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'Is this the same subject?' Students' perceptions of language use in Modern Languages degrees

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates how the structural separation between language and cultural content in Modern Languages degrees in the UK shapes students' perceptions and expectations. Drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews with first-year undergraduate students of Spanish at a British research-intensive university, the study identifies three key themes: expectations about the use of the target language, reasons for language preference, and perceived differences between language and content modules. Findings reveal a consistent expectation among students for greater integration of the TL across all modules, with many expressing a sense of disconnection when cultural content is delivered in English. While language modules were perceived as interactive and accessible, content modules were associated with academic rigour but emotional detachment. The paper argues that the entrenched division between language and content undermines student engagement, reinforces staff hierarchies, and contributes to the precarious status of ML in the UK. It concludes by calling for a re-evaluation of pedagogical approaches, advocating for a better integration of language and culture that aligns more closely with student expectations and supports the long-term viability of the discipline.

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1. Introduction

Modern Languages (ML) in the UK and globally are often portrayed as being in crisis (Ayres-Bennett, 2024; Bruzos, 2024; Harrison & McLelland, 2023, p. 2). This mirrors wider issues affecting the Humanities across the Higher Education (HE) sector (Newfield, 2009, pp. 272–273). However, the specific structure of ML may be exacerbating this crisis. In the UK, ML departments tend to incur higher-than-average staffing costs (Bowler, 2020, p. 39) due to the need to offer multiple languages and to the staff being split into language teachers and research specialists (Álvarez et al., 2018; Coderch, 2023; Klapper, 2005, pp. 23–24). Unlike other disciplines, languages are frequently promoted as a skill rather than a core part of the Humanities (Canning, 2009, p. 2; Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004, p. 63), which also deepens the ML disciplinary identity crisis

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(Coleman, 2004, p. 156; Kelly, 2000, p. 81; Macias & Moros, 2019, p. 239; Pountain, 2019, p. 246). Additionally, the standard requirement for a year abroad significantly increases the overall cost of studying Modern Languages (Klapper and Rees, 2011), contributing to their elitist image (Gallagher-Brett & Broady, 2012, p. 265). This perception is further reinforced by the concentration of ML programmes in Russell Group¹ universities (Coleman, 2011, p. 128; Gallagher-Brett & Broady, 2012, p. 2).

In this context, the existence of ML degrees appears as a victory against a doom-laden narrative. However, in this paper I will argue that the pedagogical approaches and the programme design typical of ML degrees in British research-led universities are in fact counterproductive. The detachment between language acquisition and critical approaches to the study of cultures (Gieve & Cunico, 2012; Parks, 2019; Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004) plays a detrimental role in students' perception of what learning a language entails. This paper seeks to interrogate how internal pedagogical structures may be unwittingly contributing to the discipline's precarious state. By examining how this divide is experienced by students, the study aims to uncover how programme design shapes student experiences and expectations of what learning a language entails.

This study is based on a series of semi-structured interviews (n = 14) with BA students from a research-intensive British university finishing their first year. Participants were asked about their perceptions of their language or languages of study outside language modules. After carrying out interviews at the end of two consecutive academic years to gain access to two different cohorts, these were transcribed and coded following a Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020). Three main themes were identified: (1) Expectations about the use of their Target Language(s) (TL), (2) Reasons for language preference, and (3) Differences between language and content modules.

While the primary aim of the study was to examine students' perceptions about the use of their in modules usually taught in English, it became necessary to establish a link between the students' responses and wider structural and disciplinary issues around Modern Languages in British HE.

2. The division between content and language

The structural division between language and content delivery in HE can be traced to the foundation of ML as an academic discipline. In 1848, the University of Oxford appointed its first Professor of Modern Languages, Francis Henry Thriten, a polymath who received a yearly salary of £400. However, at the same time, the French, Spanish and German teachers in the same institution earned £150 (Edwards, 2001, p. 185). Similarly, McLelland (2017, pp. 64–69) notes that during the same period in the UK, French and German language instruction often relied on native speakers, despite their lack of formal training. These teachers were typically cheaper to employ, which led to concerns that native speakers were displacing British-born professionals (McLelland, 2017, pp. 68–69).

