Choosing a Modern Foreign Language as a GCSE subject – is there a choice? Option boxes and other factors

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SUMMARY

The aim of the research which underpins this article is to identify the factors that influence pupils when choosing, or not choosing, to study a modern foreign language as a GCSE subject. In 2015, the document *Global Futures* was published by the Welsh Government to improve and promote Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs). However, statistics show that the numbers taking MFLs as a GCSE subject are continuing to fall (British Council, 2021). The *Evaluation of Global Futures* (Welsh Government, 2022a) acknowledged that not all the aims of the strategic plan were fully realised as no increase was seen in the number of pupils studying MFLs at examination level. This article focuses on one particular aspect of the data collected by the project, namely the factors that prevented pupils from choosing MFLs as a GCSE subject. Data was collected from 860 pupils in 10 secondary schools, and barriers at school level, such as option boxes and courses not running, were found to be key factors (Jones, 2021, Clayton, 2022). The perception that the subject was difficult was also a factor preventing pupils from choosing MFLs as a GCSE subject, and it should be noted that the foreign language for the pupils in this study (Fukui & Yashmina, 2021) was, at the very least, a third language. It is argued, in line with the British Council report (2021:6), that 'urgent intervention' is needed to reverse the decline in the numbers choosing to study MFLs as a GCSE subject. Some recommendations are offered on ways to increase numbers, with reference being made to such considerations such as choosing option

subjects in Year 8, setting MFL classes and the need for more deliberate planning in order for pupils to succeed in learning a foreign language (Ofsted, 2021). The implications of the Curriculum for Wales and the multilingual and plurilingual approaches presented therein as ways to "ignite learners' curiosity and enthusiasm" (Welsh Government, 2022b) are also considered.

Keywords: option boxes, Modern Foreign Languages, GCSE

Introduction and a Review of the Literature

While the central Global Futures strategy (Welsh Government, 2015) seeks to "encourage learners to …. [study] English, Welsh and at least one modern foreign language from primary to examination level," (p.3), the British Council report (2021:6) shows that 'GCSE entries for French and German have declined by almost half' between 2015 and 2021. Further details of these percentages can be found in the *Evaluation of Global Futures* (Welsh Government, 2022a) where it is noted that GCSE entries fell by 44 per cent between 2002 and 2015 with a further decrease of 42 per cent between 2015 and 2021. It should be remembered that increasing the numbers studying MFLs to examination level is given undisputed emphasis in the 2015 *Global Futures* document. In fact, the study of MFLs to GCSE level (or to examination level / to gain a formal qualification / up to levels 2 and 3) is referred to 16 times between page 2 and page 8 of the document. By *Global Futures* 2021, only in the context of support from Instituto Cervantes, Goethe–Institut and Cardiff University's mentoring scheme is there specific reference to GCSE and A-level examinations. There are other changes between the 2015 and 2021 document, with increasing importance placed on the development of languages 'at all levels', and particularly in primary schools, by the 2021 document (e.g. Strategic Action 1 in 2021 refers to supporting primary schools to plan their international languages provision while Strategic Action 1 in 2015 was to promote and raise the profile of MFLs as an important subject).

Although there is now more emphasis on introducing international languages at primary level, it is not entirely clear how the introduction

of an international language in Year 5 will address factors such as the limitations of option boxes and timetables, the perception that the subject is difficult (Jones, 2021) and the lack of motivation to learn languages other than English which, according to some (e.g. Lanvers & Graham, 2022), have been identified as factors behind the decline in numbers.

Option box and timetable barriers

It has already been argued by Jones (2021) that the limitations of option boxes are a factor in the reduction in the number studying MFLs. Reference was made there to the *Global Futures* document (Welsh Government, 2015), the latest Estyn survey into Modern Foreign Languages (Estyn, 2016), the Blake & Gorrara study (2019) and the British Council report (2019) where it was noted that the option boxes limited pupils' choice to study MFLs as a GCSE subject. Reference was also made to Abrahams' (2018) study which stressed that pupils' choices should be understood in the context of the options offered to them. Interestingly, the discussion about the new GCSE qualifications, 'Qualified for the Future', states:

> "Fewer separate GCSEs in mathematics, science and languages will provide more space for learners to gain broader experiences across the whole curriculum." (Qualifications Wales, 2022).

The quote suggests that combining Welsh and English language and literature qualifications and offering a single Maths and Double Science qualification can enable pupils to choose a greater range of subjects, possibly by offering more option boxes. Indeed, the fact that Triple Science will no longer exist means that there may be one extra option box available in some schools and this may benefit pupils who had to choose between Triple Science and a modern foreign language (MFL) in the past.

