

Languages Connect Us: An investigation into Learner Perspectives on International Languages in Secondary Schools in Wales

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ABSTRACT

The number of learners opting to study languages at GCSE other than Welsh and English has been in steep decline in secondary schools in Wales. This article seeks to understand the factors influencing learner perspectives on studying languages in Wales. It begins by providing an overview of language education policy and practice in Wales and the changes attendant on the phased introduction of a new Curriculum for Wales from 2022, as well as the learner motivation literature and Wales-based research. The core of this article centres around a quantitative analysis of a primary dataset of nearly 6,000 Year 8 and Year 9 learner responses in secondary schools in Wales. This dataset has been generated from a questionnaire distributed through a language mentoring scheme, active in two thirds of secondary schools in Wales. The analysis addresses questions related to why (and why not) learners in Wales choose to study International Languages when they come to choose options for examination at GCSE (the end of compulsory statutory education); the links between International Languages and other subjects, specifically English and Welsh in the new Curriculum for Wales; and the perceived difficulty of International Languages study at school. Our findings show that usefulness (for the future) and personal enjoyment were key motivators for learners in

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choosing an International Language at GCSE. Learners also had an appetite for learning new languages that were not offered at their schools. However, the links between English, International Languages and Welsh as languages were not evident to many learners. Learners did not perceive International Languages as necessarily more difficult than other subjects, and difficulty was not the main barrier for learners when not choosing International Languages at GCSE. The article ends by reflecting on strategies that could increase learner engagement with languages at a critical juncture in Wales with the introduction of a new curriculum and multilingual aspirations for language learning.

Keywords: Wales, curriculum, languages, mentoring, motivation, multilingualism

Introduction

The new Curriculum for Wales, like many curricula internationally (Chen et al., 2022, 3), promotes a form of Language Education Policy (LEP) that is multilingual in nature and purpose (Hélot and Bonacina-Pugh, 2023, 14). However, in Wales between 2018 and 2023, the number of learners studying French, German or Spanish (the major European languages taught in secondary education in the UK) for examination at age 16 declined by 28 per cent (Welsh Government, 2023c). In 2023, only 10.35 per cent of all Welsh learners completed an end of secondary school qualification (General Certificate of Secondary Education: GCSE) at age 16 in International Languages (French, German or Spanish) (Welsh Government, 2023c).¹ This continues an overall recent pattern of decline. In this challenging context, this article seeks to understand the school languages landscape in Wales from the perspective of the learner. Whilst there is a burgeoning body of

¹ International Languages is the term for all language study outside English and Welsh in schools in Wales. English and Welsh are compulsory subjects until age 16. Previously designated Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), the new Curriculum for Wales has prescribed this different formulation. It encompasses British Sign Language, classical languages, community languages and modern languages.

research in Wales on the learner perspective in relation to International Languages, it is still a relatively small and developing field (see Jones, 2023b). As those at the centre of education in Wales, it is crucial that we explore and understand the learner perspective to better inform policy and practice decisions.

This article will, therefore, focus on the learner perspective. It will explore what learners themselves indicate about their preferences when they choose subjects for their two-year GCSE course at ages 13 and 14. These ages equate to Years 8 and 9 in Welsh secondary schools. It will do so by drawing on survey data from nearly 6,000 responses to an annual questionnaire undertaken by learners as part of the MFL Mentoring project, a pan-Wales project that aims to inspire young people to choose an International Language at GCSE by developing learner interest and motivation. Based on the preferences revealed in our dataset, this article will ask what motivates learners to choose to study an International Language at GCSE as well as what demotivates them given the declining trend of uptake in Wales (Duff et al., 2024). It will consider, when selecting subjects to continue to GCSE, how learners rank other subjects in relation to International Languages and how they connect (or not) the study of International Languages with English and Welsh, given the interdisciplinary nature of the new Curriculum for Wales and the combining of language study (English, International Languages and Welsh) under one curriculum area (Welsh Government, 2021a). In addition to this, it will consider learners' perspectives in relation to the perceived difficulty of International Languages as a subject. Subject difficulty has been widely cited as a barrier to International Languages GCSE study in Wales and the UK (Estyn, 2009, 24; Lanvers, 2017, 521; Tinsley, 2019a, 20).

The article will begin by providing an analytical overview of language education policy and practice in Wales, identifying the unique features of the Welsh sector in a UK context. It will also explore questions of learner motivation and International Languages and some of the debates and assumptions that underpin practitioner and researcher perspectives on International Languages study in Wales. It will then focus on a primary dataset of learner responses from the MFL Mentoring project collected between 2021/2022. The article will explore methodological considerations, the design of the primary dataset and participant profiles before discussing three areas of analysis: learner motivation towards International

Languages GCSE study, links with other curriculum subjects and the perceived difficulty of learning International Languages. Crucially, the article will end by investigating strategies to increase learner engagement with International Languages at a critical juncture for Welsh education, with the introduction of a new curriculum and radically different aspirations for the language learning journey.

Learning Languages in Wales: Policies and Strategies

Wales's linguistic tapestry is diverse. Welsh and English hold equal status in Wales. According to the 2021 Census, 17.8 per cent of individuals in Wales speak Welsh (Welsh Government, 2022a). In addition to this bilingualism are languages beyond English and Welsh. Over 34,000 learners aged 5 and over had a first language other than English and Welsh in 2022/23 (Welsh Government, 2023a). Polish, Arabic and Bengali are the top three of over 150 languages spoken by learners in schools across Wales (Welsh Government, 2023b). Indeed, the linguistic context in Wales offers rich opportunities for learners to become multilingual. While on a policy level such multilingualism is promoted, the reality on the ground is quite different.

In terms of policy and strategy, much is being done to promote the learning of Welsh and International Languages for learners in Wales. In relation to Welsh, the Welsh Government's (2017) *Cymraeg 2050* strategy aims for one million Welsh speakers by 2050. A key lever for this strategy is increasing the number of Welsh speakers progressing through the education system (Welsh Government, 2017, 37–9). Learners can attend schools which are categorised by the degree of Welsh-medium provision: from Welsh-medium and bilingual instruction to English-medium instruction (Welsh Government, 2021d). In terms of learning International Languages in Wales, much is also being done on a policy and strategy level to promote learning. This is signalled in the current governing Welsh Labour Party's *Programme for Government 2021–2026* which aims to expand International Languages teaching in schools (Welsh Government, 2021e, 13). This policy promotion of International Languages learning has been carried out through the *Global Futures* plan, the Curriculum for Wales and various outreach projects across Wales.

Global Futures Plan

The Welsh Government's *Global Futures* (Welsh Government, 2022b) plan supports the promotion of International Languages within the new curriculum.² The first iteration of the strategy from 2015–2020 centred on learners studying English, Welsh and one Modern Foreign Language: a 'bilingual + one' approach (Welsh Government, 2015, 3). The second iteration, *Global Futures 2020–2022*, and the current third iteration, *Global Futures 2022–2025*, have moved away from a bilingual plus one approach, towards supporting learners to become global citizens with a focus on multilingualism (Welsh Government, 2021c; 2022b). Analysis suggests that the strategy has gained traction in schools on the ground. For example, the *Language Trends Wales 2019* report noted that 88 per cent of schools had engaged with *Global Futures*, with 52 per cent thinking that the plan had improved the situation of International Languages in their school (Tinsley, 2019a, 22). Nevertheless, respondents also noted that the *Global Futures* plan had been compromised due to lack of funding and ongoing issues with examinations and assessment for languages (Tinsley, 2019a, 23). Likewise, an external evaluation of *Global Futures* in 2022 found that, while the initiative had provided better professional learning opportunities for teachers as well as access to new support and resources, it had not realised one of its key aims: to increase the number of learners studying International Languages (Jones et al., 2022, 6–7). The report recommended that a revised *Global Futures* from 2022 onwards should adopt longer term planning for languages, in the mode of *Cymraeg 2050* (Jones et al., 2022, 8).

