Exploring the decline in uptake of modern foreign languages at GCSE in England through Positioning Theory: reflecting on the perspectives of pupils and teachers in secondary schools.

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the decline in language learning uptake in England through exploring the perspectives and experiences of MFL pupils and teachers in four secondary schools. Research indicates that over a third of secondary schools in England recognise negative effects of Brexit on their pupils' motivation to continue studying modern foreign languages (MFL). The 2016 referendum brought opposition to languages other than English to the forefront of public debate and its discourses normalised a context in which foreign language proficiency and a desire to engage with other cultures came to be seen as contentious. The position and status of MFL in secondary schools remains precarious since the removal of language study from the compulsory GCSE curriculum in 2004.

Three focus group interviews and eight individual interviews were held with pupils across four different school types, and seven individual interviews with teachers and senior members of staff. The methodological approach adopts *Positioning Theory* which examines the momentary constructed positions and identities that learners assume in focus group discourse and narratives. Examining pupils' *positioning* in conversation pays attention to the discursive processes through which learners actively and agentively position themselves and highlights the temporary and dynamic positions they assume relative to the languages-specific topics that are important to them.

Findings suggest the powerful role that family and parental influences play in the choice-making of pupils from certain backgrounds towards MFL - and how this is reflected in the language discourses that they engage with; both teachers and pupils place value on integrating the L2 community's culture into their classrooms as a way of improving language motivation and forging tangible connections for pupils to improve their language skills through real-life experiences; negative pupil attitudes relating to Brexit are much less prevalent than suggested by previous research.

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Contents

Glossary of key terms

A-Level	General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level
CA	Controlled Assessment
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
DfE	Department for Education
EBacc.	English Baccalaureate
EAL	English as an additional language (pupils)
EFL	English as a foreign language
ESL	English as a second language.
FLL	Foreign language learning
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GT	Grammar Translation Method.
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
KS2	Key Stage 2 (pupils aged 7-11)
KS3	Key Stage Three (pupils aged 11-14)
KS4	Key Stage Four (pupils aged 14-16 sitting GCSE courses)
KS5	Key Stage 5 (pupils aged 16-18)
L1	First Language (refers to English, or the first language of pupils)
L2	Second Language (see also: TL)

MFL	Modern Foreign Languages
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate of Education
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
TA	Teaching Assistant
TL	Target Language

Chapter 1.Introduction

"The trouble with languages is that too many Brits seem to think that English will do."

(Coussins and Harding-Esch, 2018, p.1)

More than seven years have passed since this statement was made, and the full impact of Britain's decision to leave the European Union on the motivation of secondary school pupils to continue learning modern foreign languages in its classrooms has yet to be fully realised. In language learning terms, since the outcome of the 2016 referendum, Brexit has been framed both in terms of the new language opportunities it might offer a country navigating new political and economic ground in trade and employment (Kelly, 2018) and in terms of concerns over how the negative consequences of its discourse might amplify what has been referred to as the ongoing language skills deficit 'crisis' (Lanvers, 2017, p. 517) in England. Many stakeholders have therefore justifiably expressed the opinion that language competencies in the UK since Brexit are of more consequence than ever (Holmes, 2018) and academic discourse surrounding Brexit's potential effects on language learning has provoked defiant stances to encourage more learners into language classrooms (Linn, 2016; Tinsley and Board, 2017). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the impact of Brexit continues to permeate learners' attitudes (Tinsley, 2019) who continue to question the place and relevance of MFL in English classrooms. The effects of Brexit on the recruitment and training of the previously consistent supply of EU language teachers (who compose 35% of all MFL teachers in Britain) have been significant, and a dramatic decline in the number of available highly trained MFL teachers in England is now notable (Tinsley, 2018). Furthermore, limited concrete evidence exists in research exploring the effects of the post-Brexit context on language learning in England and how these interact with other more complex and longstanding issues surrounding the 'crisis' of teaching and learning of languages in England over the last quarter-century (Bowler, 2020, p. 9).

Twenty years after the decision to remove language study as a compulsory element of the National Curriculum, the status and position of language teaching within English secondary

schools is more precarious than ever. Language learning levels in secondary education have consistently declined since MFL was made a non-statutory element of the KS4 curriculum. MFL entries at GCSE have fallen to 47% of pupils in all types of schools in 2022, from 86% in 1998 (Long and Danaechi, 2024). Only 5% of pupils in the UK currently study two or more languages compared to the EU average of 51% (Eurostat, 2016). Student motivation towards the subject is frequently regarded as low with learners predominantly presented with utilitarian rationales for its learning (Lanvers et al., 2019) to improve their future employability which, for them, is an abstraction at this point in their schooling. This low-motivational environment as well as the poor self-efficacy that is noted in pupils (Graham, 2004) has not been aided by portrayals of the British as reluctant language learners (Lanvers, 2017), insular and xenophobic towards other countries and cultures (Coleman, 2009) and inherently bad at language learning that are frequently conveyed by the media (Lanvers and Coleman, 2017; Graham and Santos, 2015). Within this context, this research study sets out to explore the reasons behind the decline in uptake of language learning in England through listening to and exploring how Year 9 pupils in four schools in Norfolk speak about making their language learning choices and gathering the insights of their teachers. In doing so, it will explore the factors that impact upon these choices, as well as their motivation for MFL study and their perceptions of the value of language study to them.

1.1 <u>Study Overview:</u>

This qualitative research study sets out to explore the decline in uptake of language learning in England in the post-Brexit period through listening to the perspectives and experiences of MFL teachers and Year 9 pupils in four secondary schools in the East of England. This study is limited to exploring the attitudes and perceptions of pupils towards MFL in English schools as there exist different national curriculum requirements in the four nations that constitute the United Kingdom, and this study was conducted by a researcher at an English university. Through qualitative focus group and individual interviews, it explores how secondary school pupils in Norfolk speak about their motivation for language learning and their perceptions of

its value, as a means of understanding the wider decline in uptake of language learning at GCSE in secondary schools in England since 2004.

Considering the context of global English's ubiquity (Crystal, 1997), and its noted demotivational effects on British learners of languages (Lanvers, 2017), as well as the overwhelming feelings of post-Brexit linguistic apathy that have been reported in English classrooms (Tinsley, 2018), this study can provide critical insights into the motivation of secondary school learners and why fewer young people are choosing to continue language learning in England. Through examining how pupils speak about the impact of the key influences on their language decision-making such as their home environment and local community factors and institutional school-level policy itself, it can provide greater perspectives on the wide range of factors that exist inside and outside of schools that influence pupil motivation and their perceptions of value and choice in language learning. Finally, it will make recommendations based on the insights gained from speaking with students and teachers about student motivations to learn languages which can inform practice in schools and through policy decisions.

Using *Positioning Theory* to examine the momentary constructed positions and identities that learners assume in focus group conversations and narratives, this study will examine pupils' perceptions of the value of language learning and provide insights into how learners' agency is constructed in their language choice-making processes. Examining the pupils' use of *positioning* in conversation provides a way of paying attention to the discursive processes through which people actively and agentively position themselves in talk (Korobov and Bamberg, 2004), which not only helps us to understand more about how pupils' choices are constructed around MFL study but also highlights the temporary, changing and dynamic positions that they assume in relation to each other and around certain language-specific topics. Exploring how the pupils' *positioning* clusters around certain discourses (Kayı-Aydar, 2015) in conversation and in narratives can teach us more about the MFL issues that are important to them and offers the potential for classroom and policy change to tackle this longstanding issue in English secondary education. It can also provide a way of understanding how pupils' language learning identities take shape and offer us a window into the concerns that adolescent learners in England face in their everyday learning of the subject.

1.2 <u>Chapter summary:</u>

This chapter introduces the research topic and the rationale for exploring this subject. It will introduce the overarching questions that have guided the research and outline my personal interest in this subject. Background information is provided on the research setting of the county of Norfolk that has been chosen for this study and a synopsis of why it is an appropriate region in which to base my research. This chapter will provide an overview of the current literature that already exists examining the subject of the decline in uptake of MFL learning in England – that can be used to assert that there is a strong justification for the study to take place. Finally, the chapter will provide an overview of the subsequent chapters that are presented in this study and outline the writing conventions that have been adopted during its development.

1.3 <u>Aims and rationale:</u>

The study has been designed to explore the decline in uptake of language learning in England by examining pupil motivation and their perceptions of languages' value to them in the post-Brexit context; through listening to how pupils speak about making their language choices at GCSE for the first time, it examines the factors that have contributed to their decision and to the decline in uptake of language learning. The research setting for this study is the county of Norfolk - an under-reported and culturally homogenous region of the country where the ethnic constitution is 95% white English (ONS, 2021) and where English is the main language for 95% of its residents. There is a lack of research into how pupils' choices are constructed and how their perceptions of language learning's value to them appear in response to the rationales for its learning with which they are presented. Instrumental rationales for MFL study that have no value to pupils often overemphasise the economic benefits to society that a multilingual population can bring - through workplace deficits (Tinsley, 2013) and through future qualifications to improve their educational outcomes (Lanvers et al., 2019). The drawback to such justifications is that learners often fail to see the point of these distant and irrelevant utilitarian rationales, particularly given their

own awareness of the ubiquity of global English and the feeling that knowing English will be enough to see them through their lives and careers (Lanvers, 2018).

The 'democratisation' of language study (McLelland, 2017, p. 11) during the latter half of the twentieth century in England precipitated the decoupling of language study from its elitist origins (McLelland, 2017) and resulted in language study being offered in all comprehensive schools. This subsequent shift towards a skills-based curriculum in English classrooms across the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing has contributed to making languages more accessible to all, but also to the perceptions of some learners that proficiency in languages is predominantly a vocational skill, useful for only a small minority of careers (Bowler, 2020). These perceptions might be problematic for some learners who can only envisage limited or restricted connections to such vocations. Furthermore, whether pupils in England are aware of the transferability of language learning across other disciplines and the personal enrichment and cultural benefits that languages can offer is little expressed in the literature. The strong connections that exist between language learning and increased cognitive ability and function (Woll and Wei, 2019) are a feature of previous research that has explored how language ability can be connected to improving the brain's cognitive reserve and memory (Kousaie and Phillips, 2016) as well as slowing the onset of dementia in later life (Bialystok et al., 2012) and the strong associations that have been drawn between increased empathy towards others and being able speak a second language successfully (Guiora et al., 1972; Chen, 2013; Rodriguez, 2022). This evidence would suggest that there are therefore compelling and valid reasons to currently explore why fewer pupils in England are choosing to study MFL to GCSE. Research exploring pupils in England's perceptions of the value of language study is scarce and there are few studies exploring how pupils speak about and respond to the different rationales for MFL study they are presented with and how they connect these to their language learning decisions. This study sets out to address this gap.

1.4 <u>Research Questions</u>

The research questions in this study were formed through an approach that aimed to consider the role of specific contexts in influencing pupil and teacher experiences of MFL - and their role in the decline in uptake of MFL learning in England. It explores the influence that these contexts have on how Year 9 pupils speak about their MFL decision-making before they enter their period of GCSE studies. Through the research questions and my own interview questions, this perspective examines the experiences of MFL learning during the post-Brexit period, as described by pupils, and their effects. The research questions were designed in a way to elicit pupil conversation that can help us better understand their experiences, as well as reveal the positions to MFL learning that they take up - in the narratives that they shared and their conversations during the focus group interviews.

1. How do pupils position themselves and negotiate their identities as language learners regarding:

    a) their motivation towards continuing to study MFL?
    b) their responses to the messages they receive regarding MFL's significance from their institution, home and local community?
    c) the future value of MFL to their lives?

2. What can teachers' self-positioning in narratives tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL in England?

3. How do the findings to questions 1 and 2 help to explain the decline in uptake of MFL that has occurred in England over the last 20 years?

1.5 Background to the study:

The declining uptake of MFL learning at GCSE in England began to evolve into a topic of interest to me during my year of master's study where my thesis sought to explore and better understand the emotions, experiences and motivations of trainee language teachers in schools across Norfolk during their placement year. Listening to teachers' experiences and the daily challenges they had to overcome whilst working in the region's schools, I was struck by the limited engagement and curiosity the teachers expressed for the personal factors that motivated and incentivised their pupils towards or away from MFL learning. An emerging interest in these factors lying behind the decline in uptake of languages had been sparked in me earlier during the fifteen years I spent living and working abroad as a teacher of EFL, teaching pupils English as a Foreign Language, as well as French and History. I was struck by the diligence and persistence that L2 learners of English from a different culture seemed to apply to their learning in my lessons, and it struck me that for many of them the attainment of English proficiency was strongly driven by extrinsic incentives dictated by culture. These incentives were often also reinforced through economic necessity: English for them reflected a competitive pursuit strongly entwined with their future academic success through societal discourse, as well as professional achievement and economic mobility. I was drawn to the strength of these pupils' incentives to learn English compared with the often-lacklustre motivation I knew that pupils of the same age in my country held for learning European and other modern languages in secondary school.

When I returned to the UK and read more widely into the topic during my master's degree, the literature suggested that decreasing L2 motivation and uptake in Anglophone countries was a global phenomenon that contrasted sharply with the positive motivation and attitudes that L2 learners of English held in European countries and worldwide (Lanvers and Cowling, 2025). My curiosity around this topic continued to evolve during my year of teacher education as I trained to be a teacher of MFL in Norfolk. My familiarity with L2 learning pedagogies for English-speaking MFL learners grew, as did my understanding of the logistical and structural issues surrounding the teaching of MFL in the curriculum and pupil attitudes towards the subject. Some of these issues included: poor behaviour and inattentiveness in MFL lessons; perceptions of the irrelevance of languages to their future lives; fear of making

mistakes and speaking aloud in class in front of their peers. As I reflected on the differences in learning outcomes and motivation between the two cultures in which I had taught, I wondered how such disparities could exist when I noted that similar strategies and pedagogies were employed in lessons across both settings: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) - that emphasises interaction and fluency in real life situations; Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) – the teaching and learning of a foreign language by studying a content based subject and Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) – a teaching approach that focuses on the use of language to achieve specific communicative tasks.

As I worked at different schools during my year of teacher education, I became more acquainted with the specific issues that were always proposed as having contributed to the low uptake: the negative reactions of pupils towards curriculum topics that they felt irrelevant; vocabulary they felt they would never use; increasingly difficult assessment across the four skills and a focus on reading and writing; limited curriculum time in the timetable. I felt that most of these factors concealed what I personally recognised as a significant cause of pupils' opposition towards language learning: a general reluctance towards continuing foreign language learning that was born out of a lack of parental encouragement, positive attitudes towards its benefits and a lack of strong language role models in pupils' lives.

As my year of teacher education progressed, I was struck by how schools with different backgrounds of pupils engaged different strategies to deal with this indifference, either through pedagogical strategies in the classroom, personal approaches to teaching, and school-wide policies - often with varying degrees of success. Working with and teaching pupils from a wide range of backgrounds daily, I became increasingly drawn towards the idea of exploring these personal factors that might influence the decline in uptake of MFL learning in schools in Norfolk, and particularly why poor motivation and detached attitudes appeared to be more prevalent amongst certain pupils in certain schools. At the end of my year of teacher education, I came to realise that my future lay not in teaching these learners languages in the classroom but by aiming to contribute to the limited body of academic research exploring the personal factors behind the decline from the perspectives of the pupils. Thinking more about these factors led me to reflect on questions that I felt were meriting of further attention: were there important differences of background and of school

type in the region that might affect learners' motivation to continue studying MFL? How did pupils themselves speak about their perceptions of its value and how they considered the choice of continuing MFL to GCSE? What were the primary influences that they considered to have had an impact on their decision-making? Given that sufficient time has now passed for a more precise evaluation of the impact and significance that Brexit has had in schools in this region, I reflected that such an opportunity to explore these issues was not only timely but overdue and would offer compelling perspectives on how the decline in MFL uptake and learning has evolved, using this particular part of the country as a background context.

1.6 <u>Exploring the factors contributing to the low MFL uptake in England</u>

The low uptake of language learning in England beyond its compulsory stage in secondary education has been extensively addressed in previous research as well as being widely represented across the national media (Lanvers and Coleman, 2017; Coleman, 2009). Since 2004, when languages were made a non-statutory part of the Key Stage 4 curriculum in England, the uptake deficit that followed in secondary schools has been investigated through academic and political research tracking the origins of falling pupil numbers in languages, and explored across topics that have ranged from the impact of the limited language options available to pupils in individual schools (Parrish, 2017) to the demands on teachers of teaching such a low status subject in the curriculum (Wingate, 2018). Policymakers in England have long recognised the importance of attempting to improve this uptake deficit and the urgent need to encourage more secondary school pupils to study foreign languages beyond 14+ (Coleman et al., 2007). The decline in uptake of language learning has been frequently debated in both Houses of Parliament (Lanvers and Coleman, 2017) where concerns about the state of foreign language learning in secondary schools are often solely expressed in terms of a skills shortage on socioeconomic or political levels (Brecht and Rivers, 2005). Economic and commercial rationales to support Britain's business and trade needs continue to be the primary drivers for language education policy in Westminster (Nuffield Foundation, 2000; British Chamber of Commerce, 2013) and advocates for increasing MFL take up in schools often speak primarily about reversing this decline in terms

of languages' strategic economic value to the country (British Academy, 2010) rather than the inherent benefits to be found by pupils. The sections that follow provide an overview of the main issues that have emerged from previous research exploring the decline in uptake of MFL learning in England.

Common demotivators for learners

Previous discussion of the crisis existing in language learning in England has centered on how negative depictions of language learning in the mass media have contributed to insular attitudes that persist towards languages in society and in schools (Coleman, 2009). Public portrayals of the British as inherently bad at languages risk being transmitted to learners or their parents (Graham and Santos, 2015) and perpetuating vicious cycles that particularly affect the motivation and confidence of learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Lanvers et al., 2018). Frequently nationalistic press coverage that disguises xenophobia towards Europeans as 'Britishness' or Euroscepticism have not helped this situation and have been found to be common (Coleman et al., 2007) - such sentiments are occasionally echoed by English secondary school pupils in class who have been noted to articulate stereotypes towards the citizens of the countries whose languages they learn (Williams et al, 2002).

Evidence from other Anglophone countries such as New Zealand and Australia suggests that the spread of global English is a driving force that demotivates some native L1 speakers to learn another language (Pandey, 2013; Lanvers, 2017). Previous research into the MFL crisis in English secondary schools highlights that the ubiquity of global English is indeed a demotivating factor for pupils considering continuing MFL study at GCSE: (Busse and Walter, 2013) while language learners in English state secondary schools often subscribe to the fallacy that 'English is enough' (Lanvers et al., 2018) for them to further their educational and career objectives. Furthermore, other studies have revealed that existing beliefs surrounding the widespread nature of global English are not exclusively contained to state schools. The independent pupils and language learners in Coffey's (2018) study reported

feeling disincentivised and demotivated to continue studying French when they found they were answered in English after making attempts to speak the language abroad.

The influence of others

For many pupils, the decision to continue learning a language can be the result of an intricate interplay of factors that takes in school and national MFL policy as well as their parents' attitudes and experiences of language study and their own attitudes to its perceived future usefulness (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019). The views of learners' parents act as a significant influence on the general development of their children's early attitudes towards language learning (Chambers, 1999), and previous studies in this field have noted the strong correlation that exists between young children's attitudes towards foreigners and other countries (Oskamp, 1977) that may be modelled on their parents' views. Bartram's (2006) qualitative survey involved 411 pupils aged 15-16 across different abilities at mixed comprehensive schools in three European countries. It set out to explore what pupil perceptions would reveal about the nature and extent of parental influence on their children's attitudes towards language learning. He found that the English respondents in his study perceived their parents to have much more negative views about their children's language learning endeavours than their foreign counterparts and accordingly recognised the status of languages as a much less desirable and worthy subject within the curriculum (Bartram, 2006).

More recently, research has explored how parental involvement in their child's language education can be dependent on a number of factors, including parents' perceived abilities to support their children with homework. It is reported that many parents feel unable to support their child with MFL homework or revision due to their own lack of skills and competencies in foreign languages (Costa and Faria, 2017). Gayton (2010) suggests that this relationship may be affected by social class – she noted that socioeconomic status can play a significant part in how parents perceive their own involvement in their child's education and therefore the support that they can offer - which resultingly has a negative impact on their child's attitudes towards learning a language. Martin's (2020) sequential and mixed method

study explored parental and child orientations towards language learning in England and the nature of any associations between the two. His interviews with parents of Year 8 children across four West Midlands' schools found that while some parents expressed general positivity towards the instrumental and life-long benefits of learning a language, many of them recalled the negative aspects of their own language education and were openly critical of certain aspects such as the difficulty of MFL study and the limited language choices available to their children in schools (Martin, 2020). Earlier studies exploring the differential uptake of MFL have similarly explored the significance of the influence of friends and peers towards pupils' attitudes towards MFL study in England (Taylor, 2000). Several of these report that teenage peer pressure sometimes has a negative impact on attitudes towards language learning because of its public performative element that may induce feelings of embarrassment or insecurity in adolescent learners (Walqui, 2000). Bartram's (2006) comparative study across schools in England, Holland and Germany into pupils' views on the extent that their peers might influence their attitudes to learning MFL found that English pupils revealed the most negative perceptions of peer attitudes towards language study and Bartram concluded that the dynamics of a peer group situation do exert powerful influence over learners' attitudes towards MFL study (Bartram, 2006).

