



University of  
Nottingham

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA



Volume 13: 2020-21

ISSN: 2041-6776

# **Lads and languages: a mixed-methods study into boys' lack of motivation to learn GCSE Modern Foreign Languages**

English Dissertation: Full Year  
(ENGL3002 UNUK)

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, a persistent gender disparity has been observed in levels of entry and achievement in GCSE Modern Foreign Languages. Despite a steadily growing literature of studies and reports, neither an explanation nor an effective strategy for addressing this issue has been developed. Acknowledging the importance of motivation in language learning achievement, this study aimed to investigate reasons for boys' lack of motivation to learn languages in secondary school. A mixed methods approach was adopted, aiming to gather an overarching perspective of gender differences in L2 motivation, together with an in-depth perspective of individual pupils' views. Following a sequential explanatory design, the methods of data collection were a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, with a sample of Year 11 pupils from four secondary schools. The results revealed gender differences in measures of perceived usefulness and enjoyment, which, indicated within the qualitative data, were associated with expected norms of male behaviour, a negative social image surrounding MFL subjects, and the notion of risk-taking inherent to the language learning process. Further, the data suggest the real-world applicability of lesson content, together with pupils' awareness of their progress in language learning, are integral to improving the motivation of boys and girls in this subject area.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent reports have highlighted the need to address the significant gender imbalance in uptake and attainment in GCSE Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), the most marked disparity of this kind across the pillar of EBacc subjects (Collen, 2020; Tinsley, 2013; Mills and Tinsley, 2020). Research has consistently shown boys score lower than their female peers in language learning (L2) motivation, with implications for their engagement and achievement in language subjects, and for their later personal and professional development. This study aimed to investigate reasons for this by exploring gender differences in L2 motivation in a sample of Year 11 pupils with the following research questions;

- 1) Which gender differences exist in pupils' motivation in MFL subjects?
- 2) What are pupils' attitudes towards MFL as a gendered subject area?
- 3) Do "laddish" attitudes and behaviours negatively affect boys' motivation in MFL subjects?  
If so, in what ways, and for what reasons?

In doing so, this study aims to contribute to existing research by exploring the impact of "laddish" attitudes and behaviours on boys' and girls' L2 motivation.

Section 2 will outline existing theories and findings relating to gender and L2 motivation, concentrating on three areas which have informed the aims and approach of the present study. These are the social environment, gender differences in language-related self-concepts, and the issues of image and laddishness in school. Following this, Section 3 will explain the mixed methods approach, outlining the sequential explanatory design, the methods of data collection and analysis, and measures taken to mitigate the impact of the challenging circumstances in which the research was conducted. Finally, Section 4 will present and discuss the findings of the study, of which the most notable concerned the perceived usefulness of MFL subjects, ideas of incompatibility between being a boy and being a motivated language learner, and the impact of laddish behaviours.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Overview

The underrepresentation and underperformance of boys in GCSE MFL subjects is a well-documented phenomenon. Recent findings that girls are over twice as likely to enter and achieve at least a pass in a language (Mills and Tinsley, 2020) are reminiscent of a 1977 report, which noted the ratio of girls to boys in many post-compulsory MFL classrooms was two to one (HMI). Powell and Batters' (1985) early study of pupils' attitudes towards MFL showed boys were less positive towards languages and L2 speakers, saw languages as less important, and were less likely to have positive L2-related self-images, trends which have since remained largely unchanged (e.g., Coleman, Galaczi and Astruc, 2007; Fisher, 2001; Williams, Burden and Lanvers, 2002). Previous research has identified links between these attitudes and a lack of L2 motivation, which, Dörnyei (1998) argues, acts as 'primary impetus' and 'driving force' (p.117), holding greater importance than aptitude and effective teaching as a determinant of L2 achievement. Research has found gender differences in this aspect in a variety of learning contexts (e.g., Carr and Pauwels, 2006; Dörnyei and Csizér, 2016; Henry, 2009; Yashima, Nishida and Mizumoto, 2017). The literature covers numerous reasons, with three significant areas being the influence of the social environment, the ways boys and girls construct language-related self-concepts, and the issues of image and "laddishness" in school. Whilst the breadth of these factors illustrates the complexity of this issue, recent theoretical shifts have opened new perspectives, through which further understanding has been developed.

## 2.2. Social Environment

In their study of boys' attitudes towards language learning in school, Carr and Pauwels (2006) concluded boys hold 'foundational beliefs about language study: it is not something that boys do; not something that boys are good at; it is very much a "girl thing"' (p.45). Whilst some researchers outline how cognitive differences between boys and girls may impact their success in MFL (e.g. Callaghan, 1998; Chambers, 2005), considerably more attention has been drawn to the influence of the social environment on attitudes towards these subjects. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) define attitude as 'a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object' (p.6), establishing how beliefs that languages are "a girl thing" are transmitted by external sources. According to some arguments, this begins in early childhood, with parents, toys, and media encouraging linguistic skills in girls, whilst boys are socialised into physical activity (Barton, 1997). In connection with this, Carr and Pauwels (2006) found teachers saw girls as 'more competent and comfortable communicators' (p.136), already well-practised in the relational and expressive interactions required in the typical MFL lesson. Sunderland's (1998) finding that MFL teachers asked more challenging questions to girls indicates how these ideas may also be reproduced in the classroom, cementing beliefs that MFL are a subject in which girls are expected to excel, whilst it is normal for boys to fall behind - or give up altogether.

Moreover, the impact of stereotyping and gender ideology has been widely discussed. In a Canadian study, Kissau (2006) discovered societal perceptions of appropriate male and female behaviour negatively affected boys' self-efficacy and interest in French, whilst quantitative research in numerous contexts has shown languages are stereotyped as a feminine area, even when masculine images of mathematics and the sciences were less prevalent (e.g., Francis, 2000; Van der Vleuten et al, 2016; Whitehead, 1999). French fares particularly badly, associated with feminine activities such as travel and romance (Williams, Burden and Lanvers, 2002), whilst boy-appropriate languages are identified by their practical value, German associated with industry

(Barton, 1997) and Japanese with technology (Carr and Pauwels, 2006). As indicated here, negative attitudes towards the usefulness of languages in the UK (Dobson, 2018) seem to be particularly poor amongst male pupils (Fisher, 2001; Stables and Wikeley, 1999). In relation to this, researchers refer to the role of the social environment in shaping ideas of gender-appropriate occupations (Lopez, 2006; Van der Vleuten et al, 2016), and to boys' tendency towards being motivated by the vocational relevance of school subjects (Barton, 2020), a factor which, in the case of MFL, is less present in the UK than in other contexts, and is not always evident from lesson content (Davies, 2004). These findings indicate the impact of the social environment in shaping boys' and girls' ideas of the value of language skills, of their own ability in these subjects, and, fundamentally, of whether language learning is something they, as a boy or girl, are expected to "do".

### **2.3. Gender and L2 Selves**

Whilst early discussions of gender differences in language learning foregrounded influences within the social environment, new insight has recently been offered as a result of an overarching paradigm shift, which has placed the self at the centre of L2 motivation. Whilst the self is defined as 'the summary of the individual's self-knowledge related to how the person views him/herself at present' (Dörnyei, 2005, p.11), Dörnyei's seminal theory of L2 motivation foregrounds possible selves, an individual's ideas of what they could, and would like, to become in the future. Adapting theories from mainstream psychology (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987), Dörnyei (2005) distinguishes between the *Ideal L2 Self*, representing the desired L2-related self-state, and the *Ought-to L2 Self*, the L2 self-state the learner feels they should achieve to meet expectations and avoid negative outcomes. In this new perspective, L2 motivation is seen to derive from regular and vivid visualisation of these possible selves, supported by accompanying procedural strategies with which to achieve them.



As a social and cognitive construct at the core of self-concepts in all domains (Henry and Cliffordson, 2013), gender takes on new significance within this approach. On the basis of research showing female self-construals are characterised by more interpersonal qualities than those of men (e.g., Cross and Madson, 1997, Knox et al, 2000), Henry (2010) and Henry and Cliffordson (2013) argue female learners tend to develop more powerful *Ideal L2 Selves*, as visualised communication with L2 speakers is likely to be more vivid and elaborate. Whilst this has not yet been investigated in the UK, female learners of English in China have been found to be more amenable to L2 visualisation, and more likely to expand positively on these, than their male peers (Chenjing, Dörnyei, and Csizér, 2016; You, Dörnyei, and Csizér, 2016). In another interesting application, Yashima, Nishida and Mizumoto (2017) found female university students in Japan were more likely to adopt what they called a Communication-Orientation in learning English, and thus had stronger visualisations of themselves communicating in the L2, supporting the idea that gender differences in constructions of the self play an important role in shaping L2 motivation. This perspective does not replace earlier discussions, but expands them, acknowledging learner agency in constructing gender identity within their own contexts.

#### **2.4. Laddishness and language learning**

A further factor which has been discussed in investigations of gender differences in L2 motivation is boys' and girls' attitudes towards learning and academic achievement. Consideration of this is particularly important in contexts such as the UK, where, Ushioda (1998) points out, foreign languages are generally learned in school, and L2 motivation is therefore closely tied to academic motivation, or lack thereof. In particular, research has pointed to the roles of social image and the concept of "laddishness". McCall (2011) explains a challenge for many MFL teachers is that boys think it is uncool to work hard, whilst Barton (1997) notes 'appearing "one of the lads" is...foremost in the male adolescent mind and is often achieved by appearing disinterested and boasting of missed homework' (p.12). Carr and Pauwels (2006) further found "mucking up" had 'a lot to do

with being part of the pack...Very disparaging comments were made about boys who don't conform, who... - like girls - actually work' (p.62). Despite these observations, few L2 motivation studies have sought to investigate reasons for these behaviours, nor studied their impact on pupils' motivation to learn MFL.

Observed tendencies in boys towards disruptive behaviour, procrastination, and low levels of effort in secondary school have been the subject of considerable discussion in educational psychology. Whilst early theories suggested these behaviours represent avoidance of the femininity associated with school (Francis, 1999; Younger and Warrington, 1996), Jackson (2003) takes an alternative stance, drawing on the work of Covington (1992) to argue laddishness is a way for boys to avoid the "uncool" image of working hard. Support for this is provided by studies which show boys are significantly more likely to report social costs for trying hard in school than girls (Heyder and Workman, 2020), and that an image of effortless achievement is an important element of maintaining popularity (Francis, Skelton and Read, 2010; Jackson and Nyström, 2015) and of conforming to ideas of masculinity (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). Further, Jackson (2010) argues laddish behaviours act as a means of protecting self-worth from implications of a lack of academic ability in the competitive school environment. Wilson (2008) agrees, summarising 'in their minds it often feels better to be seen to be completely uninterested in winning, rather than taking part and losing' (p.44).

Investigation of how issues of image and self-worth impact boys' and girls' motivation in MFL could offer useful insight into the gender disparity in this area. Several quantitative studies have shown MFL are perceived to be particularly difficult subjects (e.g., Barton, 1997; Lanvers, 2017; Watts and Pickering, 2005), whilst qualitative research has shown the high level of concentration, memorisation, and writing required are perceived as feminine skills, which boys find difficult and boring (Carr and Pauwels, p.76). Further, Lou and Noels (2017) point out priority in the MFL classroom is often given to assessment and performance, rather than to steady

mastery and growth, making the already daunting task of language learning even more overwhelming, potentially making learners' *Ideal L2 Self* visualisations less elaborate and plausible, limiting their motivational power. In sum, in-depth investigation of the issues of image and laddish behaviours in MFL could open up new ways of understanding gender differences in motivation in these subjects.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Methodological Approach and Design

This research aimed to uncover reasons for boys' lack of motivation to learn GCSE MFL subjects.