Earlier in the USA, George Ticknor was appointed as the first Professor of Spanish and French by Harvard in 1816. George Ticknor is considered the foundational father of this separation (Bruzos, 2024, p. 8): when he negotiated his appointment, he demanded 'not to be expected to teach languages as such' (Tyack, 1967, p. 87). Instead, Ticknor would teach literature and supervise a team of native language instructors in charge of delivering language classes (Bruzos, 2024, p. 8).

Both examples are illustrative of an approach to language instruction as a less prestigious activity (Busse & Walter, 2013, p. 447; Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011, p. 174) or a distraction from legitimate research (Coleman, 2004, p. 156) that has survived over time. The division is still reflected in the structure of academic profiles, with research-active staff often responsible for cultural content modules, while teaching-only or teaching and scholarship staff focus on language instruction (Álvarez et al., 2018, pp. 12–13; Coderch, 2023, p. 1; Klapper, 2005, pp. 23–24). Traditionally, this division is based on the allocation of language teaching to native speakers with varying qualifications (Coderch, 2023, p. 2), PGR students (Gieve & Cunico, 2012, p. 275) or staff in research contracts without any language teaching training (Coleman, 2004, pp. 155–156; Gieve & Cunico, 2012, p. 286). However, declining demand and departmental closures have led to more language teachers holding PhDs and research experience, potentially reinforcing staff divisions as they may not be recognised as researchers due to their teaching-focused roles.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, cultural content modules are assigned to staff on research contracts and are usually taught in English (Coleman, 2004, p. 156; Gieve & Cunico, 2012, pp. 280–281), although they may include a discreet use of the TL (McBride, 2000, 2003; Wielander, 2016). In research-intensive universities belonging to the Russell Group, the use of the TL tends to be less popular than in other institutions (McBride, 2000, pp. 45–47; Parks, 2020).

In this context, some authors highlight that students see language staff as friendlier and less serious, but also less academically rigorous compared to the cultural content lecturers (Busse & Walter, 2013, p. 447). Gieve and Cunico (2012, p. 286) and Parks (2019, p. 33) also note that the nature of this division impacts students' perception of what learning a language might entail. While functional skills are acquired in language learning modules, the terrain for intellectual curiosity or critical awareness seems to be reserved for cultural content modules (Busse & Walter, 2013, p. 446; Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011; Johnstone, 2013, p. 14; Parks, 2020, p. 23, p. 178). The fact that these modules are usually taught in English deepens this division and, as I will argue later, impacts how students perceive their own learning.

3. Methodology

This study is based on 14 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students finishing their first year of study at a Russell Group University in England. All participants were students of Spanish in the post-A Level route. As it shows in Table 1, all of them had Spanish combined with another subject or another language. The sample reflects a well-documented trend in ML. Student numbers in Single-Honours degrees have been decreasing for decades (Worton, 2009, p. 34) and an overwhelming majority of students now combine their languages with another language or another subject (The British Academy and University Council of Modern Languages, 2022, p. 3).

Since 2020, Spanish has become the language with the highest number of A-Level entries in England (Collen, 2023, p. 2), overtaking French as the highest recruiting language for ML programmes in British HE (The British Academy and University Council of Modern Languages, 2022, p. 8). Previous studies have primarily focused on German (Busse & Walter, 2013; Parks, 2019, 2020), French (Graham, 2004) or ML more broadly (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011; Gieve & Cunico, 2012; McBride 2000, 2003). Romero de Mills

Table 1. Participants and programme of study.