Effects of MFL policy

Current MFL policy in English secondary schools has been described as light-touch (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019) which is demonstrated by the fact that currently any language may be taught in schools (DfE, 2013). Although MFL teaching is compulsory at KS3 (11-14 years old), beyond this any MFL decision-making is left to each individual school, including whether or not to teach a language to pupils older than 14. Research into the impact of individual school MFL policy on pupils' decisions to continue studying languages has received limited attention to date, and little is known about how school leaders decide on their school's individual policy on the subject's optionality (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019) as well as the range of languages they offer to pupils (Parrish, 2017). The teaching of the subject remains compulsory for pupils aged 7-14 in England. Beyond this, myriad individual policies exist in

different schools and within different education trusts, further complicating the issue (Freedman, 2022). In some, languages are made compulsory for all pupils aged 14-16; in others, it is optional for the same age group of pupils. Some institutions stream their pupils into pathways depending on ability, with higher-achieving pupils encouraged to take a language (Lanvers, 2017; Education Datalab, 2015). However, when the subject is afforded optional status, reports suggest that pupils perceive the subject to have low value (Coleman et al., 2007). Moreover, MFL curriculum planners within schools face additional systemic problems in delivering MFL provision. These can include recruitment issues (Allen, 2016) and debate surrounding whether inadequate curriculum time (Tinsley, 2019) is afforded to the subject. Research suggests that there is currently little cohesive policy support at national level in England to increase the uptake of languages (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019). Accordingly, many schools keen to increase their own voluntary language uptake at Key Stage 4, encourage their pupils to join optional enhancement activities such as the *Routes into Languages* programme that offer tailored activities designed and implemented by university language pupils (Lanvers, 2020) to improve and sustain interest in MFL study. The decentralised nature of MFL policy and increasing devolution of power to individual schools to set their own policy decisions (Freedman, 2022) has only complicated the issue and recent studies suggest that school policies that treat all pupils the same - either through an all-compulsory model or an all-optional one are likely to yield better student motivation and increased enjoyment of the subject (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019).

Language take-up since Brexit

In England, since the decision to leave the European Union following the referendum of 2016, increasing attention has been paid to the topic of the languages' crisis in the national media (Cannadine, 2019). The 2016 referendum served to bring opposition to languages other than English, immigration and fear of the 'other' to the forefront of public debate (Lanvers, 2017, p. 776). Within this debate, the desire to speak or learn another language has been suggested as promoting an internationalist mindset (Bowler, 2020) and therefore firmly positioning oneself on one side of an increasingly polarised and contentious issue.

Questions at the time of whether the UK would really need to learn modern foreign languages after Brexit reinforced negative stances to languages other than one's own. There is compelling evidence that these perspectives started to spread and have now begun to settle in some secondary school learners' minds (Kelly, 2018). Declining motivation towards language learning is more common amongst pupils in English schools since the referendum, particularly in those performing below average and with a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils (Tinsley and Doležal, 2018).

The appetite for MFL learning in the classroom has gradually weakened, according to 25% of teachers questioned in an annual nationwide review in 2019 (Tinsley, 2019). They reported negative and xenophobic attitudes towards language learning in their classrooms that closely resemble those described in the mainstream media. Teachers note that some pupils and their parents are of the opinion that language learning is of 'little use now that we are leaving the European Union' (Tinsley, 2019; p. 8) and believe that school trips abroad are primarily redundant in the wake of Brexit (Collen, 2020). Moreover, these views tend to proliferate among certain ethnic groups of learners; children of immigrants, those of a mixed heritage, or of EAL (English as an additional language) status are more likely to hold positive views and be predisposed towards language study than white British pupils, given that they have witnessed their parents' previous experiences of learning English to improve their own life chances (Collen, 2020). However, not all consequences of Brexit are expected to be negative: research has indicated that leaving the European Union might stimulate an interest in learning the languages that are currently less taught in the UK (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019). Recent reports commissioned on the UK's language needs moving forward have tentatively proposed the idea that some language skills will become even more valued in the UK's post-Brexit future (Kelly, 2018; Tinsley and Board, 2017).

Socioeconomic status and language learning

The pervasive social inequality of opportunity available to all pupils to study languages in England is a persistent feature of previous research (Lanvers et al., 2018). The existing social divide in language study in England is denoted by fee-paying schools that select their intake

teaching significantly more MFL than those that do not (Lanvers, 2017). Only 18% of state schools currently make a language compulsory for pupils aged 14-16 across the UK (Lanvers, 2017). English schools with above average provision of free school meals (FSM) to pupils, a reliable indicator of the socioeconomic mix of a school's intake, are 50% less likely to make languages compulsory beyond the age of 14 (Tinsley and Board, 2013). At university, pupils from independent schools make up 28% of entrants for language study, compared to 10% across other degree subjects, making it the most elite subject to enter from secondary schools or sixth-form colleges.

Recent research has concentrated on how the social class aspect of the decline in uptake is perpetuated by inherent sociodemographic issues (Taylor and Marsden, 2014; Board and Tinsley, 2015) in England that surround how state schools may select their intake of pupils. The recent academisation of institutions has contributed to this social divide - academies are the schools that share the most characteristics with independent schools and are able to control their admissions and have above average academic achievement (Freedman, 2022). Schools that have a high level of academic success in England typically have a higher percentage of pupils taking GCSE languages. This market-like school environment (Woods et al., 2005) allows the strongest performing academies with the most desirable catchment areas (Burgess et al, 2014) to attract higher-achieving pupils and shape their policies according to the social characteristics of their intake (Lanvers, 2018). Therefore, selective and high achieving academies remain the institutions that are most likely to offer languages to only certain pupils in England (Board and Tinsley, 2015), helping to propagate the current social divide.

Some studies exploring this emerging connection between socioeconomic status and language learning have similarly found that learning outcomes in MFL study are connected to socioeconomic status (Sanjurjo et al., 2017) and motivation (Kormos and Kiddle, 2013). Other more recent research variations on the socioeconomic divide in language learning have employed a *Bourdieusian* conceptual framework as a way of exploring how the divide is represented in secondary schools and examining how learners from different backgrounds draw on different discourses (including those of value) that surround language learning as a means of accessing different forms of capital (Foucault, 1972) that MFL learning can come to constitute (Coffey, 2016).

In the classroom itself, there is a growing body of literature indicating that English pupils dislike the language learning experience they are presented with (Lanvers and Chambers, 2019). Assessment and curriculum constraints lead to frustration, boredom and more disruption in MFL lessons than in other classes (Taylor and Marsden, 2014). The increasing number of studies exploring this phenomenon reveal that this dislike for language study is a preference that is stronger in boys (Courtney et al., 2017; Bartram, 2006; Carr and Pauwels, 2005). Pupils themselves describe being frequently demotivated by mundane and repetitive language teaching methods in class (Williams et al., 2002) and languages are frequently described as 'boring' or too hard by secondary learners (Lanvers, 2017). Stables and Wilkeley's (1999) study into the motivation of 14-year-old pupils at ten state schools found that pupils perceived the usefulness of MFL study to them according to simplistic notions of future career relevance – i.e. only those who want to live in X country study its language. Knowing that they may give up languages after the age of 14 has also negatively impacted pupils' motivation for language study (Evans and Fisher, 2009). Wingate's (2018) study set out to collect empirical evidence from MFL classrooms in England of current teaching practices to investigate the dominant MFL teaching methodologies. The Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) was designed to promote an emphasis on meaning-focused interaction in the target language and is frequently promoted as a popular contemporary teaching methodology to resemble real-life communication (Wingate, 2018). Her study found an MFL classroom culture of low expectations, lack of challenge and light entertainment where teaching practices were devoid of any orientation towards CLT (Wingate, 2018).

Other interpretations of the crisis have focused on pupils' own perceptions of their abilities in language study, noted to be important drivers of their own motivation towards language learning. Findings of these studies reveal that pupils find language learning to be boring, irrelevant and only suitable for the 'brainy' amongst them (Board and Tinsley, 2014) and that many suffer from low self-esteem regarding their own language learning ability. Graham's (2004) study into the attitudes of pupils at 16 + towards French corroborates that lower-ability learners do become prone to low motivation and passivity in the face of difficulty. The

pupils in her study were more likely to display low levels of meta-cognition or personal executive control over their learning and a reluctance to accept responsibility for their lack of success in languages (Graham, 2004). Other more recent reports indicate that achieving a C grade at GCSE is harder in some MFL subjects than all other curriculum subjects except the individual sciences (Ofqual, 2019). The perceived harsh marking of exam assessments (Myers, 2016) contributes to this feeling, particularly the revised structure and content of the new GCSE exam, (Smith, 2015) and this can possibly be viewed as another catalyst for the lack of self-efficacy that exists in pupils. School policies that often encourage only high-achieving pupils to continue with language study beyond Key Stage 3 in order to maintain their league table standings and performance-based GCSE scores can perpetuate these negative perceptions amongst pupils (Lanvers, 2020).

1.7 <u>Explaining the research setting - the Norfolk factor:</u>

The county of Norfolk provides the setting for this research study. There is a compelling need to explore the experiences of pupils learning languages in this region that is of particular interest given its below average levels of educational attainment in KS2 and KS4 outcomes (Norfolk Office of Data and Analytics, 2024) compared to national averages, and the poor language learning record and provision amongst its schools. The inadequate academic achievement endemic to the region has manifested itself in different ways: GCSE results in the regional capital Norwich are frequently below the national average. In 2017, just 35.9% of pupils achieved a 9-5 pass in English and Maths compared to 42.9% nationally (Norwich City Council, 2019); the proportion of school leavers that go on to attend university is typically much lower than the national average of 32.6% (DfE, 2017); many of the secondary schools in Norfolk tend to fall into the bottom 10% of schools nationally (Ridealgh, 2016) and in language learning, the results of pupils in the region trend towards the lower end of annual tables measuring GCSE language take-up nationwide (BBC, 2019).

Norfolk is a county that suffers from particularly low levels of language learning take-up. In 2016, less than 200 young people in the county took a language for A-Level study (Ridealgh, 2016). Furthermore, there are only a handful of schools in the county that offer the

opportunity to pupils to study all of the major modern European languages that are normally offered to pupils - French, Spanish and German - at GCSE. The majority of schools only timetable and prioritise one or two of these languages (Ridealgh, 2016). Pupils in the region wishing to continue language study beyond Key Stage 4 to A-Level have to search hard among the limited sixth forms or college providers that are able to offer the language they want to study and be willing to travel to attend that location. The county's geographical isolation further reflects the range of opportunities offered to learners. Schools in the East of England region are more likely to report greater difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff (Tinsley, 2018) after Brexit which can affect the range and frequency that languages are offered to their cohort. This picture becomes more alarming when one considers that across the United Kingdom, evidence suggests that young people from working class or disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to have the opportunity to learn and continue studying languages at secondary school compared to their more affluent peers. (Gayton, 2010; 2014).

The English Indices of Deprivation 2019 (IoD, 2019), produced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2019) identifies the relative deprivation of a region using a wide range of indicators. Its most recent update in 2019 suggests that across all domains, Norfolk is most deprived in the domain of Education, Skills and Training with a rank of 34 out of 151 upper tier local authorities (1 being the most deprived). The county has pockets of entrenched social deprivation which have existed for generations. Norwich, though often perceived as being a relatively affluent city, scored second to bottom on the 2016 Social Mobility Index (Social Mobility Commission, 2016) and was ranked the second-worst performing local authority nationwide, denoting it as a social mobility *coldspot* - where limited education opportunities exist for young people to acquire the skills they need to achieve good outcomes in life (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). The local authority of Norwich has a much higher percentage of 16 –18-year-olds classed as NEETs (not in education, employment or training) than the rest of the East of England region (Norwich County Council, 2022).

The overall language learning picture in this region is therefore concerning and deserving of further investigation. The cultural homogeneity of Norfolk, the relative lack of linguistic diversity that exists (95% of its residents speak English as a main language) and its

predominantly white ethic makeup compose a fitting background for this study given the recent political issues surrounding the referendum that have played out in the wider media towards those that speak and use other languages (Seargeant, 2018). The post-Brexit environment continues to imply that negative views towards language study (Kelly, 2018) are now more common in schools. A growing body of literature exploring the links between Euroscepticism, xenophobia and reluctance towards language learning (Lanvers, 2018) in schools and the findings of previous studies that indicate that learners' views towards language study are more likely to be influenced by those in their immediate home background (Martin, 2023; Bartram, 2006) invite interesting debates about monolingual influences, the presence or absence of language role models and make this research a pertinent topic to explore in the region.

At the same time, there also exists vast potential for the region to improve upon its language learning potential and possibilities to develop its provision for learners. This would also suggest that there is an urgent justification for this study being set in this region. Increased migration to the region - from within the EU and outside - has meant that 1 in 5 school children in Norfolk now speak English as an additional language (EAL) and also speak a language other than English as a first language at home. Schools with a higher proportion of EAL pupils are more likely to have a better resourced and supported languages department as teachers often believe that the presence of these pupils and their improved ability in languages is more likely to raise its status within the school and encourage and motivate other pupils to do well (Evans, 2018).

The study therefore draws on the unique language learning context that Norfolk provides to explore the decline in uptake of MFL study in England through listening to how pupils in this region speak about making their language learning choices and the factors that influence their decisions. It will explore their motivation for MFL study, as well as their perceptions of its value to them. Through listening to how their teachers speak about their experiences and the uptake of MFL in their schools, a more detailed picture of the region's language learning picture can emerge and a deeper understanding of the local and national issues that continue to turn pupils away from language study.

1.8 <u>Overview of the chapters of this thesis:</u>

This thesis consists of ten chapters. In this section, I will briefly summarise the contents of the chapters that follow, drawing attention to those where the study's research questions are answered.

<u>Chapter 2: Review of the literature:</u>

This chapter introduces the background and current climate of MFL learning in England including how the effects of the post-Brexit context have been felt. It provides a detailed and chronological review of how national language teaching policy has evolved in England since 1991 by tracing a history of the major decision-making and policy changes implemented by the primary political parties. This review offers an understanding of how the rationales and ethos behind language learning and teaching in England have evolved over the last thirty-five years. It connects the policy changes that have occurred to the mood and motivation that exists for language study in England's secondary schools in the present day and offers a means of understanding the current criteria for assessment, curriculum and pupil progress that exists in schools.

<u>Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework:</u>

This chapter begins with a synopsis of the theoretical influences used in this study. It provides a definition and explanation of how the key theoretical concepts that inspire this research: *motivation, positioning theory, identity, agency and discourse* can be applied to my research questions and have been employed to explore the uptake deficit of MFL study in the context of secondary school learning in England.

<u>Chapter 4: Methodology:</u>

This chapter describes the methodological design of the study. It introduces the research approaches and explains how the primary analytical framework, *positioning analysis,* can be

used as a means of analysing the positions that pupils take up in conversation regarding their choices for language study and their motivation. It explains the justifications for using this method of analysis and the methodological decisions taken regarding the data collection methods, participants, sampling and handling of the data. Finally, it outlines the potential limitations of this research as well as its ethical concerns and the procedures that were followed.

Chapter 5: Pupil results:

This chapter begins by outlining the findings of the pupil focus group interviews and individual interviews. Through organising each section of the findings thematically, an answer is provided to each part of the first research question:

How do pupils position themselves and negotiate their identities as language learners regarding:

    a) *Their motivation towards continuing to study MFL?*
    b) *Their responses to the messages they receive regarding MFL's significance from their institution, home and local community?*
    c) *The future value of MFL to their lives?*

Chapter 6: Pupil interviews analysis and commentary

This chapter provides analysis and commentary on the key themes emerging from the pupil individual and focus group interviews. It examines the pupils' responses to their MFL decisions through adopting a positioning analysis approach to interpret the positions they take up in conversation and using key features of positioning theory to highlight their experiences and perceptions of its value.

Chapter 7: Teacher results

The findings from the teacher interviews are subsequently outlined and presented in this chapter. The second research question of this study: *What can teachers' self-positioning in narratives tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL in England*? is answered in this section; the response is presented through a thematic structuring of the chapter to present the main features of the teachers' positioning towards themselves and other protagonists in the MFL environment.

Chapter 8: Teacher interviews analysis and commentary

This chapter provides a detailed analysis and commentary on the positions that teachers assume in narratives regarding the decline in MFL uptake that offer an insight into answering this study's third research question. It also highlights the emerging themes from performing positioning analysis on their interview responses. The second research question of this study: *What can teachers' self-positioning in narratives tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL in England?* is answered in more detail towards the end of the chapter.

Chapter 9: Discussion

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the qualitative data that have emerged from this study and draws connections to the key theoretical concepts that have influenced it. Through the findings and from the discussion, new constructions of MFL learner identity emerge as well as understandings of how learners speak about and construct their agency in their language learning choices. The discussion chapter offers a reconceptualising of Dörnyei's *L2 Motivational Self-system* (Dörnyei, 2005) through a MFL lens to presents new perspectives on how learners can be enabled to access a vision of their *ideal* L2 selves.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

This chapter answers the third research question of the study: *How do the findings to questions 1 and 2 help to explain the decline in uptake of MFL that has occurred in England*

over the last 20 years? It synthesises the overall conclusions that can be drawn from the study that help to explain the decline in uptake of language learning. It presents the directions that further research on this topic can take. Based on the findings, it offers concrete and realisable recommendations for encouraging learner engagement in language classrooms for teachers, as well as implications for school leadership and policy makers on how to implement policy reforms that can provoke lasting change.

1.9 <u>Terminology and writing conventions.</u>

I have chosen to adopt certain conventions of working during the writing of this thesis and of labelling specific terms that are often reused in this study. These will be explained here for the benefit of the reader. The term *MFL* in the English school curriculum is employed according to its contemporary usage – *modern foreign languages* - with the term *foreign* emphasising a language other than English being taught. The origin of this term is rooted in the need to distinguish the teaching of modern languages i.e. - those of western Europe - from their ancient and classical counterparts. Although classifying the description of languages that are learned in the classroom which are not English as *foreign* (Kohl, 2018) may contain possible unhelpful ramifications for learners' perceptions of those languages, it is a term that continues to be used. In this thesis, the terms *community* or *home languages* is reserved for those languages that might stem from pupils' particular ethnic background. Approximately 30,000 pupils sit a language exam in a community language each year in England (ASCL, 2021) and nine out of ten schools now offer support for their pupils to take a community language at GCSE (Collen and Duff, 2024). These pupils are often referred to as being part of a schools' *ESL* intake, that is pupils that have English as a second language.

In this thesis, the term *MFL study* or *learning* is used interchangeably with the terms 'language learning', ' language study' and 'L2 (second language) learning' and 'foreign language learning' (FLL) to denote the learning and teaching of modern languages in an official English secondary school-based context. The schools in this study that receive their funding from the local authority or local government are referred to as state schools rather

than maintained schools. All pupil and teacher comments from the interviews have been reproduced verbatim in this thesis, following the complete and full transcription of the interview data by hand. Double speech marks have been used to indicate where a comment has been taken directly from the pupil or teacher interviews. The use of single speech marks in this thesis has been reserved for the use of direct citations from referenced works. All grammatical errors on the account of the participants and any vernacular language they used have also been included in the write-up to preserve authenticity. Pseudonyms have been used in the write-up of this thesis to ensure that the full anonymity of the participants has been respected - no real names are included in this write up. Further details surrounding the ethical procedures that were followed can be found in the *methodology* chapter of this thesis. A full list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this study has been made available in the glossary section which is in the opening pages.

Chapter 2. Literature review

Introduction

The language learning proficiency of the UK's native English-speaking population continues to attract greater attention since the decision to leave the European Union following the referendum vote of 2016 (Lanvers, 2017). The genesis of Britain's reluctance to learn other languages and the linguistic homogeneity (Phillipson, 1992) that exists among its native population has often been ascribed to various factors including longstanding class-specific mentalities of Europhobia, insularity (Coleman, 2009) and assumptions of English's dominance as a global language (Crystal, 2012). Despite the varied community languages (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, 2019) that can be found spoken in the United Kingdom daily, its citizens have acquired this reputation as reluctant linguists – giving birth to the contradiction of linguistically diverse immigrant communities existing amongst a predominantly monolingual native-born population (Lanvers, 2011). In formal education, language learning competencies that are developed through classroom learning continue to be much lower in the UK compared to those in EU countries (British Academy, 2016) and UK citizens appear to have much lower motivation to learn languages than their EU counterparts (Bartram, 2006). Instrumental rationales for the value of language learning that are presented to pupils in schools are often based on the economic benefit to their future careers and distant trajectories in fields that may appear unappealing or irrelevant (Graham and Santos, 2015). Often these are elitist notions that thereby contribute to the perceptions of some learners that success in languages is irrelevant for them and unattainable (Lanvers, 2017).

Among schools with a higher intake of pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, rigid and transmitted intergenerational ideas perpetuate their pupils' beliefs about the difficulty of the subject and the lack of relevance of languages to their lives (Myers, 2016). Recent government policy initiatives regarding MFL have not improved these perceptions. A series of new performance measures in schools that prioritise the learning of certain subjects over others as well as modifications to the GCSE grade boundaries (Ofqual, 2015) and changes to

the MFL GCSE syllabus and exam content (Wilson et al., 2016) have amplified the debate surrounding the elitism and unnecessary rigour that exists in language learning. These changes have further inflated pupils' anxieties surrounding the difficulty of MFL and foregrounded their concerns about it being a much harder subject in which to achieve a high grade (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019). The relationship between government policy and pupil motivation towards MFL study is therefore recognised as mutually shaping and identifies that the current language learning landscape in England's schools is one that has gradually shifted from a situation of compulsion to persuasion (Pickett, 2010). Since the 2004 Labour government decision to make languages a non-statutory element of the Key Stage 4 curriculum, this change has accelerated. The gravity and impact of this landmark policy intervention was highlighted by the fact that less than a year after its introduction, only a third of state schools required their pupils to continue studying MFL at GCSE (Language Trends, 2005). Secondary school pupils now find themselves being presented with a much wider range of GCSE options to choose from rather than continuing to learn a language (Tinsley, 2018). Their choices can be attributed in part to the newly afforded freedom from the National Curriculum that certain schools such as academies now enjoy (Glatter, 2012). Government language education policy in England is recognised as therefore being highly consequential for its stakeholders and the subject of boundless debate in the national press, online blogs and academic journals.