Informed by the literature, three research questions were developed;

- 1) Which gender differences exist in pupils' motivation in MFL subjects?
- 2) What are pupils' attitudes towards MFL as a gendered subject area?
- 3) Do "laddish" attitudes and behaviours negatively affect boys' motivation in MFL subjects?  
If so, in what ways, and for what reasons?

To address these questions, a mixed methods approach was adopted. Mixed methods is defined by Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007) as 'the type of research in which a researcher...combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research...for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration' (p.123). This brings several advantages, enabling quantitative and qualitative methods to complement each other's strengths and counteract each other's weaknesses, producing multi-level understanding of research phenomena (Johnson and Christensen, 2004). An adapted sequential explanatory design was used, with an embedded qualitative element in the quantitative component. The sequential explanatory design consists of two stages. In the first, quantitative data is collected and analysed to obtain an overview of the research issue. In the second, the collection and analysis of qualitative data is used to explain the generalised quantitative findings by exploring participants' views in more depth (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

### 3.2. Quantitative Stage

#### 3.2.1 Participants

The initial sample consisted of 35 Year 11 pupils (age 16) from 4 secondary schools, 3 coeducational and 1 all-boys' school. The inclusion of an all-boys' school was informed by recent findings that MFL tend to be a higher priority in these schools than in mixed-gender institutions (Collen, 2020), providing an interesting point for comparison. During data collection, all schools in the UK were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with learning activities conducted online. Contact with participants was therefore mediated by MFL teachers, resulting in a self-selected sample of 25 (71%) girls and 10 (29%) boys.

The small and self-selected nature of the sample presented issues for the validity and generalisability of the research findings. The highly positive attitudes expressed suggested this sample was largely made up of what Brown (2001) describes as "eager-beaver" (p.85) respondents, whose unusually high level of L2 motivation meant they were more willing to participate in the research. The discrepancy between male and female respondents suggested this was particularly the case with the boys, confirmed by their qualitative responses. To obtain a balanced sample for analysis, the female sub-sample was therefore reduced by identifying the 10 girls who scored highest in the measure of L2 Selves.

In this new sample of 20 pupils, 8 (5 male, 3 female) studied German, 5 (2 male, 3 female) studied French, 1 (male) studied Spanish, and the remaining 6 (2 male, 4 female) studied a combination of two of German, French, Spanish, and Russian. 2 boys were pupils at the all-boys school, whilst the remaining 18 participants attended coeducational. MFL subjects were compulsory for 7 (4 female, 3 male) pupils, and optional for the remaining 13 (6 female, 7 male). 4 (2 female, 2 male) spoke a language other than English as their first language, including Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, and Swiss-German.

### 3.2.2. Instrument

The quantitative instrument was an online questionnaire, which contained 36 items arranged into 9 multi-item scales (Appendix 1). On the basis of the research questions, four targeted general aspects of L2 motivation (*L2 Selves, Enjoyment, Usefulness, Difficulty*), two targeted attitudes towards MFL as a gendered subject (*Femininity, Gender Ability*) and the remaining three targeted laddish behaviours (*Procrastination, Behaviour, Effort*). Participants indicated agreement on a scale of 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. During analysis, the responses of boys and girls were compared using an independent samples t-test.

As previously mentioned, the quantitative instrument also contained an embedded qualitative element, in which pupils were asked; "Do you think you are good at language subjects in school? Why, or why not?". The rationale was twofold. Firstly, this question performed an explanatory function. As questionnaires involve a relatively brief and superficial engagement with the research issue (Dörnyei, 2007), this question was included with the aim of enabling pupils to reflect on their views of MFL in greater depth, and perhaps to clarify their responses to items they felt were significant. Secondly, by ensuring pupils felt their voices were heard, this question aimed to make them feel they were participants in the research, rather than anonymised subjects (Greig, 2013). This helped establish rapport, giving participants confidence to volunteer for the next stage. In the final sample, 18 pupils (10 girls, 8 boys) provided a response.

### 3.2.3. Procedure

Piloting was conducted in two stages. Firstly, the instrument was completed by the research supervisor and 5 university students of MFL (3 female, 2 male), who provided feedback. Following this, it was administered to 2 non-participating secondary school pupils of a similar age to the intended participants (1 male, 1 female), who also provided feedback. Following slight modifications to item wording, the link to the final version was distributed via MFL teachers to all Year 11 pupils studying GCSE MFL in participating schools.

Whilst, under normal circumstances, the environment in which the questionnaire was completed could be controlled by the researcher, this was not possible via technological communication. To address this, MFL teachers were asked to have pupils complete the questionnaire during online lessons to facilitate a supportive and focussed environment. Further, an important part of research is managing perceptions of the purpose and value of participating through friendly, professional communication (Cottrell, 2014). As in-person communication was not possible, an information sheet (Appendix 6) was produced to be distributed alongside the link, introducing the researcher and informing participants about the purpose and procedure of the study.

### **3.3. Qualitative Stage**

#### **3.3.1. Participants**

The qualitative component was a series of individual semi-structured interviews. 4 pupils volunteered to participate, 2 girls and 2 boys. For anonymity purposes, each pupil has been given a pseudonym. Ben, Olivia, and Sophie were all pupils at coeducational schools, whilst Liam attended the all-boys' school. Ben studied German, which was also his first language. Olivia studied German and Russian, and spoke Ukrainian as her first language. Sophie, who studied French, and Liam, who studied German, were both native speakers of English.

#### **3.3.2. Procedure**

The interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately 30 minutes. To guide the conversation, a semi-structured interview guide was used (Appendix 2), with questions informed by key findings of the quantitative stage. Interviews were arranged to be convenient for participants and tips were given via email of how they could prepare. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed and interpreted using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), aiming to add depth to the quantitative results.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Quantitative Findings

Each scale was tested for internal consistency measured by Cronbach's alpha, which showed all scales were of sufficient reliability (Appendix 9). The results of the independent samples t-test are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Independent Samples T-Test Comparing Boys' (N=10) and Girls' (N=10) L2 Motivation**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Effect size<sup>a</sup></i>
<b>L2 Self</b>			18	-1.7	.107	.14
Boys	4.28	.99				
Girls	4.83	.26				
<b>Enjoyment</b>			18	-1.97	.065	.18
Boys	4.08	.70				
Girls	4.6	.47				
<b>Usefulness</b>			18	-2.35	.031	.23
Boys	4.35	.54				
Girls	4.78	.18				
<b>Difficulty</b>			18	-.47	.644	.01
Boys	2.85	1.06				
Girls	3.05	.82				
<b>Femininity</b>			18	.61	.547	.02
Boys	1.6	.50				
Girls	1.45	.58				
<b>Gender Ability</b>			18	.83	.416	.04
Boys	2.03	.69				
Girls	1.76	.74				
<b>Effort</b>			18	-1.09	.288	.06
Boys	4.13	.88				
Girls	4.48	.51				
<b>Behaviour</b>			18	.13	.105	.00
Boys	4.2	.94				
Girls	4.75	.39				
<b>Procrastination</b>			18	.21	.110	.00
Boys	3.23	.66				
Girls	3.63	.36				

<sup>a</sup> Eta squared.

Due to the small size and self-selected nature of the sample, caution must be taken when interpreting these results. As evidenced by the high scores in L2 Selves, this sample represented a group of highly motivated pupils, and is therefore unrepresentative of the broader population. Despite this, some tentative conclusions can be drawn to inform future research.

Girls were found to rate MFL subjects significantly higher in terms of perceived usefulness, with a large magnitude of difference, a finding consistent with previous studies (e.g., Davies,

2004). Whilst no other results were of statistical significance, a trend ( $p < .10$ ) was revealed in the *Enjoyment* scale, reflective of existing findings that girls find MFL more enjoyable than boys (e.g., Dewaele et al, 2016; Fisher, 2001). Further, whilst both groups scored highly in this measure, a near trend was revealed in the *L2 Self* scale, and boys in this sample also found MFL to be more difficult, though this did not reach significance.

The scales measuring perceptions of MFL as a gendered subject found all pupils generally disagreed ( $M < 2.5$ ) with the notion that MFL are a feminine curriculum area and that girls have greater L2 ability. Near trends were found in the *Behaviour* and *Procrastination* scales, consistent with previous findings that these behaviours are more characteristic of male pupils (e.g., Warrington and Younger, 2000). Given the constraints imposed upon the research, and the consistency of these results with previous studies, it is likely that, given a larger sample size, the *Enjoyment* trend and the near trends in other scales would be of greater significance.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Findings

The following discussion will use qualitative data to explain and give further meaning to the quantitative findings. This data was gathered by asking pupils “Do you think you are good at language subjects at school? Why, or why not?” during the questionnaire (responses in Appendix 3), and through individual interviews (transcripts in Appendix 4). Close analysis of the qualitative data revealed three themes which hold relevance to explaining the research issue;

- 1) “Unique” and “unusual”: boys in the MFL classroom
- 2) “Only boring people”: (un)usefulness of language learning
- 3) “Last minute dot com!”: laddishness and image

Where quotes are given, statements made during interviews are shown in “quotation marks”, whilst pupils’ written responses are given in *italics*. Written responses have been reported



verbatim, including spelling and grammar errors, as participants were assured their responses would not be judged in this respect.

#### 4.2.1. “Unique” and “unusual”: boys in the MFL classroom

Whilst the quantitative findings indicated MFL were not perceived as a feminine subject, a sense of incompatibility between being a boy and being a language learner - particularly a highly motivated one - emerged from the qualitative data;

- *I don't think languages are “girly”, but I do think it is generally unusual for a boy to choose two languages like me.* (Male)
- “I'm the only one of my circle who wants to do German at A-Level...It's an interesting one because I'm really into it, but I know not many boys are. I guess I'm just unique in that sense.” (Liam)

Though the first statement expresses disagreement with the notion that MFL are a solely girl-appropriate area, this pupil nevertheless identifies himself as *unusual* for being a boy who has opted to study two languages. Similarly, Liam described himself as “unique” for intending to continue German in further education, and for being “really into” it, an expression indicating a strong sense of enjoyment and personal connection. These findings offer support for Carr and Pauwels' (2006) assertion that boys feel ‘alienated...in relation to the opportunity to “be” in a different language’ (p.87), suggesting even the most motivated male pupils face the barrier of stepping outside the expected norm of boy behaviour. Ben also pointed to this;

- “I'm expecting to be either the only boy or one of very few boys at A-Level...there are some boys I know of who...are quite good at German and they get good grades, but they don't really see it as something they want to pursue in the long-term.”

Ben's expectation of being the only boy to study German at A-Level further demonstrates it is considered unusual for a boy to want to be in the MFL classroom. The idea that boys tend not to see language learning as a “long-term” goal implies the majority tend towards a superficial and

brief engagement, with emphasis on getting a good grade rather than using the L2 outside the classroom. As Yashima, Nishida, and Mizumoto (2017) suggest, this could also impact their approach and learning behaviours, with implications for their enjoyment and achievement.