Participant	Programme of Study
Amelia	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and International Relations
Brian	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and Linguistics
Charlotte	BA Modern Languages (French and Spanish)
Daisy	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and International Relations
Emma	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and Linguistics
Fiona	BA Modern Languages (Arabic and Spanish)
Grace	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and International Relations
Hannah	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and International Relations
Isaac	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and Linguistics
James	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and History
Kayla	BA Modern Languages (Chinese and Spanish)
Laura	LLB Law with Hispanic law
Michelle	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and English Literature
Natalie	BA Modern Languages (Spanish) and Business

(2008) explored the development of criticality on Spanish ML programmes, but despite being the current highest recruiting language, student perspectives in Spanish ML are still understudied.

All participants had finished two Level 1 mandatory modules: a Spanish language module up to a B2 level on the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020), and a cultural content module that covers different topics from Spain and Latin America and mixes Spanish and English in its delivery and assessment. Content lectures are taught in English, seminars use a mix of Spanish and English, and students are expected to write their assessments in Spanish. However, the use of language is not assessed in content modules. Students with dual languages reported that most of their cultural content modules were taught and assessed in English.

Students were invited to participate in the interview by email. Participation was voluntary and was not rewarded. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant committee before recruiting any participants and written consent was obtained from all participants prior to any interviews. Interviews were conducted at the end of two consecutive academic years in 2022/23 and 2023/24, to allow students to reflect on their previous expectations and their first year as students of Modern Languages. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically coded using NVivo.

To preserve participants' anonymity, any reference that could lead to their identification has been removed or anonymised, and every participant has been given a code name following alphabetical order (see Table 1). The inclusion of programmes of study aims to reflect the current variety of combinations in research-led HE institutions.

Transcriptions were coded and analysed following a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). Since the publication of their foundational article in 2006 (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and their subsequent revision as 'reflexive thematic analysis' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020), this approach has become one of the most widely employed methods in qualitative data analysis (Byrne, 2021, p. 1392). However, with RTA, it is often overlooked that themes do not emerge from a pre-discursive, objective position. Instead, the researcher plays an active role in knowledge production and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 6; 2020, p. 3). RTA moves away from positivistic approaches to data to focus on interpretation and subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2021). Therefore, in the process of coding, themes do not emerge from an objective analysis, and language used by participants is

not interpreted as a direct window into their reality. The selection of themes aims to answer the following questions: (1) How do students perceive the use of their TL outside language modules; and (2) How the current division between language and cultural content modules might impact the students' perceptions of learning languages and cultures? Its interpretation and discussion aim to establish a link between participants' views and the traditional configuration of ML degrees in the United Kingdom.

To answer these questions, three main themes were identified in the data: (1) Previous and future expectations about the use of the TL; (2) Reasons for language preference and (3) Perceived differences between language and content modules. I will discuss how these themes are intrinsically connected to the structure of ML programmes, shaping students' perceptions of their own learning and highlighting potential risks to the discipline's survival.

4. Findings

4.1 *Previous and future expectations about the use of the TL*

Previous studies highlight that ML students expect more emphasis on language skills in their programme of study (Busse & Walter, 2013, p. 444; Gieve & Cunico, 2012, pp. 280–282; McBride, 2003, p. 309; Parks 2019, pp. 28–29; Parks, 2020, p. 237) and the acquisition of linguistic fluency is one of their main motivations (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011, p. 175; Gieve & Cunico, 2012, p. 280). Following this trend, all participants mentioned that they were expecting more use of Spanish across all their content modules: 'it's first year so a lot of the time we will use English alongside Spanish. But I think I might have expected it just to be all in Spanish' (Emma); 'I think when I started, I expected more because I thought that everything would be in Spanish, but it's not a bad thing that not everything's in Spanish because I guess it is less daunting' (Amelia).

While the use of English is not necessarily perceived as negative, there was a narrative of previous expectations linked to a wider use of their TL. The existence of a mandatory cultural content module that was partially taught in Spanish seemed to increase perceived levels of exposure, but also confusion. This module merged students in the Ab-Initio route, who would submit assessments in English, with post-A Level students who would submit their essays in Spanish. However, the use of the Spanish language was not assessed, and language proficiency was not part of the module's Learning Outcomes. This led to a situation where academic writing skills and the use of written Spanish were completely detached. In fact, while students had to develop both, they were not assessed in both. Teaching in the TL or asking students to use it is not equivalent to integrating language into the syllabus.

