

## *Why Do Secondary School Pupils in Wales Choose to Study a Modern Foreign Language?*

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on research examining why pupils choose to study a Modern Foreign Language at examination level in Wales. The Modern Foreign Language (MFL) is the third language, at least, for pupils in secondary schools in Wales. Pupils who attend Welsh-medium schools are fluent in both Welsh and English with pupils who attend English-medium schools having varying competence in Welsh. Many of the latter pupils are learning two Languages Other Than English simultaneously, (the MFL and Welsh), (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, 2017, Fukui and Yashmina, 2021)). 860 pupils in 10 secondary schools were given questionnaires to complete and asked to provide their reasons for choosing to study an MFL as one of their GCSE subjects. The reasons provided were mainly to do with extrinsic motivations, (Parrish and Lanvers, 2018). 18% of the pupils in these 10 schools had chosen to study an MFL for their GCSEs, ranging from 2% to 37% in different schools. However, 59% of them felt that an MFL would be useful for their future, despite the dominance of English, (Lanvers and Graham, 2022). The implications of adopting a plurilingual approach and teaching an international language in primary schools, in line with the new Curriculum for Wales, (2022), will be discussed in terms of increasing the number of pupils choosing to study MFLs at examination level. This could have implications for other bilingual contexts where a Language Other Than English is taught as an additional language, (Clayton, 2022).

Keywords: MFL, Motivation, Additional

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## Introduction

This paper shares part of the data collected from a larger study examining **Factors influencing take up of Modern Foreign Languages at GCSE**. The data for the project were collected from 860 pupils in Years 8 or 9 from 10 secondary schools in Wales between April and June 2022. This paper will focus on the reasons why these pupils chose to study a Modern Foreign Language (henceforth referred to as MFL) as one of their subject options at GCSE. A brief background to the teaching and learning of MFLs in Wales will be given before referring to current research on motivation to learn additional languages. The language background of the pupils in this study will then be described before highlighting the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations behind these pupils' decision to continue to study an MFL at examination level. Lastly, the implications of adopting a plurilingual approach and teaching an international language in primary schools, in line with the new Curriculum for Wales, (Welsh Government, 2022b), will be discussed in terms of increasing the number of pupils choosing to study MFLs at examination level.

## Background to the Teaching and Learning of MFLs in Wales

A Modern Foreign Language is compulsory for pupils in Wales at Key Stage 3, i.e., for pupils in Years 7-9 (11–14-year-olds), (Welsh Government, 2008). It is noted in the 2008 National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages:

**Throughout Key Stage 3** pupils should be given the opportunity to learn how to use and understand at least one modern foreign language by developing the skills of oracy, reading and writing. (bold added by the author), (Welsh Government, 2008:12)

The new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022b) aims to enable learners to 'communicate effectively using Welsh, English and international languages.' However, pupils do not always study an MFL for three years as pupils in some schools choose whether they wish to continue studying an MFL in year 8. This means that many pupils in these schools finish studying an MFL after only two years of study. Pupils in other schools make their subject choices in Year 9, after three years of MFL study. In the present research, pupils in 2 out of the 10 schools made their GCSE choices in Year 8, with pupils in one of these schools having the highest uptake of all the schools in this study. According to Speck (2021), however, choosing to study languages in year 8 is one of the 9 obstacles facing language teaching in England.

Due to the declining numbers of pupils studying MFLs at GCSE level in Wales, government initiatives have aimed at increasing uptake. The *Global Futures* document, "A plan to improve and promote modern foreign languages in Wales" was published in 2015, (Welsh Government 2015). Its aims were:

1. To increase the number of young people choosing to study modern foreign language subjects at all levels,
2. To improve the teaching and learning of modern foreign languages, with the intention of building towards a 'bilingual plus 1' system where the formal teaching of an MFL will begin at year 5,
3. To maintain and improve on the attainment levels presently being achieved in modern foreign languages subjects. (Welsh Government, 2015:3).