The factors relating to a lack of time on timetables are addressed by Clayton (2022) in her study on what was affecting secondary pupils in Australia when choosing an additional language. Clayton (2022) described a group of pupils she called "forced discontinuing students". These were pupils who wanted to study MFLs but who faced barriers such as:

i) the additional language (or languages other than English, as they are called) being taught at the same time as other subjects that they wanted to study;
ii) difficulty in fitting the additional language into study courses;
iii) and the fact that the language they wanted to study wasn't being offered.

She makes an important point when she notes that lack of interest, as is often said, isn't always responsible for the reduction in numbers studying languages:

> "The enrolment decline in post compulsory LOTE [languages other than English] subjects is often interpreted as a lack of interest from students. The findings of this study indicate that a significant number of students are prevented for studying an elective LOTE subject at school by a range of systemic and personal barriers. The conclusion drawn from this finding is that the perception of student disinterest in elective LOTES may be incorrect or simplistic. Within the cohort of discontinuing students there are those who wished to continue but were unable to do so due to a range of barriers, thus classified as Forced Discontinuing students." (Clayton, 2022:376, 377).

One of the aims of the current research therefore was to try to identify the extent to which the option boxes and timetable constraints prevented pupils from studying MFLs as a GCSE subject.

The perception that the subject is difficult

A British Council report (2019) has noted that around half of schools with a decline in numbers choosing MFLs say it is because pupils find them difficult 'in general' (British Council, 2019:20). Similar comments can also be found in England's language trends (Tinsley, 2019) where it is stated:

> "Respondents comment that languages are perceived as a difficult subject and where pupils have not been able to make sufficient progress in KS3, they do not have the confidence to choose it for GCSE." (Tinsley, 2019: 12).

It is mentioned that pupils are hearing 'rumours' spread that the new GCSE specification is too difficult and that this is affecting the numbers (British Council, 2019:20).

Indeed, the difficulty of GCSEs is further detailed in the British Council's Language Trends Wales report, (2021:6) where it is stated that their:

> "…data show that a significant majority of teachers in Wales are in favour of reviewing the content and assessment of GCSEs in French, German and Spanish. This follows years of teachers highlighting the difficulty of modern foreign language (now international language) exams in comparison with other subjects."

Reference is made to the fact that the reading and listening exams are 'far too demanding' and that the amount of vocabulary pupils are expected to learn is 'far too great' (British Council, 2021:15). It is said there that the GCSE content needs to be reduced "so that we do not have completely overwhelmed, demoralised students saying that French and German are the hardest GCSEs on offer" **(**British Council, 2021:13). Jones (2021) has outlined why GCSE MFLs are difficult compared with other subjects, referring to the number of topics, the fact that parts of the exam cannot be taken in Year 10 and the grammatical content that must be studied.

The same comments are being voiced in England, with the Ofsted report, (2021 : no page number) stating:

> "It is clear that pupils in England often perceive languages to be difficult."

It should be noted here that the difficulty of the content isn't the only concern, but also the difficulty of getting good grades in MFLs. Ofqual (2019) (the English qualifications and examinations regulatory board) acknowledged that a change to the marking system was necessary as German and French GCSEs were marked too harshly. It was noted by Hallahan (2022) that German grades were one whole grade lower than average grades in English and Maths, with grades in GCSE French 0.86 lower and Spanish 0.67 lower. Because of this, there has been a change to the system of awarding grades, resulting in improved MFL grades in 2022, with increases of 8.4 percentage points in French and 7.7 percentage points in German for those pupils who scored 4 or more (Hallahan, 2022).

Despite this, Ofsted's (2021) review of MFLs in England states that adjusting the grades should not be seen as a means of solving the problem of declining numbers:-

"However, grading standards and associated adjustments may not be a panacea. Pupils perceive the subject as difficult and often lack belief in their ability in the subject." (Ofsted, 2021 : no page number).

The fact that MFLs are regarded as difficult subjects and that it is difficult to get the best grades in them, has led to some predicting that this will bring the Ebacc in England to an end (Hallahan, 2022) because the failure to achieve a good grade in MFLs is the main barrier to pupils obtaining the Ebacc (Ofsted, 2021). In 2019, 80% of pupils lacked the language element (Ofsted, 2021) with this number rising to 87.3 per cent by 2021 (Hallahan, 2022).

While a comparison with the English perception benefits us here in Wales when discussing how difficult the GCSE qualification is for MFLs, it should be remembered that the foreign language is a third language, at least, for pupils in Wales, with those in English–medium schools learning Welsh and the MFL at the same time. The increase in recent years in research into motivation to learn a third language, a language other than English, has shown that difficulties can arise as a result (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017; Fukui & Yashmina, 2021). Fukui & Yashmina (2021), in their study on two Japanese students learning English and Chinese concurrently in Taiwan, point to the mental and physical difficulties of learning two additional languages simultaneously:

"Even the most motivated students can feel they are being stretched to the limit" (Fukui & Yashmina, 2021:289-290).