Despite this separation, participants generally reported a sense of achievement about having been able to write an academic essay in Spanish. Their perception tended towards a positive idea of having achieved new vocabulary, reproducing a deeply structuralist perception of language learning (Gieve & Cunico, 2012, p. 274). For example, Fiona mentioned academic language as 'using sort of academic or like highbrow vocabulary that you don't use daily. And yeah, getting the chance to use fancy words that you wouldn't normally use'.

The positive perception and sense of achievement about writing an academic essay in Spanish contrasts with the comments about the lack of Spanish used in the classroom environment. Participants interpreted it as part of their transition into HE, and assumed that the exposure would be increased as they progressed in their studies:

The only thing is that I'm not sure how much exposure to Spanish I will get next year. Probably more. I'm guessing more. I would say it's been a very good starting point that I can now build on for next year. And then I would say probably it would be good for there to be more exposure to the language outside of the language module. If not in first year, then definitely in second year (Amelia)

Similar expectations were echoed by Kayla, who aimed at doing all her degree in her two languages (Spanish and Chinese): 'Once I come back from the year abroad, I definitely want to do it in Chinese. Like 100%. It's all sort of like if I could do it, I'd want to do it in the target language'. These expectations were shared with the totality of participants, who assumed that their degree would be taught in the TL in higher levels: 'Obviously the advanced [post-A level] speaking language people will be taught in the language' (Charlotte); 'I would like it will go up next year, then obviously, we'll have a year abroad and then I imagine finally it'll be like basically all in Spanish' (Emma).

Given that all students had been exposed to some degree of content taught in the TL, their expectations were related to notions of progression in their language learning. Most ML programmes increase the level of language proficiency from a B1/B2 in the first year to up to a C1/C2 in the Final Year, but this does not often translate into an increase of the TL in content modules (McBride, 2003, p. 301). While not all students saw this negatively, some of them were surprised. For example, when Fiona was informed that using the TL in the Final Year Dissertation was only optional: 'Wow. I can't believe that. I think that is not good. Because if my degree was just about culture, then great, that's fine. But I literally, I'm here for languages, and that seems crazy to me' (Fiona).

The statement 'I am here for languages' summarises participants' goals of improving their language skills as their main reason to enrol in a ML degree. Kayla, for example, also states: 'If I was that good at culture I would've gone for units like, I don't know, social sciences essay as a degree instead of languages, [...] my talent really lies within languages' (Kayla). Many participants expressed ideas close to Fiona and Kayla. In all cases, language was the primary motivation and the main learning goal for students, with varying degrees of emphasis on cultural aspects. These statements could lead one to believe that students hold a purely skill-based view of their degrees. However, the second theme challenges this assumption. While universities may advertise the study of languages as a skill (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004, p. 63), students might not share this view. In the following section, I examine how many participants approached language and culture from a more nuanced and complex perspective, putting into question mere utilitarian motivations related to language learning.

4.2. Reasons for language preference

When participants were inquired about the reasons for their language preference in their content modules, the first reason was, unsurprisingly, the interest in developing language skills:

I think if you're at university to learn a language and you're paying all of that money to learn that language, why don't you learn the language? Because that's what I think about trying to do the work in Spanish as well. (James)

I think it'll be really useful to be exposed to it as much as possible because then when you kind of get to a job and you can kind of say like, oh, I'm proficient in Spanish because I learned during my time at university. (Amelia)

While it is expected that students seek to increase their language use and exposure, some authors have questioned the risks of advertising ML programmes only from a skill-based perspective, as it risks detaching language from a wider socio-cultural context (Gieve & Cunico, 2012, p. 283; Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004, pp. 12, 35). These participants, however, question the broader idea that they join ML programmes only to achieve proficiency in spoken language (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011, p. 175). When they were asked to expand on this theme, the same participants who had previously expressed mere functional views of language would show a more complex view of language learning. These views had to do with feeling closer to the object of study, having to focus more and being able to understand themselves and other speakers in a different way. For example, Fiona, who had mentioned before 'I am here for the languages', also stated this when enquired about how she felt when using Spanish in cultural content modules:

I think that when you do them in English, it feels quite like a separated thing. You almost feel like you're an observer of history or whatever, like it's quite a separate thing. Whereas like we did one [...] about [topic anonymised], and that was all done in Spanish. [...] And I thought that was really nice because obviously whatever lecturer, they're the expert in that topic anyway, but it really felt like you're actually getting some cultural insight because he's obviously mainly speaking in formal Spanish, but also just using bits of [...] slang and whatever. I think they're obviously tied together, aren't they? language and culture. So being taught the culture in the language is important and helpful. (Fiona)

Fiona is not talking about increasing her language proficiency. Her preference for the use of Spanish is justified by a feeling of closeness to cultural aspects that go beyond the acquisition of linguistic structures. According to her, language also allows for better understanding of the topic and provides a deeper sense of cultural closeness. Contrary to the idea that some lecturers may share about how the use of the TL may lower the standard or depth of cultural content (Coleman, 2005, p. 6), other participants expressed that using Spanish would indeed improve their understanding: 'you can get the culture better in Spanish 'cause like with the play for example, if it's all in slang, it doesn't translate as easily. So, some things are easier to get across in Spanish' (James); 'it's sort of like just kind of have the emotion of reading whatever in the target language or listening to the lecture talking whatever language. It just helps' (Kayla). Additionally, the claim that standards are being lowered relies on the assumption that all students are native speakers of English and are, therefore, able to communicate with greater depth and precision in English.

Many participants did not consider the use of the TL as an obstacle to understanding cultural content. James, Fiona or Kayla perceived it as an integral part of their learning, with a view that went further to a description of language learning only based on form and skills. In fact, some established a link between language, culture and emotional attachment:

when you look at it in Spanish, you're more engaged and you are more like switched on. [...] So, I just find it interesting that when we're having a conversation about culture and you think about how somebody might have said it in that language versus just talking about it in English, you kind of get the emotion of it a bit more. And that's the only way I could describe it because I definitely think it makes a difference. (Laura)

Laura was not the only participant using the word emotion when describing why she preferred the TL. This topic was mentioned by several participants when asked about their reasons to prefer the use of TL over English:

In English I feel it's quite easy to be slightly detached from it [...] Whereas if you're talking about it in Spanish, in the language of the place that you're talking about, I think it makes it more interesting. [...] just think like in Spanish, you're speaking the language of the people you are learning about and I think that just makes you feel more emotionally attached to the topic itself. (Brian)

I think, especially in the foreign language, you need that cultural closeness. [...] in English, it feels more like content. It's just stuff I'm absorbing for the sake of doing the assignment rather than it's impacting my general kind of cultural awareness or anything like that. [...] In English, I feel like I'm just picking it up to pick up the marks eight weeks down the line, but I don't know if for Spanish it feels ... if it's in the target language, rather. It's going to resonate with me more. (Hannah)

These participants are trying to articulate their multilingual identities in ways that reflect a complex and nuanced understanding of language learning. First, they describe a higher sense of emotional attachment and closeness to the object of study when the TL is used. Second, they perceive a continuum between language and cultural content. Using the TL made them feel that their learning was improving, but it also enhanced their engagement and connection to the subject. Their perception of using the TL in the content module blurs the boundaries between language as a mere skill focused on form, and cultural content taught in English as a legitimate, yet distant, object of study.

In contrast to these views, the prevailing structure of ML programmes, which frames language and cultures as separate domains, in the form of different lecturers, language of delivery, and ways of assessment, reproduces exactly the opposite view. It risks, in fact, reinforcing the division between skills and knowledge, but also negatively impacting how students may perceive learning a language as a separate activity from learning culture. The next theme was identified regarding students' perceptions of differences between language and cultural content modules and explored the reinforcement of those binaries.