In this chapter, I outline the changing national language policy landscape in England since the first National Curriculum for languages was introduced in 1991 and trace the significant language policy developments that have occurred since this time. Understanding the history of contemporary national language policy provides further background context to the current educational period and helps to explain the languages status quo in England during which this study took place. This literature review takes the form of a narrative review chronologically documenting the educational policy changes that have occurred in England affecting MFL learning in secondary schools since the year 2000. Doing this will provide a historical perspective assessing the last twenty-five years of educational policy under successive governments and enable a better understanding of their direct relationship to the current MFL learning landscape in secondary schools. Documenting these changes in a chronological way allows for the rationales behind specific policy changes that have occurred

to be explored as well as permitting insights into their impact on the uptake of GCSE MFL learning in schools. This also permits a better understanding of how the current MFL learning context has evolved in schools to this day and how student motivation and enthusiasm for the subject in the classroom can be shaped by policy changes. Chronicling the historical significance of some of these events that are related to Brexit, for example, can further help to explain the responses and experiences of some of the teachers and pupils in this study.

The year 2000 provides an appropriate juncture at which to begin this review as it enables a quarter-century of education policy to be analysed and was the year in which the incumbent Labour government endorsed the findings of the seminal *Nuffield Languages Inquiry* which had been ordered to urgently assess the UK's language capacity through an economic and skills perspective. The inquiry recognised that the government had no coherent approach to learning languages, meaning that young people in Britain continued to be at a growing disadvantage in the recruitment market compared to their European counterparts. It recommended that language learning be made a key skill for everyone and led to the new *National Languages' Strategy*, *Languages for all: Languages for Life,* published by the Department for Skills and Education in 2002.

 An overview of the education and pedagogy policy changes that have occurred over the last 25 years is represented in figure 1 overleaf:

Term	UK government	Key publications, policies and curriculum change	MFL pedagogy and methodology changes
2000-2010	**Labour**	**2000**- Nuffield Languages Inquiry **2002** - *Languages for All: Languages for Life* (National Strategy for Languages) **2004** - Removal of languages from the compulsory element of the KS4 curriculum **2007** - *Dearing Report* - Languages made compulsory in the KS2 curriculum (Primary). Specialist Language Colleges created & *Routes into Languages* - university outreach programme to encourage MFL learning in secondary schools	**1900s**- Grammar Translation Method emerged that focused on the explicit teaching of grammar in the belief that mastery of the syntax and other mechanics of the language is the key to effective L2 acquisition. **1930s**- Situational Language Teaching emerges- a focus on teaching language through the context of situations that students might encounter in everyday life. Behaviourist - language as a set of habits formed through repetition and reinforcement.
2010-2015	**Coalition Government (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats)**	**2010** - Key language infrastructure broken down. CILT (Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research) closed down, QCDA (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency) closed as well as TDA (Training and Development Agency) **2010** - *Academies Act*. Devolution of independence to academies. Schools allowed to convert to academy status if high performing or disadvantaged. **2010** - *Ebacc* Introduced. All pupils required to sit GCSEs in *Ebacc* subjects: Maths, English, Science, a humanities and one MFL subject.	**1960s**- Audiolingual method with emphasis on Behaviouralism and repetition/intensive oral drilling of grammatical patterns/ pronunciation. **1960s –** Total Physical Response- method of teaching based on teaching language and vocabulary through physical actions to respond to verbal input. **1970s**- Communicative Language teaching emerged- a pedagogical approach that aimed to prioritise communicating in the target language as both the means and goal of modern language teaching.
2015-2024 2010-16 2016-2019 2019-22	**Conservative** David Cameron Theresa May Boris Johnson	**2016** - *Progress 8* accountability measure introduced to assess student progress since leaving primary school with their peers. **2016** - Widespread changes to the GCSE exam. New grading scale of 1-9 replaces A*- U. Controlled	**2016**- TSC MFL Pedagogy Review published led by Ian Bauckham recommended changes to the ways in which MFL was taught in Schools. **2016-** The growth of influence and spread of the ideas of

		assessment replaced by end of term exams in MFL.	Gianfranco Conti on MFL teaching and practice, particularly the EPI method.
2022-22	Liz Truss		
2022-24	Rishi Sunak	**2022** - Changes to the MFL GCSE exam. 1200 items of lexical content for the foundation tier and 1700 for the higher tier expected to be learned by pupils.	

Figure 1: Significant education policy changes enacted by successive governments over the last 25 years.

2.1 <u>The crisis of uptake in MFL learning in England: the facts</u>

'Language learning on the brink of crisis'

(TES, November 2002)

The position of modern foreign languages in the English curriculum has been under threat for many years; it is a status that has been characterised by its limited provision in secondary schools and a sharp decline in the number of pupils who go on to sit a language at KS4. This state of affairs has been significantly exacerbated by the decision to remove language learning from the compulsory element of the National Curriculum in 2004: an event noted as having a seismic effect on the overall number of MFL entries at GCSE. It was a decision that would be later described as:

The single most striking piece of educational vandalism (that has been) inflicted on the young people of this country by a Government who have claimed to be, and indeed have been, keen on education. (O'Neill, 2009)

The crisis surrounding the learning and teaching of languages in English schools has not affected everyone equally. 47% percent of young people in England took a language GCSE in 2017 (Tinsley and Doležal, 2018). In independent schools, this figure was higher at 76% (Tinsley and Doležal, 2018). Regarding the limited provision, more than a third of English state schools are currently noted as not even teaching languages in Year 9 (13–14-year-olds). These schools tend to have a high proportion of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) – an indicator of higher social deprivation – and tend to be located in urban areas in the North of England (Tinsley and Doležal, 2018).

Since 2002, the total number of entries to MFL exams across the three main subjects of French, Spanish and German in England at KS4 has declined precipitously by almost two thirds (Churchward, 2019) and by almost a half since 2005. Entries for French continue to be the most affected, with 2024 seeing almost half the number of entries of 2005, and an overall fall in entries of almost two thirds since 2002. German MFL GCSE entries have been reduced by two thirds since 2005 and have continued to fall year on year. Since 2002, Spanish entries have been increasing in England, to the extent that they are now noted as having only 5,000 fewer entries than French in 2023 (Collen and Duff, 2024). This trend has been attributed to the rise in popularity of Spain as a holiday destination and the growing appeal of Spanish to adolescents familiar with its use in contemporary TV programmes, movies and other wider media. Figures 2 and 3 overleaf depict these trends.
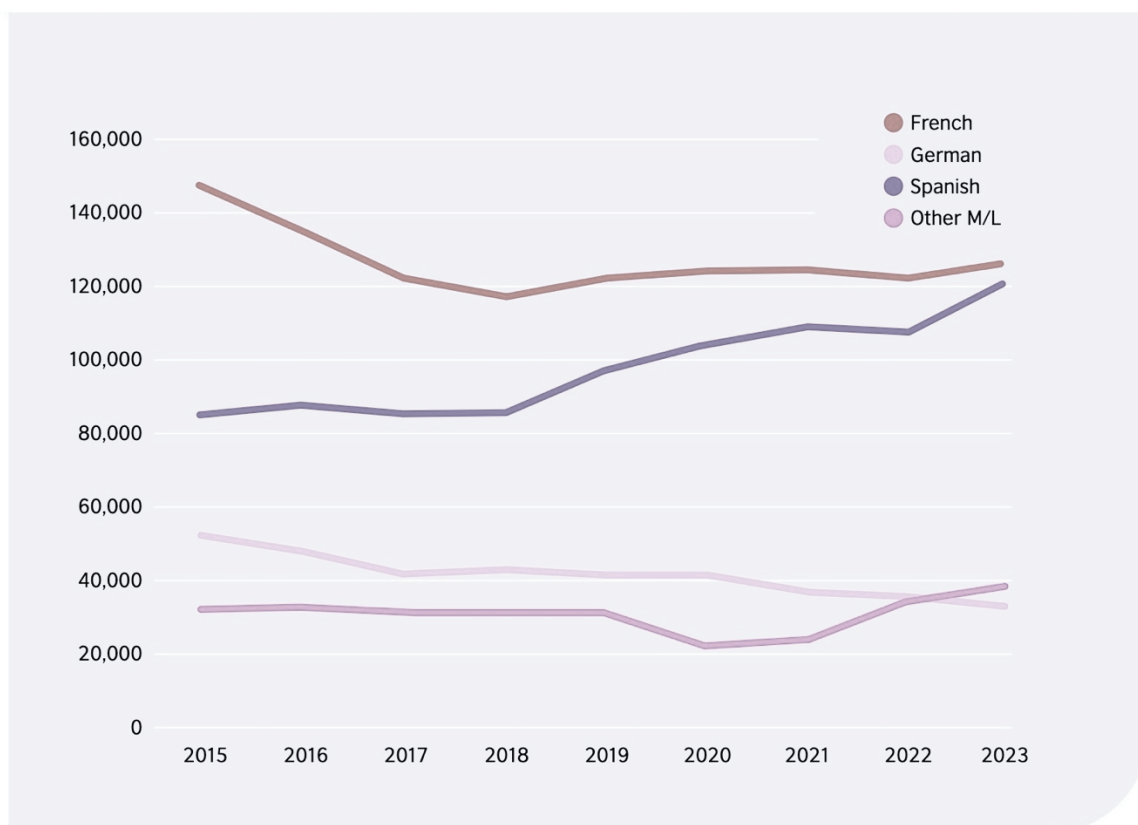
Fig 2: GCSE Entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015-2023

(JCQ, 2024.)

	2005 baseline	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
French	251,706	147,356	135,401	121,095	117,925	122,803	124,404	124,739	122,746	125,151
German	101,466	51,986	47,913	41,762	42,509	41,222	40,748	36,933	34,966	33,677
Spanish	57,731	85,217	87,581	85,184	89,577	96,811	104,280	108,982	107,488	120,198
Other M/L	28,182	32,090	32,704	31,668	31,437	30,997	22,344	24,103	35,202	38,429

Fig 3: GCSE Entries in French, German, Spanish and Other Modern Languages in England 2015-2023

(JCQ, 2024.)
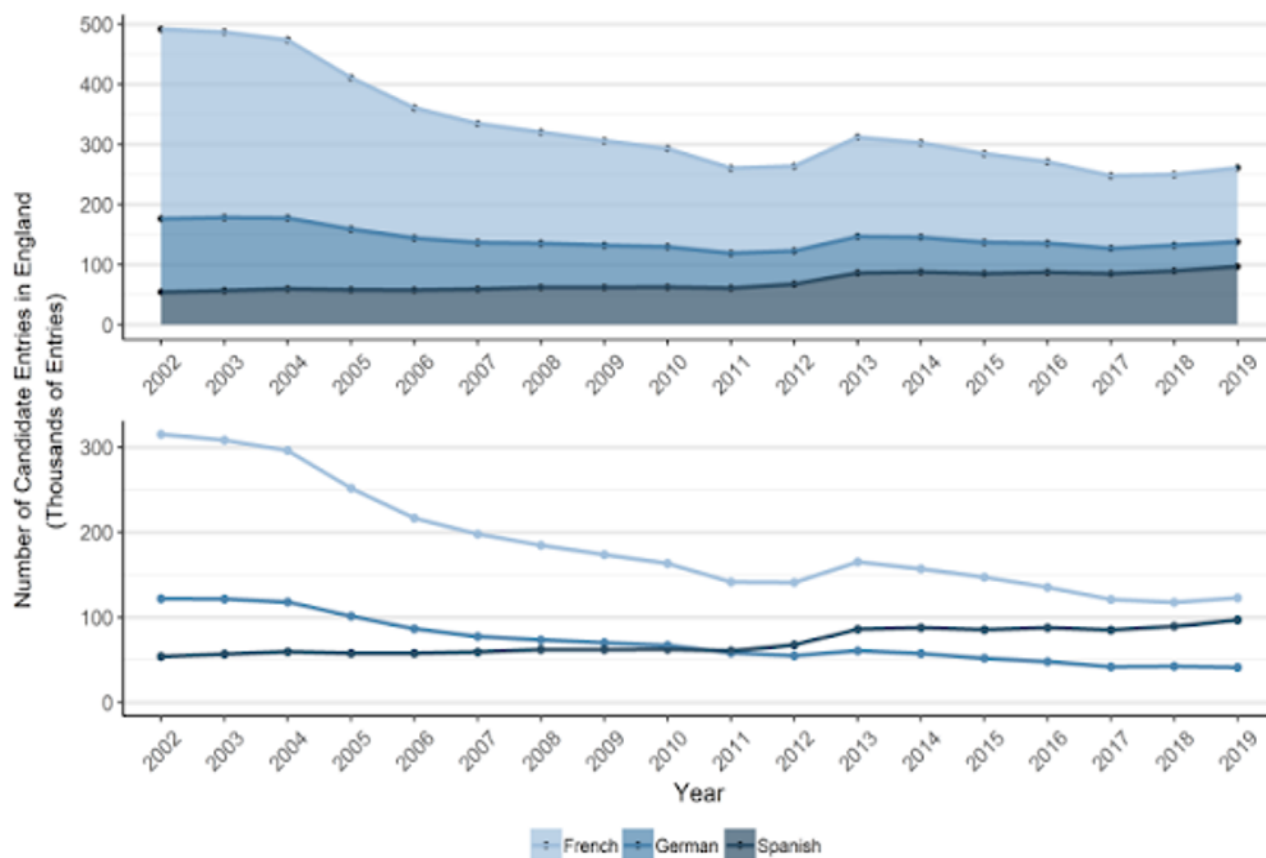
Fig 4: Number of MFL entries in England from 2002-2019 (JCQ, 2019).

The first graph shows combined entries to French, German and Spanish for each year from 2002-19; the second shows entries for the individual MFL subjects for the same period.

From 2012-13, an increase in the number of GCSE entries was noted across all curriculum subjects, as depicted in Figure 4. This slight improvement can be attributed to the interval of the two years since the government introduced the *Ebacc* in 2010. The *Ebacc* is a performance-based measure in secondary schools designed to encourage pupils to study a core set of academic subjects, including MFL. Since 2023, there have been modest improvements in the number of MFL entries in French and Spanish nationwide, with French increasing by around 6% and Spanish by an average of 8% (Ofqual, 2024). This is part of an overall trend in which the take up of French has improved slightly since 2019, with Spanish numbers continuing their steady rise and German uptake continuing to decline. On average, around 51% of pupils in Year 11 and 52% of pupils in Year 10 were recognised as studying a language for GCSE in 2022 (Collen, 2022). This is a figure that is still a great distance from the

government's ambitions of 90% of pupils taking a language (Collen and Duff, 2024) and a remarkable decline from the proportion of pupils in England entered for a MFL GCSE in 2002 - 76% of all pupils (Broady, 2020).

Pupils' attainment in MFL at GCSE in English secondary schools has stabilised in French and German since 2004, with results in Spanish showing an improvement in the proportion of pupils attaining a C grade or higher up to 2018 (relative to its increased number of entries since that time). In 2016, a revised GCSE MFL exam content was introduced in English schools that altered the GCSE grading system from 9-1 (Ofqual, 2015) and made changes to how assessment was carried out. It has raised grade boundaries, removed Controlled Assessment (CA) from the GCSE exam and made changes to the listening and reading papers that affected how long pupils would have to prepare for the examination, as well as their access to dictionaries during exams. It also altered how pupils would be allocated to assessment tiers (Ofqual, 2023). Among MFL teachers, the reaction has been fervent. Concerns have been expressed that modern languages are now among the least generously graded subjects in the curriculum (Thomson, 2019), a perception that has now filtered through to pupils who make their GCSE choices accordingly (Parrish, 2020; Lanvers et al., 2019).

The number of pupils taking MFL at Advanced level has followed a similar trend to that of the GCSE entries: numbers taking an A-level in MFL fell from 40,000 in 1996 to 27,000 in 2005 but has remained relatively steady since then (Muradás-Taylor, 2023). In the state sector, currently only 47% of schools report having a post-16 provision in languages (Collen and Duff, 2024) with 39% having no provision at all, and 10% having shared arrangements with other schools. Spanish remains the most popular A-level language according to official data with an increase of 2.3% from 2023 to 2024 (Ofqual, 2024), and the only MFL subject at A-level that has risen since 2005. A decline in the total number of entries in all MFL subjects at A-level since 2020 has been noted, with German registering just 2,198 A-level entries in 2023 (Collen and Duff, 2024). In schools that do teach languages post-16, teachers recognise that organising the provision of language teaching for the few pupils wishing to continue its learning at KS5 is often difficult, with reports of classes not being run, or Year 12 and 13 classes having to be combined together (Collen and Duff, 2024).

The training and recruitment of new MFL teachers to the profession continues to be a systemic issue at the root of the crisis of MFL teaching and learning in England. 33% of state secondary schools responding to a survey on the state of language teaching at post-16 level confirm that the recruitment of qualified teachers is a major issue (Collen and Duff, 2024). MFL has long been recognised for its severe shortages of specialist teachers working in England (McLean et al.,2024) and the failure of successive governments to meet teacher recruitment targets. For the past three years, MFL teacher training recruitment figures have not been met: In 2022/23 and 2023/24, only 33% of the government's target for recruiting initial teacher training (ITT) candidates in MFL were reached in England (Gov.uk, 2024), a figure much lower than the average of 50% of recruitment targets that were missed across all secondary school subjects. In 2024/5, the figure improved to 43% but MFL continues to be recognised as challenging subject to which to recruit trainees, who are often discouraged by the workload and high stress environment in its classrooms (Conti, 2016). This is despite the bursaries of up to £25,000 and scholarships of £27,000 (DfE, 2024) that are on offer to MFL postgraduate trainees who must complete two placement periods in secondary schools across a yearlong training schedule that includes a university-based programme of theoretical learning. Since 2019, the proportion of ITT trainees in MFL from outside the UK has risen, leading to an 87% increase in ITT applications for languages (McLean et al., 2024) in 2023/4. However, this has only translated into a 33% increase in registrations suggesting that the financial incentives on their own may play a part in these changing figures and recruiting eligible candidates who meet all the relevant criteria to be a languages' teacher continues to be an issue.

This plethora of issues in secondary MFL education continue to affect the number of pupils who choose to continue to study a language in higher education, and therefore the provision and number of courses available. The total number of undergraduate pupils enrolled on language degrees in the UK has fallen from over 160,000 in 2003 to 84,520 in 2014 (Wyburd, 2018) and again to 75,145 in 2019 (HESA, 2021). The number of universities offering languages at degree level fell from 105 in the year 2000 to 62 in 2013 (Boffey, 2013). Many universities have since decided to either close down or severely reduce their modern language departments owing to an interplay of factors. These include the reduced numbers of pupils choosing to continue the learning of MFL since 2004, and the relatively prohibitive

costs of maintaining and supporting an expensive language department's staffing requirements since a new fee regime was introduced in 2012 (Mossman, 2013). Since 2014, 17 post-1992 universities have lost their MFL degrees, bringing the total number of department closures to 28 and leaving modern languages remaining in just ten universities nationwide (Bowler, 2025). Universities offering modern languages as an undergraduate degree option continue to be scarce and tend to be increasingly contained within an elite group of Russell Group institutions, making them less accessible to pupils from all backgrounds through higher barriers for entry that they demand. Such a situation has given rise to the belief that language learning at degree level is now solely the preserve of those learners who come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Lanvers et al., 2018).

2.2 The evolution of MFL classroom pedagogy

Up to the mid 20th Century, the Grammar Translation method remained an influential language teaching pedagogy in English modern language classrooms. This method involved the teacher explaining new grammar rules in the mother tongue, exemplifying them in the target language (TL) and then the class practising their newly acquired knowledge through translation out of and into the TL. The GT method focuses on the explicit teaching of grammar in the belief that mastery of the syntax and other mechanics of the language is the key to effective L2 acquisition (Conti, 2016). Its principles view language as a set of rules and words to memorise rather than an instrument to be used in real life communicative contexts (Conti, 2016). In the 1970s, as theories of communicative competence (Hymes, 1971) emerged, the idea developed that knowing a language involved more than just grammatical knowledge (Pachler et al., 2014).

Situational Language Teaching (SLT) first emerged as a new approach to language teaching in the 1930s and 1940s in Britain. It focused on teaching language through the reinforcement of basic linguistic structures in different contexts that pupils might encounter in everyday life, and through placing learners in situations where they had to use the L2 to communicate naturally and spontaneously. SLT, also known as the 'oral method', was developed in the 1930s by British applied linguists Harold Palmer and A.S Hornby and prioritised accurate

language production that focused on sentence level grammar and structures through the situational presentation of new language patterns (Smith and Loewen, 2018). In a typical languages' lesson, this might take place through the teacher presenting a new language structure which pupils would then practise in a controlled context such as in a roleplay or in pairs, before continuing to use these new elements in a less controlled speaking activity or in written work. In this context, the theme of the lesson might be set around a 'situation', such as 'ordering a meal at a restaurant', in which pupils would use their new vocabulary learned in the first stage to create a dialogue in the second stage, where they might each take turns to roleplay as customers and waiters. One of the tenets of SLT was that speaking and listening came before the reading and writing of a language, and that language was first and foremost a spoken phenomenon. The benefits of its pedagogy were cited as offering pupils a contextualised opportunity to practise spoken language in realistic situations to make it more meaningful, while also providing an inductive approach to learning grammar– to help learners develop a more intuitive understanding of its patterns and structures (Linguarian, 2025). However, as the methodology presented a fairly rigorously structured and repetitive teacher-centred approach that over-emphasised accuracy in the classroom, it was relatively short-lived in relation to other more modern pedagogies that have emerged since. Some of its principles, however, have remained popular and many are still evident in MFL classrooms today: the idea that languages should be taught in context, and that new words and linguistic structures should be introduced within meaningful contexts to make them relevant and easier to understand (British Council, 2023).

SLT shared a similar focus on oracy and accuracy of language production with the Audiolingual Method (ALM). The ALM emerged in MFL teaching not long afterwards and had first been developed in the USA during WW2 as a rapid method of training its soldiers to develop language skills. Influenced by behaviouralism, the ALM focused on the concept that language learning is a process of habit formation and that languages are merely a set of habits that can be acquired through conditioning. Audiolingualism viewed foreign languages as a set of structures, the patterns of which can be deduced through analysing the language used by native speakers. The ALM syllabus was thus organised around linguistic structures, and fluency in the language classroom was encouraged through habit formation, drilling of patterns by the teacher and mechanical repetition of key linguistic structures (British

Council, 2023). Students were expected to understand and master these patterns and linguistic structures through extensive listening and speaking practise. The ALM was often criticised as prioritising the progression of learners' oral skills at the expense of the other skills in the classroom. These oral skills were achieved in the classroom through the use of dialogues, imitation and reinforcement to help the student develop native-like fluency and pronunciation. The method later became influential in Europe and Britain but from the late 1960s, it drastically declined in popularity. The ALM as an MFL pedagogy fell out of favour partly for being too teacher-centred and repetitive (Conti, 2016). Despite being effective for beginners and on learners' habit formation, some language teachers and learners expressed frustration at the method's lack of grammar explanations, its heavy emphasis on rote memorisation and drilling in chorus, and its failure to produce conversational ability in the foreign language (Hadley, 2001).