Although the context of their learners is not the same as the pupils in this article's research, it is interesting to note that they referred to the fact that competition can arise between the second and third languages in terms of the "limited language–learning capacity of most students". (Fukui & Yashmina, 2021:268). They also said that language teachers should be sensitive when dealing with third language learning programmes because of this (Fukui & Yashmina, 2021). Henry (2014) cites research which argues that there is more 'complexity' in learners acquiring a third language than in acquiring only one new language.

Lack of motivation to learn languages other than English.

With English dominating as a language of communication around the world, considering the usefulness of MFLs to pupils is an all–important factor, as Clayton states, (2022:361):

"In a world where English has achieved global dominance, it is unsurprising that the instrumental value of learning a language other than English (LOTE) for those already fluent in English is increasingly deemed unnecessary."

Lanvers & Graham (2022) report that the United Kingdom is now in the fourth decade of a languages crisis recognising that:

"the learner who already speaks English as (one of their) first language(s) can be conceptualised as an especially challenging case." (Lanvers & Graham, 2022:223).

It is possible that pupils' motivation to study languages (be it Welsh in English-medium schools or MFLs) was a factor in understanding the decline in GCSE MFLs. Although Lanvers & Graham (2022) said that getting pupils who already speak English to learn an additional language is difficult, the research of Gorrara & Jenkins (2022) at Cardiff University shows that learners have not turned their backs on languages just before they make their GCSE choices. Their data shows that many pupils are open to learning a language at the time when they are making their GCSE choices. In their study, they asked for the views of 5,800 young people in Years 8 and 9 in Wales, just before they decided which GCSE subjects they would study. According to the news report describing the research, this is the largest known dataset in the United Kingdom that directly addresses learners' views on the study of languages. Their results showed that 48% of learners were open to considering studying a modern foreign language at GCSE level (Gorrara & Jenkins, 2022). Similarly, there was evidence from Estyn, cited by Jones (2021), which showed that pupils enjoyed learning languages and wanted to continue studying them:

"Many Year 9 learners reported that they liked learning languages and wanted to continue to study a language in Year 10." (Estyn, 2016:23).

Many studies here in Wales that have looked at the motivation of pupils, who are already English speakers, to learn foreign languages, cannot be cited, although Rhys & Smith's (2022) research sheds light on pupils' motivation to learn Welsh as a second language here in Wales. Indeed, only in recent years has there been an increase across the world in studies looking at people's motivation to learn languages other than English. Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie (2017) report that research to study motivation to learn additional languages is primarily concerned with learning English. They cited research showing that over 70 percent of all empirical studies

on motivation between 2005 and 2014 discussed learning English as a second language. They go on to say that there are even fewer studies on learning more than one language at the same time:

> "While literally hundreds of studies have been conducted over the past decade to examine what motivates someone to learn an additional language, it has been by and large ignored how the motivational set-up might change when a person studies more than one language at a time." (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017:457).

The current study will seek to shed more light on the motivation of pupils who, in the research's English-medium schools, are learning two additional languages simultaneously. It will attempt to see whether the fact that pupils are already studying Welsh is a factor preventing them from choosing MFLs.

Methodology

The research question

The main aim of this research was to discover the reasons why pupils choose, or don't choose, Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs) as a GCSE subject. In this article, the focus is on the factors that prevented pupils from choosing to study MFLs.

Participants

The participants were pupils in Years 8 or 9, depending on whether pupils were making their GCSE choices in Year 8 or 9. They attended 10 schools in Wales. The schools represented a range of secondary schools in Wales: rural, urban, small, large, secondary, 3-16/19, English-medium, bilingual, mainly Welsh-medium and designated Welsh-medium.

The table shows that two of the schools are ones where most of the curriculum is taught through the medium of Welsh, two of the schools are dual language schools and six are English-medium schools. Two of the schools had fewer than 500 pupils and one slightly more than 500. Four of the schools had between 500 and 1000 pupils, with one school

Table 1: Number of pupils in the school and medium

School	Number of pupils★	Category★★
A	< 500	3
B	< 500	2
C	< 1000	2
D	< 2000	1
E	< 1000	1
F	< 1000	1
G	< 2000	1
H	500 +	1
I	< 1500	1
J	< 1000	3P

★The school websites were used to ascertain the number of pupils (accessed 3/10/2022). The exact number is not given here in order to maintain the schools' anonymity.
★★Welsh Government categories (2021b) were used here:
Category 1 = English-medium schools with some Welsh
Category 2 = Dual language schools in bilingual communities
Category 3 = Welsh-medium schools (in areas with a high number of Welsh speakers and schools where all subjects except English are taught through the medium of Welsh
3P = designated Welsh-medium school). (Welsh Government, 2021b).

having over 1000 children and two others closer to 2000 pupils. They were located in mid Wales, in the south-west and south-east of the country.