Curriculum for Wales

The new Curriculum for Wales, another policy driver for International Languages in Wales, is statutory for all 3–16-year-olds. It was implemented in 2022 in the primary sector and 2022/2023 in the secondary sector. In its design, it follows 'recent worldwide "new curriculum" policy' (Sinnema et al., 2020, 181), as it

2 Both the *Languages for the Future: Northern Ireland Languages Strategy* (Department of Education, 2012) and *Language Learning in Scotland: a 1 + 2 Approach* (Scottish Government, 2012) strategy recommend that learners learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue.

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provides guidance for schools to develop their own local curriculum. Following the *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015) report into Welsh curriculum and assessment, the Curriculum for Wales recognises six cross-curricular Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE), one of which is Languages, Literacy and Communication. This AoLE envisions language learning across English, International Languages and Welsh through the concept of a language learning continuum where learners make progress in all three language subjects from primary school onwards. This shares similarities with Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* (Education Scotland, 2022) and *The Northern Ireland Curriculum* (CCEA, 2020) that all group languages together.³ The Curriculum for Wales promotes a 'multilingual and plurilingual approach' (Welsh Government, 2021a) to language learning aiming to develop an appreciation of language and culture and to avoid language compartmentalisation.

While the Curriculum for Wales centres language learning on multilingualism, early implementation has raised queries on the extent to which multilingualism can be fully embedded into the Welsh secondary school classroom. The Languages, Literacy and Communication AoLE encourages cross-disciplinary links between languages subjects but 'monolingual ideologies' (Makarova et al., 2021, 1) can prevail in curriculum design and practice, meaning that school languages are taught in isolation, to the detriment of a multilingual education and ethos. Indeed, in the *Language Trends Wales 2023* report, commissioned and delivered annually by the British Council, only 26 per cent of responding teachers reported that they believed that placing International Languages within the Languages, Literacy and Communication AoLE would improve the situation for International Languages in Wales (Duff et al., 2024, 21). Recent reports, such as the *Research with Schools on the Early Implementation of Curriculum for Wales: Wave 1 Report* (Thomas et al., 2023, 7), indicate that senior leaders are prioritising learners' Welsh language skills. Other practical challenges in implementing the multilingual approach in the new curriculum have been highlighted by Gorrara et al. (2020, 251), above all a presumption that there will be a shift in teacher identity and teaching practice towards multilingual

3 Challenges have emerged for both the Northern Irish and Scottish curricula. See Jones (2020) for a critical evaluation of the situation for languages in Northern Ireland and the OECD's *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future* (2021) report for an evaluation into the Scottish context.

approaches to delivering language learning. This has not necessarily been a feature of teacher professional identity and practice to date in Wales.

Outreach Projects

In Wales, projects that aim to foster learner motivation for language learning include *Routes into Languages Cymru* and the MFL Mentoring project. Both projects promote International Languages learning by fostering peer collaboration between university students and school learners.⁴ *Routes into Languages Cymru*'s most notable initiatives are the Student Language Ambassadors (SLA) and Pupil Language Ambassadors (PLA) schemes (see Jepson, 2020). The MFL Mentoring project aims to increase the uptake of International Languages at GCSE by training undergraduate and postgraduate students to share their love for languages and global cultures as mentors with secondary school learners. This near-peer mentoring model supports learners at key moments where they choose options for GCSE at ages 13 and 14. To date, the project has worked with 172 state-maintained secondary schools in Wales and over 30,000 learners have benefited from the project. External evaluators have reported on the impact of the MFL Mentoring project in helping to offset the decline of GCSE uptake in Wales in partner schools (Rushton and Thomas, 2020). On average, 35 per cent to 45 per cent of mentees have proceeded to study International Languages at GCSE, over double the national average in Wales.⁵ These were learners from whole year cohorts who indicated in pre-mentoring surveys that they did not wish to study an International Language at GCSE or were unsure.

Language Learning in Wales: Reality of Practice

Despite the promotion of International Languages at a policy and strategy level, there remain practical challenges to International Languages teaching and learning

4 Language motivation initiatives have been or are active in all 4 UK jurisdictions, for example *We Are Multilingual* project in England (Forbes et al., 2021).

5 The *Languages Horizons* (2018–2020) project followed a similar model to the MFL Mentoring project in England, using a blended learning approach (face-to-face and digital) from the outset.

in Wales and the realisation of multilingualism. Indeed, while International Languages are central to the new curriculum vision, differently from English and Welsh as a first or second language subject, learners are not obliged to take an International Language GCSE.

Unfortunately, there is a bleak picture of uptake of International Languages at GCSE and at Advanced Level (A-Level), the two-year qualification taken at age 18. Between 2015 and 2021, GCSE entries for French and German declined by almost half in Wales (Collen et al., 2021, 6). While French continued to be the most taught language at GCSE, followed by Spanish and then German in 2023 (Duff et al., 2024, 7), schools who offer learners opportunities to study two International Languages at secondary schools are 'increasingly the exception rather than the norm' in Wales (Collen et al., 2022, 24). This largely downward trajectory was also seen across French, German and Spanish GCSE and A-Level uptake in Wales in the summer of 2022 (JCQ, 2022a; JCQ, 2022b). Only 58 learners in Wales sat A-Level German in 2022, the most spoken language in Europe (Collen et al., 2022, 5). Having said that, there was a slight increase in entries across the three languages at A-Level in 2023 (Duff et al., 2024, 8) but such entries at A-Level remained in the low hundreds for French and Spanish, with German at 65 entries. There was also a sharp decline in A-Level and GCSE entries in International Languages (including community languages) other than French, German and Spanish between 2019 and 2021 (Collen et al., 2021, 6). However, these figures have returned to their pre-Covid-19 levels, with the total of such languages faring better than GCSE German, and comparable to French and Spanish at A-Level (Duff et al., 2024, 7–8). Less is known about the individual trajectories of languages beyond the 'big 3' of French, German and Spanish in Wales. Therefore, while the policy and strategic vision in Wales is rich in terms of multilingualism, the reality of implementing International Languages learning in Wales appears disconnected from this vision.

Further challenges for International Languages learning in Wales relate to the limited time devoted to International Languages teaching in the secondary school curriculum; schools constructing pathways and choices for optional GCSE subjects that predispose learners to select other subjects; and school financial constraints leading to minimum numbers required for a GCSE cohort, which impact International Languages arguably more than other subjects (Gorrara, 2018, 150–2; Jones, 2023b, 75–82). The Covid-19 pandemic continues to influence International Language learning, with learners in schools in the most disadvantaged areas of

Wales most affected due to limited access to the internet and technology during the pandemic and reported waning engagement and motivation for language learning (Collen et al., 2021, 10). None of these challenges detract from the commitment of the International Languages teacher community in Wales who delivers language teaching and learning in contexts where the subject is often undervalued or under threat of curriculum time reduction or loss.

Learner Motivation: Conceptualisations

Learner Motivation: International and UK Conceptualisations

Learner motivation towards language learning is a vibrant and evolving field of study. For example, early on Gardner and Lambert (1972) proposed instrumental motivation (e.g. for practical reasons such as receiving a qualification) and integrative motivation (e.g. wanting to get closer to the speech community). However, the motivation to ‘come closer to the other language community’ (Gardner, 2001, 5) (integrative motivation) has lost its epistemological dominance in the field (Ushioda, 2011, 199). This is because globalisation and the status of English as a lingua franca have refocused discussions elsewhere on the motivations to study and learn a second language (L2) (Ushioda, 2011, 199). Theorists, such as Dörnyei (2009), have placed emphasis on the different language learning environments that influence motivation. This has led to work on the kinds of selves or identities that a second language learner (L2) might adopt, such as the L2 Motivational Self System, which has become an influential conceptualisation in the field. In this motivational model developed by Dörnyei (2009, 29), there is the ‘ideal L2 self’, the kind of self that language learners would like to be in the future. In contrast, there is the ‘ought-to L2 self’, which refers to a ‘self’ where language learners learn to meet other people’s expectation of them (Dörnyei, 2009, 29). There is also the L2 learning experience which looks at ‘executive motives’ from the learning environment e.g. teacher and curriculum impact (Dörnyei, 2009, 29).