The strategic aims of the updated *Global Futures* document published in 2022 (Welsh Government, 2022c) do not specifically refer to uptake of languages at examination level. However, it is included as a strategic action for the first strategic aim, “Continue to address the challenge regarding take-up of modern foreign languages in secondary schools.” Increasing uptake is referred to as a ‘challenge’ as the evaluation of *Global Futures* (Welsh Government, 2022a) found that it had not been possible to realise the aim of increasing the number of pupils studying languages due to issues like narrow options boxes choices. Indeed, in the present study, the limitations of the option boxes were found to be the biggest factor preventing pupils from taking an MFL for their GCSEs, (Jones, in press).

Government initiatives, seen in the updated *Global Futures* document (Welsh Government, 2022c) and in the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022b) now “support multilingualism” by recognising that many young people are multilingual and live in a multilingual world. Indeed, the MFL is the third language, at least, for pupils in secondary schools in Wales.

### **Research on Motivation to Learn Additional Languages**

This third language for the pupils in our study is a Language Other Than English, (LOTE). Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017) noted that the theoretical frameworks developed over the previous 25 years were based on learning English as an additional language and they questioned whether such frameworks were valid when considering the learning of LOTEs. They developed their “L2 Motivational Self System” framework, consisting of three elements which affect learners’ motivation:

- ❖ The ideal L2 self, i.e., the kind of L2 user the learner would ideally like to be in the future,
- ❖ The ought-to L2 self, i.e., what learners believe they ‘ought’ to do in order to meet the expectations of others,
- ❖ The L2 learning experience, (e.g., the impact of the L2 teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, and the perception of success).

It is interesting to note that motivations to do with careers, jobs and future opportunities are not referred to explicitly in these three elements despite an ‘instrumental’ motivation for additional language learning having been reported in the literature since Gardner and Lambert’s work in 1959. However, both instrumental and integrative motivations are deemed to be included in the L2 Motivational Self System, (Oakes and Howard, 2022).

Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017) point out that the motivation for learning more than one language at a time has not received much attention from researchers. In addition, they note that when the research has examined the learning of more than one language, Global English is always one of the target languages in question. They do not discuss examples of learners who already speak English, as this “poses its own unique issues that are outside the scope of this paper” (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, 2017:457).

The learners in the present study are speakers of English, many of whom are learning two Languages Other Than English within the school setting. Bui (2023) has argued that the motivation to learn an L2 is different from the motivation to learn an L3:

L3 motivation differentiates itself from L2 motivation, as it is likely influenced by several factors.... [In] the educational context, L3 learning is often a personal choice

of interest, while an L2 is usually a compulsory school subject. There is quite likely a qualitative difference between motivations for these two types of languages. (Bui, 2023:4)

This quotation describes the context of the learners in the present paper as the pupils learn Welsh as a compulsory subject but choose whether to continue with their study of an MFL at the end of Key Stage 3. The main aim of this paper is to consider the motivation of pupils to learn the L3 only, (the MFL) and therefore Parrish and Lanvers’ (2018) article offers interesting insights into the motivation of secondary school pupils in England to study MFLs.

Their study investigated both student motivation to study a modern foreign language in English secondary schools, and the decisions made by school-level policymakers regarding the teaching of the subject. They argue that:

the decision [for students] to learn a language is the result of a particularly complex interplay of factors: student achievement and perceived ability, national and school MFL policy, parental and family attitudes and perceived ‘usefulness’, socio-political attitudes to MFL, and personal motivation. (Parrish and Lanvers, 2018:282)

Parrish and Lanvers (2018) presented a table outlining ‘The self-determination continuum’ which includes both Extrinsic and Intrinsic motivations for language learning.

As seen in the Table below, Extrinsic motivation has 3 subsections:

- External (Compliance, seeking external rewards, avoiding external punishments),
- Introjected (Self-control, allocation of internal rewards and punishment),
- Identified (personal importance, conscious valuing of outcome)

Intrinsic motivation included Interest, enjoyment and inherent satisfaction.

self-determination continuum and modified SRQ-A responses.

Amotivation		Extrinsic motivation			Intrinsic motivation
Non-regulation	External	Introjected	Identified	Intrinsic	
1 Lack of intent, lack of value placed on outcome	Compliance, seeking external rewards, avoiding external punishments	Self-control, allocation of internal rewards and punishment	Personal importance, conscious valuing of outcome	Interest, enjoyment, inherent satisfaction	
	Because that’s what I’m supposed to do	So my teachers will think I’m a good student	Because I want to understand the subject	Because it’s fun	
	Because I will get in trouble if I don’t	Because I’ll feel bad about myself if I don’t do well	Because it’s important to me	Because I enjoy it	
	Because I might get a reward if I do well	Because I will feel proud of myself if I do well			

Table 1 Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivations (from Parrish and Lanvers, 2018:285)

It was decided that these headings would provide a preliminary framework for a thematic analysis of this study’s findings.