When asked for their views about the gender imbalance in MFL, pupils rejected the idea of an innate biological difference, and instead referred to the social environment. For example;

- “I think it's always been built into society...the social construct, that boys always do the construction and the active stuff when the girls do all the more linguistics stuff. I think it's more of a construct of what's expected, like, a girl, they must like to work talking to people...a lot of guys actually do enjoy English nowadays, and French is basically the same as English, you're doing stuff with words and language and writing essays, so if you have that passion for language then you should enjoy both subjects.” (Sophie)

The idea of a gender dichotomy between “linguistics” and “active stuff” implies traditional ideas of what male and female pupils are expected to find personally relevant, which may still shape ideas of male- and female-appropriate subjects. Later, Sophie suggested this leads to devaluation of MFL amongst male pupils;

- “...for boys, I think it's just more about the nurturing, you know, and being like ‘It's uncool for me to take French, it's uncool for me to take Spanish’.” (Sophie)

A further aspect of the social account concerned how boys and girls were expected to achieve in school more generally;

- “I think girls are encouraged to be more interested in the academic side of things and on it with their schoolwork, they're expected to do well across the board of subjects, whereas with boys, unless they're obviously that kind of person, the majority are only expected to get the top grades in the more active and practical subjects.” (Ben)

The idea that girls are expected and encouraged to achieve “across the board”, in contrast with boys' limited options of “active and practical” subjects, demonstrates very different expectations

of the curricular areas in which boys and girls are expected to succeed. In support of Kissau's (2006) conclusion, this statement suggests perceptions of "male-appropriate" behaviour limit boys' academic choices, with the only exceptions being "that kind" of boy; hard-working, generally intelligent, and passionate about learning. This is similar to Carr and Pauwels' (2006) finding that boys who opted to continue learning languages were seen as "different kinds of boys"...prepared to risk peer disapproval by defying the expected norms of boy behaviour' (p.155). Again, this highlights how, to be a motivated learner of MFL, boys must step outside of "what's expected", suggesting that, in this sense, languages are still regarded as a gendered subject area.

#### 4.2.2. "Only boring people": (un)usefulness of language learning

Following the quantitative finding of gender differences in the perceived usefulness of MFL, particular attention was given to this aspect during qualitative analysis. In general, pupils were very positive, with the theme of usefulness arising in 8 of the 18 written responses. Examples included;

- *I think that learning a language in school is extremely important. You gain so much knowledge and perspective of different countries. It also allows you to communicate with more people. (Female)*
- *Its a very important skill and will open many doors. (Male)*
- *I think in today's world it is important to be able to speak another language and especially in the UK where not many people speak more than one language, it is something unique to have on a job application. (Male)*

As these comments exemplify, many pupils in this sample perceived MFL as more than a school subject, suggesting language learning is a way of acquiring cultural *knowledge and perspective*, of establishing social networks by being able to *communicate with more people*, and as a way to *open doors* to careers. However, there was also acknowledgement of the low status of languages in the UK, and the lack of support for language learning provided in this context;

- *I personally don't believe gender plays a role in language learning, rather the education system in the country. It is sad that the UK doesn't encourage language learning from a young age.* (Male)
- "English is the world language, but because of that a lot of people are cocky and think a second language isn't valuable to them, even though it really is." (Ben)

There were also indications that lesson content was seen to have little real-world applicability;

- "...with the listening, sometimes you just listen to some scenarios and it's like, when am I going to use that?" (Sophie)
- "...when you finish the exams and then you want to go and do something like interpreting...it's difficult to talk straight away because you mainly were doing "practise on the paper" rather than speaking out loud." (Olivia)

In a statement made by Sophie, this perceived lack of value outside the classroom is suggested to be a key factor underlying negative attitudes towards MFL subjects;

- "...it's not a subject many people see as cool, they don't think the teachers are cool, they don't think anything what you learn is cool...they think it's just something that they'll never need in life that only boring people do."

From this, it is clear that whilst pupils in this sample saw themselves as learning important skills through MFL, this is not the case for the majority. The notion that "only boring people" choose to study language subjects indicates negative social meaning arising from the perceived lack of real-world value, which also exerts an impact on pupils' social image, emphasising how, to be a motivated language learner, pupils have to be prepared to face peer disapproval and be seen as "that kind of person"; hard-working, prepared to put in *a large amount of effort and work* and *to do extra study after school*. In view of previous findings that image is a greater concern for male than for female pupils, and that, as Younger and Warrington (1996) write, it is generally less acceptable

for a boy to 'be seen to be interested or stimulated by academic work' (p.303), it is likely that the "kind of person" expected to be in the MFL classroom is very different from the typical boy.

#### 4.2.3. "Last minute dot com!": laddishness and image

Supporting the quantitative findings, when asked about gender differences in school, pupils often referred to laddish behaviours. Procrastination was a recurring theme;

- "I think boys do everything at the last minute, and girls prepare for it constantly...girls, when they study constantly throughout the year, they don't have much to do for the exam when it happens. But boys just keep all the stuff until last minute and then try to learn it." (Olivia)
- "Last minute dot com!...I've seen a lot of my friends, you know, cramming it in last minute. Yeah, that's definitely lazy in some senses, but that's not everyone, but it is...it's a trend, it's a pattern." (Liam)

In connection with this, subsequent images of being disinterested in schoolwork and of being able to effortlessly succeed were suggested by both female interviewees to be an important aspect of boys' social image;

- "But they're proud of it!...They say to their friends, things like "Yeah, I only revised for fifteen minutes!". (Olivia)
- "I've got this one guy friend, and he's more proud when he blags it and does alright than if he'd done loads of revision and got a really good grade." (Sophie)

These arguments that boys are "proud" of being under-prepared, and of being able to "blag" a good grade despite this, are consistent with findings of existing studies (e.g., Jackson and Dempster, 2009; Workman and Heyder, 2020), and, as Barton (1997) notes, present particular issues for boys' achievement in language subjects, as, 'Given the essentially cumulative nature of language learning...such entrenched peer group pressures can only spell disaster if they result in inadequate commitment and self-discipline' (p.12). Further analysis also suggested boys do

not only bring laddish behaviours from elsewhere into the MFL classroom, but also display them as a response to the perceived difficulty of the language learning task;

- "...to learn a language you have to work quite hard...you can't just blag it, if you get what I mean...it's sort of a constant thing you have to be doing rather than cramming it in the night before. And if boys don't see languages as something that's useful for them, then they won't think it's worth it." (Sophie)

Here, it is suggested that part of the negative image surrounding MFL subjects stems from the nature of language learning as a slow and cumulative process, which offers few opportunities to be effortlessly successful, and thus to establish an image of 'real genius' (Heyder and Kessels, 2017, p.74). As in previous studies, pupils made clear language subjects were particularly difficult;

- *I think the thought of an entire language worth of words to learn can be daunting at times.* (Female)
- "I remember in Year 7 thinking to myself, like, how am I going to learn a whole language? Just thinking about how many words we have in English as well, it seemed a big task." (Liam)

Further comments indicated this "big task" presented a threat to self-worth and social image;

- *One of the bigger issue I have is just general confidence when speaking, a similar problem is that of 'imposter syndrome' where I feel like everyone else in my class is much better than me and I'm stupid.* (Male)
- "I think a lot of people get worked up about making mistakes and sounding stupid...Just getting embarrassed and looking like you don't know what you're doing. It's quite immediate, isn't it, when you're speaking, so if you make a mistake there's no rubbing it out and pretending it never happened." (Liam)
- "It's like mind over matter almost, because you work yourself up thinking you need to get it right otherwise you'll make yourself look like an idiot." (Sophie)

As the references to being *stupid*, “looking like you don’t know what you’re doing”, and appearing “like an idiot” indicate, MFL were seen by pupils as a particularly challenging subject area, in which risk-taking is an inherent aspect of the learning process. This is reflective of previous studies, in which the slow, cumulative nature of language learning have been found to have a detrimental impact on learner enjoyment (e.g., Carr and Pauwels, 2006; Busse and Walter, 2013). Whilst the pupils in this sample took a very productive approach to these challenges, valuing the learning process as well as the end result;

- “...in my opinion it’s alright to make mistakes and get stuff wrong because it’s not your first language and you’re never going to be completely perfect at it.” (Liam)
- “I work hard at it because I enjoy it and I know my aims and my goals, and I’m not the best, but that’s OK because I’m still learning it and still improving.” (Sophie)

- it is likely these factors play a role in de-motivating other pupils and driving preferences for other subjects, in which failure is not so obvious and immediate.

### **4.3. Summary and Implications**

To reiterate, it is important to take caution when interpreting these findings. This small and self-selected sample consisted of a group of highly motivated pupils, and thus cannot be seen to represent the broader population of Year 11s studying GCSE languages. A further limitation is the restriction of the target population to pupils in their final year of secondary education. Whilst this study could have benefitted from the perspectives of pupils in other year groups, particularly those in the process of selecting their GCSEs, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in severe disruption to learning and teaching in months prior to the study, leading to the restriction of participants to pupils with experience of MFL during years which were unaffected. Though this had considerable impact on the outcomes of the study, these findings offer some insight into the research issue.

In this study, a clear picture of the “kind of person” expected to be a motivated learner of MFL in secondary school emerged. Whilst languages were not explicitly deemed a feminine domain, it was evident from boys' comments that, as highly motivated language learners, they were considered “unusual” and “unique”, suggesting MFL are still seen to some extent as a girls' subject. Further, due to a perceived lack of real-world relevance, MFL subjects were suggested to be “uncool” and only for “boring people”, presenting a threat to the social image of the typical boy, who is expected to succeed only in “active and practical” curriculum areas. These ideas were likely underlying factors in findings of gender differences in the perceived instrumental and intrinsic value of learning a language in school, and may have played a role in laddish behaviours such as procrastination. Further, on the basis of opinions expressed by individual pupils, it can be suggested these laddish attitudes and behaviours are not only brought into the MFL classroom, but are also an active response to the social meanings surrounding language study and the threats to social image and self-worth language learning presents. This topic requires further investigation in order to come closer to explaining and addressing the problem of the MFL gender disparity.

Finally, despite the limitations, one advantage of speaking to a group of highly motivated pupils was the insight obtained into factors driving their motivation. It was clear these pupils derived enjoyment from lesson activities they felt supported their development of useful skills for the future, and all interviewees expressed the opinion that more such activities are needed. Further, whilst many comments indicated the role played by long-term goals and visions of using the language, having the *mindset of not understanding everything the first time you face it* and recognising the importance of steady improvement also seemed to underlie their positive attitudes. In this regard, one comment made by Liam points towards a strategy which could help improve the motivation of boys and girls in this subject area, helping them to see MFL as a long-term skill;



- “I find it really useful to go back to the table for German and tick off everything that I know I can do, and then look at what I can’t do yet and work on that to help me improve...it does give you, like, perspective on how far you’ve come with it. And then you know that even after the exam, that’s a skill I can use for life.”

This statement highlights the importance of having procedural strategies to accompany *Ideal L2 Self* visualisations and assure learners of their ability in achieving them. Further, as this statement suggests, making learners aware of their steady growth in the L2 may help to address the issue of languages being seen as an unimportant skill, showing the value of these subjects for learners’ futures.

## 5. Conclusion

This study drew on Dörnyei’s (2005) theory of L2 Selves and Jackson’s (2003) discussion of laddishness to investigate gender differences in secondary school pupils’ motivation in GCSE MFL, aiming to uncover reasons why boys continue to fall behind their female peers in uptake and attainment in school-based language learning. Combining quantitative and qualitative elements, the research found gender differences in key attitudinal aspects which contribute to L2 motivation, confirming there is still more to be done to reduce the gender disparity in this area. Whilst the rich variety of individual perspectives revealed the complexity of L2 motivation, the qualitative data suggest an important factor underlying these differences are expectations of how boys and girls learn, behave, and achieve in secondary education. As evidenced by pupils’ comments, the identity of an enthusiastic and committed language learner is perceived to be more acceptable for the typical girl than the typical boy, and in order to take on this identity and establish a strong L2 Self, boys must face the additional hurdle of stepping outside the boundaries of expected boy behaviour. Future research could provide further understanding by gathering perspectives from pupils of a broader range of ages through cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches. Observational studies could also be of benefit for exploring how laddish attitudes

and behaviours manifest in the MFL classroom, and their impacts on learning and teaching therein.

