[...] because my mum speaks French as well so she has experience of doing French so obviously, she is able to help me and wants me to carry on learning French as well.” (Student)

According to the parent, home encouragement is key. She states that parents who have little exposure and experience of language learning are at a disadvantage in supporting their student (see also Costa and Faria, 2017). She concedes that if her student had chosen a *different* language, she would still be supportive, but with limited support:

“[...] I don’t speak any other languages so we couldn’t have our banter ‘en français’ and I think, support wise, this would become very difficult.” (Parent)

Thus, this dyad generally shares the same positive views on language learning and its instrumental benefits that it can bring.

*Case Study 2*

## **Table 5.6. Coding frequencies for Dyad 2**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **code** | **Student** | **Parent** |
| Parental experience of language learning | 1+ | 3+ |
| Parental encouragement and engagement | 3+ | 1= |
| Student enjoyment of LOTE | 1+ | 0 |
| Intrinsic value of LOTE (cognitive, cultural awareness) | 2+ | 2+ |
| Perceived usefulness – travel and tourism | 2+ | 1+  1= |
| Perceived usefulness – career progression | 4+ | 1+  2= |
| Perceived difficulty of learning a LOTE | 1- | 0 |
| Options and timetabling restrictions | 1+  1- | 1+  1- |
| Teaching approach in LOTE lessons | 2+ | 2+ |

Like dyad 1, this dyad shares generally positive stances on learning MFL, with the same salient theme of perceived usefulness for career progression, here more often mentioned by the son, e.g.:

“I think of it as a really good opportunity, that it can help you later on in life when you get a career, possibly in a foreign country and it’s helpful to have a language or two.” (Student)

The parent confirmed his views regarding the importance for career prospects, and added that during her schooling, it was taken for granted that all had to do it. Furthermore, dyad 2 highlighted the support of the wider family:

“Well one of the things is me having French cousins who live near Paris. I’m now going to see if I can Facetime my cousins and uncle to see if I can speak to them in French, so it’s an opportunity basically.” (Student)

“I think that, in combination with the fact he’s got a French uncle and his other uncle is Head of MFL in a college, it normalises the experience of another language spoken in the family.” (Parent)

Both participants also commented favourably on the pedagogy used on the language classroom, with the student speaking positively about the types of activities that are used in order to encourage autonomy in learning, and the mother praising the teacher. To sum up, the student is even more positive in this dyad than the mother. Both emphasise the opportunities the wider (French) family offered to develop his language, and shared positive stances towards the current MFL school experience.

*Case Study 3*

## **Table 5.7. Coding frequencies for Dyad 3**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **code** | **Student** | **Parent** |
| Parental experience of language learning | 0 | 2+  1- |
| Parental encouragement and engagement | 1+ | 1+ |
| Student enjoyment of LOTE | 1+  1= | 1= |
| Perceived usefulness – travel and tourism | 1+ | 1+ |
| Perceived usefulness – career progression | 1+ | 2+ |
| Perceived difficulty of learning a LOTE | 3- | 2- |
| Options and timetabling restrictions | 2+ | 2+ |
| Teaching approach in LOTE lessons | 2= | 2+ |

Both mother and daughter focused on discussing difficulty of MFL, with the daughter commenting more negatively on this than the mother:

“My experience is I struggle with French quite a lot. I find writing difficult especially. When I write it, I try and form the words and think about what they are and that’s definitely what I struggle with the most.” (Student)

The mother recalled her difficulty in learning Arabic, an experience she extrapolates onto both other languages, and other individuals. The daughter, however, has a more positive stance towards learning a heritage or community language:

“I’ve heard that you can do almost any language as long as they can get a teacher for the examination. I’ve seen a student doing Chinese and other students have done Russian. So it turns out that you can do pretty much any language as long as they can get a tutor for it.” (Student)

Furthermore, mother and daughter comment -mostly negatively- on issues regarding MFL delivery in school, such as pedagogy and timetabling. The parent, a teacher, is aware of the timetabling and curriculum pressures on MFL:

“When you are in a class, if the pupils are not engaged with the lesson, they will tell you. Also, I don’t think once a week in some cases is anywhere near enough.” (Parent)

However, despite this problematisation of MFL, both broadly support the view that languages are important, and useful for the future.

We note that both parents and students in the independent school report overall more positive aspects about MFL than negatives. We now turn to the three state school dyads.