4.3 Perceived differences between language and content modules

When asked about differences between language and content modules, the picture drawn by participants substantially differed from the previous views on language as part of a wider cultural understanding. Language classes were perceived as being more interactive, friendlier and relaxed, while content modules were seen as more academic, less relaxed, and involving a higher workload. For example, Michelle and Natalie referred to the language class as 'relaxed', in opposition to other modules: '[the language class] was more kind of relaxed 'cause it felt like we were doing group work more often' (Michelle); 'it's very chill down and I think it kind of has to be to make you kind of

want to get involved. Whereas with the [content] ones it's a lot more like you have the lecture and then the students and it's a lot less relaxed' (Natalie). When Natalie was asked about why she felt less relaxed, her answers were in line with other responses: less familiarity with the lecturer and other students, and bigger groups:

I think part of it is just because we have it less so by the time you get a bit more comfortable with that lecturer, then you change to a different one. [...] I think as well, because there's so many more people. (Natalie)

The link between the lack of familiarity with the lecturer and the lack of engagement became a recurrent answer:

I didn't know my class as well and because we didn't have, the lecturers obviously, swapped around. For each topic you didn't know your lecturer as well [...]. I feel people didn't, I mean, I didn't really want to talk that much in seminars. (Emma)

There was, however, one participant who elaborated further on this idea. Hannah linked the change of teaching staff in content modules with a deeper distinction between language and content delivery:

[the content module] it's done on people's research. Obviously, the person changes every four weeks. [...] it is good to learn different topics and learn from the people who are researching it, but I think that can also be a drawback at the same time. And I think especially for less motivated students, if they read the title of the topic and think, not interested. They know it's only four weeks long and it's only one contact hour a week. So, they won't bother. (Hannah)

Hannah's reflection links research specialism and teaching in content modules while inadvertently assuming that language teaching is not research-based. This is also evidenced by the lack of a general offer in language teaching pedagogy or linguistics of languages other than English in ML programmes. This perception also structures many ML departments and relies on the conception that language teaching can be delivered by a cheap workforce of native speakers if adequate training is provided (Bruzos, 2017, p. 243). Even if language teachers are PhD holders, they are still not perceived as researchers.

In contrast, research-led education can only be provided by highly qualified specialists who will focus on their area of specialisation. Hannah's accurate perception of this division in her first year of university reflects how this dichotomy affects not only perceptions but also students' engagement. This lack of active engagement in class, however, was not necessarily perceived as a lack of learning. In fact, when talking about new learning and attitudes towards the Spanish-speaking world, it was the cultural content modules that had helped participants change their previous knowledge and perceptions: 'It [the content module] makes you think and reflect a lot about culture and I guess because we just learn so much and just a large variety of things, it's intellectually challenging but in a good way' (Amelia). Similarly, Brian reported that the content modules had opened his mind:

I think this year, there's been so much coverage of the different cultures and the different movements and all these different societies [...] So I think it's not that I changed from one thing, it's that I felt like it just opened my mind to it in a way. [...] Yeah. Positive change. [...] I think probably mainly down to the content modules. (Brian)

Similar statements were echoed by other participants. In general, and compared to their A-Level studies, content modules had effectively supported students in developing new knowledge and attitudes towards different aspects of the Spanish-speaking world, echoing Parks (2019, 2020) findings. This picture, however, seems different when referring to the language class, where confidence, practice and a performative approach to language were highlighted:

I don't think it's changed [my attitude] actually. I feel like I approach, for the language, in the same way that I always have done. In terms like, I kind of understand what it takes to improve in language. Which I guess is just like exposing yourself to the language, practicing, kind of just practicing repeatedly. (Amelia)

I'd say it hasn't changed [my attitude] very much. I guess I find it quite hard to tell if I've improved in Spanish like even from like year seven to now. I mean, I obviously have, but you can't really tell that happening at the moment that it does happen. But I'd say I feel more confident speaking Spanish. (James)