**(Word count: 6916)**

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Questionnaire Items

#### L2 Selves

"I can see myself using foreign languages in the future."

"When I imagine myself in the future, I want to be able to speak another language."

"I want to become fluent in the foreign language I am learning in school in the future."

"When I picture my future, being able to speak a foreign language is one of the skills I would like to have."

#### Enjoyment

"I enjoy language subjects in school."

"Learning languages in school is fun."

"I look forward to language lessons."

"I think language subjects are interesting."

#### Usefulness

"I think it is important to be able to speak another language."

"Being able to speak another language is useful to me."

"Getting a good grade in language subjects will lead to benefits for my future."

"Skills in a foreign language are important to have."

#### Difficulty

"I think foreign languages are a particularly difficult subject."

"Getting a good grade in foreign languages is harder than in other subjects."

"I find the work in language subjects confusing."

"Only really clever people can get good grades in language subjects."

#### Femininity

"Languages are girly subjects."

"Language subjects are for girls."

"Foreign languages are more feminine than other school subjects."

"Learning a foreign language is a girly thing to do."

#### Gender Ability

"If you're a boy, learning a language isn't something you're expected to be good at."  
"Girls are more suited to learning foreign languages than boys."  
"The way girls work means they are better at language subjects than boys."  
"Learning a language requires skills which girls have more than boys."

### **Procrastination**

"I spend a lot of time on work and revision for language subjects."  
"I give myself plenty of time to do homework for language subjects."  
"I cram work for language subjects - I put it off until the last minute."  
"I procrastinate instead of doing work for language subjects."

### **Behaviour**

"I behave well in language lessons."  
"I concentrate on my work in language lessons, even if my friends or other classmates are misbehaving."  
"I tend to mess about in language lessons."  
"My behaviour in language lessons is good."

### **Effort**

"I put in a lot of effort for my work and revision in language subjects."  
"I do "the bare minimum" for language subjects - I do what is needed, but I don't put in extra effort."  
"I try hard when I am doing work for language subjects, even if I find it difficult."  
"I work very hard on my work for language subjects, both in class and at home."

## **Appendix 2: Interview Guide**

1. Which languages do you learn in school?
2. How long have you been learning the language?
3. Do you like language subjects in school, and why (not)?
4. Is there anything in particular you enjoy?
5. Is there anything in particular you don't enjoy?
6. Do you like school in general?
7. What do you like and dislike about school?
8. What is the main reason you chose to study the language at GCSE?
9. Will you continue learning the language in the future, and if so, what for?
10. How hard do you work in language subjects?
11. How hard do you work in school generally?
12. Studies show more girls than boys choose to take GCSE languages. Does this match your experience? Why do you think this is?



13. Have you noticed any differences between how boys and girls behave/learn in school?
14. Have you noticed any differences between how boys and girls behave/learn in language subjects?
15. What would you change about language subjects, if you could?
16. Is there anything I haven't asked which you think is important to mention?

### Appendix 3: Open-Ended Question Responses

#### Girls

*I think I'm not too bad as I have the passion and the drive to work for the grade I want because I find the subject interesting and I would like to use it later on in life. I think that learning a language in school is extremely important. You gain so much knowledge and perspective of different countries. It also allows you to communicate with more people*

*I think I am good at languages as I spend a lot of time learning grammar and exam techniques etc. I can find it difficult at time especially when learning a new module but with support from a teacher I am fine*

*I do as I'm quite a patient and hard working individual and so I accept that languages do not have to make complete sense immediately and you build the skills gradually however I do believe that a lot of people struggle with languages because the way we're taught them can be confusing since we use terms like the subjunctive which doesn't make sense to people until you understand how the actual English language works, people think that languages are therefore all harder than English when in reality they're mostly always of a similar difficulty.*

*Yes, as I am a very resilient and focused learner, and because I have the qualities needed to be good at learning languages (German in particular). German is a logical language and I have a logical brain. I have also always wanted to learn German, and I think you have to be passionate about a language, because there is a large amount of effort and work required to learn that language.*

*I am good at the subject but I wish to be better. For me it just came naturally, but I'd need to put in more work to be better, my issue however is the confusion on how to revise a language properly. Also because of corona this year I have spent less time worrying about doing well in a language compared to other subjects*

*I study Maths and English at A-Level and both of these subjects have helped me in both the essay writing area of German and also the formulaic style of the lexicon and verb conjugation.*

*My memory is fairly good therefore I find it easy to remember vocabulary and structures once I've seen them a few times.*

*Yes. Although I find languages incredibly difficult, I focus on the end goal of being fluent in at least German and possibly French and Spanish in the future. I spend a lot of time trying to learn long lists of vocab so everything is more accessible to me which helps a lot! I have to be in the right mindset for languages, but when I am committed to the lesson or independent study, I find it pretty easy to just pick things up and remember them for a long time. I get on really well with my language teachers which I think also helps.*

*I would say I'm alright at languages as I enjoy the lessons and put in work to get better. I feel like I don't put in as much time into learning new vocab as I could at home but I am trying to improve. I think the thought of an entire language worth of words to learn can be daunting at times.*

*Yes as I am passionate and that is all that matters. Learning a language at school has really aided me to fully develop an idea of what career I would like to pursue in the future*

*In my opinion, it is quite important nowadays to know at least one foreign language to communicate with others and also develop your personal experience in learning a new language and being fluent at it. Currently, I know 4 languages: Ukrainian, Russian, English and German, I also started learning Spanish at home after school. I want to speak fluently and get my future job related to languages. I tend to do well on the lessons, in general, and I'm also always looking forward to find out new information and then use it in everyday life.*

## **Boys**

*I always like to think that I am good at languages and generally speaking so far I have achieved higher than average grades. However, when I get to the lessons, I tend to focus slightly less and make quite a few preventable mistakes. I think that if I were to put the effort in I plan to, I would achieve my targets for sure. However, I feel that I prioritise languages below my other subjects so I do less preparation for it. This has led to me entering an exam with only fifteen minutes preparation before and it showed in my grade. Overall, I think I am good at languages but only when I work for it.*

*I think I am good at language subjects in school. This is something I have always been passionate about and I find myself investing a lot into the subjects that motivate me.*

*No. I do much worse in my MFL subject compared to anything else I have done, which is discouraging. But I would really like to speak a foreign language despite this and so have continued to apply for courses in higher education which heavily focus on them as I truly think they're interesting, important, and fun even if I don't feel that way when I struggle (which is*

*common for me..). One of the bigger issue I have is just general confidence when speaking, a similar problem is that of 'imposter syndrome' where I feel like everyone else in my class is much better than me and I'm stupid. Another issue I have is having no environment to actually use foreign language in outside the classroom.*

*I get decent grades (6/7) if I try hard. So with the right work ethic, they can be rewarding to learn. It can be enjoyable to learn languages but i wouldn't choose to if I was left to my own devices- so I don't particularly care for the learning process, moreso for the end result.*

*Yes, I would say I am one of the top 10 in my class and I do pretty well in vocab tests and practise exams. Because of this I plan to study German as one of my A-Level subjects. I think in today's world it is important to be able to speak another language and especially in the UK where not many people speak more than one language, it is something unique to have on a job application.*

*I am the only boy in my cohort of 6 studying German. I really enjoy learning the language and our teachers make it really engaging. I think you need to have the mindset of not understanding everything the first time you face it. I weirdly enjoy speaking the language and fall back in more formal areas such as reading and writing. Its a very important skill and will open many doors.*

*I am Swiss so I speak Swiss-German at home: because of this I can also speak German. I took German for A-level; yes I am at an advantage but it is also the fact that I have a passion for languages. I personally don't believe gender plays a role in language learning, rather the education system in the country. It is sad that the UK doesn't encourage language learning from a young age: I think that is what needs to change.*

*I think I am good as I put in a lot of effort and my teachers encourage me to get a good grade and to do extra study after school (watching shows in the language, listening to music etc.) I don't think languages are "girly", but I do think it is generally unusual for a boy to choose two languages like me. I know it's a useful skill and I would like to travel abroad in the future*

#### **Appendix 4: Interview Transcripts**

(Quotes in italics are the interviewer.)

##### **Interview 1: Ben**

*Before we start, I'm just going to reiterate some of the important information so you're fully aware of what's going to happen. This interview is completely voluntary so if there's a question you don't want to answer or if you want to stop the interview completely, you can. Your answers will be completely anonymous, none of them will be passed on to anybody else and if I do refer to your answers, your real name won't be used. Audio of the interview is being recorded and as soon as all of your answers are typed into a transcript, the audio files will be permanently*

*deleted. I'm interested in everything you have to say, whether you love languages or hate them, so please be as truthful as possible. OK, do you have any questions before we start?*

No.

*OK. Firstly, which languages do you learn in school?*

I learn German, just German.

*How long have you been learning German for?*

I started in Year 8. I did French from Year 7 but along that I did German as well. I did them both to Year 9 and then in Year 10 and 11 I've been doing German.

*Do you like it?*

It's my favourite lesson.

*That's great! What would you say are the main reasons it's your favourite?*

It helps that I'm Swiss and I speak German at home, but I don't know. Everyone's got different abilities in the lesson and I can help out, without showing off. It's a good atmosphere.

*I bet you're useful to have around for remembering vocab.*

Yeah, I get asked about words a lot.

*Is there anything you don't enjoy about German?*

One thing I don't enjoy is the analysis side of it. We just started doing the film aspect, and we watched a film, and I don't mind watching it but I don't like having to do the pages of analysis.

*I imagine that's similar to what you have to do in English.*

Yeah, it's not something I really enjoy. It's not so much difficult, more it's not what you'd do in real life, so I don't really see the point of it.

*Do you like school in general?*

I'll be honest, my opinion has changed. Before it was alright, you know, I survived it, but it wasn't something I enjoyed. But now I do enjoy school.

*What changed your opinion?*

I just like how it's more on you to do your own work and it's more interesting stuff that you learn.

*Would you say you have more independence now, then?*

Yeah.

*I imagine that's helpful for learning a language.*

Yeah, you have to learn vocabulary and stuff on your own so it's good to have that attitude.

*What about school don't you like?*

To me...I don't want to be harsh on people but my school is pretty by the books, there isn't really much allowance to do stuff, they're pretty...what's the word...you know when you fixate on small details? They're always looking over stuff and you learn stuff but it isn't the best atmosphere. It's pretty strict.

*Could you explain what sort of things they fixate on?*

They're just a bit uptight to be honest, a lot more...yeah, they don't really speak to you as people, it's more about get the exams done, get the grades.

*Is there a lot of pressure on you, to get good grades?*

Yeah, quite a lot.

*Is there a lot of pressure in German?*

Yeah. Not so much me, because I speak it, but people get really stressed about it. We've got speaking exams in a few weeks and everyone's quite nervous about that.

*Yeah, in my experience, speaking can be the most daunting part of it.*

It's always the part people get worked up about. But then it's what you're going to need most in real life, so it's all helpful.