While much of the international literature focuses on learners of English (Lanvers and Graham, 2022, 224; Oakes and Howard, 2019, 169), in the UK (a mostly anglophone context), learner motivation towards language learning offers a

different perspective. This is because the second language subject to be studied is not English, which is different from many contexts globally. Indeed, in the UK context, researchers have been exploring learner motivation towards International Languages learning in schools for some time (e.g. Coleman et al., 2007; Bolster, 2009). In this context, some researchers (e.g. Parrish and Lanvers, 2018; Lanvers and Graham, 2022) have drawn upon Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 1985) whereby motivation can be conceptualised along a continuum going from amotivation (non-regulation, lack of intent) towards extrinsic motivation (containing four types: external regulation e.g. parental expectations; introjected regulation; identified regulation e.g. usefulness; and integrated regulation) and finally intrinsic motivation (intrinsic regulation, e.g. enjoyment) (Lanvers and Graham, 2022, 224; Oakes and Howard, 2019, 168; see Parrish and Lanvers, 2018, 295 for a useful visualisation).

UK studies tend to focus on the individual learner's demotivation towards language learning and stress that motivation 'tends to be conceptualised as a learner characteristic applicable to all [International Languages], rather than related to specific target languages' (Lanvers and Chambers, 2019, 434). Lanvers and Chambers (2019, 436) note how negative learning experiences can 'cancel out' positive attitudes. This negative effect can increase as learners progress through secondary education (Lanvers and Chambers, 2019, 435). Lanvers's (2017, 521) review also highlighted the 'downward trajectory' for L2 motivation at secondary school in England, linked to a decrease in enjoyment and a loss of a sense of ownership related to repetitive teaching and an over-focus on assessment. Moreover, Lanvers's (2017, 521) review revealed that language learners were 'poorly and dominantly instrumentally and *Ought* motivated' (see Dörnyei, 2009) in the secondary school context in England and concerned with the expectations of parents and the education system. This was especially true of the 11–14 age range (Lanvers, 2017, 521).

Learner Motivation: A View from Wales

The education system in Wales offers yet another context for studying learner motivation towards International Languages in the UK context. This is because, in Wales, International Languages are taught as the third language (L3) subject. Indeed, recent research in Wales on International Languages learner motivation has drawn from Self-Determination Theory and from the L2 Motivational Self System

(c.f. Jones, 2023a).⁶ For researchers, such as Henry (2017, 549), this focus on second language learning and motivation misses out the complex dynamics of multilingual environments where, as in Wales, there is more than one second language active and being learnt in the classroom and in curriculum design.⁷ Indeed, Jones (2023a) also highlights the differences between learning an L2 and an L3. Drawing from the work of Bui (2023), Jones (2023a) offers an important observation about the potential differences in learner motivation based on the L2 (Welsh) being a compulsory subject for those who study it as an L2 at GCSE in comparison to the L3 (International Languages) being an optional choice at GCSE.⁸ Indeed, English for all, and Welsh as a first language (L1) are also compulsory GCSE subjects. Regardless of Welsh being an L1 or L2 subject for learners in Wales, International Languages are arguably always positioned as the L3 optional GCSE subject in the school curriculum (Arfon, 2024). Therefore, while we have drawn from UK studies and international conceptualisations to inform our thinking, we draw mainly from the International Languages research context in Wales, which we present in the next sections. This is because of the linguistic context in Wales of teaching International Languages as the third language subject in a bilingual education system where both English and Welsh are present. Our research concerns learner motivation towards the L3 subject in Wales – a unique context ripe for exploration.

Learner Perspectives in Wales: Teachers' Perceptions

In Wales, discussions around learner motivation to International Languages have drawn a rather negative picture, primarily reported through teachers' perceptions. This demotivational picture has been determined to have had a consequential impact on GCSE uptake (Board and Tinsley, 2017, 9; Tinsley, 2018, 52; Tinsley, 2019a, 30). In *Language Trends Wales 2019*, the perceived difficulty of the new GCSE, first awarded in 2018 and named Modern Foreign Languages, was reported as a major issue for

6 Recent research on learners' perceptions towards learning Welsh as a second language has drawn on the work of Dörnyei (2009) (See Rhys and Smith, 2022).

7 Henry (2017, 549) talks about the 'ideal multilingual self' as an extension of the L2 Motivational Self System.

8 For multilinguals with an existing L2 and who are learning a L3, Bui (2023) proposes a L2-L3 dual motivation system.

uptake of languages by teachers (Tinsley, 2019a, 20). In Estyn's (2009, 24) *Improving Modern Foreign Languages in Secondary Schools in Wales* report, schools reported that as Modern Foreign Languages become more difficult towards Year 9, learners began to lose interest in the subject. Exploring learners' perspectives on International Languages' perceived difficulty is thus a central concern for this study. Furthermore, in successive *Language Trends Wales* reports, authors have noted the undervaluing of International Languages. Teacher respondents perceive Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects to be prioritised over languages subjects in their schools (Tinsley, 2018, 36; Tinsley, 2019a, 27), with learners not seeing a 'skills link' between languages and a range of future careers (Tinsley, 2019a, 27). This trend continued in *Language Trends Wales 2022*, with secondary school teachers commenting on the poor promotion of careers with languages and how this acts as an impediment and barrier to positive learner choice (Collen et al., 2022, 30). The impact of coupling Welsh and International Languages as 'other' languages for learners in English-medium schools is also a recurrent feature of *Language Trends Wales* reports. For example, since Welsh is a compulsory subject in English-medium schools, some International Languages teachers believe that learners see Welsh as the 'other' language and do not feel the need to study International Languages at GCSE, as well as both subjects competing for curriculum time (Board and Tinsley, 2016, 47; Tinsley, 2018, 16). This finding makes the exploration of how learners perceive International Languages in relation to other subjects, specifically English and Welsh, an important point for discussion.

Learner Perspectives in Wales

Learner Perspectives on International Languages Study

The literature in Wales on learner motivation towards International Languages has centred predominantly on teacher perspectives. While valuable research projects have been undertaken on learner perspectives and motivation (e.g. Jepson, 2020; Jones, 2021), there is limited quantitative research to provide a large-scale picture of such perspectives in Wales (Jones, 2023b). One qualitative study available is Estyn's (2016) *Modern Foreign Languages* report that asked learners aged 13–16 (Years 9, 10 and 11) about their perspectives on International Languages. Many of

the Year 9 learners commented that they liked learning languages and recognised the importance of taking a language option at GCSE for improving career prospects or going to university (Estyn, 2016, 20). For the Year 10 and 11 learners who had chosen to study International Languages for GCSE, reasons included their love of the subject, and its usefulness for life beyond school (Estyn, 2016, 21). For Year 10 and 11 learners who had not chosen to study International Languages for GCSE, reasons were lack of subject enjoyment, difficulty at Key Stage 3 and wanting to choose another subject as they were already studying Welsh as a second language (Estyn, 2016, 21).

In Jones's (2023b) survey study of 860 learners in 10 secondary schools in Wales, she confirms some of the trends from previous reports, highlighting above all the effect of restrictive option blocks and timetabling that dissuade learners from choosing languages. The findings from her questionnaire to pre-GCSE learners indicated that an additional 33 per cent of the learners surveyed may have chosen to study International Languages if the option blocks had been more favourable towards languages (Jones, 2023b, 77). While questions of subject difficulty and a Brexit effect 'English is enough' mindset were present in Jones's cohort, her study indicates the weightiness of other determining factors in learner choices, such as school timetabling and option blocks limitations (Jones, 2023b). Jones's learner cohort also contested the notion that studying Welsh was a barrier to learning other languages; only 12 of the 860 learners commented that learning Welsh dissuaded them from studying an International Language at GCSE (Jones, 2023b, 81). Jones's research and our own highlight, therefore, the difference between teacher and learner perspectives on learning languages in schools in Wales and reinforces the value of large-scale plotting of learner perspectives.

Learner Perspective in Wales: What Can We Learn from Welsh Language Research?