Language is thus interpreted as a focus on form, with a lower workload compared to content modules, and based on practice and repetition, despite being more interactive and requiring students to be more active within class. Comments about how language classes feel more relaxed and informal may contrast with the view content modules as the real academic and legitimate object of study, knowledge-based and able to change their views of the world. McPake et al. (1999, p. 60) also found that high-attaining secondary students viewed French as 'difficult' but not 'intellectually challenging'. Similarly, Busse and Walter (2013, p. 446) reported that first-year German students saw language learning as lacking intellectual depth. More recently, Parks (2020, p. 23) also highlighted that students in German in the US and the UK felt that some degree programmes lacked meaningful integration and language modules were perceived to be less intellectually challenging. This perception, shared by James and Amelia, is linked to a structural separation between language and content teaching, which reinforced the view of language study as primarily skills-based rather than as a site of critical engagement.

The lack of integration between language and content does not align with students' preferences and has significant pedagogical consequences. It impacts engagement and how students perceive their own learning processes. It also affects their interactions with lecturers and peers, as well as their understanding of what constitutes new learning. It may constitute a threat to ML. Despite these issues, this dichotomy remains persistent in ML and is difficult to overcome. Several factors contribute to the continued separation, including staff professional identities, logistical challenges, the shaping of ML as a discipline or the relative value placed on teaching versus research.

5. Discussion: the survival of Modern Languages

ML university programmes would be expected to become the perfect environment to lead on approaches such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), which argue for the integration of language as medium, message and object of study (Coyle et al., 2010; Coyle & Meyer, 2021). Instead, while CLIL has gained traction in the European context, it seems particularly absent from the British context (Dobson, 2020, p. 508), more specifically from ML degrees and their curriculum in Russell Group institutions. Even when

students reported the use of the target language (TL) in cultural content modules, the focus on language was lacking. Equally, participants did not feel that their language modules had contributed to their knowledge or widened their perspectives. One participant expressed his confusion, as he initially assumed the language and the content modules were covering the same topics:

I wasn't expecting to study in the way that we did. To be honest, in the first time at least, I wasn't really sure what was going on with the research module because I wasn't sure how much it was connected to the language one, and whether there was any link between them. [...] But I think it makes a bit more sense now that I've been here for a while, but I was a bit puzzled as to, 'Is this the same subject?' (Isaac)

Instead of fostering an integrated approach to languages and cultures, ML seems to be moving in the opposite direction. At the same time, their very own existence as a discipline is put into question by financial pressures. ML has been under the constant threat of closure and redundancies for more than ten years (Ayres-Bennett, 2024) and radical changes that affect recruitment issues or add workload to pressured staff are not considered a priority.

There are further ingrained issues linked to how teaching and research are perceived in HE. While this dichotomy is not exclusive to languages, ML might be the only discipline in which different contracts, workloads and career progression are awarded to staff depending on their teaching specialism. While precarity is present across the sector, language teaching staff may lack a defined career path and are in more precarious employment in the form of temporary and hourly-paid contracts, compared to their research counterparts (Álvarez et al., 2018, pp. 12–13; Coderch, 2023, p. 2). This division has a direct impact, not only on the status of teaching itself, but on how language teaching is hierarchically placed and delivered. As previously discussed, it also shapes how students perceive their modules and their learning.

Structural issues such as students doing the Ab-Initio and the post-A level route are usually reported as obstacles to widening the use of the TL (Floriano Ramos & Fuertes Gutiérrez, 2021, p. 45). Another challenge lies in the financial need to open modules to students from other disciplines, as a response to the falling number of students (Floriano Ramos & Fuertes Gutiérrez, 2021, p. 45; McBride, 2000, p. 48). However, before the implementation of Ab-Initio routes or cross-Faculty modules, this separation operated in the same way, and it has been documented as inherent to the existence of ML degrees both in the UK and the US (Bruzos, 2024, p. 8; Kelly, 2000, p. 82; Parks, 2019, p. 27).