*So what's the main reason you chose to study German at GCSE?*

People have asked me this before and they say that it's an easy subject for me, that I shouldn't be allowed to do it. And I mean, I agree it's easier, but I just really enjoy it as well. Even if I didn't already speak German, languages are still something I enjoy and there's just something about it that appeals to me. Like with French, I don't speak French but I really enjoyed going to the

lessons. There's just something about languages, I really get them, I'm not a math-sy person, I'm not a science-y person, but languages I do really well.

*What do you mean by a math-sy person?*

You just get a sense sometimes of people who are good at certain subjects, who enjoy them. So a math-sy person is someone who's sort of naturally good at solving problems and thinking in that logical way.

*Could you describe a language-y person then?*

I'd say I'm a languages person because I'm more open to other cultures, and that's another reason why I like languages. When you speak a language you can speak to a whole other group of people. I understand English isn't the language that everyone speaks and it's fascinating to see other languages and the details in them and the reasons why the language is the way it is.

*Can you see yourself using German in the future?*

I plan on moving to Germany and getting a job there when I'm 18, so as soon as possible.

*How hard would you say you work in German?*

I put more effort in for German than for other subjects. Even though I speak German I still do all of my assignments and stuff to the best standard I can do it and put in as much effort as I can.

*So how many hours would you say you study for German in a week?*

About six or seven.

*That's quite a lot with your other subjects too.*

Yeah. It's just the passion for it to be honest, with other subjects I find it hard to motivate myself. But I speak to all my friends in Germany, I watch Youtube videos in German, I listen to German music non-stop, that kind of stuff counts as well.

*It sounds like you enjoy learning about the culture.*

Yeah. That part interests me.

*Do you work hard in school generally?*

It depends on the subject. Overall, I'd say I work pretty hard, you know, I get the homework done and things like that. Especially now, I want to do well to get into college so I try to do as much as I can.

*What would you say are the subjects you find the most difficult? And where is German on that scale?*

German would obviously be one of the easiest for me. I think chemistry's the one I struggle with most, and maths. Like I said, maths has never really been a thing that I've got straight away.

*OK. So something I'm interested in is whether gender has an impact on whether and how pupils learn languages in school. Do you think gender plays a role?*

I personally don't think it plays a role. I know boys don't tend to choose languages as much, and I'm expecting to be either the only boy or one of a very few boys at A-Level.

*Why is that?*

Well, there are some boys I know of who don't speak German as their mother language who are quite good at German and they get good grades, but they don't really see it as something they want to pursue in the long-term. I'm not sure, maybe there's a social aspect behind it. But in general, I think if somebody has the interest for the language, it doesn't matter what gender someone is. It's just the mental side of it. If you enjoy it, you're going to want to do well at it. Yeah, I don't think it depends on your gender.

*You said there's a "social aspect". Could you elaborate on that a bit more?*

I just meant something about, like, how boys and girls grow up. I think girls are encouraged to be more interested in the academic side of things and on it with their schoolwork, they're expected to do well across the board of subjects, whereas with boys, unless they're obviously that kind of person, the majority are only expected to get the top grades in the more active and practical subjects. So PE, obviously, that sort of stuff. But I don't think that should matter too much, if you're passionate about a language and you're willing to work at it then you'll get good at it. I don't think gender really matters in how good you are.

*Are there any differences between how boys and girls behave in school, in your experience?*

It depends on the person. Boys tend to be louder, they'll tend to talk rather than listening and end up getting sent out. Yeah, boys get sent out more than girls.

*Why do you think that is?*

I don't know. It isn't all the boys, like I said, it just depends on the person. And who they're with as well, if people are next to their mates they'll mess about more than they would if they weren't.

*Does that happen in German?*

Quite often, yeah. I think people in my class, they either don't enjoy it as much or they don't see it as important because they speak English, so they won't concentrate as much as in other lessons. They think they aren't going to use it so they don't think it's as important.

*OK. If you could change anything about how you learn languages in school, what would you change?*

I would make it more sort of culture-based. It takes the fun out of it if, you know, from whatever age the only thing about languages you learn is how to pass a language exam. That doesn't help you in the real world and it doesn't show people how fun learning a language can be.

*So if you were a teacher and you had to plan the perfect German lesson to motivate people, what would you do?*

I would take real-life scenarios and...I don't know, even just ordering at a restaurant or booking a hotel or buying something off the internet over a phone call, that kind of vocabulary helps. Just getting people involved in real experiences like talking to people on the street, something that applies to everyday life, not just "you need to write 90 words in this exam to pass". That's just not useful.

*Do you think that your teachers support you well?*

Yeah, they're really good. I just love being in a room where you can hear German people talking. That's what motivates me. Any lesson you're passionate about, you're going to enjoy going to.

*OK. This is the last question, so almost done. Is there anything I haven't asked you about which you think is particularly important, or that you want to mention?*

I would maybe ask whether you think language learning in the UK should be brought in at a younger age.

*That's an interesting question! What do you think about it?*

Personally I don't like the attitude that many people in Britain have towards languages. Because yeah, English is the world language, but because of that a lot of people are cocky and think a second language isn't valuable to them, even though it really is. And I just feel like if it was brought in earlier and you got people enthusiastic about it, and made it not about passing exams but showing them that there's more than just our country and teaching them about other cultures, I feel like that could be useful. So yeah, they should be brought in earlier.



*That's a good point. I think one of the big problems in Britain is that everywhere you go, it's all in English. In the media, on the radio, it's very rare you hear other languages.*

Yeah, that's a factor as well. No-one thinks they're like, useful for them because you don't experience them.

*So how would you say teachers could get primary school kids engaged with languages?*

I would teach them the basics, nothing strenuous, no exams, nothing like that. But have lessons maybe twice a week of French, for example, and stuff like how to count, making them watch TV shows in French, nothing that feels...something where they learn without realising they're learning.

*Why French instead of German?*

I don't know, French is the go-to language in England, I think. German and Spanish are a bit more advanced, when you go higher up in the years, but I did French at the end of Year 6 in primary school. I don't know of any other primary schools that did French, but yeah. It would be good if they spoke German, though.

*I think German is more similar to English.*

Yeah. German is good with rules, and there aren't many exceptions.

*Yeah. Apart from the irregular verbs! They're the bane of my life, I hated learning all of those.*

Yeah, it's hard but once you understand then it's easy to, like, apply them when you're talking.

*Yeah. OK, is there anything else you want to add before we finish?*

No.

*OK. Thank you very much for your answers and for participating in the study. I'm going to stop the recording now.*

## **Interview 2: Olivia**

*Before we start, I'm just going to repeat the important information about the study. This interview is voluntary and if there's a question you don't want to answer or if you want to stop the interview completely, you can, just let me know and I'll stop the recording. Your answers are completely anonymous, none of them will be passed on to anyone else and if they're used in the dissertation, your real name won't be mentioned. Audio of the interview is being recorded, but*

*as soon as all of your answers are typed up into a transcript, the audio files will be permanently deleted. I'm interested in everything you have to say, whether you love languages or hate them, so please be as truthful as possible, there are no right or wrong answers. OK, do you have any questions before we start?*

No.

*OK. Firstly, which languages do you learn in school?*

I learn German and Russian, but outside of school I also study English and Ukrainian and a little bit of Spanish.

*That's so impressive! That's a lot of languages.*

Yes. I was born in Ukraine and we moved here two years ago, and back then I didn't know English very well, it was just basics, so I started learning it here. I know Ukrainian quite well but not professional, so I'm just studying it in my free time, watching videos, things like that. And Russian is because my mum is Russian so I decided to study that aswell. I also started learning Spanish not long ago, at home.

*I think it would be amazing to be able to speak so many languages.*

Yes, I think it is a useful skill.

*So how long have you been learning the languages you learn in school?*

I've been learning German since Year 5, and Russian I started at home with my Mum, but I just started it in school recently.

*Do you enjoy language subjects?*

Oh, yes! Outside and inside of school. It just gives me a lot of opportunities for my future I think, and it's nice to go to lessons and then learn something new and then after the lesson you feel like you know more information and you can speak more and more.

*Do you feel like you've made progress in the subject so far, then?*

I think so, yes. In German, it was very hard at first, but now I feel like I can talk to a German person and have a conversation.

*You said about having more opportunities in the future. Is there anything in particular you'd like to do with the languages you study in the future?*

I would like to connect my job with languages. Probably...I don't want to be a teacher, but probably an interpreter, translator, maybe something in the media. Or journalism, something where the language will be a useful skill.

*Is there anything in particular that you enjoy about learning German and Russian?*

There isn't anything in particular. I like learning the new words and then using them in speaking practise and realising I can widen my knowledge and that I can speak to people. It's nice to learn and then use it.

*Do you enjoy school in general?*

Not really.

*No? Why's that?*

I have to wake up early!

*Yes, that can be difficult sometimes!*

Sometimes it's OK, but other times you wake up and you're tired and then you have to sit in school for five, six hours straight. And then you go home, and you realise it's already four o'clock and there's still homework to do, and you don't have enough time. And I think some teachers aren't very good at teaching sometimes. Not in languages, but just in general, some teachers either don't like children at all and their attitude towards children is like, ridiculous. But sometimes teachers are not teaching properly as well, so when you get to your final exams it feels like you didn't learn enough.

*How are the teachers in German and Russian?*

I don't so much have a teacher in Russian, we just have one session a month. She just gives us homework and I have to prepare for my exam. But in German we have regular lessons, with different teachers. It's actually quite useful to have one teacher for grammar and the other for studying the film we have to write about.

*What is the main reason you chose to study languages?*

I just enjoy learning languages. I think that since I was small languages have been an easy subject for me. But I also enjoy maths. Most people say I'm very strange because most people like either languages or maths, but I enjoy both.

*That's interesting. Why do you think people think it's strange to like both?*

I think it's just because, in general, some people are more, I don't know, wordy people? Like, writing essays in history and languages. But in maths, there's numbers and you need to solve problems. It's just like there are different kinds of people who are good at different things.

*So would you say you're a mix, then?*

I think so.

*Do you think there are skills that go across maths and languages? So does learning a language give you skills that are helpful in maths, or vice versa?*

I don't really know. I don't even know how to combine maths and language in the future. I'm just doing it for my own development, in general. I think it's good to have a mix of subjects.

*Do you work hard in German?*

Yes, because German is my fourth language, and it's quite difficult to learn a new language after everything else that has come before. So I actually use a lot of time to practise speaking to myself, or just to watch videos or listen to music, so I can practise German in everyday life. But we also do a lot of homework, revision, practise, so yeah. We have a lot of homework so we already have a lot of practise outside of school, but I make sure to use time to do that myself too.

*Do you enjoy doing that?*

Well, our teachers said that if we do a lot, we'll succeed. So I said to myself that if I do more, I'll help myself in the future.

*That's a good attitude to have. Do you see other lessons in the same way?*

Most of the time.

*Do you think everyone else in your class has the same attitude?*

In German or in other subjects?

*In German.*

I don't know. We just sit there and try to learn, but then when it comes to translation, for example, we don't really know what to do. Translation is very difficult I think. And sometimes it's hard to prepare for exams because if you learn all of the vocab you might forget something. So we do put in effort, but it doesn't pay off sometimes.

*Well, I'm studying German at university and I find translation difficult too, so don't let it affect you too much!*

Yes, I hope that if I do study at university I'll find it easier by then.

*There are studies that show more girls choose to study languages at GCSE and A-Level than boys. Does that match with your experience?*

Actually, all of my class, everyone studies the same language because we didn't have a choice, they just told us we had to study German. But not everyone enjoys it, lots of people are just like, "I don't need it in the future". But in my Russian class that's optional, there are only two boys. I don't really understand why boys don't want to learn languages. Maybe they find it too difficult.