In contrast to the paucity of research on learner motivation towards International Languages, there is more accessible learner data on attitudes towards learning Welsh (e.g. Jones, 2019; Rhys and Smith, 2022; Thomas et al., 2014). Such studies highlight the relationship between Welsh and learners' perception of its economic benefits (Jones, 2019; Thomas et al., 2014). For example, Jones (2019) explored the perspectives of 15- and 16-year-old (Years 10 and 11) learners from mostly English-speaking households attending a Welsh-medium secondary school. In this

study, academically orientated learners acknowledged studying in Welsh could increase employability after graduating from Higher Education, despite most choosing to study at university through English (Jones, 2019, 268). It is important to acknowledge the limited options to study at university through the medium of Welsh. However, important work is being done, primarily funded through the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, to promote and enable university study through the medium of Welsh. Furthermore, in Jones's (2019, 268) study, vocationally orientated learners referred to the 'labour market advantages of Welsh-medium study'. In a study by Rhys and Smith (2022), secondary school learners' perceptions of Welsh taught as a second language were explored using survey and focus group data. Their analysis demonstrates that, as learners progressed through school, their liking of Welsh taught as a second language decreased (Rhys and Smith, 2022, 15). This correlates with Coleman et al.'s (2007, 260) findings on decreased liking of Modern Foreign Languages through secondary education in England. Therefore, whilst the contexts for teaching Welsh and International Languages differ, there are potential overlaps in terms of learner motivation and attitudes. This article proposes that understanding more about language learner perspectives could help policy makers and language leaders in Wales to maximise opportunities for learner engagement with the new Curriculum for Wales for both Welsh and International Languages.

Research Questions

This article thus far has taken the reader through an exploration of the policy and practice context in Wales, as well as relevant research. Key points emerge from this exploration: firstly, a relative lack of research on what motivates learners to study (or not) International Languages at GCSE in Wales. Such research is essential given the established decline in GCSE uptake in Wales (Duff et al., 2024, 7). Secondly, there is a paucity of data on how learners perceive the relationships between English, International Languages and Welsh as a new combined curriculum area (Welsh Government, 2021a). Understanding how languages connect us will be essential for supporting the multilingual ethos of the new Curriculum for Wales. Thirdly, while the general learner motivation literature in the UK points towards the difficulty of International Languages as a subject (e.g. Lanvers, 2017, 521),

research in Wales suggests that this may not be the main barrier to International Languages GCSE study (e.g. Jones, 2023b, 79). How and why learners are motivated to study languages requires, therefore, further investigation. The following three research questions structure our analysis:

1. What motivates Year 8 and Year 9 learners in secondary schools in Wales to study (or not) International Languages at GCSE?
2. How do Year 8 and Year 9 learners in secondary schools in Wales perceive International Languages as compared to other subjects, specifically English and Welsh?
3. What are the perspectives of Year 8 and Year 9 learners in secondary schools in Wales on questions of difficulty in relation to International Languages as a subject?

Methodological Considerations and Researcher Positionality

This article is based on the findings from a questionnaire developed by the MFL Mentoring project. This language mentoring outreach project has been active in Wales since 2015. The MFL Mentoring project is funded by the Welsh Government to increase the number of learners in Wales taking International Languages for GCSE. The MFL Mentoring project disseminates an annual questionnaire to support the selection of learners to be mentored in schools and to gather insights into learner motivations and intentions for language learning. This data underpins strategies to improve the uptake of International Languages in Wales, influencing the design of mentoring resources and mentor training. Whilst the programme collates such data to support and improve project delivery, it has value here for practice-based research. The project team has adopted pragmatism as a framework for their research, considering 'theories, concepts, ideas, hypotheses and research findings not in an abstract form, but in terms of the roles they play as instruments of thought and action, and in terms of their practical consequences in specific contexts' (Saunders et al., 2019, 151). This is important given the real-world outcomes of working with data from schools and the fact that 3 of the 4 authors writing this article are actors in the MFL Mentoring project.

Pragmatism as a situated position allows the project team to determine what will work best for the project, whilst also understanding the wider and situated context of

learners and teachers as key agents in shaping the past, present and future of International Languages learning across Wales. This pragmatic approach was adopted early on in the design of the project through the commissioning of mixed-methods external evaluations (Rushton and Thomas, 2020; Thomas, 2022; Tinsley, 2017; Tinsley, 2019b) which sought to understand better the impact the project was having on learners and teachers. Findings from these evaluations have informed multiple iterations of the same project, as well as influenced the design of related projects including the Love Reading Mentoring Pilot Project, funded by the Welsh Government to support improving literacy in primary schools in Wales. By working in a pragmatic fashion with key agents such as teachers and learners, we work on the basis that ‘knowledge is based on experience; and second, [it] encourages the researchers to analyse organizational practices through experience as well as action’ (Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020, 4). This has allowed this practice-based project to take a self-reflexive approach and to generate ‘useful and actionable knowledge’ (Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020, 3). This informs the continuous improvement of project processes and content, whilst also advancing knowledge in the wider landscape, and acknowledges prior endorsement of core values underpinning the project (Holmwood, 2014).⁹

Survey Design

The data on which this article draws was collated between October 2021 and January 2022 from the annual questionnaire disseminated in the MFL Mentoring project partner schools. This survey data is the largest known dataset to date relating to Welsh learner motivation towards International Languages. Since 2015, an annual questionnaire has been used to support learner selection and project delivery. The outcomes of the survey have been mobilised for research purposes with appropriate ethical approval from Cardiff University since 2019 (excluding 2020 when no survey was carried out due to the Covid-19 pandemic).¹⁰ Since 2021, the project has conducted the annual questionnaire through Qualtrics as an online process; paper

9 This is outlined in the mission and vision statements of the MFL Mentoring project website: <https://mflmentoring.co.uk/>.

10 School of Modern Languages, School Research Ethics Committee, ‘The Modern Foreign Languages Project’, approved 14 September 2020: reference: 202021/002.

questionnaires and online software SurveyMonkey were used in the early years of the project. The annual questionnaire is undertaken by Year 8 or Year 9 learners (13 and 14 years old) in their secondary schools, with support from teachers. The questionnaire is available in English and Welsh. Learners taking the questionnaire are making their options choices for GCSE within that academic year. The data seeks to identify learners who are indifferent or disinclined towards taking an International Language for further study. This is the target group for the mentoring intervention.

The questionnaire is designed to take a user approximately 10 minutes to complete and consists of up to 52 questions depending on which routing is applied based on answers provided. Most questions require a response, with open-text sections optional. The questionnaire is made up of five sections: learners' details (demographic information), learners' languages, travelling abroad, subjects and school environment, and languages and the future. Question development has been an iterative process over eight years, with the survey updated and refined each year in response to user feedback, as per the pragmatic approach outlined above. The questionnaire comprises primarily close-ended questions and requires responses for key questions (see Blair et al., 2014), such as, 'Do you want to take International Languages for GCSE?'. This informs the selection of learners for the intervention. Most close-ended questions have ordinal response categories, for example, Likert scales. Multiple choice questions and ranking questions are also used. The dataset for this article was downloaded from Qualtrics to Excel ready for analysis to ascertain patterns in learner responses. Responses from individuals that were under 40 per cent complete across the full set of questions were deleted. All responses were cleaned of individual learner names to ensure that individual learners could not be identified.

Participation and Participant Profiles

Responses from 5803 learners from Years 8 and 9 across 64 secondary schools are included in the analysis.¹¹ The dataset comprises learners from 72 per cent

¹¹ In the analysis of this article (except for Tables in this section: Participation and Participant Profiles), percentages are rounded to whole numbers for readability, as is done in *Language Trends Wales* reports (c.f. Duff et al., 2024; Collen et al., 2022).

English-medium schools (n=46 schools), 19 per cent bilingual schools (n=12) and 9 per cent Welsh-medium schools (n=6). The sample comprises 23 per cent (n=1353) Year 8 learners and 77 per cent (n=4450) Year 9 learners. When divided by gender, the sample represents the following: male learners 47 per cent (n=2753), female learners 48 per cent (n=2764) and learners that identify in another way or prefer not to say comprises 5 per cent (n=286) of the sample. Where analysis of the data is not aggregated by gender, all respondents have been included. Participants were also asked to self-identify their ethnicity in the questionnaire. 12 per cent (n=676) of all participants self-identified as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic and 88 per cent (n=5127) self-identified as White. See Tables 1–4 for pupil profile statistics.