## **Language Background of the Pupils in This Study**

As noted previously, the data for this study were collected from 860 pupils in 10 secondary schools in Wales. The first question on the questionnaire distributed to the pupils asked which language or languages they spoke at home:

“Which language(s) do you speak at home (usually)?”

Of the 151 pupils in the study who had chosen an MFL:

- English only was noted by 111 pupils as the language they spoke at home, (5 of these attended Welsh-medium schools)
- Welsh and English were noted by 14 pupils,
- Welsh only noted by 3,
- Other languages (either noted alongside English or noted as the main language only) – 17. (Other languages included Urdu (2), Mandarin, Tagalog, Polish, Romanian, French, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, Dutch and German).
- No data were given by 6 pupils.

129 pupils out of a total of 151 pupils who had chosen to study an MFL as a GCSE subject in these 10 schools were learning both Welsh and a Modern Foreign Language, (i.e., two Languages Other Than English) at school. The other 22 pupils were either receiving their education through the medium of Welsh or spoke Welsh at home; they cannot be described as learning Welsh at school as an additional language.

## **Motivations of Pupils to Study an MFL**

A process of thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse patterns in the data, (Byrne, 2022). The responses provided to the question:

“Why did you choose to take a Modern Foreign Language at GCSE?”

by the 151 pupils who had opted to study an MFL were transcribed and the following words were highlighted to correspond to the following codes:

- Enjoyment (enjoyable, enjoyed, love, fun)
- Interest, (interested, intrigued by)
- Being easy, (good/decent at it)
- Useful, (helpful, help me, beneficial, benefit me)
- Career, (jobs, open doors, opportunities, money, future, university)
- Desire to learn languages,
- Travel, (name of countries, move to, abroad)
- Influence of the teacher

These codes were then organised around themes (based on Parrish and Lanvers, 2018 and Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, 2017):

- Extrinsic motivation, (Useful, Career, Travel,),
- Intrinsic motivation (Enjoyment, Interest, Desire to learn languages, (Parrish and Lanvers, 2018),
- The L2 / L3 learning experience (Being easy, Influence of the teacher, (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, 2017).

The number of times these words occurred in the respondents' replies was counted to see which themes were more prevalent. More than one theme was identified in some responses so all were counted. Table 2 shows the number of times the following themes were mentioned by the pupils.

<u>Extrinsic motivation</u>		<u>Intrinsic motivation</u>		<u>L2 / L3 Learning experience</u>	
Career	40	Enjoyment	14	Being easy	14
Useful	35	Interest	25	Influence of the teacher	5
Travel	28	Desire to learn languages	33		

Table 2 Motivations for learning an MFL

Reasons to do with career, job opportunities or their future were noted by 40 of the pupils. Some examples of replies included:

- “Because it would open my options for future jobs etc”
- “could open a lot of doors for me”
- “I want to have a job including modern Foreign Language”
- “Because I want to become a medical professional”
- “opens up more jobs”
- “I felt it would give me more opportunities in life”
- “I want a highly educational job”
- “to get better job opportunities”

It is clear that these young people recognise the importance of being able to speak another language in the job market. It is possible that initiatives such as Routes into Languages (Routes into Languages | Promoting the take-up of languages and student mobility) have influenced the perception of languages being valued in different careers. Routes into Languages Cymru is a project that works in schools across Wales to promote the uptake of languages. They provide resources such as Career Flyers which highlight 23 different careers where speaking a foreign language would be beneficial, (<https://routesintolanguagescymru.co.uk/>).

The Modern Foreign Languages Mentoring Project should also be mentioned here as it has influenced many pupils to continue studying an MFL for their GCSE. This project's two objectives are: “to increase the number of pupils taking one or more modern foreign languages at GCSE and to broaden pupils' horizons by highlighting career and mobility opportunities available to those with modern foreign languages,” (Blake and Gorrara, 2019:31). It appears that initiatives such as these can have an impact on pupils' decision to carry on with languages. It can also be argued that the pupils are aware that speaking French or Spanish might give them a competitive edge in the job market, as suggested by Siridetkoon and Dewaele's study (2018).