The data collection tool

A 5-question questionnaire was used to collect the data. The use of questionnaires is common in research on language learning and allows for cheap and rapid data collection (Cohen et al, 2018).It ensures that the answers are anonymous and that the data can be collected without the researcher being present. Four of the 5 questions resulted in quantitative data, with a choice of boxes to tick. There was an opportunity in

Table 2: Questionnaire Questions

Question number	Open or closed	Exact wording of English version
1	open	*Which language(s) do you speak at home (usually)?*
4	open	*Why did you choose to take a Modern Foreign Language at GCSE?*
3	closed, with option of additional answer	*Why did you NOT choose a Modern Foreign Language? (Tick ✓ 2 main reasons):-* *It was in the same option box as another subject I wanted to take.* *Don't like the subject* *It's a difficult subject* *There were not enough option boxes for me to be able to choose a Modern Language* *Any other reason _____*
2	closed	*Have you chosen a Modern Foreign Language (French / Spanish / German) for your GCSE options. (Tick either Yes or No).*
5	Closed	*Do you think a Modern Foreign Language will be useful to you in the future? Yes / No*

Question 3 for pupils to offer an alternative answer should they so wish. Question 4, *"Why did you choose to take a Modern Foreign Language at GCSE?"* provided qualitative data.

Care was taken to ensure that the wording of the questions was clear and straightforward. For example, the foreign languages concerned in this research were named (*French / Spanish / German*) because some pupils could potentially take voluntary exams in other languages if they spoke those languages at home. The second person singular 'ti' was used in the Welsh version in order to be more informal. It was also thought that pupils were more familiar with the use of 'ti' than 'chi'. The questionnaire was bilingual and planned deliberately to fit on one side of a page to be more accessible to pupils. We tried to make the page look clear, with a bold font used at times (e.g. *Tick ✓ 2 main reasons*, Question 3) and Welsh in italics always followed the English text. A size 14 font was used for all 5 questions.

Pupils were asked what language they spoke at home (usually) (Question 1) and whether they had chosen a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) (French / German / Spanish) as a GCSE subject (Question 2). The 2018 British Council report (Tinsley, 2018) noted that fewer pupils in Welsh-medium schools were choosing a foreign language. It was also noted that pupils who spoke English as an Additional Language at home were less likely to choose a foreign language (British Council, 2019). Consequently, this question was trying to find a pattern involving choosing a foreign language and the language of the home. Those who answered "Yes" to Question 2 went on to Question 4 and those who answered "No" answered Question 3 next. Question 3 contained 4 potential answers based on reasons identified in research in the field why pupils were not taking a foreign language as a GCSE subject. In terms of option 1, the reason was included here as Estyn (2016) had noted that having another subject in the same option box was a barrier for some pupils to choose MFLs as a GCSE subject. The reduced number of option boxes being offered has been referred to in British Council reports (Tinsley, 2018, British Council, 2019), and was the basis of option 4. Reference has already been made to reports indicating that pupils find the subject difficult (option 3) (British Council, 2019). Option 2, *Don't like the subject*, was included because a link has been identified between a subject's difficulty and a greater dislike for it (e.g. Marsden & Taylor, 2014, quoted in Jones, 2021:15). They were also given the opportunity to state '*Any other reason*'. Question 4 asked them to note why they had chosen MFLs at GCSE, while Question 5 wanted to find out whether they thought MFLs would be useful to them in their future.

The front page of the questionnaire contained details about the researcher, again in both Welsh and English *("As a French teacher for 19 years, I have been very interested in why pupils choose to take Modern Foreign Languages as a GCSE subject I am now working on the PGCE course at Aberystwyth University, training French and Spanish teachers.)* It emphasised that pupils did not have to complete the questionnaire and that their answers would be anonymous and confidential.

Data collection method

An email was initially sent to the heads of Modern Foreign Languages at 14 schools in March 2022. The researcher had a personal connection

with some of these teachers and other schools were part of Aberystwyth University's ITE Partnership. Twelve of those 14 schools replied within a week. It was important that the teachers knew that participating in the research project would not increase their workload, and therefore the researcher offered to photocopy the questionnaires on their behalf. Reference was also made to the content of the researcher's previous article so that they understood the context of the research (Jones, 2021).

An email was sent to the headteachers of these 12 schools in March / April 2022. It sought permission for their school's Year 8/9 pupils to take part in the research project "Factors Influencing Take up of Modern Foreign Languages at GCSE." A document containing information for headteachers was also sent out which provided much more information about the research project. They were also asked to arrange for parents of Year 8/9 pupils to receive a parental information document and for pupils to receive information through the school's normal correspondence system. Ten of these headteachers gave their permission.