*Case Study 4*

## **Table 5.8. Coding frequencies for Dyad 4**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Student** | **Parent** |
| Parental experience of language learning | 0 | 1= |
| Parental encouragement and engagement | 1+ | 1= |
| Student enjoyment of LOTE | 1- | 1- |
| Perceived usefulness – travel and tourism | 2- | 1+  3- |
| Perceived usefulness – career progression | 1+  1- | 1+  3- |
| Perceived difficulty of learning a LOTE | 1- | 1- |
| Options and timetabling restrictions | 1- | 2=  6- |
| Teaching approach in LOTE lessons | 1- | 2- |

Both mother and daughter are overwhelmingly negative about MFL, the mother especially about the languages on offer, and timetabling restrictions.

“I don’t think that the languages that are currently on offer in secondary schools are perhaps the most beneficial. So for instance now, it is still primarily focused on French and I think more people tend to go on holiday to places like Spain and Greece rather than France.” (Parent)

Just as the parent, the daughter equates ‘usefulness’ with the ability to use a language on holiday:

“[...] like no-one really goes on holiday to France but they go on holiday to Spain, so Spanish would be more useful than French.” (Student)

Finally, despite their overall negative assessment, both mother and daughter acknowledge that some -rather unspecific- general benefits of MFL exist:

“I guess it does open more doors for you if you can speak a language. My daughter is saying that she would drop it if she had the option, I personally wouldn’t want her to do that because I do think that even having the basics of the language can be beneficial.” (Parent)

To sum up, this dyad report largely negatively on the experiential level of MFL at school, and struggle to articulate a rationale for learning MFL beyond the ‘holiday’ argument.

*Case Study 5*

## **Table 5.9. Coding frequencies for Dyad 5**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **code** | **Student** | **Parent** |
| Parental experience of language learning | 0 | 2+ |
| Parental encouragement and engagement | 1+ | 0 |
| Student enjoyment of LOTE | 1= | 1= |
| Perceived usefulness – travel and tourism | 1- | 1=  2- |
| Perceived usefulness – career progression | 1- | 1=  1- |
| Perceived difficulty of learning a LOTE | 1+  1- | 1- |
| Options and timetabling restrictions | 1+  2- | 1+  1= |
| Teaching approach in LOTE lessons | 1- | 1- |
| Impact of Brexit | 0 | 2- |

Despite the mother reporting overall positively on her MFL experience, the salient themes from this dyad centre around the (lack of) perceived usefulness of languages, problems at school level, and the impact of Brexit:

“Even though I think there is a lot of value in learning a language, I do think that a lot of people won’t get to use it or necessarily need it throughout their life in the same way. There is an attitude in the business world that most people speak English.” (Parent)

The son echoes this opinion. Furthermore, the mother explains that contacts to other countries and cultures were not part of her upbringing:

“Family holidays were never abroad, so I didn’t travel, no, as a young person or have that kind of cultural experience.” (Parent)

This dyad thematised option choices and timetabling a lot, a theme also prominent in the discussion fora. Despite not being selected for this pathway, the student is considering continuing with German, and the mother is considering refreshing her knowledge of that language. However, both advocate greater choice of different target languages:

“I feel like there should be a few more language choices. If I study a little bit more with the environment, I might drop it half way through Year 9.” (student)

In sum, despite the student’s -hesitant- proclivity to continue MFL study, and the mother’s positive learner experiences, both see little value overall in language learning at school, and in particular not the languages currently on offer.

*Case Study 6*

## **Table 5.10. Coding frequencies for Dyad 6**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **code** | **Student** | **Parent** |
| Parental experience of language learning | 0 | 1= |
| Parental encouragement and engagement | 2+ | 0 |
| Student enjoyment of LOTE | 2= | 1+ |
| Intrinsic value of LOTE (cognitive, cultural awareness) | 1= | 0 |
| Perceived usefulness – travel and tourism | 1+  1- | 1= |
| Perceived usefulness – career progression | 2- | 2- |
| Perceived difficulty of learning a LOTE | 2- | 3- |
| Options and timetabling restrictions | 1=  4- | 2- |
| Teaching approach in LOTE lessons | 2= | 3- |
| Impact of Brexit | 0 | 1=  2- |

This dyad commented generally negatively on foreign language learning, with only one positive comment made by the parent, and three by the student. Their negative views focused on pedagogy of MFL, and lack of usefulness, and in particular restrictions of choices, as exemplified here:

“I told my daughter that I didn’t enjoy French, but that I enjoyed Spanish and Italian. But at her school, they do only French, they don’t do any other language.” (Parent)

“As part of my option pathway, I have no choice, we have to do French until Year 11 as a GCSE.” (Student)

Both mother and daughter interpreted ‘usefulness’ with a strict focus on language-related professions only, rather than other career-supporting, or intrinsic benefits:

“Unless you’re actually going to be an interpreter or travel abroad for a living or something to do with foreign countries, I don’t think it’s necessary unless it’s something that you really want to learn.” (Parent)

Furthermore, the parent in this dyad stood out as mentioning Brexit as a detrimental factor to learning the languages currently on offer in schools, but suggests others might be useful:

“This is going to sound really bad but the way our country is going at the minute, I don’t think it will be French, Italian, Spanish or German that people are going to need to learn.” (Parent)

Overall, this dyad, held the most negative stances towards MFL, with both parent and student interpreting benefits of MFL in an instrumental sense, and strongly critiquing the school’s languages offers.

**Discussion of Interview data**

Looking at sector differences, one striking observation concerns the preoccupation with specific target languages of participants (both student and parent) in the state sector, while those from the independent sector show little dissatisfaction with the traditional range of languages currently on offer. Parents from the state sector in particular are asking for a diversification of languages on offer (in part, in reaction to Brexit), and mostly interpret the ‘usefulness’ of languages along the perceived instrumental benefits of specific languages (see also, Thompson, this volume). Parents from the independent school had few complaints regarding school MFL policy, reported more positive MFL experiences, and contacts to MFL speakers abroad – favourable contexts which allow parents to construe the benefits of MFL in broader terms than a solely instrumental focus. Generally, this sector is financially better equipped to diversity their languages and work with smaller classes. Conversely, resource restrictions in the state sector often leads schools to reduce choices, and language offered (often to one language only, see Introduction), leading to parental and student dissatisfaction. Furthermore, nearly all parents actively seek to support their child’s MFL learning and consider their own language skills an important factor in their child’s MFL choice, but parents from the independent sector had greater linguistic resources to do so. Finally, no gender patterns regarding attitudes were discernible, possibly due to the small data sample, but the most salient observation overall is the extent to which students echo their parents’ views.

**Conclusion**

Any dataset needs to be interpreted within its limits. In the case of the forum data, little is known about the representativeness of those choosing to post on *Mumsnet*, and *Studentroom*. The interview data is small-scale and offers only a snapshot of both generational and education sector (Independent or State school) differences. Thus, while care has to be taken not to over-generalise the results, we can comment on the patterns emerging from this data. The forum data in particular has revealed that many parents *and* students harbour opinions on language study that are in themselves not suggesting an intrinsic disinterest or dislike of the subject. On the contrary, a relatively large group of both parents and students express desire for proficiency, intrinsic interest and curiosity for other cultures. The discussions around the pros and cons of continuing with MFL at school, however, become operationalised alongside strategic questions such as: *Do I like the other Option subjects in my GCSE Option block that go alongside a MFL? Would my grade in MFL be as good as if I had chosen History instead? Will I need a MFL for my university application?* etc. In other terms, potentially favourable stances towards MFL are mediated via the restrictions and regulations within the education system, at which point the ‘reality principle’ of strategically choosing options to one’s future academic advantage might disfavour a language study.

However, the positive ‘take home’ message here is that, contrary to some public debates on the language crisis, students are not necessarily all ‘linguaphobes’, harbouring the belief that ‘English is enough’. Yet, such beliefs are easily reinforced by an education system that does put little emphasis on language study. Thus, to capitalise on existing positive stances towards MFL, the education system needs to incentivise and enable more MFL study.

Neither the parental nor student forum reported many intergenerational conflicts, suggesting that students’ stances towards MFL are largely shaped by family values on this. The interview data clearly illustrates the intergenerational ‘echo effect’, whereby children echo the parental views on the value of languages. The interview data has also shown, more strikingly still than the forum data, the degree to which parental language skills influence student choice, with some students choosing a particular language as a direct consequence of parental support and language skills. The interview data, permitting the researcher access to background information about participants, also shows the extent to which differences in beliefs about MFL fall along socio-economic divides, resounding the social divide we find in the UK in general in MFL uptake (see Introduction).