Survey Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis on Excel was used to identify trends in key statistics by deducing percentage totals across the whole cohort of responses. While there are limitations to descriptive analysis in terms of being able to infer wider conclusions, it was useful in drawing out overall trends in the data, as well as providing a basis for understanding cohort perspectives. While the overall questionnaire comprises up to 52 close-ended and open-ended questions depending on the topic, only specific questions were analysed for this study. This is because this article is focused on the motivation for and barriers to choosing an International Language at GCSE, perspectives on subject links and perspectives on subject difficulty, rather than career aspirations or attitudes towards travel abroad, both topics the questionnaire broaches that could yield rich data for future research. Therefore, all questions analysed for this article were close-ended except for one (Question 46) (see Appendix for list of questions analysed). Where appropriate, responses were cross-referenced with either national data sources, such as Stats Wales, or with outcomes from other survey questions where cross-referencing could offer additional insights, for example, demographic-based perspectives towards languages. Where appropriate, nationally published statistics were used to provide wider context to the findings that are discussed. The next section explores, therefore, the findings from the dataset in relation to three areas: what learners told us motivated them to choose International Languages and demotivated them from choosing to study an International Language at GCSE, links

Table 1: School medium of learners that participated in the learner baseline survey

Total respondents: 5803 learners			
School-Medium	English-medium	Bilingual	Welsh-medium
No. of schools	46 schools	12 schools	6 schools
% of schools	71.86	18.75	9.38

Table 2: Year group split of learners who participated in the learner baseline survey

Year group (5803 responses)		
	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Year 8	1353	23.32
Year 9	4450	76.68

Table 3: Gender self-identified by learners who participated in the learner baseline survey

Gender (5803 responses)		
	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Female	2764	47.63
Male	2753	47.44
Identify in another way	141	2.43
Prefer not to say	145	2.50

Table 4: Ethnicity self-identified by learners who participated in the learner baseline survey

Ethnicity (5803 responses)		
	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Asian or Asian British	241	4.15
Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	98	1.69

Ethnicity (5803 responses)		
	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups	207	3.57
White	5127	88.35
Other Ethnic Group	130	2.24

with other curriculum subjects and the perceived difficulty of learning International Languages.

Motivators for and barriers to choosing International Languages GCSE

In the questionnaire, learners were asked, ‘Do you want to take International Languages for GCSE?’ and were reminded that International Languages include French, German and Spanish but not English or Welsh. There were 5705 responses to this question. The data indicates that 16 per cent (n=935) of these learners responded ‘definitely yes’ (n=313) or ‘probably yes’ (n=622) to this question.¹² According to Stats Wales (Welsh Government, 2023c), the national average for uptake of GCSE International Languages in Wales in 2021/22 was 14.4 per cent. These findings therefore mirror the national trend. Of those who said that they would definitely/probably choose to study an International Language at GCSE (n=935), 56 per cent self-identified as female (n= 524) and 38 per cent self-identified as male (n=354). Furthermore, 16 per cent (n=146) of those who indicated definitely/probably yes self-identified as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, compared to 84 per cent (n=789) who self-identified as White.

Those learners who indicated a preference for choosing International Languages were then asked, ‘What makes you want to take International Languages for GCSE?’. They were able to choose from 16 statements, as well as offer additional comments by selecting ‘other’.¹³ Of the learners who selected ‘definitely yes’ or

¹² 32 per cent of respondents selected ‘maybe’ (n=1799) to this question but were not asked to select reasons for their uncertainty to choosing an International Language for GCSE.

¹³ These statements draw on known ‘push and pull’ factors for learners as discussed in *Language Trends Wales* reports since 2015. Learners could select multiple statements. The percentages here represent, therefore, learner responses to individual factors. The ‘other’ statement and its open-ended responses have not been analysed in this article.

'probably yes' to choosing an International Language at GCSE (n=935), 79 per cent (n=737) of these learners selected the reason 'it's useful', with 61 per cent (n=566) also choosing 'I want to travel' and 60 per cent (n=562) noting 'it will help me get a job'. Just over half of these learners, 56 per cent (n=522 responses) indicated that it is because they find languages 'fun', whilst just under half (45 per cent, n=420) of these learners said it is because 'I'm good at it'. Lesser selected factors included the influence of others: 'my friends are doing it' eliciting only 5 per cent agreement (n=51); 'my teacher thinks it's a good idea' only 16 per cent (n=147); and 'my parents think it's a good idea' at 30 per cent (n=278).

52 per cent (n=2971) of responding learners indicated 'probably not' or 'definitely not' to the question, 'Do you want to take International Languages for GCSE?'. Of those who said that they would probably not/definitely not choose to study an International Language at GCSE (n=2971), 43 per cent self-identified as female (n=1265) and 53 per cent self-identified as male (n=1564). Furthermore, 10 per cent (n=292) of those who indicated probably no/definitely no self-identified as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, compared to 90 per cent (n=2679) who self-identified as White.

These 2971 learners who selected 'probably not' or 'definitely not' were then required to choose reasons why they did not want to take an International Language at GCSE. Again, learners were given 16 statements to choose from and could pick as many statements as were applicable to them, as well as offer additional comments by selecting 'other'.¹⁴ These learners indicated that the biggest barrier was 'it's boring' with 51 per cent (n=1514) of responses. The second and third most selected statements were: 'I want to take something else more' with 47 per cent responses (n=1395) and 'I'm not good at it', also with 47 per cent (n=1385). 35 per cent (n=1050) of these learners opted for 'it's too difficult' and a minority indicated that it was due to having to take Welsh as a subject at 15 per cent (n=438). There is little evidence from such responses to suggest that learners see the fact that they will be studying Welsh at GCSE as a barrier to taking an

¹⁴ Learners could select multiple statements. The percentages here represent, therefore, learner responses to individual factors. The 'other' statement and its open-ended responses have not been analysed in this article.

International Language at GCSE, a finding which concurs with that of Jones in her recent research (2023b, 80–1).

Learners were later asked whether they thought that ‘Other subjects will improve my career opportunities more than International Languages’. Of 5331 responses, 71 per cent of respondents strongly agreed (n=1565) or agreed (n=2224) that other subjects would improve their career opportunities more than International Languages. Those learners were then asked to identify *which subjects* would improve their career opportunities more than International Languages. Learners were able to select multiple subjects in their response. 3942 learners responded to this question with subjects individually chosen 21214 times. The results showed that Welsh was only selected 1026 times (5 per cent), faring better than Art (n=782), Drama (n=556), Music (n=518) and Religion (n=639), but significantly behind English (n=3208), Maths (n=3209) and Science (n=2752). This highlights the high value learners attribute to STEM subjects in terms of careers, and the lower value placed on humanities and expressive arts subjects, apart from English.

Yet learners demonstrated high interest in learning other languages, with 51 per cent (n=2962) of *all* learners answering ‘yes’ to the question: ‘Are there languages that you’d like to learn that aren’t available at your school?’. This represents triple the number of learners who indicated that they definitely/probably would take an International Language for GCSE (16 per cent, n=935). These 2962 respondents were then asked, ‘Which language/s would you like to learn that isn’t available at your school?’. The open-ended responses were analysed to determine the most regularly selected answers, and then put in rank order. The top five languages selected were: Spanish (1), German (2), Japanese (3), Italian (4), and Russian (5). The data indicates that there is interest in learning languages but not necessarily only those available within the school curriculum.