Between 2014 and 2024, several UK universities announced further closures and redundancies affecting the Arts and the Humanities, with ML departments badly hit (Ayres-Bennett, 2024). This shift may mark a turning point in which HE may cease to consider the need to keep languages programmes as 'a hallmark that signifies social cachet' (Foster, 2019, p. 263). While this permanent crisis (Bruzos, 2024) seems to deepen via cuts and redundancies, the need to make a case for languages is a pressing priority. One text written in relation to the proposed cuts in Cardiff University tackles specifically the problematic nature of using English to teach culture:

Studying global culture uniquely through the medium of English would demonstrate an indifference to both linguistic and viewpoint diversity. Worse still, it would impose an Anglo-normative framework on the cultural realities being examined. When so much

recent attention has, rightly, been paid to cultivating inclusive and decolonial approaches to the study of culture, it is astounding that any university would wish to predicate its approach to global humanities on such an imperialist premise. (Ayres-Bennett et al., 2025)

This statement, which defends ML programmes and highlights the need for multilingual research (Holmes et al., 2022), ironically contrasts with the reality of how these very programmes are often structured. In practice, language is frequently separated from the delivery of cultural content, undermining the possibility of any integrated approach. It also shows a detachment from students' views and expectations when enrolling in a ML programme. At the same time, this separation shapes the design of full programmes, impacts students' expectations of what learning a language entails, and divides staff and their contracts. It also contradicts a growing body of evidence (Gieve & Cunico, 2012; Parks, 2019, 2020) highlighting similar issues.

The apparent contradiction between the aims of ML and the reality of their delivery deepens the urgency to consider a realistic reshaping of the discipline. It is unclear if a widespread use of CLIL would improve student numbers (Canning, 2009, pp. 4–5), but it is increasingly obvious that the study of cultures in English negatively impacts the acquisition of linguistic (Pountain, 2019), critical and intercultural skills (Gieve & Cunico, 2012; Parks, 2019, 2020). From this data, it is also clear that this division negatively interferes with how students develop their own multilingual identity and their emotional attachment to their topics of study.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined first-year BA Spanish students' perceptions of the use of their TL in non-language modules. The data pointed, first, to students expressing a preference for a wider use of the TL and expectations about that use being expanded in subsequent years. These expectations, however, contrasted with a reality where most cultural content modules are delivered in English. Secondly, when asked about the reasons for that preference, participants expressed a variety of complex motivations ranging from an interest in improving language skills to the affective dimension and a vision of cultures and languages as part of the same phenomena. Stemming from these perceptions, the third theme examined the relationship between engagement and changing attitudes in content and language modules. While content modules were seen as less interactive and practical compared to language classes, they were also seen as ways to acquire new knowledge and expand the curiosity about other cultures and societies.

This study draws on a small sample of 14 first-year undergraduate students of Spanish at a single Russell Group university, which may limit the generalisation of the findings to other institutional contexts. The focus on post-A Level students excludes Ab-Initio learners and those studying other languages, potentially narrowing the scope of the analysis. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews may not fully capture actual classroom practices or long-term changes in perceptions. Future research should consider broader and more diverse samples, adopt longitudinal designs, and explore staff perspectives to gain a fuller picture of the structural and pedagogical challenges affecting Modern Languages programmes.

With these limitations, this data still highlights the need of a wider reflection on the identity and survival of ML programmes in British HE. The lack of CLIL approaches and the study of cultures using English are not perceived as beneficial by students, undermines their expectations about their own cultural and linguistic ability, and does not contribute to making a case for the survival of Modern Languages.

Languages in British HE face a complicated scenario. Their existence is under threat by multiple financial and ideological factors. However, this challenging situation should not impede a re-examination of pedagogical approaches and modes of delivery based on current evidence and students' voices.

Note

1. The Russell Group represents 24 self-selected research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom.

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Ethics statement

This project was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee, at the University of Leeds (United Kingdom), Approval reference FAHC-22084.

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