Linked to the theme of careers was the theme of being beneficial to the learners, with 35 pupils noting the words, ‘useful,’ ‘beneficial’ or ‘helpful.’ Some examples of their responses include:

- “Because it is a usefull (*sic*) skill”
- “I think it would be helpful”
- “I thought it would be useful for me later in life”

“Because I wanted to learn a useful language”

“It will be beneficial for my future”

As can be seen in the last example, some pupils linked the theme of being useful to the importance of MFLs in the job market and for their futures. An instrumental motivation seems an important factor why pupils in Wales decide to carry on with the study of a modern foreign language. Indeed, this was seen in the responses to question 5 in the pupil questionnaire with 59% of the pupils replying ‘Yes’ to the question:

“Do you think a Modern Foreign Language will be useful to you in the future?”

This figure of 59%, who thought the language would be useful to them in the future, is much higher than the 18% who chose to continue studying the language. (Some reasons for this are provided in Jones, in press).

In the post-Brexit era, and living in the shadow of English, (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, 2017), it is pleasing to note that many young people continue to see the value of learning Languages Other Than English. It is worth remembering that Lanvers and Graham (2022:223) noted that pupils who already speak English are an ‘especially challenging case’ when referring to their motivation to learn additional languages and Clayton, in the Australian context, refers to this as a ‘challenging task,’ (Clayton, 2022:361).

Reasons to do with wanting to travel were given by 28 pupils. This motivation is linked to an ‘External’ Extrinsic Motivation of ‘seeking external rewards’ as noted by Parrish and Lanvers, (2018:285). This reason also relates to an ‘Identified’ Extrinsic motivation to do with ‘Personal importance, conscious valuing of outcome.’ The following reasons were provided by the pupils:

“useful for job opportunities or going abroad”

“I would like to travel the world”

“I have family in Spain”

“want to live in Spain”

“I go to France every year twice”

“I am interested in language and travelling”

“Because when you learn 1 language you can travel to places and get by”

“I want to move abroad”

“Because I would like to travel”

“Because I want to move to France when I grow up”

Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, (2017:459) link this motivation to the “powerful 21st century process of migration,” because learners “plan to move” to a different country.

The desire to learn languages *per se* was identified in the responses of 33 pupils. Some responses included:

“I like learning about different languages”

“I want to learn another language”

“I enjoy the idea of speaking a foreign language”

“I love learning about other cultures and learning their languages”

“To learn a 2<sup>nd</sup> language”

“I would like to be fluent in French”

“I find languages very interesting and want to learn many more”

It seems that many pupils liked learning languages for its own sake. This motivation has been placed under an Intrinsic motivation in Table 2 above as it is linked to an ‘inherent satisfaction,’ (Parrish and Lanvers, 2018). This motivation also corresponds to the first element of the L2 Motivational Self-System, which refers to the type of L2 user that the learner would ideally like to be in the future, (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, 2017).

25 pupils mentioned that they were interested in the language taught and supplied some of the following reasons:

“because it is interesting”

“I am interested in the subject”

“because I am happy and interested in Spanish”

“I find the subject interesting”

Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017) refer to Gardner's integrative motive which contained a component termed as an 'interest in foreign languages.' This is an element which the new Curriculum for Wales (2022b) wishes to develop in the future partly by introducing an international language in the primary school.

Reasons to do with enjoyment of the language were mentioned by 14 pupils as was the fact that the students found the subject easy. While Parrish and Lanvers' table labels enjoyment of the language as an Intrinsic motivation (along with Interest and Inherent Satisfaction), it could be argued that enjoyment of the language is also linked with the L3 learning experience of the pupils (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, 2017). The perception of difficulty or ease of language learning is also linked to the L3 learning experience.