Another pedagogy emerging during the latter half of the 20th century and whose principles have remained influential today was Total Physical Response (TPR). TPR had been developed in the 1960s in the USA under psychology professor James Asher, who believed that young learners were able to internalise new linguistic commands in the right side of their brain through observing physical actions and were able to immediately respond to these linguistic inputs physically without needing to analyse them in the more analytical left side of their brain (Garcia, 1996). The TPR suggested combining language and physical activity in lessons through the form of commands would enhance learners' ability to retain new information (Asher, 1977). Its principles advocate for integrating physical actions into classroom teaching to make language lessons more interactive and engaging for pupils whilst providing a low-stress environment for them to learn. In one example of a TPR-led lesson aimed at low level or beginner learners, the teacher would provide a number of simple commands in the L2 for pupils to respond to, by physically following the teacher's instructions through using mimicry involving movement and gestures to practise the vocabulary that might be connected with actions of the body, for example, or simple classroom commands. Despite the effectiveness of TPR as an aural methodology on beginner and younger learners' ability to improve their listening comprehension and memory retention skills (Anita et al., 2025), its limitations for older learners and the lack of attention it devoted to the skills of reading, writing and speaking were also recognised. Despite this, several of its tenets can still be noticed in KS2

language teaching classrooms today, such as its ability to set the pace and the mood in language classes of younger learners, and the usefulness of some of its activities with mixed-ability language classes (British Council, 2025).

The first policy document of the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages (NCMFL) (DES, 1991) sought to develop a MFL curriculum that was accessible to all pupils with an approach that focused on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in English secondary school MFL classrooms. CLT was a pedagogical approach that had emerged out of a dissatisfaction with Situational Language Teaching in the 1970s and that aimed to prioritise communicating in the target language as both the means and goal of modern language teaching. The new orientation towards this style of learning was emphasised by the NCMFL's accompanying Programme of Study (PoS) which aimed to encourage learners to develop the ability to use language effectively for purposes of practical communication (DES, 1990) and to maximise their involvement in meaningful target language use (Mitchell, 2003). CLT promoted an emphasis on meaning-focused communication in the TL through the choice of topics and activities that resembled real-life communication (Wingate, 2018). It emphasised the teaching of skills in the classroom, rather than knowledge and prioritising language use across the four core skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing to convey and understand messages in the real world (Conti, 2016).

In contemporary MFL teaching, CLT is often described as a catch-all term for an eclectic and novel assortment of approaches to FL teaching (Pachler et al., 2014) although generally it continues to prioritise the development of pupils' ability to communicate rather than grammar and issues of accuracy. As the emphasis on the authenticity of tasks and texts used in the classroom has evolved, as has the use of the TL in real contexts for communicative purposes. Classroom activities are increasingly designed to maximise communicative and interactive opportunities for pupils to use the language in a variety of contexts where the messages they produce have come to be viewed as more important rather than the structure and the form of their language use (Pachler et al., 2014). Nonetheless, over the years the CLT approach has been often criticised for failing to prioritise accuracy and more recently, in encouraging a system that over-focuses on pragmatic communicative goals (Mitchell, 2000) and specific phrases that are only useful in narrow communicative situations – which often leads to boredom and disengagement in learners (Bartram, 2005). The

examples of CLT pedagogy that can be found in KS3 language textbooks in secondary school classrooms often contains little relevance to student' lives and are unlikely to be experienced by them (Andon and Wingate, 2013). To this day, this criticism of CLT principles persists: their inherent focus on authenticity and the use of language in real world situations often meaning that activities such as information gap activities, games and role plays can be often over-promoted in class, inducing accusations that language teachers' grasp of CLT principles are often unclear and fuzzy (Klapper, 2003).

Despite this, certain principles of CLT remain influential and are evident today in English MFL classrooms. To further meet the challenges of providing an authentically communicative classroom environment, MFL teachers have become drawn into creating a variety of methods to engage pupils: creating lively, appealing and attractive lesson activities that predominantly attempt to give their class more speaking time. There are relatively few studies that exist conducting systemic analyses of MFL classroom practice through lesson observation to examine how teachers' methodological practices in the classroom are connected to their pedagogical beliefs and knowledge. Pachler et al. (2014) define a teacher's pedagogical approach as their own coherent blueprint for teaching and learning that they have drawn up explicitly and that is derived from 'principles that might arise from an understanding of empirical research in the field and reflection on the work of educators in other contexts' (p.137).

Wingate's (2018) study explored the extent to which dominant teaching methodologies in MFL classrooms are still influenced by CLT. She observed 15 KS3 lessons in French, German and Spanish in 6 state schools across London and its outer boroughs and found that teacher-led activities still accounted for over half of pupils' MFL lesson time, in which only 12% of class time was being devoted to group and pair work. Most of the activities she observed being used in class did not require any target language use at all or required only regurgitation of prior vocabulary. Overall, her study identified several missed opportunities for providing meaning-focused interaction through a range of different activity types in class and noted a classroom culture lacking in any TL production of consequence - where the use of games and gimmicks (such as throwing sweets or toys) to encourage pupils' responses were commonplace. This lack of opportunities to use the TL in class is also noted as seriously underestimating learners' intellectual and cognitive capabilities (Wingate, 2018). The

evidence suggests therefore that the key principles behind CLT - using the TL to communicate personal meaning and an emphasis on active participation and communicative interaction – are often lacking in English MFL classrooms and instead can often be misapplied by teachers who use games and activities in class that result in low learning outcomes and only serve the purpose of making language lessons appear more attractive to pupils through their competitive elements.

In 2016, the Teaching Schools Council (TSC) published the MFL pedagogy review which suggested a range of recommendations for improving languages' provision and teaching in English secondary schools. The TSC is comprised of a national body of 20 members who aim to lead and shape the work of over 800 teaching schools that have been nationally recognised for their capacity to support and help other schools to improve outcomes in teaching (Smith, 2018). The review, led by headteacher and linguist Ian Bauckham, took in the opinions and evidence from an advisory group that included MFL specialists, as well as university academics. Among its principal recommendations (TSC, 2016) were that pupils should take MFL lessons for preferably three hours per week spread over lessons of 40-60 minutes, reasoning that more frequent gaps between lessons would impact on pupils' ability to retain the language they had been taught (TSC, 2016). The review also advised that teachers should select textbooks on the basis of how well they supported approaches to teaching phonics and vocabulary and that had a 'well sequenced and sufficiently demanding grammatical structure running through them' (TSC, 2016, p. 18). It also specified that language content should be stimulating and widen pupils' knowledge of the culture, history and literature of the TL country.

Other TSC proposals included that teachers should use error correction sensitively to inform teaching and help pupils pay attention to detail, rather than discourage them. To do this, it suggested a number of strategies they might employ such as prompting and recasting of information. The document identified key difficulties in the transition from primary to secondary teaching, recognising that many opportunities for pupils to begin language learning with a good knowledge of a second language were currently not being exploited. It encouraged teachers from secondary schools to visit their feeder primary schools after summer half-term to assess the language skills and achievements of their new intake. It further recommended that teachers be provided with a clear summary of the language

curriculum taught at KS2, so that they might take this into account in their teaching from Year 7. The review encouraged opportunities for using the Target Language (TL) in the classroom wherever possible to build pupils' familiarity with the rhythms, sound and intonation of the language. According to its recommendations, teachers should adapt and select the language used in the classroom, building on previously taught knowledge to promote 'automaticity' in learning – establishing the language in pupils' long-term memory through regular meaningful practice so that 'it can be accessed without conscious thought' (TSC, 2016, p. 8). The TSC MFL pedagogy review slanted towards a perspective that believed the process of acquiring a second language was comparable to the learning of a complex skill (Smith, 2018), which therefore positioned itself as ahead of its time and in opposition to several ideas about language pedagogy and its curriculum that were becoming popular at the time – including one that the MFL curriculum should be knowledge rich and promote the learning of several different disciplines.

The positive responses of teachers towards the TSC review confirmed that it was a worthy and necessary document, especially in some of its messages towards school leaders about the timetabling of the subject. At the same time, others doubted how influential it would be (Smith, 2016). Indicating the extent to which the review's influence had spread, the Association of Language Learning (ALL) set out a call for evidence for the TSC review of MFL pedagogy through an online questionnaire to 54 of its members and teachers, replicating the questions posed by the TSC and asking them to respond with their own suggestions to the topics that the review had raised. These included the most effective ways of teaching and improving grammar, vocabulary and language mastery in the classroom. To help put into practice the recommendations of the review across 45 schools nationwide, the National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy (NCELP) was set up in 2018 by the Department for Education to help improve language curriculum design and pedagogy, leading to higher uptake and greater success at GCSE (Cooney, 2019).

During the same period, the ideas and influence of MFL teacher, linguist and researcher Gianfranco Conti began to spread more widely in MFL teaching classrooms and in its pedagogies in secondary schools in England as well as other Anglophone countries. Conti's approach of Extensive Processing Instruction (EPI) in MFL teaching aimed at encouraging learners to gain language familiarity by using patterns and exploiting 'chunks' of small units

of language in 'sentence builders' and 'parallel texts' (Conti, 2020), rather than starting from a basis of isolated words and grammar rules, to attain fluency and spontaneity. The theoretical underpinnings of EPI attempt to take advantage of two fundamental ways of learning a language: skill acquisition and implicit learning (Smith, 2023) and both imply that the learning and practising of a new language rely much on how they are acquired implicitly as an automated skill and picked up unconsciously through repeated use. Through intensive processing and repetition of input language, pupils can learn to understand and use a repertoire of language efficiently. The popularity of Conti's method in the classroom and amongst teachers relied to a large degree on EPI's focus on the 'chunking' of language – breaking it up into large sections to build sentences and understanding and recognising the capacity of pupils' working memory and cognitive load. The ability to manipulate this language, as opposed to isolated words, and having to deal with grammatical rules aligned appropriately with how pupils acquire a language naturally and that considered the limitations of their working memory for absorbing new information were also responsible. The EPI style sentence-builder approach to new language that has to be learned and practised by pupils entails that clearly defined yet limited 'chunks' or collocations of the L2 are always translated into the L1 (English) during the process, meaning that weaker students in the class are able to understand and do not fall behind - aiding their motivation and improving their feelings of self-efficacy. The methodology has remained popular amongst pupils in part because of the gamified nature of many EPI activities which helps to encourage pupil confidence in the classroom. EPI has also gained acclaim amongst MFL teachers nationwide, partly due to the tireless ways in which Conti has promoted and explained the methodology in professional training and development courses over recent years.

In the present day, current MFL pedagogy in England continues to retain a communicative emphasis and continues to advocate for embedding new language in the classroom in 'meaningful contexts that arise spontaneously in the classroom' where opportunities may be provided for 'essential dimensions of practice and reinforcement' (TSC, 2016, p.14). The studies that do exist suggest, however, that it remains important that opportunities to implement the TL in lessons continue to be judiciously applied through activities that pose real challenge to pupils, and that adhere to the original principles of CLT. Studies have shown that an over-reliance on games with few opportunities for pupils to use new language

productively can risk creating a classroom atmosphere of light entertainment where pupils are socialised into an undemanding culture of lack of expectation (Wingate, 2018).

2.3 <u>Government policy towards language education in England</u>

The situation at the turn of the century

Freire (1996) suggested that all education is overtly political and as a consequence its policies are often designed by those with ideological as well as educational aims. Pachler (2007) similarly describes government policy towards compulsory education as '*state sponsored socialisation*', and examining this comment through an MFL lens would suggest that government language policy and attitudes are often dictated by the desire and the necessity of their country to communicate with their neighbours and conduct trade on the world stage. Education and the learning of languages are widely considered an area of significant political focus for most governments that are concerned with the politics of international relations (Lo Bianco, 2014). It is in this era of globalisation which has precipitated rapid technological change and instant communication that has revolutionised the way in which we live and accordingly affected our beliefs surrounding the purposes of learning languages. It was a similar ethos, and the desire to consolidate a new era of communication and openness with the UK's neighbours on the international stage that would maintain its competitiveness in economic markets that ushered in the Labour government-sanctioned Nuffield Languages Inquiry (Nuffield Foundation, 2000).

The document's aims were strongly framed through an economic and skills perspective to examine the UK's language capacity (Nuffield Foundation, 2000) and to produce recommendations for improving it. The recommendations of the report were scathing and assessed that urgent changes in policy and practice were required for the new millennium to develop a coherent national strategy for languages to maximise the linguistic and economic opportunities that could be found in Britain's position on Europe's doorstep. It proposed widening choice in the secondary sector, including making a greater range of language

options available to pupils and more flexible decision-making, especially for those pupils of lower abilities, with the aim of all school leavers departing with at least foundational skills in a language (Nuffield Foundation, 2000). The report identified acute shortages of supply of language teachers in schools and a secondary system that was not geared to support the different languages that it would be necessary for Britain's school children to learn, alongside technical and professional skills, to equip them for the workforce in the 21st century (Nuffield Foundation, 2000). The inquiry took place amongst a language background in England where nine out of ten secondary school children had stopped learning languages at 16 altogether, with many pupils facing the harsh choice of specialising in a language at 16+ or giving it up entirely (Dobson, 2018), and in a secondary school climate that lacked the necessary positive messages being reinforced towards MFL. What factors had contributed to creating such a climate of discontent surrounding language learning in schools?

Language education policy before the millennium

The heart of these problems surrounding the teaching and learning of MFL in secondary education in England that existed around the turn of the century could be traced back to historical and systemic issues that had traditionally preserved the approach that language learning was only appropriate for certain sections of society (Hawkins, 1982). The ensuing organisation of the selective education system in England, which had traditionally separated schools into grammar and secondary modern institutions until the mid-1970s, brought these entrenched differences to the surface. Secondary modern school pupils did not traditionally learn MFL, yet they comprised over 80% of the school population (Dobson, 2018), and the demands of suddenly teaching MFL to pupils of all abilities in the new comprehensive schools proved a new and daunting challenge for teachers who had been trained in grammar schools themselves (Dobson, 2018). Furthermore, many educationalists continued to question the value of extending the learning of MFL to all pupils and several argued against its inclusion in the core secondary curriculum (Hargreaves, 1982). A national survey: *Modern Languages in Comprehensive Schools*, commissioned in 1975, expressed reservations about

the experience that even the most able pupils were getting in schools: that their capacity to reproduce the language was often mechanical and lacking in initiative (DES, 1977). This survey provided the basis for rethinking the delivery and provision of MFL in secondary schools in England in the 1980s (Dobson, 2018) and gradually led to support for developing a MFL curriculum for all that would prioritise international communication as a basic aim of MFL teaching (COE, 1988). Historical education policy in England since then has been organised around favouring universal provision and attempting to establish a curriculum that would reach motivated learners regardless of their socioeconomic background (Pachler, 2007).

The first version of the National Curriculum (NC) for MFL was subsequently published in 1991. It introduced a practical Programme of Study (PoS) for teachers and curriculum planners that was developed with the aim of focusing on a communicative approach towards language teaching in schools that would enable pupils to practise the four skills and a focus on using the language for practical purposes (DES, 1991). Assessment of pupil progress would take place according to a framework of Attainment Targets (ATs) that would occur in class alongside teaching, and boundaries within the framework set out specific targets that each pupil should achieve at the different 'Key Stages' (KS) of the curriculum (Dobson, 2018). This pattern of new versions of the National Curriculum released alongside renewed attainment targets and an updated Scheme of Work (SoW) for MFL teachers is one that would be repeated in the years to come. Barely two years had passed before revisions were needed to the 1991 Curriculum, triggered by the issues of work overload on teachers and pupils in core subjects (Dobson, 2018). The main remit of a 1994 review to slim down the curriculum aimed to reduce its teaching time of 25 hours a week, of which MFL took up ten percent (Dearing, 1994). Its content focused on making using the target language (TL) much more manageable and began to highlight the intellectual and cognitive benefits of developing meta-linguistic skills and the contribution of languages to improving intercultural competencies (DES, 1990). The report brought a simplification of many subjects in the PoS, compressing the descriptors for the AT levels and dropping the requirement for the exemplification of tasks and outcomes in class so that expectations were less specific and potentially less demanding (Dobson, 2018). Further revisions to successive versions of the curriculum in 1995 and again in 1999 now saw the aim of most secondary school pupils

being entered for the new language GCSE being achieved. Significant progress was made in this regard after the move to make MFL compulsory in KS4 with 90% of pupils taking an MFL in 2000, of which 79% were entered for GCSE (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016).

2000 onwards - Labour Government initiatives

A National Strategy for Languages for England (DfES, 2002) - *Languages for All: Languages for Life* took up many of the proposals of the Nuffield Inquiry recommendations such as appointing a National Director for Languages for England to work with Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to produce best language guidance to schools on early language learning (DfES, 2002). The national strategy aimed to improve the teaching and learning of languages nationwide, to introduce a recognition system for the first time to give people credit for their existing language skills and to increase the number of people studying languages in further and higher education and in work-based training. The subsequent period up to 2004 was a brief golden period for language learning in England, coinciding with the national strategy of '*Languages for All'* that had, in effect, been in place in England since 1996 when languages were made a compulsory part of the national curriculum at Key Stage 4 (Parrish, 2024). Language teachers already benefitted from a strong infrastructure supporting their teaching that had been developed by New Labour government initiatives, including a network of specialist Language Colleges (1995) and the internationally reputed Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT) (1966) which offered a ready-made platform for materials development and a specialist library resource (Dobson, 2018). The 2002 National Strategy aimed to capitalise on these changes and claimed that 'language competence and intercultural understanding are not optional extras, they are an essential part of being a citizen' (DfES, 2002. P. 4) and included an entitlement to language learning for all pupils aged 7-11 as well as a stipulation that all 7–14-year-olds should study a language.

A shift in education policy followed in 2004 when the then Secretary of State for Education Estelle Morris, seeking increased choice and flexibility in the 14-19 curriculum, decided that MFL should no longer be compulsory after the age of 14 (Morris, 2006). This was outlined in

the government's *Green Paper 14-19 Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DES, 2002) which stated:

Currently all pupils must study modern foreign languages..we believe this is too constraining. For some pupils it is demotivating in the short-term and has consequences for their eventual achievement of qualifications (Department for Education and Skills, 2002. P. 24).

The document proposed that languages be made an entitlement which schools must make available to any student wishing to study and introduced a range of vocational qualifications instead (DfES, 2003). One of the reasons proposed for the change was that alongside the changes in the primary curriculum, children would eventually have seven years of MFL study before the age of 14, which would naturally encourage them to continue at GCSE (Parrish, 2024). The decision did not come without controversy. Members of the Languages National Strategy Steering Group (2001-2002) publicly expressed reservations when the change was first proposed in 2002 (Dobson, 2018) and the contradiction of enacting this change while introducing new policies that focused on MFL teaching in primary schools was not missed. Subsequent literature addressing this policy change has noted that the status of the subject was immediately damaged in the years following it becoming optional, leading to a dramatic decline in the number of pupils taking it at GCSE (Coleman et al, 2007; Macaro, 2008).

The change indeed led to a drastic and immediate decline in the number of pupils studying a foreign language in English state schools. Some schools, including those that were making solid progress with 'Languages for All', immediately dropped the requirement to teach an MFL in KS4. Just 3 years later, in 2007, the proportion of all pupils taking a language GCSE was 47% (Rodeiro, 2009). By 2012, the proportion of pupils taking a language at GCSE had already fallen to 40% (DfE, 2015). Responding to these changes, the government initiated an extensive review of the progress of the National Strategy for Languages (Lanvers, 2011). The Dearing Report (2007) concluded that MFL teaching in England was in crisis, noting that large numbers of pupils found its study boring and difficult. It recommended increasing the number of Specialist Languages Colleges alongside developing a statutory curriculum for

primary schools, as well as developing an informal alternative to the GCSE that would engage a wider range of pupils in the study of languages – in the form of a diploma (Lanvers, 2011). The outgoing Labour government chose not to implement many of the report's recommendations, however, instead deciding to concentrate on targeted initiatives that would promote language learning – including *Routes into Languages* – an £8 million university outreach programme to promote HE language studies amongst secondary pupils as well as promoting the growth of community languages (Lanvers, 2011).

Coalition Government Education policy from 2010

Government policy on traditionally supporting language teaching and providing interventions that benefitted MFL teachers began to radically change from 2010 with the incoming Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition Government. A new approach of minimalist intervention in language teaching was adopted and vital infrastructure in language teaching was discontinued. CILT was closed as well as another support and interventions organisation – the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) which, together with the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA), had provided an indispensable resource for teachers to access information and advice and collaborate with colleagues as well as receive specialist training (Dobson, 2018). The post of National Director for Languages, that had been set up following the recommendations of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry in 2000, was discontinued in 2011 alongside the 2002 National Strategy for Languages and other professional development-based support schemes such as Links into Languages (2009) that had existed. Any remaining alternative routes to recognised language qualifications in community or other languages in England that adhered to the Common European Framework (CEF) such as Asset Languages were also disbanded in 2012 (Steer, 2015). Such actions were attributed to desires to reduce public spending during austerity measures following the economic crisis of 2008 (Gray and Barford, 2018) but also to the new government's objectives to minimise and prune the oversized state machinery that existed in the form of public services – including the large number of administrative bodies and overlapping authorities that now existed within language learning – and to

return some of those resources and responsibility to the point of delivery i.e. - schools (Steer, 2015). Funding that had been previously earmarked for languages' infrastructure and support was now transferred to general school budgets (Dobson, 2018). The sudden and drastic removal of an entire framework of infrastructure and teacher support proved catastrophic for MFL teaching. The need of schools to maintain an infrastructure of support in curricular and professional development matters had been previously recognised by successive Labour and Conservative government since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1991 and teachers struggled to adjust to these sudden changes (Dobson, 2018).