*Why do you think it would be difficult?*

I think it's because...well, this might be a bit sexist in a way, but boys are lazier than girls, I think, and learning a language is really hard. So they don't really want to learn a new language, unless it's something useful for them and they want to use it later in their job. I have friends who don't like German and I asked them why, and they actually said "I'm too lazy for it".

*Are they like that in other subjects?*

Some subjects, yes. Some of the boys in my maths class don't do anything. We have to do lots of practise questions for revision and they don't do anything at all.

*Nothing at all? Why do you think that is?*

I think boys do everything at the last minute, and girls prepare for it constantly. Not all of the girls, but most of them are studying hard. For example, girls, when they study constantly throughout the year, they don't have much to do for the exam when it happens. But boys just keep all the stuff until last minute and then try to learn it. But they're proud of it!

*What do you mean by proud?*

They say to their friends, things like "Yeah, I only revised for fifteen minutes!". Not all the boys, but in general.

*What would you say are the most difficult school subjects, and where are languages on the scale?*

I think German is around the middle, I like it but it's hard sometimes. Russian I can't really say because I've only just started with it. The hardest I think is history because you have to remember, like, a whole book of facts. And the easiest is drama. The writing in drama is hard but I like the acting parts.

*So what do you do when you're struggling with something in your schoolwork?*

Homework or in class?

*Both.*

If I'm in class I will ask somebody near me, or the teacher if nobody knows. For homework, me and my friends work together usually so we help each other.

*Do you work with friends for German too?*

Yes, we practise German speaking together.

*If you could change anything about how you learn languages in school, what would you change?*

I would use more speaking practise, because I've noticed everyone says we don't have enough speaking practise. When you're trying to explain to the teacher in the language, it's quite difficult to do that straight away, you just need to think of it or you forget words. So I would encourage people to do more speaking practise. Also, two of the exams we are doing are written exams, so when you finish the exams and then you want to go and do something like interpreting, for example, it's difficult to talk straight away because you mainly were doing "practise on the paper" rather than speaking out loud.

*OK. Finally, is there anything I haven't asked about which you think is important?*

Erm...no, I don't think so.

*OK. I'm going to stop recording now. Thank you very much for your participation, your answers will be very helpful.*

### **Interview 3: Liam**

*Before we start, I'm going to reiterate some of the important information about the study. The interview is completely voluntary and if you want to stop at any point, or if there's a question you feel uncomfortable with, just let me know and we can stop. All your answers are completely anonymous, so if I do refer to them in the final essay, a pseudonym will be used so you won't be identifiable. None of this is going to impact your studies, it won't be passed on to your parents or teachers. The interview is being recorded, but once the answers have been put down into a transcript the voice files will be permanently deleted. Finally, I'm interested in everything you have to say so it doesn't matter whether you love languages or whether they're the bane of your life. Do you have any questions based on any of that?*

No.

*So then, first question, which languages do you learn in school?*

So, at my school, we have German, Spanish and French. Everyone learns French from Year 7 to Year 9. And then depending on what form you're in, you're either allocated German or Spanish as well with that. And then when you get to about Year 10, about GCSE time, because in our school it's compulsory to take a language GCSE, you can then pick one of them that you most prefer.

*Okay, and which language did you pick?*

German. And then, as well, I'm going to do it at A-Level and maybe uni as well.

*Oh, brilliant! I do German at uni, it's good fun. Do you like learning German, then, as you're planning on continuing with it?*

Definitely a lot more now, because you explore more about the culture, rather than stuff like, you know, "I have two cats and a dog". So it sort of makes learning the language more purposeful. Yeah, 'cause when you go over there, it's not just the language, it's the culture and the people, how everyone behaves, you know, just a bit of background behind it.

*And is there anything in particular you enjoy in German?*

A lot of people don't like speaking, but I quite enjoy it. Which is weird, because speaking is the most difficult bit, but I think it's one of the more useful skills for learning a language, you know, to actually speak it. When you go over to Germany, you're going to be speaking to people so it's useful to have that confidence and the ability to be able to speak to someone, regardless of whether it's perfect German or broken German. Just, you know, the confidence to do that.

*How often do you get the opportunity to speak in lesson?*

So it's been varied 'cause of Covid, but we have speaking assistance for about half an hour every week, which I really enjoy. That's the best bit of it, I think.

*You mentioned about speaking in "perfect German" or "broken German".*

Yeah, so, especially when you're speaking, I think it's better to be in that mindset of actually speaking rather than getting worried about "did I get that word order right?". I think a lot of people get worked up about making mistakes and sounding stupid, when really it's more important that you're actually just making the effort.

*What do you mean by "sounding stupid"?*

Just getting embarrassed and looking like you don't know what you're doing. It's quite immediate, isn't it, when you're speaking, so if you make a mistake there's no rubbing it out and pretending it never happened. But in my opinion it's alright to make mistakes and get stuff wrong because it's not your first language and you're never going to be completely perfect at it.

*That's a good work ethic to have. Is there anything that you dislike about learning languages?*

Vocab can be tricky sometimes. It's expected at the end of the day, it's one of them things you've just got to know. And you appreciate it in the long run, I guess.

*Quizlet is your friend with that.*

Yeah, definitely, I use that a lot, it's perfect.

*I think every German word I've ever learned is in that app! So what in particular about learning vocab do you find difficult? Do you find the process of learning it hard or is it more the types of words?*

That's a good question. It sounds really lazy but it's...it depends, because sometimes it goes in first time you read something and you remember that word for the rest of your life, and then there's just some words that you've got to go out your way and just keep repeating it, repeating it, repeating it, which can be really frustrating. And I guess it varies between students as well how quickly they pick it up.

*Are you required to learn a set number of words or are you left to your own devices?*

Sometimes it depends on teachers and how they're feeling, or what we're doing that week. Sometimes they'll set formal sort of tests, you know, for learning vocab, but sometimes it's just our...yeah, we expect you to know this for this assessment you're going to do. So you want a broad range of vocabulary to be able to tackle the reading and the listening. So yeah, sometimes it's explicit and sometimes it's implicit in terms of what they want us to learn vocab-wise.

*Do you think German and other foreign languages are difficult subjects in comparison with others?*

I definitely find it easier now, but I remember in Year 7 thinking to myself, like, how am I going to learn a whole language? Just thinking about how many words we have in English as well, it seemed a big task. But now I'm used to it and I've got that experience. My German definitely isn't perfect, but it's got easier to learn as I've moved through.

*What do you think is the most difficult subject?*



I think people think maths and history are the worst ones, although that has to do with teachers as much as what you have to learn. Languages actually are up there as well, in terms of how much content you have to do and the different kinds of exams.

*Do you enjoy school in general?*

Yeah, I do really enjoy it. The social side, like, I've met some good friends through languages and just in school generally as well. I think teachers change, you know, as you move through. They're more approachable, more relatable, less strict. Yeah, for sure, it just makes it that much better learning environment, you feel treated a bit more like adults.

*Is that in comparison to say, Year 7?*

Yeah, definitely. I know people that don't enjoy school, but that just depends on your work ethic, who you are, how you behave. If you behave and you get the work done, there's no reason why I don't think you can't enjoy school.

*Is there anything you don't like about school?*

Probably just the fact that - like, we're all in the same boat, but often, in our class, sometimes we do get penalised for stuff that wasn't all us. And, you know, if one person does something silly, the consequences are for the whole class then. So yeah, just the way that situations are dealt with sometimes.

*So what's the main reason you chose to study German?*

I've really enjoyed it so far, it came quite easily to me. And it was definitely sort of learning about, more broadly, Germany, German society, German culture. It was just the additional building blocks about actual Germany rather than just how to say "I play football with my friends at the weekend". So then, at A-Level, I guess - I want to build on to that again, but also I've come quite far with it and it just seemed like a shame to lose that skill.

*That makes sense. Following on from that, is there anything in particular you would like to use German for in the future?*

At the moment I'm not specifically thinking of a German language based career. However...so it's not the best time to go into the industry at the moment, but I want to get into the international tourism industry for work, for some companies that have, like, attractions, not only in the UK but sort of around globally, so, for example, in Germany. Or work within management somewhere that attracts a lot of global tourism, so then I can still use that language.

*So do you work hard in the language?*

Yeah. On a scale of one to ten, I'd probably say, seven to eight. Not ten out of ten, because I feel like that would mean burning out too much. I do feel like it's important to have a break from everything, have a social life, but it's important to keep it all ticking over and keep the work ethic and keep the independent study, because it's going to be an important skill in the future as well.

*So more of a slow and steady approach?*

Yeah, definitely.

*And do people who are in your class put in the same amount of effort, would you say?*

I'd say fairly similar, yeah. The people I talk to anyway. And that helps, it keeps you motivated if everyone is sort of, like-minded and wants to do well and achieve well. It motivates you as well, I think.

*Do you think that being a boy or being a girl influences how motivated you are?*

Specifically languages or just school in general?

*Just languages, firstly.*

Well, I'm the only one of my circle who wants to do German at A-Level, which is interesting. I think I saw somewhere that statistically more girls study languages than boys. It's an interesting one because I'm really into it, but I know not many boys are. I guess I'm just unique in that sense, but unless they try and push it more - although I feel like in the past that's been quite counterintuitive, like, it's come across in the wrong way. So for example, my brother in Year 9, at the moment, he's doing French and German as well. And one of my old teachers has been like, "Oh yeah, we think he can do two languages" but he does not want to do two languages and he's been nagged and nagged and it's like, it's not for his benefit. It's just to tick a box in the SLT meeting and, yeah, the quota of, you know, people into languages. But yeah, it's a very interesting question that, maybe there's something to do with it if it's on more of a global - well, not global, but a nationwide scale.

*Well, from the research, it definitely does seem to be a broader trend. So there's a study in 2020 that showed that a lot more girls choose GCSE languages than boys do in the UK.*

Oh right. Yeah, it's an interesting one. I never really thought about it too much, to be honest. I go to an all boys school so I wouldn't really be able to compare boys and girls to be honest!

*Fair enough! Would you be able to summarise the kind of attitudes of boys in your school then?*

Erm...last minute. Last minute dot com!

*Really?*

Yeah, for a lot of things. Exams last minute. And, as well, teachers have said - because I'm part of the prefect team so we have meetings - but he said, because we've got these maps and stuff to judge our grades, he said that Year 11s tend to not do anything for the whole year until the last two months. That was quite interesting to hear. I can understand that because I've seen a lot of my friends, you know, cramming it in last minute. Yeah, that's definitely lazy in some senses, but that's not everyone, but it is...it's a trend, it's a pattern.

*By "maps", do you mean those tables where you have assessment objectives?*

Yeah, it's a table and say for example you want an 8, it'll say for German "I can use complex structures in writing", or "I can use this and that tense", so you know what you have to do so you can get that grade at the end.

*Is that helpful?*

Yeah, definitely. In the first years of school, so in 7 and 8, we would write down the objective for the lesson at the start, which seemed a bit pointless at the time, but now I find it really useful to go back to the table for German and tick off everything that I know I can do, and then look at what I can't do yet and work on that to help me improve.

*It must feel quite encouraging to be able to tick off more and more as you go through.*

Yeah, definitely, it does give you, like, perspective on how far you've come with it. And then you know that even after the exam, that's a skill I can use for life then.

*So, going back to the original point, is procrastination "cool", would you say?*

I mean, I don't think it is. I think I read somewhere that procrastination isn't, like, being lazy, but it's because you want to avoid feeling bad while you're doing whatever you're meant to be doing so you just choose to put it off.