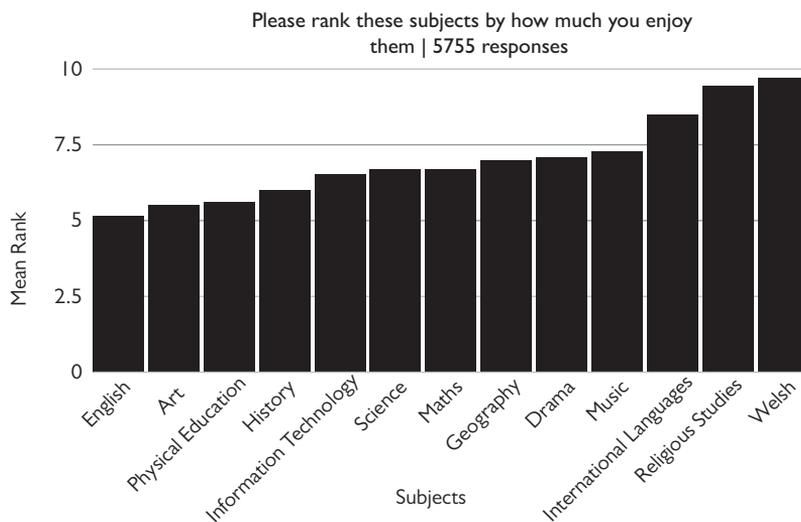
Links with Other Subjects

The questionnaire sought to understand the relationship and linkages between International Languages and 12 other subjects. Learners decide which subjects to continue to study to GCSE examination from within option blocks that are regulated through individual school timetabling. As such, the interrelationships between subjects within option blocks is a major factor in learner choice and

decision-making. *Language Trends Wales 2021*, for instance, highlighted teacher concerns that International Languages as a subject was being pitted against popular subjects and consequently was not chosen (Collen et al., 2021, 21).

The questionnaire from the MFL Mentoring project asked learners to rank 13 subjects, from the most enjoyed ranked as 1 to the least enjoyed ranked as 13. The 13 subjects were selected based on the official curriculum subjects in the National Curriculum (Wales) at the time the questionnaire was live in 2021/22 (Welsh Government, 2019). The wording and delineation of subject areas were amended to reflect better individual subject areas and updated terminology, for example International Languages instead of Modern Foreign Languages. There were 5755 responses to this question. Working out the weighted average of each score allowed the mean placement of each subject area to be determined and is shown in Figure 1. The data shows that English was ranked as the top subject for enjoyment, whilst Welsh was ranked as the least enjoyed. International Languages fared better than Welsh but only ranked as 11th for enjoyment, above Religious Studies. Such data

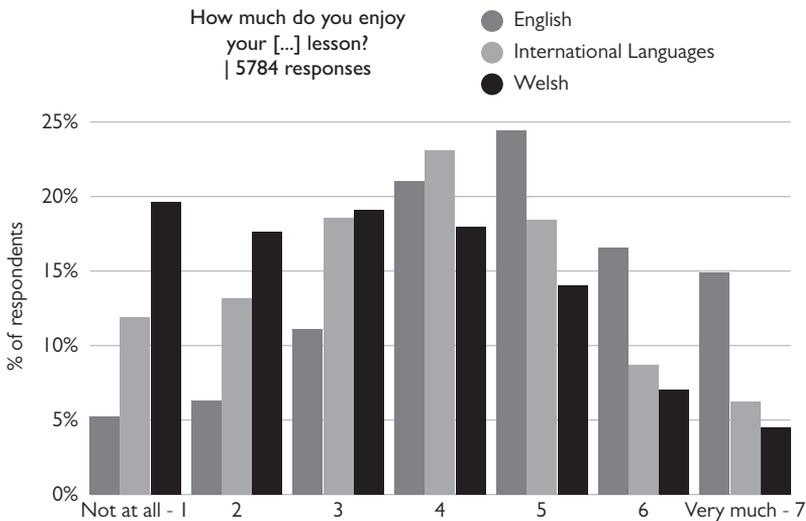
**Figure 1: Mean ranking of responses to the question
‘Please rank these subjects by how much you enjoy them’ based
on the overall weighted average for each subject.**



indicates polarised perspectives to the three subjects comprising the Languages, Literacy and Communication AoLE. The rankings also highlight learner enjoyment of humanities subjects, with three of the top four preferred subjects ranked as English, Art, Physical Education and History. The STEM subjects occupy the middle ranks overall. The dataset shows that 8 per cent (n=936) more male learners placed International Languages as their least favourite subject than female learners (n=715) based on those that placed International Languages as one of their bottom 3 choices (rank 11, 12 or 13). This points towards sector-wide findings that male learners are less inclined to opt for International Languages at GCSE (Tinsley, 2018, 27).

In contrast, when learners were asked to indicate how much they enjoyed different lessons on a Likert scale, with 1 being 'not at all' and 7 being 'very much', 33 per cent (n=1926) of respondents (n=5784) opted for '5/6/7' for International Languages as shown in Figure 2. This is double the number of learners who indicated that they would definitely/probably take International Languages for

Figure 2: Respondents' ranking of how much they enjoy English, International Languages and Welsh on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all and 7 is very much.



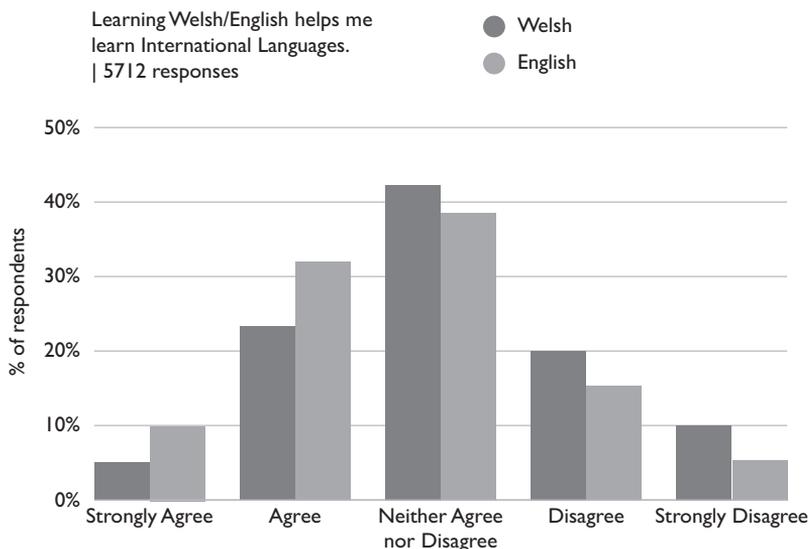
GCSE. This suggests that there is a large proportion of learners who enjoy International Languages but that this does not translate into choosing the subject at GCSE. Of the learners that responded to these questions, there was a preference for STEM subjects with 47 per cent (n=2746) selecting '5/6/7' for Maths and 54 per cent (n=3131) for science subjects (Physics, Biology, Chemistry). This dropped to 26 per cent (n=1477) who selected '5/6/7' for Welsh and rose dramatically to 56 per cent (n=3247) who selected '5/6/7' for English. These results consolidate findings that enjoyment of languages is differentiated by language, with English, International Languages and Welsh performing differently and modulated relative to other subjects.

Given the differences in perspectives towards English, as compared to International Languages and Welsh, the questionnaire also sought to understand how learners connected (or not) the learning of English and Welsh with the learning of International Languages. The questions asked to ascertain views on this were, 'How much do you agree with the following statements: 'Learning Welsh helps me learn International Languages'; 'Learning English helps me learn International Languages''. Respondents answered via a 5-point Likert scale. There were 5712 responses to each question. Responses indicated that these learners identified the language links between International Languages and English, with 42 per cent (n=2373) strongly agreeing or agreeing that English helped them learn International Languages. In contrast, only 28 per cent (n=1593) of these learners strongly agreed or agreed that learning Welsh helped them learn International Languages as shown in Figure 3. The disconnect between Welsh and International Languages is interesting given that, in the English-medium education sector, for example, both languages require teachers and learners to adopt comparative second language pedagogies. The perceived connection between English and International Languages, on the other hand, points to the need to understand in greater depth both cultural and pedagogical factors that influence learners' perspectives on subject-specific coupling.

Perceived Difficulty

Subject difficulty is widely discussed in view of the uptake challenges for International Languages in the UK and Wales contexts (Estyn, 2009, 24; Lanvers, 2017, 521; Tinsley, 2019a, 20). In the questionnaire, learners were asked 'Compared to your other subjects, how difficult do you find your International

Figure 3: Responses to the questions 'Learning Welsh/English helps me learn International Languages' in percentage.