Pupils mentioned:

“I enjoy learning a new language”

“I enjoy the subject”

“I find it fun and easy”

“dwi'n joio'r iaith Ffrangeg” (*I enjoy the French language*)

“I'm good at it”

“I find it quite easy”

“I also enjoyed it and thought I was good at it”

“it is easy to learn”

“learning languages is easy for me”

“I'm good at it / better than other subjects”

These examples show that some pupils link enjoying the subject with the fact that it is easy for them. Many authors and reports have mentioned the fact that students find languages difficult and that this prevents pupils from studying them (Coffey, 2018; Rodeiro, 2017; British Council, 2019). In this study, finding the subject easy is a reason for continuing to study it. Ofsted (2021) has pointed out that it is important for pupils to feel successful in their learning and are clear about how to make progress. Taylor and Marsden's study (2014: 913) also highlighted the importance of pupils' perception of the subject's difficulty or ease in their decision whether to choose it or not: ‘Whether the class was perceived to be easy or



hard significantly predicted language uptake in our study.’ In the current research, it was found that 218 of the 860 pupils felt that the subject was difficult and that this constituted a barrier for them to study the language for their GCSEs, (Jones, in press).

The positive influence of the teacher was mentioned by 5 pupils, e.g.:

“because sir is a awesome (*sic*) teacher”

“I like the teacher”

“I enjoy the subject and I like the teachers”

The influence of the teacher was not a major factor in this study, therefore.

## Conclusion

Bearing in mind that the main reasons provided by the pupils in this study for continuing to study an MFL were to do with:

- careers,
- the benefit of languages for both jobs and travel,
- and the desire to learn languages for its own sake,

it is pertinent to ask whether adopting a plurilingual approach and teaching an international language in primary schools, in line with the new Curriculum for Wales, (2022b), will have an impact on increasing pupils’ motivation to study MFLs at examination level.

The Curriculum for Wales emphasises that:

[the] *plurilingual* approach is intended to ignite learners’ curiosity and enthusiasm and provide them with a firm foundation for a lifelong interest in the languages of Wales and the languages of the world”. (Welsh Government, 2022b: no page number)

It remains to be seen whether a focus on ‘curiosity,’ ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘interest’ in languages will lead to more pupils choosing to continue with the study of MFLs. While enjoyment and interest were important factors for the pupils in this study, the data also point to the importance of continuing with initiatives that highlight the benefits of languages in terms of future opportunities. Ushioda (2017), however, does not believe that focussing on an instrumental motivation will lead to increased uptake:

such an [instrumentalist] view (and its associated ideologies and discourses) may communicate a somewhat restricted set of motivations for learning languages in general that will not necessarily be helpful in promoting uptake or enhancing societal and individual engagement with language diversity. (Ushioda, 2017:471)

Current research has not yet offered conclusive evidence of the benefits of learning foreign languages in primary schools in terms of increasing motivation or attainment, (Bolster, 2009) but has been reported to be better at fostering enthusiasm for learning languages, (Myles, 2017).

When considering Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie’s (2017) theoretical framework for learning Languages Other Than English, it is important to point out that despite the global dominance of English, according to this research, English-speakers do see the value of other languages

for the job market, for travel and for the intrinsic value of language learning per se. Consideration must also be given to the fact that the pupils in this study are learning two Languages Other Than English in the school context and Bui (2023) argues that the plurilingual approach, as proposed by the new Curriculum for Wales, can create positive motivation towards the learning of both the L3 and the L2:

... teachers must appreciate the fact that L3 learners do not start from scratch. Therefore, teachers should draw students' attention to the potential advantages of prior L2 learning experiences. Teachers should provide guidance for developing approaches aiming at active cross-referencing between the L3 and other NNLs to identify similarities. This applies not only to the teaching, but also to the learning materials, where comparisons of L2 and L3 can be made. (Bui 2023:8)

These suggestions correspond to the guidelines of the Curriculum for Wales, (Welsh Government, 2022b) to enable learners to “transfer what they have learned about how languages work in one language to the learning and using of other languages.” Further research is needed to see whether the plurilingual approach will increase pupils' motivation to learn both Welsh, (the L2) and the MFL, (the L3) in the Welsh context.

This present paper has focussed on motivation to learn an L3 in the specific context of Welsh secondary schools and has contributed to a field that is presently lacking in research, as noted by Siridetkoon and Dewaele (2018:314), “Motivation research on L3 is scant compared to the large volume of English L2 motivation research.” The multilingual nature of Wales can provide a rich context for further research into motivation to learn an L2 and an L3 simultaneously and for further research into the growing field of motivations to learn Languages Other Than English.

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