After receiving the headteachers' permission, the questionnaires (photocopied) and script were posted to the Foreign Language teachers at these 10 schools. They were asked to distribute the questionnaires after pupils had made their GCSE choices and proposed a date at the beginning of June for returning the questionnaires to the researcher. The script was intended to ensure consistency in the teachers' instructions to pupils and to ensure that pupils were clear that the answers would be anonymous and confidential and that the teachers would place the questionnaires, unread, in the envelope provided. Pupils were also given a leaflet outlining useful websites if they had shown they were concerned about the selection process and completing the questionnaires.

Ethical considerations

The research follows the *British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA 2018) and was approved by Aberystwyth University's Ethics Panel. It was decided to use the system of parents contacting their child's foreign language teacher if they did not want him/her to participate in the research. This was justified as the children understood the purpose of the research and were already familiar

with completing similar questionnaires (according to teachers' anecdotal evidence). There were no disadvantages for pupils who did not wish to participate. Teachers were instructed to distribute the questionnaire to all pupils and not to send the questionnaire to the researcher if the parents or pupil had stated that they were opposed to participating.

Analyzing the data

The pupils' answers were noted, including the open answers, on Excel spreadsheets. The percentages of the answers to the closed questions was calculated and a note was made of the open answers which offered further insight into the pupils' answers.

Results and Discussion

Number of pupils who took MFLs at GCSE

In order to establish the factors preventing pupils from choosing MFLs as a GCSE subject, the first step was to ascertain how many had chosen a foreign language at GCSE. The data showed that 18% of pupils in these 10 schools chose to study a Modern Foreign Language as a GCSE subject. This is higher than the 14.4% of Year 11 pupils in the whole of Wales sitting a Modern Foreign Language exam in 2021 (Gorrara & Jenkins, 2022).

Table 3 shows that the percentage of pupils who chose MFLs ranged from 2% to 37% in these 10 schools.

The highest percentages were found in School E (37%) (Category 1, English, < 1000), and School G (29%) (1, English, < 2000). (The relevant features of School E are discussed below in the section *Selecting options in Year 8).* School G differed from the other schools in that it was possible for pupils to choose the subjects they wanted there, without being confined to the option box system, due to the size of the School (< 2000 pupils). The percentages of pupils who chose MFLs in English-medium schools were found to be higher than those in Welsh-medium schools (16%, 37%, 2%, 29%, 8%, 22% – an average of 19% in the English-medium schools – and 16% and 6% – an average of 11% – in the Welsh-medium schools), a pattern already observed in the British Council's *Language Trends* reports (Tinsley, 2018).

Table 3: The percentage of pupils completing the questionnaire who had chosen MFLs at GCSE

School (Language Category, Medium, Size)	Percentage of pupils	Number of pupils completing the questionnaire in each school
A (3, Welsh, < 500)	16%	37
B (2, dual language, < 500)	16%	43
C (2, dual language, < 1000)	11%	61
D (1, English, < 2000)	16%	133
E (1, English, < 1000)	37%	94
F (1, English, < 1000)	2%	86
G (1, English, < 2000)	29%	160
H (1, English, 500 +)	8%	66
I (1, English, < 1500)	22%	72★
J (3P, Welsh, < 1000)	6%	108

★Only half of the year group filled out the questionnaire at this school due to practical timetable considerations.

Limitations of the option boxes

We now look at the number of pupils who ticked the boxes *It was in the same option box as another subject I wanted to take* (reason D) and *There were not enough option boxes for me to be able to choose a Modern Language* (reason G). 280 pupils (33% of them) ticked one or both of these boxes, with 73 of the 280 ticking both. Table 4 shows the percentages of pupils in each school who chose reason D and/or reason G.

Table 4 shows that around a quarter of pupils in 8 of the 10 schools (A, B, C, D, F, G, H, I) cited the limitations of the option boxes as a factor preventing them from choosing MFLs as a GCSE subject and that almost 80% of pupils in School A (3, Welsh, < 500) had noted this. It can be suggested that the size of School A was a factor which meant that there were more restrictions in terms of the option boxes there.

Table 4: Percentages of pupils choosing reason D and/or reason G

School (Language Category, Medium, Size)	Percentage of pupils choosing reason D	Percentage of pupils choosing reason G
	It was in the same option box as another subject I wanted to take	*There were not enough option boxes for me to be able to choose a Modern Language*
A (3, Welsh, < 500)	78	30
B (2, dual language, < 500)	28	16
C (2, dual language, < 1000)	25	26
D (1, English, < 2000)	10	27
E (1, English, < 1000)	5	12
F (1, English, < 1000)	50	11
G (1, English, < 2000)	7	26
H (1, English, 500 +)	24	17
I (1, English, < 1500)	32	18
J (3P, Welsh, < 1000)	15	15

It is interesting to take a closer look at School F (1, English, < 1000) where only 2% of the pupils had chosen MFLs. It can be seen that 42 out of the 84 pupils (50% of them) who completed the questionnaire ticked the box *It was in the same option box as another subject I wanted to take*. On the other hand, looking at School E (1, English, < 1000), where the highest percentage of pupils had chosen MFLs (37% of them), only 5 of the 94 pupils chose the box *It was in the same option box as another subject I wanted to take,* with a further 9 pupils indicating *There were not enough option boxes for me to be able to choose a Modern Language.* In other words, 15% of this School's pupils noted option boxes as a barrier compared with 50% of pupils at School F.