Languages lesson?'.¹⁵ There were 5446 responses to this question. Figure 4 shows that 43 per cent (n=2360) of these learners selected '1/2/3' suggesting that they considered International Languages easier than other subjects. In comparison, 27 per cent (n=1468) of these learners selected '5/6/7' suggesting that they considered International Languages more difficult than other subjects. 30 per cent (n=1618) of learners selected '4', which suggests that they found the subject to be neither easy nor difficult in comparison to other subjects. This corresponds to an earlier question where all learners were asked 'Do you want to take International Languages for GCSE?'. 35 per cent of learners who answered,

¹⁵ Learners were not asked about individual languages, but rather International Languages as a subject. Comparison between International Languages subjects, French, German and Spanish, has not been possible in this analysis due to the very low number of schools that teach more than one International Language to GCSE level (Collen et al., 2022, 24). Exploring difficulty in relation to different languages could be a future avenue of research.

‘probably not’ or ‘definitely not’ to this question, then opted for the reason not to choose International Languages as ‘it’s too difficult’. The survey data suggests, therefore, that perception of difficulty is a less significant barrier in choosing an International Language for GCSE than is commonly assumed in reports and scholarly reporting, mirroring Jones’s (2023b) study on learner motivation in Wales. The survey data here shows that there were more learners who saw International Languages as easier than other subjects than there were learners who saw it as more difficult.

Interestingly, when learners were asked ‘Compared to Welsh, how difficult do you find your International Languages lesson?’, there was a similar trend shown as outlined above. There were 5446 responses to this question. Figure 5 shows that 47 per cent (n=2545) of these learners chose ‘1/2/3’ suggesting that they considered International Languages easier than Welsh, and 27 per cent (n=1487) of learners chose ‘4’, which suggests that they found Welsh to be neither easy nor difficult in comparison to International Languages. In comparison, 26 per cent (n=1414) of

Figure 4: Responses to the question ‘Compared to your other subjects, how difficult do you find International Languages?’ 1 represents very easy and 7 very difficult.

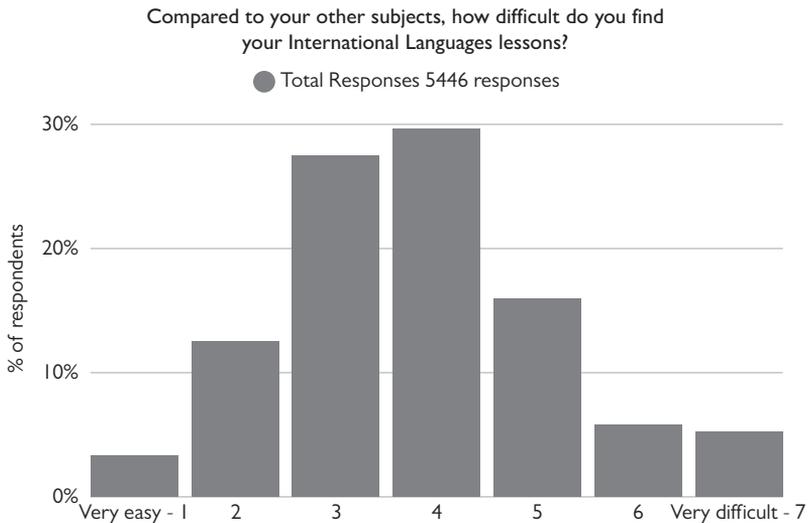
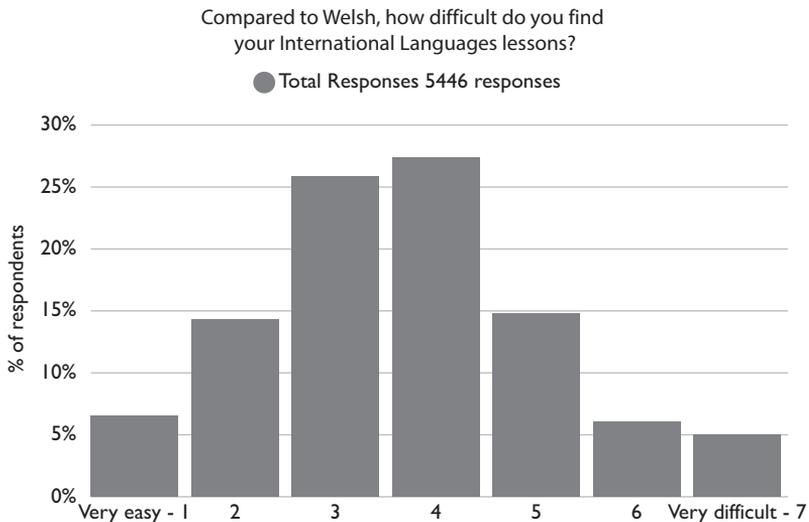


Figure 5: Responses to the question 'Compared to Welsh, how difficult do you find International Languages?' 1 represents very easy and 7 very difficult.



these learners chose '5/6/7' suggesting that they considered International Languages more difficult than Welsh. The survey data here shows that there were more learners who saw International Languages as easier than Welsh than there were learners who saw it as more difficult.

Discussion

This article has explored learner perspectives on International Languages in Wales through the survey data collated by the MFL Mentoring project from 2021/2022. This perspective is largely absent from longitudinal studies from Wales, such as the *Language Trends Wales* reports, which focus on teacher perspectives. There are clear take-home messages around questions of motivators for and barriers to International Languages GCSE study, links with other curriculum subjects and amongst languages and perceptions of difficulty. These prompt reflections on how best to integrate International Languages into the new Curriculum for Wales.

Why Study International Languages GCSE? Personal Enjoyment Also Important and an Appetite for New Languages

Firstly, our survey data indicates that, in terms of choice and preference, intrinsic motivation is a significant generator of commitment to languages for secondary school learners. Of those who definitely/probably wanted to study International Languages, personal enjoyment is a powerful reason to continue to study languages. Whilst usefulness, travel opportunities and career considerations are the top three reasons to choose a language for GCSE (extrinsic motivation), over half of respondents indicated that they wanted to continue because languages were ‘fun’, all reasons seen in other research on learners’ motivation towards learning languages in Wales (e.g. Estyn, 2016, 20, 21). This enjoyment can also be inferred from the comments and suggestions of the other languages learners would have liked to learn but which were not available at their school. Over 50 per cent of the learners who responded selected languages not necessarily offered in state-maintained schools in Wales, such as Russian and Japanese. This appetite for ‘other’ languages indicates a bigger canvas for language appreciation than can be accommodated within current school curricula. This finding also indicates the cultural attraction of learning from non-like linguistic communities and the value of a context-rich approach to languages that would align the teaching of International Languages more closely to English in curriculum terms—the most enjoyed subject according to survey data. It is also worth noting here that the influence of others, such as teachers, parents, and peers, is a less prevalent factor for learners in choosing to study International Languages at GCSE, as seen in other studies (e.g. Lanvers, 2017, 521). From the questions outlined in the previous section regarding motivations to choose International Languages at GCSE, only 5 per cent of learners agreed with the statement ‘my friends are doing it’. This suggests that the option choices of their friends, for example, minimally influenced their own decision-making in terms of choosing to study International Languages at GCSE.

International Languages Links with English and Welsh: Not Evident for Learners

Secondly, Welsh learners demonstrate the complex relationship between perceptions of curriculum subjects and the impact of such perceptions on

decision-making. Welsh and International Languages sit towards the bottom of rankings of preferred option subjects for learners, whilst English is ranked top, with STEM subjects occupying the middle rankings. English as a subject appears to exist in an entirely different domain to International Languages and Welsh in terms of enjoyment. The undervaluing of International Languages and their low status compared to STEM subjects has been reported on regularly by teachers in *Language Trends Wales* reports (e.g. Tinsley, 2018, 39–40). However, our research indicates that the notion that International Languages are not enjoyed should be qualified by the finding that when asked directly (and not in comparison to other subjects) if they enjoyed their classes, learners respond more positively and positioned International Language learning towards the top end of the Likert scale for enjoyment.