We conclude with the reflection that any initiative aiming to increase uptake must necessarily widen the social spectrum in MFL uptake, and incentivise groups of learners who, whether by their upbringing, learning opportunities, or family value systems, have had little exposure to MFL in their environment. Breaking intergenerational cycles of dislike of MFL thus constitutes a particular challenge. Targeted confidence boosting interventions in schools with low uptake, or- more effective still- a policy that truly disadvantages no child - making MFL compulsory for all would achieve this widening participation.

**References**

Allen, R. & Vignoles, A. (2007). What should an index of school segregation measure? *Oxford Review of Education,* 33 (5), 643–668.

Bartram, B. (2006). An examination of perceptions of parental influence on attitudes to language learning. *Educational Research,* 48 (2), 211–221.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). “Using thematic analysis in psychology”. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3, 77-101.

British Council. (2019). *Language Trends 2019*. Available at <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/languagetrends-2019> [accessed 1 November 2019].

Coffey, S. (2018) Choosing to study modern foreign languages: Discourses of value as forms of cultural capital. *Applied Linguistics*, 39 (4), 462-480.

Courtney, L., Graham, S., Tonkyn, A. and Marinis. T. (2017). Individual Differences in Early Language Learning: A Study of English Learners of French. *Applied Linguistics* *38* (6), 824–847.

Corazza, O., Simonato, P., Corkery, J., Trincas, G., & Schifano, F. (2014). “Legal highs”: safe and legal “heavens”? A study on the diffusion, knowledge and risk awareness of novel psychoactive drugs among students in the UK. *Rivista di Psichiatria*, *49* (2), 32-49.

Costa, M. and Faria, L. (2017). Parenting and Parental Involvement in Secondary School: Focus Groups with Adolescents’ Parents. *Paidéia*, 27 (67), 28-36.

Foreman-Peck, J & Wang, Y. (2014). *The costs to the UK of language deficiencies as a barrier to UK engagement in exporting: A report to UK trade & investment. Cardiff Business Schoo*l. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/309899/Costs\_to\_UK\_of\_language\_deficiencies\_as\_barrier\_to\_UK\_engagement\_in\_exporting.pdf [accessed 1 November 2019]

Holmes, B. (2018). Speaking to a Global Future: The Increasing Value of Language and Culture to British Business Post-Brexit. In M. Kelly (ed)  *Languages after Brexit* (pp. 61-74). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Lanvers, U. (2011). Language education policy in England. Is English the elephant in the room?. *Apples-Journal of Applied Language Studies*, *5* (3), 63-78.

Lanvers, U. (2017). Elitism in language learning in the UK. In D.J. Rivers & K. Zotzmann (eds): *Isms in Language Education: Oppression, Intersectionality and Emancipation*, 50-73. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Lanvers, U., Doughty, H., & Thompson, A. (2018). Brexit as Linguistic ‘Symptom of Britain Retreating into its Shell?’ Brexit-Induced Politicisation of Language Learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 102 (4), 775-796.

Lanvers, U. (2020). MFL policy: quo vadis? Book chapter in C. Cunningham & Hall, C. (eds): *Taking Risks in Applied Linguistics.* Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Lanvers, U., & Chambers, G. (2019). In the Shadow of Global English? Comparing Language Learner Motivation in Germany and the United Kingdom. In Lamb, M., Csizér, K., Henry, A., Ryan, S.(eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Motivation for Language Learning* (pp. 429-448). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Mackenzie, J. (2019). *Language, Gender and Parenthood Online: Negotiating Motherhood in Mumsnet Talk*. Milton Park: Routledge.

Martin, C. (2019). Modern foreign language learning: The impact of parental orientations on student motivation, in: The 7th European Conference on Language Learning: Independence and interdependence, Official conference proceedings, 19th-21st July, London, UK, pp. 47-60.

Martin, C. (2020). Response to ‘The Motivational Dimension of Language Teaching’, Language Teaching, 53(2), pp. 233-236.

White Paper (2019). *Primary Languages Policy in England – The Way Forward*. <http://www.ripl.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/RIPL-White-Paper-Primary-Languages-Policy-in-England.pdf> [accessed 10 March 2020]

1. General Certificate of Secondary Education, high stake exam age 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Unfortunately not in respect of parental gender: no fathers made themselves available for interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Both forums regularly use abbreviations. The most frequent ones are: DS=darling son, D=darling husband, DH=darling husband, O level=old qualification for 16 year olds replaced by GCSE. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Numbers refer to the thread number in which this quote occurred. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)