Dramatic infrastructure changes outside the classroom correlated with radical transformations made to the MFL policy in the classroom by the Department for Education in 2013. The guidance and explanatory notes that accompanied previous versions of the Programme of Study (PoS) (DfES, 2013) were removed. The changes introduced by the Department for Education to the PoS (that is still in use to this day) were extensive and followed government directives that the curriculum should be less prescriptive (House of Commons, 2009) and with more autonomy devolved to teachers. A 'solid foundation of core grammar and vocabulary' (p.2) was made central to developing competencies in each of the four skills (Dobson, 2018) yet no mention was made of the reference materials that teachers would find necessary for this. Few references were made in the document to memorisation, yet retaining and reusing grammar would clearly be needed if pupils were to demonstrate the 'increased spontaneity, independence and accuracy' that the document demanded (DfES, 2013). MFL teachers now found themselves in a vastly different situation to the 1990s where extensive non-statutory guidance was published to help them plan for effective lessons as well as assess pupils progress (Lanvers, 2011). Attainment Targets (ATs) were also now dropped so there was no commonly accepted means of recording and reporting progress in England, leaving some teachers to resort to textbooks to fill this void (Dobson, 2018).

Further Conservative government reforms: a focus on ideology and performance measures.

When they took office in 2010, the Conservative government made no moves to reverse the non-statutory position of languages in the KS4 curriculum. This decision came despite evidence of the views of the Expert Panel for National Curriculum Review, who believed that at least one modern language should form part of a balanced National Curriculum at Key Stage 4 and be a core subject for all throughout compulsory secondary education (DfE, 2011). Ministers chose to disregard the highly regarded and empirical evidence of the members of the expert panel (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016) and instead highlighted their own recent measures to reverse the uptake deficit of pupils studying MFL at Key Stage 4: the Ebacc (DfE, 2012). A recent policy measure announced to improve participation in languages at KS4, the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) 'qualification' required all pupils to sit GCSEs in all subjects that make up the Ebacc, which included Maths, English, Sciences, a language and a humanities subject (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016). Described as 'a set of subjects at GCSE that keeps young people's options open for further study and future careers' (DfE, 2019. p.19), schools were now held accountable for the proportion of their pupils achieving a grade 5 or above in the full list of Ebacc subjects which they were required to publish every year (Cairns, 2024). The government's ambition for the Ebacc was for 75% of pupils nationally to be entered for the whole range of subjects and 90% by 2025 (DfE, 2019). This figure has not yet been achieved however as the take up of the Ebacc remained at 39.3% nationally for the academic year 2022/23 (DfES, 2023). In 2024/5 the take up rate for the Ebacc in all five subjects was noted as remaining at 40.5%. In November 2025, a Curriculum and Assessment review commissioned by the incumbent Labour Government announced that the Ebacc qualification would be removed from the curriculum to encourage a wider focus on a range of subjects, including the arts (The Times, 2025).

The introduction of the Ebacc in 2010 was criticised at the time by MFL teachers as a failure of the government's responsibility to maintain the requirement to provide a 'broad and balanced curriculum' that had historically existed within the National Curriculum dating back to the Education Reform Act of 1988 (Richards, 2019). The narrow range of subjects making up the Ebacc was partly responsible for this belief, with creative and business courses excluded. Critics claimed that the Ebacc diminished the intrinsic value of studying and

learning, in favour of attaining pre-determined standards that had no impact on attainment (Hout and Elliot, 2011). It was criticised for being of no direct value to the pupils who achieved it but rather a performance measure for schools who would benefit from the high rate of Ebacc passes (Parrish, 2024) that they published. Further criticism surrounded its motivations as being predominantly ideological, moving the focus towards specific elite subjects that were arbitrarily deigned by the government to be more rigourous and academic, and based entirely on political notions of what it means to be educated (Wright, 2012). The policy received significant backlash from stakeholders and particularly headteachers, who felt impeded by this relentless focus on raising standards (Ball et al., 2012). Additional concerns emerged from those who worried about being able to attract adequate numbers of language teachers to their schools (The Guardian, 2015) to cope with the new list of in-demand subjects. Restricted choice for pupils was still a concern: there were still stakeholders that believed making languages optional at KS4 had been a positive move for their pupils who had benefited from the freedom to choose what they were studying (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016). A 2015 consultation on implementing the Ebacc included a modified goal for that year of the 'vast majority' of pupils taking Ebacc subjects (DfE, 2015), although concerns remained that the language's 'pillar' would prove a barrier to its entry among the other remaining pillars of Maths, English, Sciences and a Humanities subject (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016) which were considered more attainable. To some extent these concerns were valid: 67% of pupils in 2015 who had studied the other four subjects did not qualify as having taken the Ebacc because of their lack of a language GCSE (DfE, 2015).

The Conservative government's preoccupation with subject-specific performance measures continued in a further policy intervention in 2016: Progress 8. Progress 8 was intended to measure student progress since leaving primary school against their peers with the same prior attainment in English and Maths, to show how much pupils had improved or 'progressed' since entering secondary school (Good Schools Guide, 2015). A pupil's Progress 8 score was calculated by comparing the pupil's performance at GCSEs (their Attainment 8 score) measured across 8 subjects which were divided into three categories or 'buckets': English and Maths, 3 top scoring Ebacc subjects - including MFL - and a third bucket containing any 3 Ebacc or other subjects from the curriculum. The pupil's performance was

then compared to the GCSE results of all children nationally, who had performed similarly to the pupil in KS2 English and Maths, and a score was calculated to understand whether the pupil had progressed at above or below the expected level (Good Schools Guide, 2015). Progress 8 was criticised in places as being a contradictory measure that did not specifically prioritise MFL – at a time when the concurrent policy of the Ebacc was intent on valuing it - (Parrish, 2024). However, it was also praised as being a more flexible measure that permitted schools to focus on *all* pupils' progress since KS2 rather than their attainment, and not just the higher attaining ones (Francis et al., 2017). Accusations of an incoherent education strategy continued to follow the Conservative government, however, with the feeling that Progress 8 and the Ebacc did not align with their overall aims of improving MFL uptake at GCSE. Progress 8, despite noted as being more inclusive and allowing schools to be less prescriptive in their curriculum approach (Parrish, 2024) did not specify that a language had to be taken at all and if a school decided to focus on their Progress 8 score, with its deeper and more flexible pool of subjects to choose from rather than the Ebacc, GCSE MFL uptake in that institution might not necessarily be boosted. Whether a school chose to focus on either their pupil's Progress 8 score or their institution's Ebacc percentage were both very much dependent on the values and culture existing within an individual school. The decision about which policy to prioritise was left to school leaders according to which would fit best with their current curriculum and provide the fewest challenges – in terms of staff recruitment, for example (Maguire et al., 2012). Both policies were criticised ideologically, however, as diverging from the long-standing UK education and social policy of levelling up (DLUHC, 2022) in imposing a preordained list of elite subjects that the government had determined as useful for pupils' employability or their future lives (Neumann et al., 2020). In doing so, this move continued to characterise MFL as an academic rather than vocational pursuit (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016), taking the focus away from applied or community languages that might have been offered by their institutions (Parrish, 2024). Other critics also noted that policies of measurement in educational attainment often have the unintended effect of making pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds afraid of the consequences of failure (Reay, 2006).

Gradual changes to the MFL GCSE curriculum and exam

After coming to power in 2010, the Conservative government continued to make a succession of changes to the syllabus and to the content of the GCSE curriculum and exam that had wide reaching consequence for how MFL would be taught in secondary schools. These series of reforms, introduced by then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, would seek to make the curriculum and exam content more rigorous and prioritise pupils' acquisition of knowledge. A centrally imposed system of pupil assessment in secondary schools was withdrawn, leaving schools with the flexibility to design their own assessment systems (Molway, 2022). The 2013 MFL PoS had already made mentions of translation, and the compulsory reading of 'great' literature foregrounded these elements, presenting a problem for those MFL teachers who had little experience in teaching translation and literature below sixth form levels (Dobson, 2018). These reforms marked the beginning of a new knowledge-oriented shift that would dominate school curriculum policy until the end of the Conservative period that were the inspiration of then Education Secretary, Michael Gove. Gove was inspired by the ideas of the English academic Michael Young and his book *Bringing knowledge back in* (2009), which sparked debates about how the curriculum could be made more challenging as well as how teachers' sequencing of certain subjects fostered the acquisition of knowledge in lessons (Marshall, 2022). In the MFL classroom, this policy shift resulted in broad changes to the MFL GCSE course and exam content from 2016 which would come into effect for the first time in the 2018 results' period. The moves were noted as driven by desires to promote higher expectations and more rigourous standards in the teaching and learning (Tinsley and Doležal, 2018) of MFL and their interpretation was reflected varyingly in different specifications across all the exam boards. The most significant changes were made to how the MFL GCSE would be assessed from 2018: the controlled assessment (coursework) element was removed from the curriculum and replaced by end of course exams, the reading paper with its focus on classic literature was made much more difficult, and the oral exam focused on preparing pupils to produce spontaneous and original language in conversation (Smith, 2015). Teachers themselves were no longer able to enter a portion of their class into the higher and foundation tiers for each skill; under the new

arrangements they were able to use their own judgement to decide which was more appropriate (Smith, 2015).

Conservative reformation of the school system - devolution of independence to academies

One of the most consequential changes for the current English education system was enacted in 2010 by then secretary of Education, Michael Gove, who returned independence to all schools by allowing them to convert to academy status. Previously, following reforms that had been started under the Conservatives through the Education Reform Act in 1988, some schools were allowed to opt out of their local authority and claim independence in how they were run and how they taught their pupils (Freedman, 2022). The idea of schools being independent from their local authority continued under Tony Blair and New Labour from 1997 as more high-achieving schools were permitted independence from their local authority to assume responsibilities for their school's budget and setting their own curriculum (Gillard, 2007). This evolution meant that 90% of schools' budgets were suddenly delegated to individual headteachers and effectively shifted the local authorities' role to that of regulators, rather than the bodies that administered the schools (Wintour, 2005). Many of the resulting successful academies that were designed to be high-profile beacons in disadvantaged communities were funded directly by central government and run in partnerships with businesses (Freedman, 2022). Disadvantaged or underperforming schools were permitted to partner with educational 'sponsors' such as universities or faith institutions and become sponsored academies (Curtis et al., 2008). The dramatic attainment turnaround of some of these schools set in deprived and underprivileged areas captured favourable media attention (The Guardian, 2010) compared to the coverage of comprehensives at the time and the incoming Conservative government of 2010 saw this as a political opportunity (Freedman, 2022).

Underperforming state or local authority run schools would be given to a business 'sponsor' and allowed to convert to academy status, an expansion of the New Labour programme (Curtis et al., 2008). Furthermore, 'good' and 'outstanding' schools, as defined by Ofsted, would be allowed to opt out of local authority control. The 2010 *Academies Act* (DfE, 2010)

allowed for these schools to convert to academy status, without the need for local authority approval. This expansion of the academy system was enshrined in the 2010 *Importance of Teaching* white paper (DfE, 2010) and continued with the creation of multi-academy trusts (MATs) where one education trust would run multiple schools and the most effective schools in the trust would, in theory, help the weaker ones to improve through an array of support policies – such as matching struggling schools with successful heads (Freedman, 2022). Academies are now defined by their origins as either *converter* – those which were higher performing and wanted to gain greater autonomy and *sponsored* – which usually replaced an underperforming school with the intention of stimulating improvement (Bolton, 2012). Sponsored academies are more likely to have a higher proportion of pupils that come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Gorard, 2014). The number of academies subsequently proliferated through the English state school system, attracted by the new funding model which meant that they now received funds that local authorities had previously held back from state schools for central services (Freedman, 2022). By 2013, 50% of state schools had been converted into academies and by 2021, this figure was at 79% (Institute for Government analysis, 2021).

It remains difficult to draw conclusions about the impact of the expansion of academies on pupil participation and attainment in MFL due to the lack of conclusive research. There appears to be little difference between the performance of academies and local authority-maintained (state) schools - not in itself a conclusive finding as some of the worst performing schools were converted into academies themselves (Freedman, 2022). A report on the current picture in academies of over a thousand schools found that many institutions had converted or intended to convert to academies with the intention of 'staying the same' (Earley, 2013 p. 61). The introduction of these new types of schools in England has been accompanied by new methods of governance and funding as well as new expectations. (Parrish, 2019). Free from local authority control and from the constraints of the National Curriculum, decision-making regarding MFL policy has been devolved to school level and to individual academies (Broady, 2020). Academies and free schools are not required to follow the National Curriculum for MFL, provided that the curriculum they offer is 'broad and balanced' (DfE, 2024). However, academies are bound by the same accountability and performance measures introduced by the Conservative government that were listed earlier

in this chapter. Findings of the limited research that exists exploring the relationship between the proliferation of academies in England and their result on MFL participation and teaching has found that only 10% of pupils of an academy who had achieved 5 A*- C GCSE grades had a pass in French (Titcombe, 2008). The findings concluded that these schools were more likely to focus on subjects that would boost their headline results and league table positioning, marginalising the ones that were more likely to bring down their performance (Titcombe, 2008). However, a renewed autonomy in provision has brought some benefits to academies. In multi-option subjects such as MFL, academies are afforded the flexibility to decide on the individual languages that may be offered to their pupils, allowing schools to better provide for the needs of their own community and helping them better plan their recruitment choices (Parrish, 2017). MFL teachers themselves have remarked on the freedom they enjoy in the classroom to adapt the syllabus now that they are no longer required to follow the National Curriculum (Aston, 2015). At the same time, however, the academisation of the English secondary school system has been noted as having a detrimental effect on inclusion in MFL take-up through the creation of a pathways system. Higher achieving academies with more self-determination over their curriculum and intake are more likely to self-select the higher attaining pupils in their cohort to continue to study languages (Hunter et al., 2024) based on the likelihood of their future success.

2.4 <u>Languages in the post-Brexit context:</u>

This period of recurring and fragmented education policy change over the last twenty-five years suggests that there is a now a compelling need to reassess the MFL learning crisis in England in light of the post-Brexit context. Five years have now passed since the withdrawal period, and our growing clarity of Brexit's full effects on the discourses that surround the learning and teaching of languages in England's secondary schools are starting to take shape. Given this context, it is now an appropriate moment to examine how secondary school pupils' speak about their motivation for continuing MFL study beyond KS3 and to explore the experiences they undergo. Debates surrounding the period of the 2016 referendum vote established a context in this country that suggested the ability to speak foreign languages

and engage with other cultures was politically contentious (Copland and McPake, 2022) and media coverage comprehensively reflected these discourses. Evidence exists that such 'linguaphobic' perspectives continue to deepen in Britons' minds and at the same time persist to be the biggest driver of attitudes towards learning languages in the classroom (The Guardian, 2018). In the classroom, powerful shifts have been noted: just over a third (34%) of state secondary schools in England now recognise the negative impact that Brexit has had on pupil motivation to learn languages (Tinsley, 2018). At the same time, parents have become more outspoken regarding its place in the curriculum and more vocal - many now hold the belief that their son or daughter should not be studying MFL - and that it will be of little use now that we have left the European Union (Tinsley, 2019). The example of the following comments are some of those regularly heard in schools:

We regularly have questions from pupils or parents about the value of learning a language, as 'we don't need it' and 'everyone should speak English' (Tinsley, 2019).

Schools that note this change in pupil attitudes since Brexit are also more likely to suffer from lower attainment at GCSE (Tinsley, 2018a), have higher levels of pupils eligible for FSM, as well as more likely to be sponsored academies (Tinsley, 2018a). Schools with higher numbers of EAL pupils are less likely to report negative attitudes towards language learning in response to the Brexit vote. In concrete terms, Brexit has had practical consequences for the teaching and learning of MFL in the classroom: exchanges and trips abroad continued to be cancelled in some schools (attributed to government red tape and an inability to secure qualified cover teachers); and a dwindling of the previously-consistent supply of high quality EU-trained teachers now unable to obtain work permits (Tinsley, 2018b) and a gentle decline in schools' engagement in international activities – such as joint curriculum projects and work experience. Other schools indicate that pressures due to Brexit as well as parental and media pressures have resulted in language study being sidelined by their pupils and result in their inability to support the placement of language assistants in their schools (Collen, 2020).

At the same time, some schools note a counteractive effect taking place. In 2019, 10% of state secondary schools reported that their senior management had become more positive

towards language study as a result of Brexit (Tinsley, 2019) – and becoming more determined than ever to secure its teaching in the curriculum for the intercultural benefits it brings, as well as maintaining their school exchange trips. Such a finding was also reflected in the literature that was published immediately following the referendum vote that posited Brexit as an opportunity to urgently rebuild Britain's language skills and education as part of its long-term economic future - through proposing strategic and unifying approaches to the country's needs - and connecting the many different government departments that use languages on a daily basis and how they are taught in schools to pupils (Coussins and Harding-Esch, 2018). These approaches propose eschewing the traditional approach that Britain has always taken in response to its language skills deficit: in employing native speakers.

A 2018 study sought to explore the links between Brexit and language learning through examining how rationales for the UK's poor language learning record might be connected to Brexit. 33 publicly available texts ranging from broadsheet articles to website texts and university course promotional material were explored on the subject of Brexit and language learning that appeared in the immediate aftermath of the referendum from June to November 2016 (Lanvers et al., 2018). The authors used a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (Van Dijk, 2013) to analyse these texts and found that the different authorship groups (professional linguists, journalists, political writers and commercial language providers) had distinct ways of framing Brexit. The study's analysis found that several texts focused on the connection between Brexit and existing *linguaphobia* and unwillingness to learn languages in the UK which framed these as an inherently British characteristic. In several of the other texts, Brexit was presented as an opportunity that might rejuvenate the state of language learning in the UK or instead as a prompt to raise specific concerns about the state of language learning and to safeguard existing opportunities for language learning. Overall, the study found that discourses that presented Brexit as a potential positive opportunity for language learning in this country were equally as prevalent as those framing it as a threat. Its findings noted that discourses of opportunity that claim the need for languages will be greater in the light of Brexit appeared equally widespread in the post referendum years, as well as those urging defiance towards Brexit (Lanvers et al., 2018). Discourses stressing the need to avoid a Brexit-policy related fallout on MFL learning in

schools to safeguard language learning opportunities there were also noted during this time and also acted as a timely foretelling of how schools might come to be affected in the future.

Leaving the EU has directly impacted the teaching and learning of MFL in schools

For more than 20 years, a deficit of home-grown and trained language teachers in England has been made up by the recruitment of language teachers from European countries such as Spain, France and Germany - amounting to approximately 35% of the total number of working MFL teachers in UK schools (Coussins, 2019). In the 2023/24 academic year, only 33% of the target numbers of MFL trainee teachers were recruited (Gov.uk, 2024) and while the official number of the trainees coming from EU countries is not noted in official government figures, it is certainly a large proportion and is estimated that Brexit has played a large part in reducing these numbers. With the end of freedom of movement and with new restrictive visa requirements, more EU trained language specialists are choosing not to work in the UK, meaning that schools have had to increasingly rely on hiring on non-native speakers of the language. In 2021, MFL teachers were added to the UK shortage occupation list (Gov.uk, 2021) making it easier for schools to recruit MFL teachers from outside of the UK, and from where they would normally require a visa.

The cuts to European funding programmes in English schools that have provided opportunities for teachers to refresh their language skills abroad – as well as pupils to take part in programmes, cultural exchanges, international projects or even work experience in another country have been a devastating blow. Longstanding school to school connections - established between UK institutions and those on the continent - have been severed, withdrawing facilities for the whole school to engage internationally and savour the importance of speaking another language (Tinsley, 2018b). Promoting the uptake of language learning, traditionally an unpopular and risky choice amongst pupils, is now harder for teachers given the removal of incentives for further study, cultural exchanges and future employment within the European Union now that Britain is no longer a member. The end of Britain's participation in the *Erasmus* scheme has meant that there is little motivation for those pupils interested in spending a year abroad in the EU in employment or study for

choosing to continue the study of MFL beyond KS4. Returning graduates from the *Erasmus* scheme are no longer able to visit schools and speak about their experiences abroad, inspiring a new generation of pupils to go abroad (Tinsley, 2018b). There is evidence that the year abroad is a richly rewarding and beneficial experience for those pupils undergoing modern language degrees with studies suggesting that pupils who do participate in the scheme having a lower unemployment rate than those non-participants (Coussins and Harding-Esch, 2018). The UK government-endorsed replacement programme to provide funding for international opportunities in education and training remains little known in secondary school spheres (*Turing* programme) and more needs to be done to raise awareness of the access their pupils may have to it. (Collen and Duff, 2024).

The current situation

Applied together with the new grading scale introduced for GCSEs from 1-9 in 2016 (Ofqual, 2018), the current GCSE MFL grade attainment boundaries are perceived as being much more difficult by teachers and staff leadership (Tinsley, 2019). Then Education Secretary, Michael Gove's plans for original, knowledge-rich yet demanding curriculum and exam content and more rigourous standards of assessment provoked much censure from teachers as being overly proscriptive and traditional (Marshall, 2022) and the debate that surrounds these changes continues to this day. In 2022, a consultation on one of the Conservative government's final education policies approved further changes to the MFL GCSE starting from 2024 and that will initially be returned in the 2026 assessment period (DfE, 2022). The linguistic content of the new GCSE for MFL will no longer feature specific topics but focus instead on the most commonly occurring vocabulary of each language; pupils will be expected to know 1200 lexical items for the foundation tier and 1700 for the higher tier - on which new assessment objectives will be based (Hedley, 2022). Despite these and previous Conservative government interventions, annual surveys conducted by the British Council into the state of language teaching in English schools increasingly show that considerable numbers of pupils still find themselves switching off from selecting MFL due to their perceptions over the difficulty and the harsh marking of the new MFL GCSE exam (Transform

MFL, 2018) and the concerns of some pupils that higher grades are more difficult to obtain in MFL. Teachers, meanwhile, confirm that take-up of MFL is again being depressed and the recent gain in GCSE numbers delivered by the Ebacc since 2014 have primarily been reversed (Tinsley and Doležal, 2018).

Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

Introduction

The focus of this thesis is to explore the reasons that lie behind the decline in uptake of modern foreign language (MFL) learning in English secondary schools and how learners speak about their decision to continue learning a language or not at GCSE. Through pursuing these aims, it will explore the influences that impact on pupils' decision-making as well as their perceptions of the value of language learning to them. This focus will be enabled by exploring the responses from pupils and their teachers in qualitative focus group and individual interviews across four different types of secondary school in the East of England region.

Part A of my first research question: '*How do pupils position themselves and negotiate their identities as language learners regarding their motivation towards continuing to study MFL?*' necessitates a deeper look at how the concept of motivation has been presented and evolved within second language acquisition (SLA) over time and an exploration of the principal theories of motivation that are relevant to exploring the incentives of secondary school pupils in England to continuing MFL study. Part B of question one: 'How *do pupils' position themselves and negotiate their identities as language learners regarding their responses to the messages they receive regarding MFL's significance from their institution, home and local community?*' employs a key concept and methodological influence in this study, positioning theory, to provide an appropriate theoretical framework that can better explore and analyse how secondary school pupils in England talk about making their personal MFL decision-making. It will explain why positioning theory is an appropriate framework to examine the delicate and complex interactions of a peer group interview setting that can reveal a more unambiguous understanding of their learner identities and a better appreciation of their own agency in their decision making. Finally, this chapter will present how Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1984) and Foucault's (1972) concept of *discourse* and can be applied as a framework to process and understand the different influences that secondary school pupils draw on when they speak about their motivation for

language learning and the choice to continue it or not. The following chapter firstly introduces and describes the concept of motivation and the subsequent significant theoretical influences that have inspired this study.

3.1 <u>Motivation</u>

Evidence exists that motivation amongst secondary school pupils learning languages in England remains acutely low: studies report learners' growing dissatisfaction and indifference to the subject, turned off by assessment focused and repetitive teaching (Evans and Fisher, 2009), harsh exam assessment (Myers, 2016) and a lack of enjoyment that is indicated by their low self-esteem (Erler and Macaro, 2011). Motivation is therefore a fundamental concept that merits closer attention within the aim of this study of making sense of the decline in MFL uptake through listening to how pupils speak about choosing to continue language study or not. Research into second language acquisition (SLA) motivation has its origins with Gardner and Lambert's (1959) and Gardner's (1960) research that suggested that achievement in second language (L2) learning was largely determined by the attitude, motivation and language aptitude of the learner. Attitude, defined as 'an evaluative reaction to some referent, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions' (Gardner, 1985 p. 9) is clarified as unmistakeably distinctive from motivation and is noted as 'the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes' (Gardner, 1985 p. 10). Bartram (2010) clarifies the distinction between attitude and motivation by proposing that attitudes are related to the cognitive and emotional aspects of doing a task whereas motivation is goal-oriented and linked to the behaviour of an individual. Gardner and Lambert's study (1972) presented the L2 learner's motivation as appearing on two different points on the continuum of orientation - *instrumental:* that recognises the practical benefits of learning a new language, and *integrative:* characterised by a sincere interest in learning more about the people and the culture of the target language (Coleman et al., 2007). Learners holding more integrative motivation towards the L2 such as a strong drive to learn the language and favourable

attitudes towards the language group are construed as being more successful than those with instrumental motivation. (Gardner and Lambert, 1972)

The widespread rise of English as a global language (Lo Bianco, 2014) is recognised alongside an emergence of factors that threaten pupils' instrumental motivation to learn a second language (Oakes, 2013); these include the hostile UK sociopolitical climate towards language learning (Graham and Santos, 2015) and a perceived lack of real-life applicability of languages to their future careers (Taylor et al., 2013). Such developments have meant that the integrative/instrumental model of L2 motivation is now regarded as more redundant in SLA than it once was. Theories of motivation that recognise the fluid and mutable nature of how pupils' language learning incentives change in the face of temporal and environmental factors as well as the importance of the educational context and the social setting of learning (Coleman et al., 2007) have now gained more prominence. The presentation of motivation as a dynamic construct with four integrative variables at its centre: learner history, personal and family background, socio-cultural environment and contextual factors - including the classroom and teacher - (Gardner, 2001) exemplified this new understanding. This recognition of contextual factors including the attitudes of agents within the classroom and those in the social milieu delineated a new process-based model of motivation. Such perspectives on motivation are appropriate to this research study that anticipates the contextual factors that are available to pupils to draw on - such as home background and institutional influences - in their choice construction.

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System

Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, derived from Higgins' (1987) Self-discrepancy theory, is widely acknowledged in studies investigating the decline in MFL uptake and its framework acts as a significant theoretical influence in this study. Dörnyei (2005) suggests that L2 motivation can be stimulated in learners by invoking the disparity that exists between where they see themselves currently in their language progress and where they would like to be. The two possible selves that emerged are depicted as the *ideal self* - what the learner would very much like to become and the *ought to self* - the image of self that

considers the external pressures and the viewpoints of others. In Higgins' (1987) theory, these two representations instead manifested themselves through various motivational outlooks that are embodied in the gaze and expectations of significant others looking at the individual as well as other stimuli: *Others* (parents, teachers, society), or the *Own Self,* including*: Own Ideal* (who the learner would like to be), *Own Ought* (the learner's sense of obligation to develop and learn), *Other Ideal* (goals and ambitions that others have for the learner) and *Other Ought* (duties and responsibilities that others might hold over the learner). Previous research conducted on L2 motivational dimensions in secondary schools in England reveals that learners are primarily *ought* motivated and concerned with fulfilling parental expectations and the demands placed on them by their institution (Lanvers, 2016; Taylor and Marsden, 2014; Coleman et al., 2007). Feelings of their lack of ownership over the learning process (Macaro, 2008) as well as their knowledge that they are allowed to give up the subject at 14 (Evans and Fisher, 2009) contribute to this proliferation of *ought*-dominated dispositions often expressed amongst secondary learners. The dearth of research that exists exploring the different ways that *ideal*-associated motivation - such as valuing language learning for its own sake or deep appreciation for the L2 culture - could be articulated amongst secondary school learners struck me as meriting further attention. I was interested to explore how such expressions might emerge in my study given the variance of school type, community and socioeconomic background that exists. Furthermore, limited research in MFL learning exists about how significant secondary school learners speak about the specific influence of other *ought*-related dimensions when making their MFL choices - including their peer and parent influences – and I felt that such an exploration might unfold during my research process.

The image of future possible selves

The emergence of the *L2 Motivational Self System* represented a major reform of existing motivational concepts. It marked the beginning of psychological theories of the *self* being connected to concepts of motivation and associated the learning of the L2 with individual elements of the learner's identity or core (Dörnyei, 2009). The study of *possible selves* or

future self-guides emerged from this and tended to focus on how individual differences in personality can be translated into behavioural characteristics (Cantor, 1990). This research led to theorists becoming more interested in the notion of a self-system that mediates and controls ongoing behaviour (Markus and Ruvolo, 1989). The idea of *possible selves* in motivation first emerged through the research of Markus and Nurius (1986) who proposed that several possible selves of an individual learner existed that represented their ideas of what they *would like* to become, what they *might* become and what they were afraid of becoming (Markus and Nurius, 1986). This denoted for the first time a unique self-dimension in that they not only referred to future rather than current self-states (Dörnyei, 2009) but captured how people envisaged their unrealised potential and drew on their hopes, wishes and desires. In the context of L2 learning, possible selves can also be understood as *future self-guides* (Dörnyei, 2009) and reflect a conception where an individual is moved from the present towards the future.

The work of Higgins (1987) has also been strongly influential in L2 motivational research and the concept of Dörnyei's (2005) *ideal* self eventually emerged from this, incorporating the notion of a definite guiding function of standards that could be reached in learning. As I collected my interviews and analysed my findings, I noted that the pupils' concept of an *ideal* self was often intuitively and unconsciously expressed through the positions they took up and their non-verbal cues. I realised that the *self-structure* concept could therefore provide a dynamic and interpretative framework for exploring their thoughts and feelings towards MFL study and explaining their actions and choices in certain contexts. It also appeared to connect to the important role that imagery can play in their expressions of motivation. Markus (2006) concluded that the individual's dream or image of a desired future is the core content of the *ideal* self. The use of *positioning theory* to explain these findings allowed me to draw out any implicit or tacit self-images of the pupil's self-visions as MFL learners that emerged and enabled a richer understanding of their MFL motivation.

It was this element of a 'vision' of an *ideal* L2 learner that I kept returning to throughout the collection, handling and analysing of my data. The concept emerged as an appropriate lens through which to view and present my findings. Dörnyei conceptualises a significant component of the *Ideal-L2 Self* dimension as the individual's own language learning vision, the strength of which may be determined by learners' own images towards their

achievements and successes - important in a subject such as MFL where its mastery is 'a sustained and tedious process', and where the possession of a superordinate vision (Dörnyei, 2009, p.25) is able to keep successful learners on track. Hock et al. (2006) agree that the images of present and future visions of themselves as learners are often presented as a pathway to their hopes and expectations. That there existed such a disparity of vision in the pupils, between the different school types and the views of the class teachers, served to affirm my belief that this concept was meriting of the further attention I had given it. A limited number of studies currently exist in MFL contexts that explore the influences on how pupils' visions of themselves as learners might be formed. These range from the impact of peer pressure (Bartram, 2006) to the ideals and experiences of others, such as parents, might held for their children (Martin, 2020) towards MFL. Accordingly, I realised that being able to define how pupils' spoke (or did not) about their hopes and dreams in MFL and how they visualised their *ideal* selves though the temporary positions they took up might appreciably explain some of their L2 learning experiences in the classroom and also justify their choices. Would their ability to speak about their past successes and failures, and also *how* they spoke about them, operationalise any sense of this vision?

The theories mentioned thus far formed the primary motivational concepts that have been a feature of previous research that I consider having significant influence on and that provide a practicable framework for my research. What follows in this chapter is a synthesis of the significant other theories of motivation and motivation in L2 learning that I considered might have relevance to this study and that I occasionally drew on when analysing my data, representing the research findings and writing my conclusions.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Deci and Ryan's (1985) model of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) that presents a continuum of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is a theoretical framework within which my study can be situated. The theory can be useful in comparing the different strands of extrinsic motivation evident in secondary school learners in different types of school - that each have their own institutional policies for language education among Year 9 pupils. A sub-theory of SDT,

Organismic integration theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) provides a flexible outline to consider the multifaceted variations on pupil language-learning motivation that might emerge from the different types of schools and communities I was conducting my research in. The theory proposes a continuum that deconstructs extrinsic motivation into distinct internalised elements within the learner - who moves between three key types of motivation depending on the learning conditions and environment (Martin, 2020). These range from *amotivation* - being completely devoid of any intention to act (Ryan and Deci, 2000) to *intrinsic motivation*, with *extrinsic motivation* situated between the two. Extrinsic motivation is accordingly broken down into four elements (Ryan and Connell, 1989): *external regulation:* where motivation is linked to external factors such as desiring a reward; *introjected regulation*: feelings of pride in success and shame in failure; *identified regulation*: the desire to improve their chances of getting a good job or academic success and *integrated regulation*: the closest possible point to intrinsic motivation where the benefits of the action are closely internalised.

The theory proposes that motivation on the continuum moves from less autonomous to more self-determined; the more self-determined a student is, and the further up the continuum they move, the more positive their educational outcomes become (Reeve et al., 2004; Taylor and Marsden, 2014). Thus, the concept interacts with Weiner's (1985) Theory of Attribution (see below): individuals that exhibit stronger *amotivation* feel that they have little control over the task and lack any intention to participate; those on the intrinsic end display increased awareness of the value of the task and feelings of a larger degree of control over it (Weiner, 1985). *Identified* and *integrated* regulation are considered the most autonomous and self-determined types of extrinsic motivation before the learner arrives at intrinsic motivation which is differentiated through his or her desire to accomplish specific tasks for their own inherent enjoyment (Martin, 2020) rather than being important to the individual for a particular valuable purpose (Parrish, 2017). Previous studies using SDT to measure the motivation of anglophone learners of other languages in England have focused on the connection between internalised aspects at the level of the learner experience - such as freedom of language choice and the role of autonomy supportive learning activities - (Parrish et al., 2024) and motivation as well as the role of parental intervention (Martin, 2023).

SDT is a useful framework to explore the motivation of secondary school pupils to continue MFL because of its flexibility that allows an interaction of the extrinsic and intrinsic elements of motivation rather than one that imagines them as mutually exclusive (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019). SDT treats motivation as unstable with regards to the influences at the level of the individual learner experience (Martin, 2020). This can help us to understand the role that specific MFL learning experience factors play in each individual school, including their MFL policy and pedagogy and how pupils respond to their teacher and to the target language community - in a subject which pupils have ordinarily found to be not intrinsically motivating (McPake et al., 1999). SDT offers an alternative model of motivation to Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self-System (Parrish, 2020) - which concentrates on progress in MFL learning for an imagined future goal - while, on the other hand, SDT does not assume any agency on the learner's behalf and provides a more flexible outlook to explore motivation in FLL in English secondary schools where the reality of pupil experiences suggest that most learners are faced with learning a compulsory subject that they have no interest in (Parrish, 2020; Gayton, 2010). The SDT model also proposes a further premise exploring the role of the teacher that is worthy of further exploration: the more supportive the learning environment is towards learner autonomy, the more self-determined learners' motivation becomes (Reeve et al., 2004).

Although the standard questionnaire for Organismic integration theory, the Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire (Ryan and Connell, 1989) was not used in my research, the theory of SDT still contains some relevant features that may be applied to the analysis of the focus group and individual interviews. Given that I was using ice-breaker activities with the pupils during the focus group interviews and at the beginning of each relevant interview question, I felt that the multiple-choice options provided in the activities that ranged from the instrumental to the intrinsic, might provide some compelling data in their responses. These responses could accordingly be specifically applied to the SDT categories on the continuum. Their inclusion in this study can be justified given that I was recording the interviews and would be able to distinguish which pupil had made each selection.

Attribution Theory:

An important indicator of motivation is the degree to which learners' efforts in FLL can be hindered by their own perceptions of being able to meet the challenge that is presented to them (Tremblay and Gardner, 1995). Bandura (1995) describes this as self-efficacy, or the self-regulating mechanism of personal beliefs about one's capacities. Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) argues that learners account for their perceived successes and failures by attributing their achievement to four distinct factors: task difficulty, their own ability, effort and luck. The theory considers an individual's causal attributions that are guided by three key principles - *locus* - whether the attribution is inherently internal or external to the learner; *stability* - if it is able to be changed and *controllability* - the ability of the individual to influence it through their behaviour (Weiner, 1985). For example, effort in a task is internal to the learner and may be controlled by them but is unstable as it varies from task to task. The theory suggests that those individuals who attribute their successes or failures to task difficulty or ability or other factors beyond their control are likely to have lower levels of motivation (Parrish, 2017). However, if an individual believes that their effort is the primary driver of their success, they are likely to have higher levels of motivation towards the task (Graham, 1997) and towards the subject. Attribution theory is further connected to the work of Dweck on mindset which posits that two types of mindset exist in learners; *growth* - those who harbour beliefs that their ability and eventual success in learning can change and *fixed* - those who believe that their ability is static and unchanging (Dweck, 2000).

Research into Attribution theory in L1 learners recognises that some learners attribute positive learning outcomes to their effort as well as to effective learning strategies they are introduced to in class (Chan, 1996). Other studies with an MFL focus highlight the lack of self-esteem that is evident among low-achieving pupils in England, characterised by their beliefs that natural talent in languages is innate and a requisite for success (Graham, 2004). Graham interviewed Year 11 pupils studying MFL in England and found that both their attributions for their successes and failures in languages could rationalised by their beliefs about their own abilities (Graham, 2004). Her 2006 study into the metacognitive beliefs of language learners of French in England found that learners with lower self-efficacy tend to

make maladaptive attributions for failure - to factors over which they have no control - such as low ability and task difficulty (Graham, 2006). Conversely, learners with higher self-efficacy were more likely to attribute their failures to their effort and other factors under their control. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1995) is a significant motivational concept that emphasises the relationship between a learner's self-efficacy and the explanations they give for their successes and failures. The attributions that MFL learners themselves make can denote an important marker of motivational difference that can be relevant to this study. If some MFL pupils continue to see their low-ability as fixed and inherent, it is possible they are less likely to see the opportunity for improvement in their language skills and want to continue its study to a higher level.

Therefore, I was interested to understand what Attribution theory might offer in terms of discerning the specific factors that pupils cite when justifying the variation that appears in their own motivation for continuing to study MFL. The focus of my first research question attempts to learn more about pupils' motivation to continue studying MFL and how they respond to the messages they receive surrounding its learning from various background factors. Research investigating the attributions that learners from different backgrounds make towards their language learning motivation is sparse. It is possible that a better understanding of the uptake deficit in MFL can be gained by listening more closely to the different success and failure attributions that pupils make when they speak about their MFL classroom experiences that consequently affects the choices they make. Might there be important differences or commonalities of background or learning experience among pupils who attribute their successes and failures in language learning to different factors? By paying attention to the more positive attributions (and displays of self-efficacy) that pupils in different schools exhibit in interviews, it can enable future research to consider successful learning strategies that can potentially contribute to learners' desire to continue learning MFL.

3.2 Positioning Theory

Introduction

Positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990) is a concept that provides a theoretical framework through which to view the research taking place in this study. The concept of positioning theory focuses on exploring the *positions* that individuals take up in conversation and that they correspondingly assign each other in talk that reveals insights into concepts such as their individual identities, their agency and power relations in a conversation. Positioning theory and the notion of *positions* offer a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of *role* (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991) and can be understood through the ways in which individuals take up certain perspectives and views according to their membership of a certain category or subject position (Davies and Harré, 2001). It aims to analyse the rights, duties and obligations that are distributed amongst speakers in conversations and narratives (Davies and Harré, 1999) with the aim on focusing on the *moment* rather than causation or hypotheses to explain the actions of social actors in a moral landscape (Kayı-Aydar, 2019a). Positioning theory first appealed to me as an appropriate lens with which to view how secondary school pupils represent their own motivation to continue learning MFL and its value to them because of its focus on the momentary conversational exchanges that occur between people. Its focus on the ephemeral construction of fleeting positions can provide insights into pupils' language learning beliefs and is appropriate for exploring and discussing this topic within the context of a focus group interview with adolescent learners in what may be an unfamiliar environment for them.

The use of positioning theory in the field of SLA education is one that has become progressively adopted in the last decade, particularly amongst L2 education researchers (e.g. Kayı-Aydar, 2021; Liu and McVee, 2025) seeking to understand the relationship between the language learner and the social world. Since the 1990s, a social turn has emerged in SLA research that has challenged traditional and enduring views of SLA and turned researchers' attention towards notions such as self, discourse and identity in relation to developing acquisition of a second language (Mantero, 2007). These alternative approaches have

focused on the role and differences that social context, membership and identities of learners of the L2 might play (Kayı-Aydar, 2019) in order to understand how these social categories determine and affect why some learners appear to be more successful than others (Saville-Troike, 2006). Positioning theory, therefore, as a 'trans-disciplinary, conceptual and analytical framework' (Slocum-Bradley, 2009, p. 79) allows SLA researchers to understand and explore social issues that are 'not bound by disciplinary divisions'. Its strong focus on social context, identities and social interaction and the intricacies that emerge from the nature of interactions and experiences in multi-lingual contexts (Kayı-Aydar, 2019) mean that it is a particularly suitable framework to use in this study.

Modes of positioning

Positioning theory, primarily situated within a social constructivist perspective, was first developed by Davies and Harré (1990) and presents a reworking of the traditional understanding of the ontology of social phenomena in which people's actions and their conceptions of self are not self-contained psychological entities but tied to social discourse (Deppermann, 2015). Positioning has been defined as the 'basic mechanism by which a self and identities are acquired in social interaction' in terms of practical and emotional and epistemic commitment to identity categories (Deppermann, 2015 p.372). The theory defines two primary modes of positioning: *interactive* and *reflexive*. *Interactive* positioning refers to how positions are assigned to others; *reflexive* regards how individuals assign positions to themselves (Davies and Harré 1999). As positioning is, in its essence, a relational activity, positions are always relative to one another (Harré and Slocum, 2003) and how people act, speak and perceive themselves is always in relation to each other (Hazari et al., 2015). Through *interactive and reflexive* positioning acts, an individual's positioning influences the manner in which people conceptualise and enact their status or place in a given context (Whitset and Volet, 2013). Examining the reflexive and interactive positioning by individuals within a focus group interview will inevitably explore forms of speaking, actions and cognitions that individuals are afforded and therefore, their right to contribute or control the discourse in that area (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). Within the context of focus group

interviews amongst adolescents in the same peer group, this can mean focusing on how implications of power relations appear in discourse and raises question of how the participants might break or align with a consensus formed by their peers and influence how freely they feel able to express their views on a divisive subject.

Distancing and alignment with subject positions to highlight values

The positions that participants take up in discourse can serve as indicators of the values they hold and those they wish to distance themselves from. The use of oppositional and relational positioning is a feature that highlights this concept and the contrasting stances that individuals assume in relation to each other that reflect differences of practices and behaviour (Kayı-Aydar, 2015). Søreide (2006) proposes an analytical framework that highlights how individuals' distancing and identifying with available subject positions in discourse can illuminate their values in the process of identity construction. By distancing themselves from certain kinds of behaviour, values and ideas, individuals are able to position themselves in certain ways that can empower themselves (Kayı-Aydar, 2019a) and develop the sense of behaviour they value. Conversely, the opposite is also true. By aligning or identifying with certain subject positions, individuals mark affiliations with categories or communities (Bamberg, 2012) and highlight what is important to them. In such a way, they draw attention to attributes that they bring that are different to others and draw boundaries around themselves and those who do or do not subscribe to the same categories (Bamberg, 2012). In the context of this research, this framework will be useful in being able to explore the rights and duties that are permitted or denied to certain learners through subject positioning in a social setting. It will permit an in-depth focus on how learner identities are constructed through the subject positions they take up, answering the second part of my first research question. Søreide's (2006) framework also allows us to document the polarising attributions of value it is anticipated that MFL study will elicit from the pupils and to note how such views might be used to delineate group and individual categories of learner according to school type for the benefit of future inquiry.