According to this research, therefore, it could be suggested that if the option boxes did not limit pupils' choice, an additional 33% of these

pupils would have chosen a Foreign Language compared with the 18% who did.

Reference was made in Jones (2021) to comments by Estyn (2016:6), to the British Council report (2019:20) and to the *Global Futures* strategy (Welsh Government, 2015) which had stated that 'increased competition for subject time in school timetables… have …contributed to the decline in take up of modern foreign languages at examination levels' (2015:4). The data from this research offers support for the view that the option boxes are an important factor in pupils choosing, or not choosing, MFLs as a GCSE subject.

Lack of opportunity to study one of the Foreign Languages

There were revealing comments from pupils of some schools stating that some languages could not be chosen because the class was unable to run due to a lack of numbers. Blake & Gorrara (2019), when evaluating the student mentoring project, also referred to this problem of a class not being able to run despite pupils choosing MFLs as a result of the mentoring project: "even when mentees had selected a modern foreign language at GCSE helping to generate a group, it was not permitted to run" (Blake & Gorrara, 2019:34). Clayton (2022) refers to this as a factor to do with availability, and says this is a 'key barrier' to additional language choice in Australian schools.

This appears to be a factor in School C (2, dual language, < 1000), School E (1, English, < 1000), School F (1, English, < 1000) and School J (3P, Welsh, < 1000).

These are some of the comments from pupils in these schools:

Comment from School C: Not enough people choosing it

School E: wasn't enough people for the course to run, no but I would've done it if I had some GCSE spares, even thoug (sic) don't like it

School F: There weren't enough classes for it to happen, I took Spanish but there was not enough in the group

School J: Not enough people doing it, the school doesn't do it any more, chose Spanish but the course didn't run, there was no Spanish option, Spanish wasn't available x 2.

Only a pupil in School B (2, dual language, < 500) stated specifically that only 3 subjects could be taken:

> Comment from School B: Because I could only choose 3 subjects and there wasn't enough, I wanted to pick other things

and that this was a barrier, although see the comment by the School E pupil above saying that they would have picked a MFL 'if I had some GCSE spares.'

Selecting options in Year 8

Two of the schools, School B, (2, dual language, < 500) and School E, (1, English, < 1000), made their GCSE choices in Year 8. School E was the school with the highest number of pupils who chose the subject, while 16% chose the subject in School B. (Table 5 below shows that School B pupils had the highest percentage reporting that the subject was difficult). The British Council's report (Tinsley, 2019) on language trends in England said that making choices in Year 8 meant that some pupils only studied foreign languages for two years. Speck (2021) referred to the Ofsted review, saying that making GCSE choices in Year 8 is one of the 9 barriers facing language teaching in England. The current research data, however, offers a more complex picture with the highest percentage choosing MFLs at GCSE coming from School E.

The perception that the subject is difficult

The research data shows that the fact that the subject is difficult is less of a barrier than the limitations of the option boxes. Remember that 280 of the 860 pupils noted that the limitations of the option boxes prevented them from choosing MFLs, while 218 of the pupils ticked the box *It's a difficult subject*. However, the answers varied from school to school, as Table 5 shows:

Table 5 shows that over 30% of pupils in 4 schools ticked the box that the subject was difficult, with two of the schools making their GCSE choices in Year 8, (namely School B and E), with the highest percentage of pupils finding the subject difficult.

It has already been noted that pupils in the English-medium schools in this study were learning at least two additional languages (Welsh and the foreign language) at the same time (namely pupils in schools D, E, F, G,

Table 5: Percentage of pupils who noted the subject as difficult

School	Percentage who noted the subject as difficult
A (3, Welsh, < 500)	14
B (2, dual language, < 500)	40
C (2, dual language, < 1000)	33
D (1, English, < 2000)	5
E (1, English, < 1000)	43
F (1, English, < 1000)	23
G (1, English, < 2000)	29
H (1, English, 500 +)	36
I (1, English, < 1500)	29
J (3P, Welsh, < 1000)	16

H and I), although the pupils had been learning Welsh for a longer period of time than the foreign language.