*Do you think that's a good theory?*

It does make sense. Perhaps, I think a large part of it is aspiration as well. I don't think many people know what they want to do in the long-term. Yeah, they don't really know what they want to do after school or as a career, so no one really has a long term vision. And I think when you don't have that long-term goal to reach to, it sort of makes everything you're doing at that point seem like it doesn't have any purpose to it.

*Good point. Do you have a long-term vision in German then?*

I would say so, yeah. I mean, like I said, I'm not completely sure what I want to do yet, but I do think that...yeah, I do want to be able to speak German fluently at some point, it feels like it will be a good skill to have. So that helps to keep me motivated, thinking about that end goal.

*You mentioned earlier that you're unique for being a boy who's into language learning. Why do you think boys in general aren't that interested in being able to speak a language?*

I don't think it's seen as like, a girly subject or anything, I remember that was asked about in the questionnaire. There is that belief, isn't there, of girls being better at language. But I don't think that's true, because boys are just as good at doing English presentations and things like that. Maybe, yeah, maybe because a lot of lads don't really know what they want to do in the future, they can't really see how useful a language would be for that.

*OK. If you could change anything about how you learn German in school, what would you change?*

Erm...I've got to think about that. So, yeah, maybe just for my benefit with vocab, just a bit more structure in terms of assessments, because then it would push me to actually go away and learn a big list and feel like there's some purpose doing it. But then, generally...to be fair, I think they do okay because they put you in sets so people can work at their own rate, and they do really push us to go away and watch German films and read books in German and things like that.

*Okay. Last question, is there anything that I haven't asked you about what you think I should have done?*

I don't think so. No, you asked some very good questions that had to make me think so, no, I don't think so.

*Well, that's everything done. Thank you very much for your answers! I'll stop the recording now.*

#### **Interview 4: Sophie**

*Okay, so before we start, I'm just going to repeat the important information. This interview is completely voluntary and if there's a question that you don't want to answer or if you decide halfway through that you don't want to do it anymore, that's completely fine. All the answers will be completely anonymous, so if I do refer to them in the final essay a pseudonym will be used so you won't be identifiable in any way. The interview is being recorded and once your answers have been put into a transcript, the audio files will be deleted. And finally, I'm interested in everything you have to say, if you love languages, if you hate them, so please be as truthful as possible. Do you have any questions before we start?*

No.

*Okay. So first of all, which languages do you learn in school?*

I do French. I did Spanish up to Year 9 but after that I just took French for GCSE.

*How long have you been learning French, is that since Year 7?*

Yeah. We did a little bit of it in primary school, just as a taster. And then I started it properly in secondary.

*Do you enjoy learning French?*

Yes I do, yeah.

*Is there anything in particular that you enjoy about it?*

I just love the idea of learning about new cultures, new languages. Just the whole idea of being able to go through the country speaking their language, rather than expecting them to speak English. Yeah, it's just a nice thing.

*Have you ever been to France and used the language?*

I went in Year 7. I also went to Belgium, I went to the French part of Belgium as well. And yes, I've used a bit of French. Especially in the chocolate shops!

*Yeah, I went on my year abroad last year and German chocolate is some of the best chocolate in the world. I sometimes found it hard to understand what the staff there were saying because they're used to talking so quickly though.*

Yeah, I noticed that too. When they realised I was English though they talked slower which helped a lot.

*Is there anything you don't enjoy about learning French?*

So, I don't necessarily not enjoy it, but the thing I find more difficult is doing verbs and stuff like that, doing all the different tenses. It's always when you find it hard that you don't like it as much. And also with the listening, sometimes you just listen to some scenarios and it's like, when am I going to use that? Yeah, same with every subject really, it's like, when am I going to use Pythagoras' theorem?

*Do you enjoy school in general?*

Yeah, most of the time. I enjoy socialising with friends. I moved here six months ago, and in all my different classes you get different mates. So in French, if you want to practise French

speaking then we can talk. But I've got friends in maths too, and in all my other subjects, so all different groups of friends get put together. Yeah, I enjoy that you can socialise, but obviously it's a bit different now because of Covid and everything. It's the socialisation but also with teachers, you have more of a...it's not necessarily that strict teacher-student in the way of Miss and Sir all the time. It's a bit more informal, because they have a certain amount of respect for you.

*How do you mean "respect"?*

So they'll talk to you more like adults rather than just bossing you about. And in lesson they'll let us talk while we're working, rather than making us work in, like, complete silence. My art teacher lets us put on music and everything, so yeah, it's just a better atmosphere.

*So what is the main reason that you chose to study French?*

So, you know how you always have, like, that one dream in life? Yeah, for me it's always been to be bilingual. As soon as I started French, and I even, obviously we dabbled in Spanish and that, but as soon as I started French I just knew that I'd want to do that.

*That's great! Is there anything in particular that you want to do with French in the future?*

I would love to work in a larger business, but branch off to help with like, the communications between the two, and meet and work with the French colleagues. So, for example, I'd say things like, well, actually I think in France it's more key to have this, whereas in Britain we need that. So in France, they don't really like sugar - I always use Coca Cola as an example - so it's more worth doing Diet Coke there, because they're not big fans of sugar, whereas if you go to England, they might like a bit more sugar. Yeah. So, I would like, advise with how they push their resources from knowing the culture in France and talking to French people and seeing what their opinions are.

*That's really interesting! Are you interested in business too?*

Yeah. I don't just want to learn the language and just use it for a week every year on holiday, I want to have it in a career.

*Are other people in your class the same?*

One of my friends likes French but I don't think she's going to do it at A-Level. Lots of people just seem to do the bare minimum, really. A lot of the pressure is obviously on passing your maths and English so French isn't really like, one of those subjects that are up there.

*Is there anything that you don't like about school?*

I don't like exams being mostly written, and it's all based on one exam. Obviously nowadays it's a bit different because of Covid, but normally it's all based on one exam, it's just this one exam, that's basically it, and if you fail that, you fail it. And if you do so well throughout the year and it's just a single bad day for you, after that it's just, well, exams are over and you can't change it. And for certain people it works a lot better practically. For me, I've always loved French speaking more than French listening or reading because it's more practical, you'll find that you're probably speaking a lot more than you would necessarily use reading. Yeah, it's like, it's more practical-based, and I'd rather have them like spaced out throughout the year so you know that if, say if you were ill or if you had a really bad injury that meant you couldn't fully focus on exams, which means you can't work to your full potential. Yeah, it kind of screws you over a bit, doesn't it?

*That makes sense. Do you put a lot of effort into learning French?*

Yeah, it's probably the one I study the hardest for. That's probably because I like it so much, but I also know that I need to put the effort in, simply because it's the most English-based. Because I'm more of a math-sy person, and I've always had a problem reading, I'm very slow at processing words and stuff, so to do that in French is almost like putting yourself into the deep end with it all.

*That's interesting. So do you find revising for French easier than for English?*

I do, yeah, I find it easier than it would be in English, weirdly enough. Because even if the spelling's weird, you can just sound them out and you know where it's going. You know like, 'J'aime', which is 'I like', I go, 'J' and then 'Jai', and then, 'aim' on the end, so 'J'aime'. That's how I just tried to learn it, which works.

*That's a creative solution!*

Yeah, it's just about figuring out what works for you. It's silly but it works, I remember the spelling.

*Okay, so, something I'm interested in in this study is whether gender influences language learning in school. Do you think that being a boy or being a girl has an impact?*

I don't think it does. I think it's always been built into society, how it's like, the social construct, that boys always do the construction and the active stuff when the girls do all the more linguistics stuff. I think it's more of a construct of what's expected, like, a girl, they must like to work talking to people.

*So would you say it's something to do with communication generally?*

Well, I know a lot of guys actually do enjoy English nowadays, and French is basically the same as English, you're doing stuff with words and language and writing essays, so if you have that passion for language then you should enjoy both subjects.

*What's the main difference between English and French, do you think, that makes boys not enjoy it as much?*

Probably that, so with English, you're obviously going to need that for the rest of your life, whereas with French, it's - it's useful, I personally know it's important, but not many people in the UK think they need it. And for boys, I think it's just more about the nurturing, you know, and being like "It's uncool for me to take French, it's uncool for me to take Spanish".

*Is that an attitude you see a lot in your school?*

Yeah, it's not a subject many people see as cool, they don't think the teachers are cool, they don't think anything what you learn is cool, like, they think it's just something that they'll never need in life that only boring people do. And then to learn a language you have to work quite hard aswell, like, you can't just blag it, if you get what I mean. So in English I know some of the dudes haven't read the books or anything, but they still do alright somehow, so that sort of reinforces that they can get away with it. But with a language you can't do that, you have to make sure you know the vocab for each topic, so it's sort of a constant thing you have to be doing rather than cramming it in the night before. And if boys don't see languages as something that's useful for them, then they won't think it's worth it.

*Do boys see "blagging" it as cool?*

Yeah. I don't understand it personally, some of the boys, like, I've got this one guy friend, and he's more proud when he blags it and does alright than if he'd done loads of revision and got a really good grade.

*Do boys tend to behave well in lessons?*

Most of them do, but we do have a couple of dudes that just goof up. Like, messing about and winding up teachers. It's obviously not all of them, but yeah.

*Would you say that other people in your class enjoy learning languages?*

Mostly, yeah. When I was lower down the school, so when I was like, seven and eight, I was in top set for French but bottom set in Spanish. And I think as soon as you got into the bottom set, that they'd just turn around and be like what's the point in trying, because if I do it, it's only because I have to do it, and I'll get only be put on foundation, so what's the point in trying because I'm not going to go anywhere with it. But there's a massive jump from going from - say if you have twenty, thirty people in your class, and pretty much all of them are the low



performing ones, especially in Year 7 and 8 that think it's just cool to like joke around and, you know, throw pens about and everything - as soon as you go to GCSE there's a lot more severity about it because they have the want to try and they have that determination because they've obviously chosen it and want to do it. Yeah, and we have a guy in our class, and the amount of effort he puts into it, he enjoys it a lot. You can see that he does. But he doesn't put, obviously, in his eyes, he doesn't put as much work in as we do, because he is more naturally skilled in the French language. And it may be because his mum is a private school French teacher. But he obviously chose that because at the end of day, it was his choice to do so because obviously he's nearly an adult now.

*You mentioned that boy is "naturally skilled". Do you think you can be naturally good at learning languages?*

I think some people do pick it up easier than other people, like, the way their brains are wired. But I also think that, you know, I'm not very good at anything to do with words but I work hard at it because I enjoy it and I know my aims and my goals, and I'm not the best, but that's OK because I'm still learning it and still improving.

*If you could change anything about the way that you learn languages in school, what would you change?*

I'd say do a lot more speaking. And I'd like the opportunity to talk to a French person. I know it's a lot more money, but also to go to France, if that's possible, as part of the course. I know you can do it in uni, but I think you always have in the back of your head that you can't do it. But when you get put on the spot with someone speaking, then people will find that it's actually a lot easier than what they think. And that's more of a practical side of it because you're not going to always be asked, like, what's your opinion on this book. Yeah, I would definitely think using it more practically-based would be better.

And I think they need to adapt the course every five years or so, to just, you know, make sure that it's keeping up to date with the current themes, because obviously people are going to be more interested in your current times than the past times. It's like technology, we have cars that are self driving, so you could talk about that and bring languages into the now. And maybe like, Black Lives Matter was a massive movement last year, and you could use it as actually an interesting way of doing it, bring it into the now with politics and stuff. So talking about, like, how was the movement done in France or in different countries because obviously, you find out what happens in America but you don't know what's happening in France. And then you're a bit more engaged because this happened actually last year. Yeah, this is still happening now.