The role of positioning theory in this thesis

Positioning theory thus emerged as a logical theoretical framework to complement my research and with which to explore the responses of learners to their language motivation. This is partly due to the myriad and versatile reactions that I anticipated being provoked among pupils when interviewed in the unfamiliar setting of a focus group environment that would capture their responses to what has been previously noted as a contentious and fractious topic in England (Coleman, 2009).

During my reading, several features of positioning theory struck me as an appropriate analytical tool to use in the context of my research that would complement the theory as a framework. According to Harré et al. (2009, p. 9), positions are features of the "local moral landscape" which consists of practices or "habitual ways of speaking and interacting". Using positioning theory as a tool to analyse the habitual ways of speaking and interacting that are common amongst adolescent pupils in England and that they employ when talking to each other appeared appropriate because of the emphasis it raises on the prosodic features of their conversation – the nuances of what might be implied rather than explicitly expressed by my participants. Such emphasis might include paralinguistic features, non-verbal cues and body language (Kayı-Aydar, 2021) that are typical of teenage secondary school aged pupils in England.

Kayı-Aydar (2019a p. 28) distinguishes this analytic element as separate from the theoretical framework component of positioning theory and labels it *Positioning Analysis*. The section of this study describing this analytical methodology will be further detailed in the methodology chapter of this thesis which describes how this analytic element of positioning theory that accompanies the theoretical framework can be used to examine the positions that pupils take up in the focus group interviews. What follows in this chapter, however, is an explanation of the primary features of positioning theory and how they interact with other significant concepts to form the conceptual framework that will be used in my research.

3.3 <u>Positioning and Discourse</u>

Positioning itself is a discursive process whereby people locate themselves and are located in conversations by others. Positioning theory centres on how actors accordingly assign and are assigned positions that can be situation-specific, disputed, changing and dynamic (Harré and Slocum, 2003). The theory focuses on how people concurrently shape and are shaped by the discourse they produce and that surrounds them and through the discursive possibilities by which selves are shaped and constructed (Kayı-Aydar, 2019b).

Discourse has been defined as 'language in use' and 'language used to do something and mean something, language produced and interpreted in a real-world context' (Cameron, 2001. p 13). Contrary to Foucault's (1972) view of discourse as the institutional infrastructure of distributions of power and knowledge which provide opportunities and constraints for individual action and cognition (Deppermann, 2015), the concept of discourse tied to positioning theory imagines the self as an agentive subject shaping social behaviour and the changes of knowledge formations through discourse creation. This understanding of discourse is closest to *poststructuralist discourse* (Kayı-Aydar, 2015) in which the self is no longer stable and relatively fixed, but always in process, taking its shape in and through the discourse that is produced by our multiple selves (Davies, 2000). Being assigned positions by others or assigning positions to them is a discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants (Davies and Harré 1999). This study therefore focuses on how discourse is both constructive and constructed in my participants through paying attention to the meanings, norms and behaviours that guide their speech and action (Slocum-Bradley, 2009). It can present an alternative perspective on the role of discourse in understanding the MFL crisis that has traditionally been depicted in terms of it being a constraining or enabling influence on learners – particularly amongst those from different backgrounds (Coffey, 2018).

The close entwinement between discourse and positioning theory is reflected in how certain individuals gain more entitlement than others to speak from positions of authority and use certain modes of discourse (Harré, 2012) in group interactions. The imbalance of rights and duties (Harré, 2012) that are distributed within groups also determines this, as well as the

positioning of individuals who may perform certain actions in discursive practices such as issuing orders and ascribing value (or lack of) to something. Through the use of positions to situate themselves and others through discursive practice, speakers position themselves as powerful or powerless, unconcerned or interested and at the same time limit or allow the opportunities of others to speak (Kayı-Aydar, 2019a). Positioning theory provides a suitable framework to study the focus group interactions of secondary school pupils and to pay attention to these discursive practices - that may inhibit or permit certain individuals within the group from performing particular actions, and which enables us to draw distinct conclusions about their motivation and value towards MFL study.

Gee (2008) first suggested that language use in discourse is socially determined and stressed the saying-doing combination in how language is produced as being a crucial component. This view is similar to a discourse analysis approach to exploring the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. Van Dijk (2009) proposes that the link between discourse and society often depends on how language users themselves define the context in which they are engaged. In this approach, contexts are not objective conditions but rather inter-subjective constructs that are constantly updated by participants in their interactions with each other as members of groups or communities (Van Dijk, 2008). In adopting such a perspective, positioning theory becomes a useful tool to explore how certain contexts within the field of MFL learning are perceived and defined differently by different parties and how they can be constructed in discourse. It is reasonable to infer that the contexts that adolescent learners construct within the field of MFL learning between themselves in conversation could considerably differ from those of their teachers or from the realities of other adults who have experienced MFL learning within secondary schools. Positioning theory therefore provides a means of drawing out these subtle and individual variations of context within the field of secondary school MFL learning in England and of better understanding the conditions that pupils repeatedly return to in conversation, and eventually to begin to understand how these representations might be connected to their inclination to (dis)continue the learning of languages.

Paying attention to interdiscursivity, or how discourses intersect, overlap and entwine in various ways (Rex and Schiller, 2009) can highlight the multiple worlds and discourses available to secondary school learners. Positioning theory notes that people speak by

deploying the resources, ideas and categories available to them (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006), and by building their social worlds through their own accounts. Positioning and discourse are thus tightly connected, especially given that a major part of positioning acts are accomplished by linguistic action (Deppermann, 2015). By paying attention to the particular moments that are shaped in discourse: the words, categories and common-sense ideas that typical secondary school pupils deploy when speaking about their motivation for language study and its value, we can learn more about how these acts of positioning come to be accompanied by certain linguistic features (Kayı-Aydar, 2019a). These linguistic features can be associated with certain social groups and particular ways of speaking and indicate how moral, evaluative and epistemic judgements are used to construct locally relevant positions (Deppermann, 2015). This focus on the linguistic features of discourse and their social function (Wood and Kroger, 2000) is particularly fitting to exploring the verbal acts that secondary pupils use amongst themselves and in a group of their peers and in understanding how individuals recognise themselves and others as certain kinds of people (Rex and Schiller, 2009) – through realising that they use language to act, behave and speak in certain ways and taking on positions that others will recognise (Rex and Schiller, 2009).

3.4 <u>Positioning and Identity</u>

The focus of my first research question concerns how secondary school pupils negotiate their identities as language learners regarding their motivation to continue learning MFL and their perceptions of its value to them. Positioning theory is also a fitting lens through which to view and better understand the concept of learner identity because of the notion that speakers' identities are constructed through the temporary positions they take up in everyday discourse (Kayı-Aydar, 2019a). Such understandings emphasise the nature of identity as constructed, enacted or produced moment to moment (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). This runs contrary to the traditional concept of identity as an overarching and static structure that is composed of a person's experiences and defined in terms of their personality and biological traits (Deppermann, 2015). In this case, the notion of identity is

established and accomplished in and through social discourse and located in what people observably do (Deppermann, 2015).

According to Kayı-Aydar, (2019a), *positional identities* emerge and are constructed and reconstructed in discourse through each position that emerges in social interaction. Individuals' identities cannot be separated from the discourses in which they are embedded but can be assigned new identities in the form of positions in different social contexts. This version of identity permits a reimagining of MFL learner identity in this research context that is not demonstrated through their dispositions and aggregated experiences, but instead through the accumulation of subject positions clustered around a discourse. This conceptualisation of identity reveals it as a dynamic and changing activity with participants who actively co-construct their own identity by actively taking up subject positions incorporating a conceptual repertoire and inevitably coming to see the world from that position (Davies and Harré, 1990). The creation of positional identities from accumulated subject positions emphasises that an individual's identity is 'constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate' (Davies and Harré, 1999 p.35) with the positions they take up forming who they are.
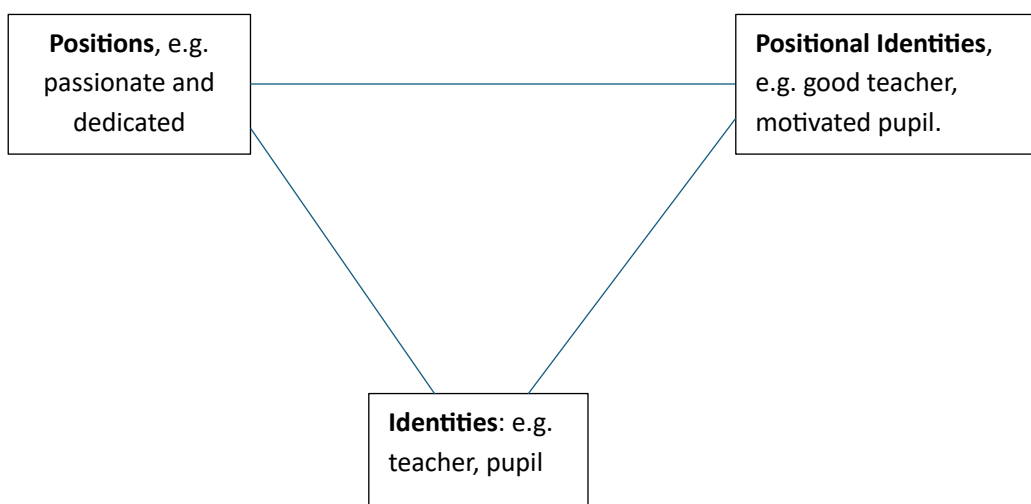
Figure 5 depicts the relationship between identities, positional identities and positions (Kayı-Aydar, 2019b).

Listening to my participants and employing the definition of *positional identities* to understand identity can offer an original interpretation of learner identity as a means of understanding the uptake deficit in language learning. Numerous studies attempting to illuminate and define the identities that language learners exhibit in the MFL learning process exist (Lanvers, 2018; Fisher et al., 2018; Evans and Fisher, 2022) but the majority have tended to focus on the inherent features of their background that comprise and influence learners' identification and engagement with the subject. In L2 learning contexts, studies have explored how teachers construct their positional identities in educational settings (Søreide, 2006) but research exploring how this notion of identity as co-constructed and negotiated around temporary subject positions in MFL learners in England is limited and has not addressed the subject of the crisis in MFL teaching and learning. This study can address this gap by attempting to distinguish identity as a concept that is not bound by learners' overall orientation and identifications towards the subject but instead through highlighting the clusters of identity within discourses that emerge from the positions that learners take up.

3.5 Positioning and Agency

The close coupling of positioning and agency can be understood through the notion that by engaging in intentional positioning moves in social action, individuals exercise agency and achieve specific goals (Kayı-Aydar, 2019a). Agency is defined as 'the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world' (Rogers and Wetzel, 2013, p. 63) and is shaped through social situations. Duff (2013, p.417) defines agency as 'people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading to, possibly, personal or social transformation'. In relation to positioning theory, agency exists in so far as individuals assign or take up agentive positions regarding other actors within a social setting (Harré and Slocum, 2003). Intentional positioning of themselves or others can be strategic (Van Langenhove and Harré, 1999) and through certain intentional positioning moves, individuals can gain or lose the right to speak or act, and therefore, agency.

When considering an appropriate conceptual framework for this research, I anticipated that expressions of agency would feature prominently within the focus group interview responses as pupils spoke about the day-to-day actions they took in their language classes and the myriad factors that influenced their decision making. I imagined that such manifestations of localised agency in action (Miller, 2010) would be evident in how pupils spoke about their involvement and participation in their everyday language learning lessons in the MFL classroom, as well as how they consciously settled on the decision to either continue or discontinue to study the subject at GCSE. Indeed, my first research question focuses on the role that background influence can play in pupils' decision-making and might therefore logically necessitate exploring how pupils spoke about exercising their own agency in this decision at GCSE. I was curious about how the focus group contexts would illuminate localized examples of their own agency towards their MFL learning – not only in key decisions but the extent to which they felt they were accountable for their own learning progress and how this accountability interacted with their motivation.

As I developed my conceptualization of agency, the notion of how it might apply to this study evolved and began to integrate poststructuralist understandings of agency that emphasise how it is co-constructed by the sociocultural environment and the L2 learner (Ros I Soli, 2007). Van Lier (2008) notes that language learners' agentive capacity to act runs contrary to notions of linguistic competence as something that learners possess. Instead, agency is mediated by other 'cultural, social, interactional, institutional and other contextual factors' (van Lier, 2008, p.171). Such an understanding of agency might not solely be indicated by learner commitment to describing their active and explicit participation in a language class for example, however, but recognizes that agency comprises more than performance or action (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). It is linked instead to how individuals assign relevance and significance to things and events (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006) and how they perceive their own agency.

More recent understandings of agency similarly engage with how it is primarily constructed through discourse rather than by explicit action. Davies (2000) agrees with this poststructuralist perspective in depicting how people act as deliberate agents by moving within and between discourses in a social setting, modifying, refusing and resisting those discourses that are available to them. By rejecting or identifying with specific positions

within a discourse, people can claim or refuse agency (Kayı-Aydar, 2015). In the context of focus group interviews with learners speaking about their motivation and perception of language study's value, expressions of agency may be implicit and emerge through how they assign relevance and significance in learning to acts and moments and through the transitory and fragmented (Miller, 2010) discursive positions they take up. These actions are always socioculturally mediated and constrained by other contextual factors (Kayı-Aydar, 2019a) such as the subject positions from which they can speak and act. In this way, certain positions may constrain or permit agency and agentic individuals position themselves and exercise agency through the acceptance or resistance of discourse structures (Tran and Vu, 2018).

Liu and McVee's (2025) study examined the deliberate and forced self-positioning (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1991) of EFL teachers to analyse how their agency was revealed through the ways in which the teachers positioned themselves. It explored how EFL teachers positioned themselves within various social forces, such as institutional constraints. Their research examined how the teachers repositioned themselves and others through discursive constructs and used Biesta et al.'s (2015) model of agency to better understand how the role of certain factors (such as professional and cultural experiences) can affect teachers in certain positions and shape them to exercise agency. The study's findings showed that teachers actively constructed their positions as both agentic teachers and passive teachers by talking about their research and practice activities. External influences such as school structures and available support were found to support or constrain the teachers' ability to exercise their agency in teaching and research activities (Liu and McVee, 2025).

To conclude, this study's findings have engaged with different understandings of agency; firstly, as a localised concept that is tied to a specific action and secondly, its definition not as an individual and tangible quality to be witnessed in action, but instead as spoken into existence at any given moment (Davies, 2000). This focus on agency is enabled through a poststructuralist approach that explores the different ways in which learners come to be constituted as agents and how they perceive their own capacity to act, as well as by localizing the different examples where their actions demonstrate that their agency in their language learning and decision-making is evident. Paying attention to the positions that language learners assign themselves and are assigned during their experiences and

interactions provides a fruitful understanding of how learners' agency is constructed through the discourses they choose to accept, counteract, or modify and can lead to a rich understanding of their relationship with language learning and their perceptions of its value.

3.6 <u>Bourdieu's notion of habitus</u>

Our understanding of learners' attitudes towards language learning indicates that their relationship to the L2 may be socially constructed (Norton, 2010). Previous studies note that positive influences stemming from family support and encouragement towards MFL study can form a virtuous circle of mutually reinforcing motives from different domains that are embedded in pupils' multi-dimensional experiences (Coffey, 2018). These domains can be multifaceted and might include different environments such as the institution as well as the role of learner's home background in shaping their engagement, dispositions and attitudes towards learning. The concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986) describes the embodied history of social structures available to an individual that shape how they perceive the world and act in it (Power, 2015). Decisions within it are often motivated by the need to accrue economic, social or cultural capital – within certain *fields* - structured spaces that consist of competing zones for status and distinctions to be drawn (Reay, 2016). Different types of capital exist: *economic* – accumulated wealth; *symbolic* – accumulated prestige that confers an amount of honour; *cultural* – accumulated from embedded everyday cultural goods and icons and *social* – resources that accrue from possessing a durable network of institutionalised relationships. Bourdieu (1986) indicates that a family's access to the different forms of capital contribute to the subsequent *habitus* of the child which in turn combine to shape their future attitudes and engagement with different forms of education. Coffey (2018) offers a further model within the MFL context regarding how the value of language learning may be perceived by learners in England. His study (2018) demonstrated that learners appropriate or reject certain popular discourses surrounding the current and future value of language study presented to them as their dispositions are formed within the social horizons of their *habitus*.

When applied to language study, the concepts of *habitus* and *capital* advance the view that entrenched structures existing within the social world also serve as mechanisms that ensure their reproduction. For some learners, these structures serve to maintain their limited access to language learning and an understanding of its value. Learner preferences absorbed from their parents and other modelling agents within their social world, acquired through deep-rooted cultural (holidays abroad, language exchanges) and social practices (engagement with peers, community), become embedded as habituated behaviour and beliefs (Lanvers, 2017). *Practice* as described by Bourdieu (1986), is neither objectively determined nor the product of free will and equals the relation between *habitus* and the current circumstances that takes place within a certain social arena or *field* (Power, 2015). In the *field* of the language learning classroom, the practice of choosing to engage with language learning and the discourses that surround it represents the opportunity for language learners to acquire further capital according to their interpretation of its relevance.

Learners respond to and access the actual and potential resources linked to a durable network of institutionalised relationships that provide different *cultural* and *social* capital depending on their socioeconomic status (SES) background (Costa and Murphy, 2015). Through their home environment, studies suggest that children from higher SES backgrounds have access to both more of and the appropriate kind of capital for success in language learning (Gayton, 2013). Those learners more familiar with a *habitus* incompatible with that presented in school towards languages and often from a lower SES background are more likely to encounter disruption when entering a formal learning environment and responding to these discourses (Lin, 1999).

Evidence suggests that learners from higher SES backgrounds are more able to articulate their agency to justify their choices for language study (Taylor and Marsden, 2014), based on its usefulness to them within the structural constraints of the school environment. They display a tacit understanding of the role of languages as a cornerstone in their future academic success and exhibit epistemological connectivity in tracing its benefits to other subjects and improving their cross-curricular skills (Coffey, 2018). These expressions suggests that languages are often taken as a deliberate choice as part of a long-term considered educational strategy and expressed in these terms. Studies suggest that learners from lower

SES backgrounds often express opinions that fall within traditional reductive and instrumental discourses that surrounds the value of FLL. In previous research, these have included familiar tropes such as: '*language learning is only suitable for those who want to become language teachers*' (Taylor and Marsden, 2014), and pupils who justify their choices based on superficial motives: '*Spanish sounds a fancier language than French*' (Graham, 2004; p.4) that do not spring from a deep well of belief. For these learners, their *habitus* has led them away from making decisions to continue language learning (Lin, 1999). These can often be based on a number of factors such as their family influences, family background experiences of languages and the personal value that they see in it for themselves.

Despite this, the actions and preferences of actors within this social field are not entirely determined by the structural constraints inherent in their fields, and there remains scope for individual agency to effect change, even within the horizons of the *habitus* (Kramsch, 2015). As Skeggs (1997) notes, such notions are not fixed: a family may 'capitalise further on the assets they already have' (p.9). Assets and access to *capital* may be accrued by a committed learner through increased knowledge of the L2 and familiarity and proximity to its culture.

Taking the concept of Bourdieu's *habitus* as 'a set of dispositions that generates practices, perceptions and attitudes' (Thompson, 1991; p.12) based on familial legacy and childhood socialisation (McNay, 1999), this study highlights the role that these background factors play in their MFL choice making at 14+ and for GCSE. This can also connect to understanding how pupils' attitudes and motivation towards language learning are expressed. It can explore whether the MFL learners in my study express any understandings of the notion of improving their future *capital* through the learning of languages. As Pennycook (1994) describes the *power and prestige of competence* that is conferred upon learners of English, do some of the learners in my study articulate these views symbolising improving their existing *capital* through L2 learning and by acquiring status and academic qualifications, or are there other motivations they hold?

3.7 Appropriated discourses of value – Foucault

The work of Foucault (1980) on discursive fields provides another lens through which to explore my research. Discourse, as defined by Foucault, refers to 'ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them' (Weedon, 1987; p. 104). Such discourses have shaped and created meaning systems that dominate how we define both ourselves and our social world (Hall, 2001). Distinct fields, such as 'education' or 'language learning', contain a number of competing discourses that contain different degrees of power giving meaning to social institutions and processes (Graham, 2011). Foucault's theorising of discourse helps us understand how a certain discourse can be established and substantiated as hegemonic practice in a field and how institutions can serve to strengthen existing forms of power belonging to learners according to their background (Coffey, 2018). Selected and prioritised rationales for language learning are often drawn from within an exclusive *habitus* in this way.

Learners favourably disposed toward language study perceive its value as embedded across existing and projected networks and educational and career pathways. They are able to express explicit understandings of and adapt and appropriate popular discourses surrounding FLL to their advantage (Lanvers, 2017). Those from higher SES backgrounds pursue cultural practices deemed as worthy along a 'road map of Anglo middle-class lifestyles' (Coffey, 2018; p.7). Among these, European cultural practices and perspectives such as open-mindedness and progression can be esteemed by learners, eager to adopt behaviours such as engaging with locals whilst abroad and travel as a commitment to cosmopolitanism (Coffey, 2018). A desire to travel abroad and engage with locals is one aspect packaged as desirable practice that can be connected to language learning as part of the network of neo-liberal market values (Chard, 1999).