The current study's data shows that very few pupils, 12 pupils in 6 schools, noted any comments about Welsh when offering '*Any other reason*' for not studying a foreign language as an answer to Question 3: *Why did you NOT choose a Modern Foreign Language?*

There was no reference from pupils from 4 schools to the fact that they are already learning Welsh and that this could be a barrier to them learning an additional language. There was no reference to the Welsh language by pupils of School J (the designated Welsh-medium school). This could be explained by the fact that they aren't learning two additional languages at the same time, as was the case with the pupils from English-medium schools. The comments of the 12 pupils who referred to Welsh in the '*Any other reason*' section of Question 3 are quoted here:

School A: 'I'm learning Welsh as well'

School C: 'Would choose French over Welsh,' 'already struggling with Welsh'

School D: 'I already have to learn Welsh,' 'I'm already doing Welsh,' 'I didn't want to take a language as we have to take Welsh'

School E: 'The language I like most (Welsh) is compulsory already'

School G: 'already doing Welsh'

School I: 'I can already speak Chinese and Welsh,' 'It would be too much learning Welsh at the same time,' 'Because Welsh was already third language for me.'

Only some of the comments above (e.g. Schools C and I) referred to the fact that learning Welsh makes studying a foreign language more difficult. Remember that 218 pupils noted the foreign language as difficult, but only 12 pupils referred to Welsh, and not all of the above comments suggested that studying the two additional languages at the same time was difficult for them. This goes against Fukui & Yashmina's (2021) finding that studying two additional languages simultaneously is difficult and that one additional language is a barrier to learning another additional language. It can be argued, as Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie (2017) did, that studying an indigenous language is very different from studying a foreign language in that the feeling of belonging that comes with learning the country's language is a factor that facilitates learning that language:

> "… unlike English, LOTEs [languages other than English] are usually associated with a specific community that 'owns' the L2, and the generation of positive atti-tudes towards this community may be facilitative to fostering the motivation to learn their language." (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017:465).

It can be noted that the results of this study clearly show that pupils do not feel that learning Welsh prevents them from studying a foreign language. Only pupils in one school (School D, 1, English, < 2000) referred to the fact that Welsh was compulsory and that this was a barrier (This differs from Rhys & Smith's (2022:16) study, on secondary pupils' experiences and perceptions towards Welsh as a second language, who noted that "The compulsory nature of WaSL [Welsh as a Second Language] was a recurring theme)."

Lack of motivation to learn languages other than English

While 18% of pupils in this study chose to study a Foreign Language, 59% of the 860 respondents ticked 'YES' to the question *"Do you think a*

Modern Foreign Language will be useful to you in the future?" It is clear, therefore, that the majority of pupils see value in studying a foreign language. The percentage is slightly higher than the finding of the Gorrara & Jenkins (2022) study in which just under half of their 5,800 pupils were identified as 'open' to studying a foreign language. The percentage in this study is arguably surprisingly high, given that it is both 'especially challenging' (Lanvers & Graham, 2022) and a 'challenging task' (Clayton, 2022) to get pupils who already speak English to learn additional languages. (Compare with the metaphor 'in the shadow of English', by Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017).

Interestingly, 17 pupils added their own answer of 'Maybe' (10 pupils), 'Yes/No' (5 pupils), 'depends' (1 pupil), and 'sometimes' (1 pupil) to this question. It seems, possibly, that pupils recognise the dynamic, changing nature of motivation to learn a language (Fukui & Yashmina, 2021). This can be something for teachers and career leaders to discuss as pupils consider which subjects to choose for their GCSEs.

Conclusions

This article has discussed the importance of the option boxes and timetable constraints and concluded that they are key factors in preventing pupils choosing MFLs as a GCSE subject. It was also argued that pupils found languages difficult but the fact that many participants were learning two additional languages at the same time was not a major factor that prevented them from studying a foreign language to GCSE examination level. The fact that pupils saw the value of a foreign language to their future was welcome in light of the perceived negative attitudes towards other languages as a result of Brexit, and the 'English is enough' mentality (Clayton, 2022).

It is beneficial here to revisit an update of the *Global Futures* strategic plan (Welsh Government, 2021a) which has outlined three strategic goals to improve and promote MFIs in Wales, namely:

1. Increase the number of learners studying languages at all levels and across all sectors.
2. Provide clear guidance, principles and raise awareness in all sectors to support multilingualism in schools in Wales.
3. Support excellent teaching and learning of international languages for all learners.

The Government's continued support for MFLs in the form of *Global Futures* (2021) activities is undeniable, but this research clearly shows that school-level factors prevent pupils from being able to continue studying foreign languages at GCSE level, despite their desire to do so. It is also clear that, according to this research, the majority of pupils in Wales see value in studying foreign languages, or international languages as they are referred to in the new curriculum, and this is a crucial factor when considering the future of MFLs. The fact that the *Global Futures* (2021) strategy states that it is important that schools "recognise that being able to speak one or more international language… assists learners in opening doors to exciting work possibilities as well as enriched personal lives" and encourages schools to give MFLs "an important place on school agendas" are very positive factors in favour of international languages.