*Well, if you're intending to study a language at university, it does get a lot more current, so you have that to look forward to!*

Yeah, I am quite excited to carry on with it and start using it for more useful stuff. But yeah, I think, so we've just found out we have to talk about technology and stuff in the next topic, and it puts people off a bit because people always have that one thing that just makes them, you

know, that they don't enjoy. And that's just simply because, well, they're just looking at the old technology, and that's just not something I'm interested in. I think we should have an option to write in the language about, like, a hobby or an interest, because then that makes it more relevant and personal. So, like, a sport you like playing or a book or a TV show, just something that you'd want to talk about, and in an exam it would be less scary then, because then you'd be like, well, I don't have to worry about that because it's already something I enjoy.

*Okay, last question then, is there anything that I haven't asked you about which you think is important to add?*

I think a lot of people - I've always been told this by my French teacher - people always try so hard in French or any language to get every single thing right. And then if they get it wrong they'll be mad at themselves for getting one word wrong, but we do it all the time in English. We get multiple words wrong. And it's like, we get the premise of what they're trying to say, but in French or in any language people think we have to get every single word right to get anywhere with it and that's not the case. I know quite a few people in my class who were like, "French is gonna be so hard", but when they came out they realised it actually wasn't that bad. It's like mind over matter almost, because you work yourself up thinking you need to get it right otherwise you'll make yourself look like an idiot, but actually no-one's going to judge you for it. And they'll probably just be happy that you're actually making the effort to speak to them in their language, because I always thought, when I went abroad to any country, the fact that we as English-speaking people just expect them to know our language, when we're going into their country. And it's like, hang on a minute, do you not think we're being a bit ignorant here, because when they move into our country people will always be, like, effing and blinding saying they need to learn our language because they're here now. We can't say that, because we've been hypocritical, like, going to Spain for two weeks and not even bothering to learn how to say Hello, Goodbye, How are you, I'm good, Thank you. Just simple vocabulary, and people are just so ignorant to not do it.

It's more the older generation because I find that in the younger generation, so many people are learning languages to a certain extent, there's Duolingo and stuff like that you can access now, and they will use it. Because they know that when they go abroad, it's only fair for us to at least know a little bit about the language because at the end of the day, they make the effort for us, we should make the effort for them.

*That's an interesting point. Why do you think that the younger generations want to learn languages more? Is that a result of the internet, do you think?*

I think so. I think, weirdly enough, there's a lot more popular songs and stuff like that from different languages. Like Despacito, that's a Spanish song and people really want to know what the words actually mean. Yeah, they actually go out their way to search it, and at that point, you're practising translation. So they see other languages around them. It's like, there are French songs in TikTok, French speakers on TikTok, or like, a French versus English where

someone says a French word, and what they're saying is in English and they have to translate it to each other and try and pronounce it to each other.

*Is social media the way forward for getting people engaged with languages, then?*

Maybe, yeah! And then as well, there's French shows and Spanish shows, German shows, there's a massive variety. And chances are that you'll find something that's interesting. Yeah, it's always there. When we went abroad, you know how you get a TV in your room, like an all inclusive room? Yeah, at nighttime, there was so many different shows that I'd just sit and watch, and you often find that you're just listening to music from different languages and you'll be like, "Oh, this actually isn't that bad". And as well, I noticed a YouTube thing that I find interesting. There's this guy that's American who went to Beijing for a year. He studied Mandarin and so he went, he goes to this street market, and the sellers try talking in English asking for this and they're like, trying to understand it. And next thing you know he'll go into Mandarin and they're so grateful for it. Yeah, because obviously they're trying to learn our language, which in all fairness, is a really hard language to learn. I know they learn it from such a young age. I've met a French speaking person before and I was like "I can speak French to you", but they straightaway said "No, I want to speak English". Yeah, they're so invested in our language.

*Yeah, when I went on my year abroad, I was trying so hard to practice my German speaking, and everyone was like "Can I practice my English with you?". And I was like "That's not why I'm here!".*

Yeah, they learn, they do it more than we do French or any language. And it's like, how is it fair that you've learned more English than I've learned French? And it can be quite intimidating sometimes as well because they've been learning English for so long, and then your skills are sort of put up against their skills, so it can be a little bit daunting at times to do.

*Yeah. OK, we're running a bit over time so I'll end the interview now, unless you have anything else you want to add?*

No, that's everything I think.

*Great. Thank you for your time and for all of your answers, they'll be really helpful. I'll stop the recording now.*

## **Appendix 5: Awareness of Ethical Behaviour**

### **Awareness of Ethical Behaviour for Data Collection**

#### **Research Practice**

<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	My full identity will be revealed to potential participants
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	I will provide participants with my contact details in order that they are able to make contact in relation to any aspect of the project, should they wish to do so
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	The purpose and procedures of the project, and the potential benefits and costs of participating (e.g. the amount of their time involved), will be fully explained to participants at the outset
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	Undue pressure will not be placed on individuals or institutions to participate in project activities and participants will in no way be prejudiced if they choose not to participate in the project
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	Participants will be made aware that they may freely withdraw from the project at any time without risk or prejudice
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	Research will be carried out with regard for mutually convenient times and negotiated in a way that seeks to minimise disruption to schedules and burdens on participants
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	At all times during the research I will behave in an appropriate, professional manner and take steps to ensure that neither myself nor research participants are placed at risk
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	The dignity and interests of research participants will be respected at all times, and steps will be taken to ensure that no harm will result from participating in the research
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	The views of all participants in the research will be respected and special efforts will be made to be sensitive to differences relating to age, culture, disability, race, sex, religion and sexual orientation, amongst research participants, when planning, conducting and reporting on the research

**Consent & Anonymity****Agree** N/A

All potential participants will be asked to give their explicit consent to participating in the research, and (where written consent is given) separate copies of this will be retained by both researcher and participant

**Agree** N/A

All necessary steps will be taken to protect the privacy and ensure the anonymity and non-traceability of participants

**Agree** N/A

Prospective participants will be informed that I will be forced to consider disclosure of certain information where there are strong grounds for believing that not doing so will result in harm to research participants or others, or (the continuation of) illegal activity

**Agree** N/A

In addition to the consent of the individuals concerned, the signed consent of a parent, guardian or 'responsible other' will be required to sanction the participation of minors or those whose 'intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstance may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily'

**Agree** N/A

Data gathering activities involving schools and other organizations will be carried out only with the agreement of the head of school/organization, or an authorised representative, and after adequate notice has been given

**Data Storage****Agree** N/A

Data generated by the research will be kept in a safe and secure location and will be used purely for the purposes of the project (including dissemination of findings).

**Agree** N/A

No-one other than markers and examiners will have access to any of the data collected (not applicable for staff)

<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	Research participants will have the right of access to any data kept on them
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	Where possible, participants will be provided with a summary of research findings and an opportunity for debriefing after taking part in the research
<b><u>Agree</u></b>	N/A	Participants will be informed of how their data is used and stored in the Privacy Notice for Research Participants
<b>Name:</b>	<b>XXXXXXXXXX</b>	(Information removed for marking purposes)
<b>Signed:</b>	<b>XXXXXXXXXX</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	<b>15/10/2020</b>	

## Appendix 6: Information Letter for Participants

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study.

The research aims to investigate UK secondary school pupils' opinions about learning languages. There are no right or wrong answers; I'm interested in everything you have to say about your experiences of MFL subjects, whether you love them or hate them. All answers you give will be completely anonymous, and if you are referred to in the final essay, a pseudonym will be used. There are two sections of the study, which are explained below.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire can be accessed by a link, which will be given to you by your teacher. It should take 10-15 minutes to complete. You will be asked to decide how much you agree or disagree with some statements about language learning, and to provide an optional written answer.

### Interview

At the end of the questionnaire, you will be asked if you would like to take part in an interview. If you agree, the interview will take place via Microsoft Teams and will take no longer than 30 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked some questions about your opinions of learning languages in school. Nothing you say will be passed on to your parents or teachers, and your answers will not affect your grades in school. You will be free not to answer any question you do not want to, and if you feel uncomfortable at any point during the interview, you can request that it be stopped.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time (even after the interview), in which case any previously collected data will be deleted.

Please feel free to contact me via the contact details above if you have any further questions. Once again, thank you very much for agreeing to participate; your responses will be very helpful for this research!

## **Appendix 7: Informed Consent Forms**

### **Online Questionnaire**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out what students think about learning languages in school, as part of the research for a university dissertation. The questionnaire will take about 10 minutes.

Don't worry - this isn't a test and there are no right or wrong answers. Your answers won't be passed on to your parents or teachers, and your name won't be used in the final essay.

The questionnaire isn't compulsory - you can stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Please answer all questions honestly.

Finally, thank you very much for agreeing to take part!

---

Yes

No

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason and without consequence

---

Yes       No      I understand that all data are anonymous and that there will not be any connection between the personal information provided and the data

---

Yes       No      I understand that there are no known risks or hazards associated with participating in this study

---

Yes       No      I confirm that I have read and understood the above information and that I agree to participate in this study

---

Yes       No      By completing this questionnaire I confirm that my answers, which I have given voluntarily, may be used anonymously for research purposes.

---

### Informed Consent Form for Interviews

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study. Please read the information below carefully.

1. The study is being conducted as part of the research for an undergraduate dissertation in the School of English at the University of Nottingham. The study is being conducted by:

(Details removed for marking purposes)

Phone: XXXXXXXXXXXX

Email: XXXXXXXXXXXX

2. In the study, you will be asked to take part in an online interview. The purpose is to find out what students think about learning languages in school. The interview will last no longer than 30 minutes.

3. There are no known risks or hazards involved in participating. Participation will not count toward your grades. I have provided my name and contact information should you have any questions about the research, as well as the contacts of my dissertation supervisor and the Ethics Officer for the School of English at UoN.

Dissertation Supervisor

(Details removed for marking purposes)

Phone: XXXXXXXXXXXX

Email: XXXXXXXXXXXX

School of English Ethics Officer



(Details removed for making purposes)

Phone: XXXXXXXXXXXX

Email: XXXXXXXXXXXX

4. At any time you have a right to withdraw participation. After the data is collected you have a right to request that the data not be used.
5. The data being collected will be used solely for the purpose of an undergraduate dissertation. It will be read only by the student and the markers. Your answers will not be passed on to your parents or teachers.
6. The data will not be made public in any way. Your name will not be used. You will be referred to by a pseudonym in the dissertation.

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	I confirm that the purpose of the study has been explained and that I have understood it
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	I have had the opportunity to ask questions and they have been successfully answered
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	I understand that participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason and without consequence
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	I understand that all data are anonymous and that there will not be any connection between the personal information provided and the data
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	I understand that there are no known risks or hazards associated with participating in this study
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	I consent to the data being transcribed and wish to be referred to anonymously in written forms of dissemination
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	I confirm that I have read and understood the above information and that I agree to participate in this study
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	I confirm that I am over 16 years of age

Participant's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix 8: Test for internal reliability - Cronbach Alpha Results**

<b>Scale</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math></b>
<b>Self</b>	<b>.95</b>
<b>Enjoyment</b>	<b>.82</b>
<b>Importance</b>	<b>.84</b>
<b>Difficulty</b>	<b>.71</b>
<b>Femininity</b>	<b>.88</b>
<b>Gender Ability</b>	<b>.81</b>
<b>Effort</b>	<b>.86</b>
<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>.93</b>
<b>Procrastination</b>	<b>.87</b>