However, in terms of cross-curricular language learning, the survey findings demonstrate that learners in Wales do not currently understand English, International Languages and Welsh as a ‘family’ of interconnected subjects, as promoted in the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021b). Indeed, more learners (42 per cent) reported how learning English supported them with learning International Languages than in relation to how Welsh (28 per cent) could support International Languages learning. There is no evidence from our survey that the pathway from bilingual to multilingual is self-evident to learners. Indeed, research by Arfon (2024) has found that teachers believe Welsh learners lack awareness of their skills in English and Welsh to then support International Languages learning. In Arfon’s study, school medium of instruction affected teachers’ beliefs. Specifically in English-medium schools, teachers reported that English was understood as ‘literacy’, as opposed to Welsh and International Languages, which were seen as ‘languages’ (Arfon, 2024). Future research should examine whether the degree of Welsh-medium provision impacts on how learners relate to English, International Languages and Welsh. For International Languages to thrive, nurturing more proactive relations between English, International Languages and Welsh would reap rewards.

International Languages: Difficulty Not the Main Barrier

Thirdly, our survey data demonstrates that there is no pre-conditioned learner perspective that International Languages are more difficult than other subjects at

secondary school in Wales, including Welsh – an oft noted perception in feedback from International Languages teachers in Wales (Estyn, 2009, 24; Tinsley, 2019a, 20). This highlights the importance of continuing to explore learners' perspectives of languages in Wales. Of those who said that they definitely/probably would not choose to study International Languages at GCSE, 51 per cent of these respondents noted that it was because 'it's boring', and 47 per cent selected 'I want to take something else more'. These were the top two barriers selected from a bank of 16 statements. Similarly, in Jones's (2023b, 82) recent study, limitations of option blocks and timetabling were the key barriers for learners in choosing not to study International Languages at GCSE. As Lanvers (2017, 521) has suggested in the England context, learners in the primary sector are enthused by language learning, with interest and inclination for language learning declining through secondary education. The continuation of a 'discovery' mode of language learning, focused on raising language awareness and promoting a curiosity-driven and connected language curriculum, could improve language motivation. This is reinforced by Coffey (2022) in his work on 'ambition' and the importance of content and cultural learning in the modern foreign language classroom. Further research from educationalists exploring multilingual identities in the classroom (Fisher et al., 2022; Forbes et al., 2021) and linguists working at the interface of creative practice and language learning (Kohl et al., 2020) provide powerful evidence of the value of such approaches. Experts in Wales have also promoted this approach in commissioned research for the Welsh Government on second language teaching approaches and methods (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018, 67).

Conclusion

Returning to our introduction, the analysed data tells us much about learner perspectives and language learning in Wales and how uptake in secondary schools might be increased. Our data suggests, firstly, that there is no innate disinclination to learn International Languages but that learners do not perceive how and where International Languages fit into the wider curriculum in Wales. They do not necessarily connect International Languages to some of the subjects they enjoy the most, such as English. This is a missed opportunity and could be investigated to maximise the visibility and value of International Languages for secondary school

learners. Our dataset also tells us that, whilst learners can see and appreciate the ‘usefulness’ of languages, those inclined to study languages also highlight the enjoyment and ‘fun’ they derive from language learning. To increase uptake of International Languages, personal satisfaction needs to be enhanced in the classroom and integrated into curriculum resources, as well as assessment. There is also the question of the untapped interest in languages beyond the ‘big 3’ of French, Spanish, (and now less evidently) German. In an era of Duolingo, where we can learn a swathe of languages on our mobile phones and laptops, the classroom is a far less ‘bounded’ environment for the trial and error of language learning. A discovery mode of learning that inspires primary school learners of languages – all languages – could be developed more fully in the secondary school curriculum. This would increase interaction with creative language resources and opportunities, as well as relationship building with language communities outside the classroom – in the local environment, at Further Education colleges, proximate universities and globally through virtual and actual travel. Being part of a broader community of language learners shapes the global citizenship mindset that is at the heart of the Welsh Government’s vision for young people in the new Curriculum for Wales. This is evident in the Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and Experience where one of the four Statements of What Matters is ‘languages connect us’ (Welsh Government, 2021b). If we, in Wales, want to arrest and reverse the decline in learning International Languages, it is this connectivity between languages that we need to inculcate through a creative approach to language learning that draws upon the many linguistic assets of Wales.

Appendix 1: Specific questions from the learner questionnaire that that have formed the basis of analysis for this article

Question 6

Gender:

Female

Male

Prefer to self-identify _____

Prefer not to say

Question 7

Ethnicity:

White Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish or British Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Any other White background

Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, Any other Mixed or Multiple ethnic background

Asian or Asian British India, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Any other Asian background

Black, African, Caribbean or Black British African, Caribbean, Any other Black, African or Caribbean background

Other ethnic group Arab, Persian, Any other ethnic group

Prefer not to say

Question 8

Respondents were asked to select the school they attend from a drop-down list of 86 secondary schools. 'Other' was also offered as an option. When 'other' was selected, learners were shown Question 10: 'What is the name of your school?'

The medium of school instruction was coded post data collation using information from My Local School <https://mylocalschool.gov.wales/>.

Question 9

Year group:

Year 7

Year 8

Year 9

Year 10

Year 11

Question 30

How much do you enjoy your international languages lessons?

Not at all 1

2

3

4

5

6

Very much 7

Question 31

How much do you enjoy your Welsh lessons?

Not at all 1

2

3

4

5

6

Very much 7

Question 32

How much do you enjoy your English lessons?

Not at all 1

2

3

4

5

6

Very much 7

Question 33

How much do you enjoy your science (physics, biology, chemistry) lessons?

Not at all 1

2

3

4

5

6

Very much 7

Question 34

How much do you enjoy your maths lessons?

Not at all 1

2

3

4

5

6

Very much 7

Question 35

Please rank these subjects by **how much you enjoy them**.

Drag and drop the subjects so that your most favourite subject is at the top and your least favourite is at the bottom.

- _____ Art
- _____ Drama
- _____ English
- _____ Geography
- _____ History
- _____ International Languages
- _____ IT
- _____ Maths
- _____ Music
- _____ Physical Education
- _____ Religious Education
- _____ Science
- _____ Welsh

Question 36

Compared to your other subjects, how difficult do you find your international language lessons?

Very easy 1

2

3

4

5

6

Very difficult 7

Question 37

Compared to Welsh, how difficult do you find your international language lessons?

Very easy 1

2

3

4

5

6

Very difficult 7

Question 39

How much do you agree with the following statement: Learning Welsh helps me learn international languages.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Question 40

How much do you agree with the following statement: Learning English helps me learn international languages.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Question 42

Do you want to take international languages for GCSE?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Maybe

Probably not

Definitely not

Question 43

Display this question if respondent chose 'probably not' or 'definitely not' for question 42.

What stops you taking international languages for GCSE? You can select as many as you like.

It's too difficult

I'm not good at it

It's boring

It's not useful

It's not creative

Everyone speaks English

I'm already taking Welsh

I want to take something else more

I don't need it for the job I want

I don't like my teacher

I don't like my lessons

I don't have enough option choices

My friends aren't doing it

My parents/guardians don't think it's a good idea

My teacher doesn't think it's a good idea

Other, please write:

Question 44

Display this question if respondent chose 'definitely yes' or 'probably yes' for question 42.

What makes you want to take international languages for GCSE? You can select as many as you like.

It's easy

I'm good at it

It's fun

It's useful

It's creative

It will help me get a job

It's my first choice

It's useful with Welsh too

I want to travel

I want to work abroad

I like learning about different cultures

I like my teacher

I like my lessons

My friends are doing it

My parents/guardians think it's a good idea

My teacher thinks it's a good idea

Other, please write:

Question 45

Are there languages that you'd like to learn which aren't available in your school?

Yes

No

Not sure

Question 46

Display this question if respondent chose 'yes' for question 45.

Which language/s would you like to learn which aren't available in your school?

Question 51

How much do you agree with the following statement: Other subjects are more important for my future than international languages.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Question 52

Which other subjects do you think are more important for your future than international languages? You can select as many as you like.

Art

Business

Drama

English

Geography

History

IT

Maths

Music

Physical Education

Religious Education

Science

Welsh

Other - please specify:

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