Recommendations

i) Further research is needed on a wider scale to detail the barriers and reasons for choosing MFLs as a GCSE subject. The rest of the existing research data, not referenced in this article, can shed more light on pupils' reasons for choosing MFLs and this, in turn, may provide suggestions about how to promote it more effectively.

ii) The impact of the language of the home and the medium of education on the choice to study or not to study MFLs can be explored further, bearing in mind that more and more pupils are moving along the language continuum and receiving Welsh-medium education (e.g. Ceredigion's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan, 2022).

iii) The impact of choosing option subjects in Year 8 needs to be looked at in greater detail. The data from this study is unable to conclusively infer whether this is helpful in increasing numbers or not.

iv) The impact of grouping, or setting, pupils in MFLs needs to be investigated further. Grouping classes for Welsh and English lessons is very common in Welsh schools. Now that international languages, English and Welsh are part of the same Area of Learning and Experience, *Languages, Literacy and Communication*, it could be

argued that the same principles should underpin the teaching of all three languages. (Compare with a British Council report (2019:21) outlining one advantage of setting at Key Stage 3:– "'Setting' in KS3 has enabled us to extend MAT [More Able and Talented] pupils.") It could be argued that grouping would ensure that the work is better tailored to the needs of each pupil.

v)   Ofsted (2021) argued that more deliberate planning at the level of language sounds, vocabulary and grammar was necessary for pupils to witness success in learning a foreign language. This could make teaching MFLs appear less difficult for them.

vi)   Changes are needed at school-level so that the barriers identified in this article do not persist. To some extent, the Government refers to this in Strategic Action 5, under Strategic Aim 2 of *Global Futures* (Welsh Government, 2021a) where it is stated that the lack of prioritising languages in school-level planning should be addressed.

vii)   It is argued that there is a need to develop a multilingual ethos in schools, and to promote a culture of interest in learning about different languages, from the age of 3–16.

viii)   It is recommended that plurilingual pedagogy should continue to be developed to highlight the links between languages (Gorter & Cenoz, 2011), which develops transferable skills and makes MFLs accessible to a wider range of learners (compare with the Little & Kirwan report, 2022).

ix)   Further investigate the effects of using multilingual and plurilingual approaches on learners' enthusiasm and curiosity in terms of languages.

In conclusion, it should be remembered that there is great potential to promote foreign languages here in Wales through

- the new curriculum (Gorrara et al., 2020 and Hopwood, 2017),
- proposed changes to qualifications (Qualifications Wales, 2022)
- and the fact that pupils see value to languages despite the 'global dominance' of English (Clayton, 2022).

It is worth noting that Hopwood, (2017:80) argued that Donaldson suggests a revolution with the introduction of the Area of Learning and

Experience, Languages (in the plural), Literacy and Communication. She says that this means bringing different languages together within our schools (p.80). It could be argued, however, that MFL teachers have been forging links with Welsh and English Departments for years, (compare with ACCAC, 2003, Estyn 2009, Welsh Government, 2012). There are echoes between some strategies recommended in the *Supporting Triple Literacy* document, (2012) and some statements in the Curriculum for Wales (2022). In *Supporting Triple Literacy*, there is mention of 'identifying cognates and making comparisons across languages' (p.14), offering 'reading activities that provide opportunities to make links' (p.14) and 'creating explicit opportunities to compare languages and use learners' knowledge of one language to support skills in another' (p.16). In the Curriculum for Wales (2022), the statements of what matters state that 'the aim is to enable learners to recognise similarities between languages and to embrace the differences between them.' Progression Step 3 of the statement Languages connect us states, 'I can recognise and discuss connections, commonalities and differences between the languages I speak and those that I am learning.' Despite these echoes, the firm emphasis on pluralistic approaches to language teaching in the 2022 Curriculum can provide tangible benefits by highlighting the links between all learners' languages (Gorter & Cenoz, 2011) and leading to improved progress in language learning, (Gorter & Cenoz, 2017).

It is worth remembering that Wales has an important role to play in research into motivation to learn a third language as well as research into the concurrent learning of two additional languages, contributing to an area that has become increasingly relevant in recent years. Research in Wales also has the potential to shed further light on questions relating to the teaching of the country's indigenous language as well as the learning of a foreign language (see Tarsoly & Valijarvi, 2020), from learners who are already English speakers. It is hoped that the new curriculum will provide opportunities for pupils to develop 'a lifelong interest in the languages of Wales and the languages of the world' (Welsh Government, 2022b). Hopwood's blog (2019) refers to Goethe's notion of roots and wings and argues that the Curriculum for Wales (2022) can give pupils the opportunity to take pride in their roots and to develop their wings to fly with confidence in Europe and the world.

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