The role of discourse as suggested by Foucault (1980), is therefore illuminated through this research, particularly in exploring the role of how pupils from different school type and background respond to the discourses they encounter that surround language learning in England. The variation in their response might be evident in how secondary school pupils

express an understanding of any potential ceilings that might be imposed on their progress in terms of the views of others and according to their background. It is also reasonable to infer that learners from different backgrounds might draw on different discourses available to them surrounding MFL learning to express and justify their motivation and decision-making in it. These can include the discourses of political and public debate, of the family background and home environment and the institution and the discipline of MFL learning.

3.8 <u>Conclusion:</u>

In summary, there is a complex interplay and mutually shaping relationship that occurs between the concepts of positioning, discourse, identity and agency that can unify to provide an appropriate conceptual framework for this study. Positioning theory is the study of the individual positions that people take up in conversation and is represented through the ways in which individuals adopt certain perspectives and views according to their membership of a certain subject position or category. The imbalance of the rights and duties that might be distributed amongst a group in that conversation reflects how certain individuals become more entitled than others to adopt positions of authority within the group and to use certain modes of discourse in conversation. Through analysing these positions, we can highlight the practices that inhibit or permit learners from saying certain things or performing certain sorts of actions in discursive practice in the field of language learning (Kayı-Aydar, 2019a). Through the acceptance or rejection of certain discourse structures in conversation, learners can position themselves and at the same time align or distance themselves from the different values they associate with regarding MFL learning. In doing this, they use language to act, behave and speak as a way of taking on the positions that others recognise and are evaluated by the meanings, norms and behaviour that guide their speech and actions. In the context of this research, analysing the positions that pupils of different backgrounds take up in conversation is therefore a valuable means of understanding the MFL discourses that they are most familiar with and those they choose to engage with or not.

Through analysing the positions that individuals take up in conversation, understandings of the contexts and realities that they construct through discourse can unfold. Positioning theory offers a means of examining how individuals differently define and construct the contexts in discourse that surround different fields, such as MFL study. In relation to the subject of language learning, this can mean that the contexts that adolescent learners construct around language learning might appear to be different to those which are constructed by an adult or their teacher.

At the same time, analysing the positions that individuals take up in discourse offers a means of observing how their identities are constructed through the temporary positions that they take up in conversation. Through each position that emerges in discourse, an individual's positional identities emerge through the accumulation of subject positions that cluster around a discourse. This reveals identity as a dynamic and changing activity constructed by individuals who actively take up temporary and changing positions. This creation of positional identities from accumulated subject positions emphasises that an individuals' identity can be reconstituted through the discourses in which they choose to engage with and with the positions they take up forming who they are. The process of identity construction is also highlighted as being connected to positioning through the ways in which individuals' distance and identify with available subject positions in discourse -which is a way of illuminating their values and highlight what is important to them (Søreide, 2006).

Similarly, an individual's agency in any given situation can be constructed through discourse, rather than through specific action. Individuals exercise agency by navigating within and between the discourses they encounter in social interaction; by accepting, modifying or resisting those discourses that are available to them. In rejecting or identifying with certain positions in a discourse, individuals can claim or refuse agency. Agentic individuals position themselves and therefore exercise agency through their willingness to engage in intentional positioning moves within a given discourse, and thereby lose or gain the right to speak or act. Using this interpretation, exploring how MFL pupils in England position themselves within certain discourses by choosing to accept, modify or refuse them can indicate how they claim or refuse agency for themselves as well as how they assign relevance and significance to their learning through the discursive positions they take up.

Figure 6 below illustrates the interaction between positioning, discourse, identity and agency.

```
┌──────────────┐
│   Identity   │
└──────────────┘
        ↑↓                                                    ↘
                                                    ┌──────────────────┐
                                                    │    Positioning   │
┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐                 │ (positions taken │
│   Discourse  │   │ Institutional│                 │  up by pupils)   │
│ (co-created and│ │ discourse (   │ ←→             └──────────────────┘
│ shaped by agents│ Political, home,│                        ↑↓
│ in conversation)│    school)    │
└──────────────┘   └──────────────┘
        ↑↓                                           ↗
┌──────────────┐
│    Agency    │
└──────────────┘
```
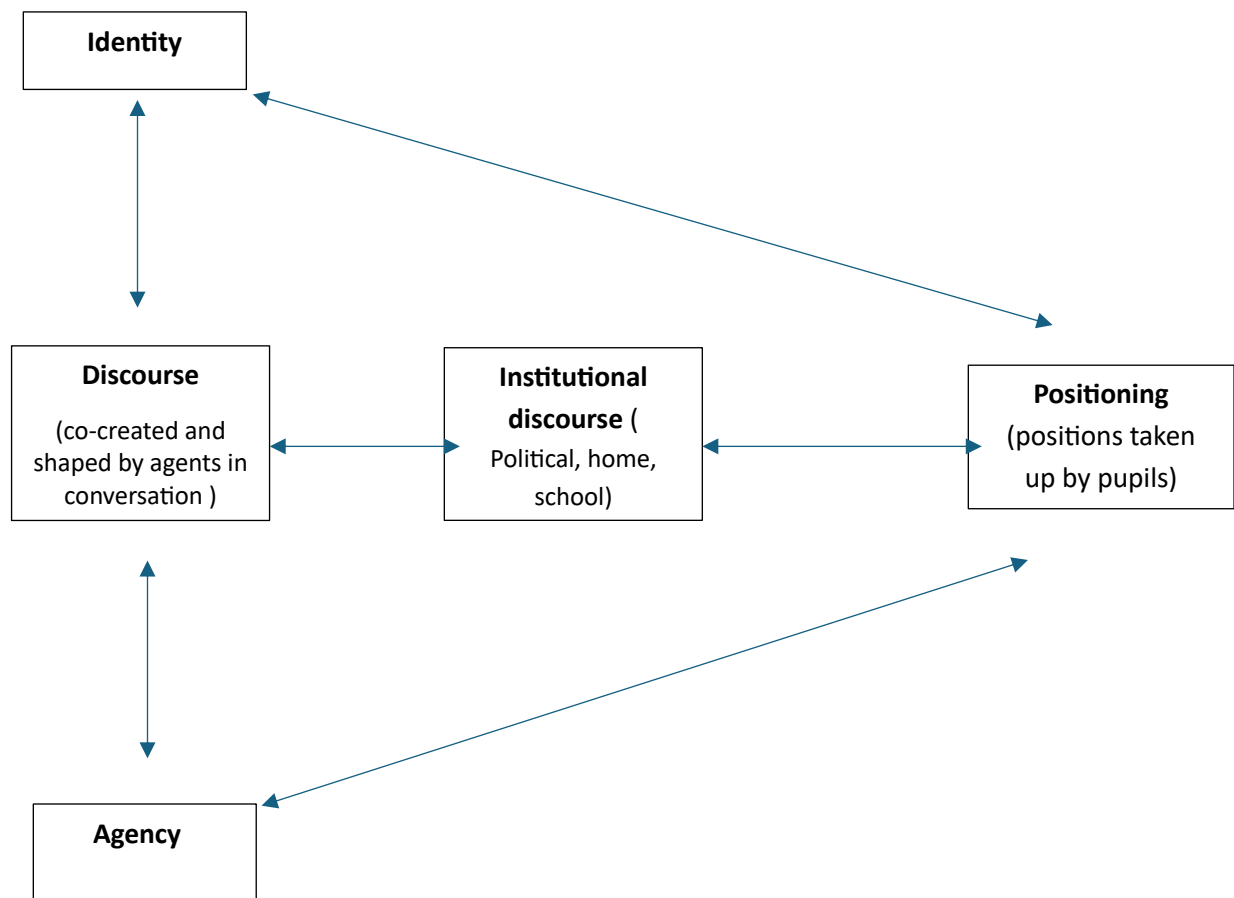
There are three broader forms of institutional discourse relevant to this research: one is the political discourse of the language learning climate post-Brexit in England that shapes the context of this research; another is the institutionalised discourse that surrounds each individual school, their policy towards languages and the MFL discipline itself; lastly, the discourses that emerge from the home environment and family background of each pupil towards languages.

Chapter 4.Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The focus of this research is to explore how secondary school pupils speak about their motivation for learning languages and how they justify their decision-making regarding MFL as part of a wider means of understanding the decline in uptake of languages at GCSE in England. Through pursuing this aim, it will examine learners' expressions of the value of language learning to them. The focus of this study was enabled by exploring responses from secondary pupils in four focus group interviews across four different school types in the East of England region. This was followed by two semi-structured follow-up individual interviews with two pupils from each focus group. Finally, a languages teacher and a member of the school leadership team from each school were interviewed in individual semi-structured interviews across the different schools. This study uses a qualitative framework that follows an inductive design, and a combination of data collection methods were used to answer my research questions. Using this range of methods enabled data to be collected from different participants in a number of institutions within the East of England region to gain a broad picture of learners' motivation, perceptions and experiences of language study.

In the chapter that follows, I introduce my research questions and the methodological design of the study. I explain the epistemological position that informs my research and the justification for adopting this approach. I also explain the methods and the logistics of the data collection as well as the justification for the method of data analysis, positioning analysis, that I used, along with their rationales. Finally, I discuss the broader implications such as the possible limitations of my research and ethical considerations that need to be addressed when considering this topic and the research setting.

4.2 <u>Research questions</u>

1. How do pupils position themselves and negotiate their identities as language learners regarding:

   a) their motivation towards continuing to study MFL?

   b) their responses to the messages they receive regarding MFL's significance from their institution, home and local community?

   c) the future value of MFL to their lives?

2. What can teachers' self-positioning in narratives tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL in England?

3. How do the findings to questions 1 and 2 help to explain the decline in uptake of MFL that has occurred in England over the last 20 years?

4.3 <u>Research Design</u>

Research approach

The research taking place in this study is qualitative research that is by nature interpretivist– it tries to generate an understanding of the social world that people inhabit by examining how participants ascribe meaning and interpret it (Clark et al., 2021). Qualitative research aims to generate insights into particular topics, and it does this through a considered engagement with the social actors and places including the people, organisations and institutions of that community (Hammersley, 2012). It often assumes an ontological position that is constructivist, in that social properties are seen as outcomes of the interactions between individuals and how they are constructed in a certain context (Hennink et al.,

2020). Qualitative researchers therefore usually develop concepts and theories using the data that is generated during the research project and are inductive in nature (Robson, 2011) whereas in quantitative research theoretical issues are seen as shaping how the data is collected and analysed (Clark et al., 2021).

Newby (2014) states that in a qualitative research tradition, relationships, character, emotions and all the other ways that we live our lives and express ourselves are legitimate sources of information that can be used to make sense of the world. Qualitative research regards people as anticipatory, meaning-making beings who actively construct their own interpretation of situations, make sense of their world and act in it accordingly (Cohen et al., 2017). This approach is particularly suited to exploring the attitudes and motivation of secondary school aged pupils towards MFL study that have often been noted as reflecting their different perspectives, frustration, dissatisfaction and a lack of understanding of its relevance to them (Lanvers, 2017; Graham, 2004). Outside secondary school language classrooms, such views have more recently emerged through ambivalence and hostility expressed towards languages other than English in society and through the wider media (Graham and Santos, 2015).

Mills et al. (2006) state that in order to ensure a strong research design, researchers must choose a research paradigm and subsequently, a methodology that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality. Epistemologically, I class myself as a researcher who embraces constructivist principles in believing that all knowledge is actively constructed through human experience whilst at the same time preferring detailed, objective and systematic procedures of analysis. Attempting to explore the personal and subjective experiences of learners' motivations and their perceptions towards the value of language study lends itself to qualitative research with a predominantly constructivist worldview because it originates from the assumption that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and actively construct their own meaning (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Adopting this stance is also suitable for the aims of my methodology, given the range of institutions I plan to explore in my study and the different backgrounds and experiences that my participants will bring to my research. Using in-depth focus group and individual interviewing as a method of data collection can furnish rich interpretations of the beliefs and emotions that a context such as MFL learning in secondary schools can provoke, as well as

providing an environment that can be used to best study how my participants actively co-construct meaning from their language experiences.

4.4 <u>Positioning analysis</u>

I propose using an analytical framework derived from positioning theory to examine and analyse the interview data that I collected and the temporary positions that the pupils took up in focus group interactions. This would provide a means of exploring how they articulate their motivation for language learning and justify their choices. Positioning theory, introduced by Davies and Harré (1990), focuses on the momentary conversational exchanges occurring between people to highlight the practices that permit or inhibit individuals from saying certain things or performing certain actions in discursive practice (Harré, 2012). Several aspects of positioning theory feature in this study as significant theoretical influences as well as serving as a method of analysing the data and both of these aspects have been described in greater detail in the *Conceptual Framework* and *Results* chapters of this thesis. The section that follows will elucidate what positioning analysis entails and why it was chosen as an analytical tool in this study to provide an original interpretation of secondary school pupil responses to the decline in uptake of language learning in England.

Positioning analysis, which draws heavily on other discourse analytic techniques to understand the momentary construction of reality created by participants (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2003), involves analysing and drawing links between the momentary and temporary positions that individuals take up in spoken interactions that act a way of expressing their beliefs regarding certain subjects. By paying attention to these, positioning analysis enables us to gain a deeper understanding about the perceptions of value and their own motivation that individuals connect with language learning. Positioning analysis is a particularly appropriate tool for understanding how individuals construct certain temporary subject positions in talk (Kayı-Aydar, 2019) around particular discourses. To distance or align oneself from the available subject positions in a discourse is an act of self-positioning that can reveal an individuals' identification with a set of values, ideas and beliefs. Through performing positioning analysis, we gain a better understanding of how individuals assume

subject positions that distance or align themselves from certain values and beliefs that others hold, which can be useful in recognising why pupils respond in the way they do to MFL learning and the discourses that surround it. Performing positioning analysis can further help with establishing identity categories that individuals belong to and the group belonging that they wish to indicate (Bamberg, 2012). As they align or distance themselves from certain categories, speakers draw boundaries around themselves (Bamberg, 2012) distinguishing those who share the same and different identities and beliefs.

Positioning analysis focuses on exploring the oppositional and relational subject positions that individuals take up in conversation and how these subject positions situate themselves in relation to others in speech (Harré and Slocum, 2003). These acts are known as self-positioning, or *reflexive positioning* – the way in which individuals position themselves, and *interactive* positioning - how individuals position each other. In the context of a focus group interview with adolescents, the subtle and temporary subject positions that pupils take up and assign each other can betray insights into their characteristics as well as into the personal and moral attributes they hold – including details about their language abilities (Harré et al., 2009; Deppermann, 2015) and self-beliefs. Analysing the positioning moves that the pupils engage in draws out a more implicit analysis of their own ability perceptions and their suitability for language learning according to the discourses that are available to them and that they choose to engage in. This might include revealing how pupils position themselves as competent or incompetent, powerful or powerless (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999) during the interviews as 'part of a practical, emotional and epistemic commitment to identity categories and associated discursive practices' (Deppermann, 2015, p. 372).

Another primary aim of using positioning analysis in this research is to better understand how the intricate and nuanced details of social interactions unfold through a focus on individuals and their presumed rights, duties, and obligations in conversation (Whitset and Volet, 2013). As individuals take up positions in discourse, they assume certain rights and responsibilities that accompany that position (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). In exploring a topic such as pupils' MFL motivation and perceptions of its value, an analysis of these momentary yet significant subject positions can teach us more about how the rights and duties are distributed in discourse amongst speakers i.e. – who amongst them is permitted or inhibited

from saying certain types of things in discursive practice (Harré, 2012). This knowledge thus opens up interpretations of how certain individuals assume dominant or non-dominant roles in conversation, forcing the other speakers to assume positions they would not necessarily have voluntarily occupied otherwise (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). In the context of a focus group of pupils discussing their MFL motivation and perceptions, using positioning analysis to analyse their temporary positions can enable explorations of how power and speaking rights interact around this topic and the question of whether the right to engage with certain modes of discourse surrounding MFL learning exclusively belongs to pupils from certain backgrounds and experiences and school types.

Why positioning analysis?

Positioning analysis emerged as an appropriate tool for analysing the different ways in which secondary school pupils speak their motivation and perceptions of MFL study. This is a topic that has inspired a particular partiality amongst adolescent learners in England ever since the decision to make the subject non-compulsory in 2004. In preparing my research methodology I anticipated that holding focus group interviews for the first time, I would encounter the varied and unexpected ways that a group of adolescents unfamiliar to me might express their views on such a contentious topic (Coleman et al., 2009). I realised while preparing for the focus group interviews that much of the meaning that might be extracted from how the pupils responded to my questions might be inexplicit and might require a more intuitive interpretation. Conducting research with adolescents, particularly with any interview form as a research method, can often be characterised by their hesitancy or unwillingness to participate in the research (Bassett et al., 2008) as well as a difficulty in eliciting direct responses from teenagers on the topic in question (Neal, 1995). Using positioning analysis as a means of studying the temporary positions that pupils take up in conversation provides a suitable method of examining these responses, some of which it was anticipated might be tacitly expressed.

It would also help develop a better understanding of how the pupils position themselves according to certain background categories in their lives such as their school, their parents, and the future concepts of themselves, their lives and careers. By removing myself as a figure in the focus group interactions (aside from making certain interjections for the next question or topic) I would permit the pupils both physical and figurative space to speak amongst themselves and allow the positions that each individual assumed in the group to unfold organically. Research has noted that adolescents may lack confidence or the ability to articulate themselves clearly (Adler et al., 2019) in front of an unfamiliar person and I considered this possibility when devising my focus group interviews. Paying attention to the positions that pupils took up temporarily as they interacted would allow me to not overly focus on the opinions or beliefs (or lack of) that were stated overtly and potentially (in)articulately but instead focus on the inexplicit or tacit positions the pupils took up, which represented their connections and self-placement towards learning languages. I imagined that their experiences with MFL learning might be unable to be defined and summarised by singular statements, and positioning analysis would allow me to capture an understanding of their feelings relative to various concepts or ideas. I also anticipated that as I was interviewing them about a subject that it was compulsory for them to learn, the views of teenage learners towards languages might emerge instead in terms of the proxies or substitutes that they felt most comfortable speaking about, such as the stereotypical cultural activities or icons that they most readily associated with the learning of any particular European language. Another benefit of choosing positioning analysis as a method in this study was that it would permit a less intrusive means of allowing the pupils views to emerge during the data collection. It would reduce my role to noting the positions they took up and how they evolved in their ongoing conversation and discussion, something I would later return to the analysis of transcripts. Accordingly, as I conducted the focus group interviews, I anticipated that the conversation would flow more freely providing a richer source of data from which to analyse the positions the pupils took up.

Other approaches considered

The data collection methods selected for this study were chosen on the basis of being the most appropriate and practical for gathering secondary school pupils' responses to learning MFL in the available time. When considering the methodological framework to analyse the data that would complement the research methods in this study, it initially appeared that a general discourse analytic approach that concentrated on how language is used in particular contexts might be appropriate. Discourse analysis, in its most basic form, is the study of language patterns used across interactions, as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the language occurs (Paltridge, 2012). Through performing discourse analysis, we gain information about the context in which a piece of language is being used and use that information to form hypotheses about what that piece of language is doing and means (Gee, 2014). My aim of paying attention to the recurring linguistic patterns at the level of the sentence in the focus groups as a way of understanding the pupils' motivation and decision-making appeared to initially indicate discourse analysis as a suitable approach. A link between discourse and positioning theory subsequently emerged: understanding that the ways in which the meanings, norms and behaviours evident in everyday positions that guide our thoughts and actions are constructed through discourse (Slocum-Bradley, 2009) indicated that a close connection existed between the two theories. A shift in the analytical focus towards positioning theory, however, would move the inquiry of this study towards how the pupils used language to act, behave and speak through taking on temporary positions in the group that the other pupils and the researcher would recognise (Rex and Schiller, 2009). This would precipitate a shift in the focus of the analysis from simply concentrating on its linguistic elements but instead towards how their language could be interpreted in a real-world context of interactions amongst their peers (Cameron, 2001).

A form of discourse analysis, conversation analysis (CA), was also considered, to provide a micro-analytic variety of discourse analysis (Wood and Kroger, 2000) in the focus group interviews. Conversation analysis focuses on the analysis of ongoing interactions and by understanding the momentary construction of reality by participants (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2003) by paying attention to face-to-face interactions, the immediate situation and local events (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Using conversation analysis in the analysis of the

focus groups transcripts might allow me to achieve a more in-depth analysis of the interactional organisation of the focus group discourse at sentence level, paying more attention to the turn-taking of each student, those pupils who might be dominating the conversation rather than being more reticent to speak as well as the alignment of certain pupils and their views with others within the conversation.

I realised that positioning analysis heavily draws on certain aspects of conversation analysis, borrowing from its various techniques such as turn-taking and feedback-giving, but builds on it by offering more comprehensive perspectives on the identities that are assumed in temporary positions and interactions through 'attending to moral and epistemic positioning in terms of agency and evaluation' (Depperman, 2013, p. 68). After much consideration, I concluded that positioning analysis would enable me to develop a better understanding of the interactional structure of the focus group interviews through interpreting how the participants positioned each other tacitly in speech. Positioning analysis additionally offered an extra dimension to using CA by focusing on the 'why' element that lies behind why certain individuals are positioned in certain ways in different environments (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). This element would take the analysis of this study beyond the level of focusing on 'the conversational details of talk-in sequence' (Korobov, 2001, p.3) by tracing the linguistic formation of participants' expressions through longer threads that give rise to the pupils' orientations and bring the wider socio-political discourses that influence their motivation and perceptions of value into the analysis (Kayı-Aydar, 2019b).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which focuses on how agency, power and control shape social relationships and discursive practice, is another analytical framework that I briefly considered for the methodological analysis of this study. CDA's micro-level study of patterned linguistic features and interdiscursivity to understand how the role of power and status and gender serve to exclude certain groups and individuals in conversation (Van Dijk, 2015) appeared a suitable framework to use for the analysis of my data. CDA also shares similarities with features of positioning analysis in that it argues that language used in any discourse is always shaped and influenced by social norms and can only be understood by paying attention to the social and cultural discursive contexts in which it occurs (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006).

Positioning analysis appeared to offer a bridge, however, between conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), in bringing the wider socio-political discourses that influence the pupils' MFL orientations to my analysis, whilst also retaining an interpretation of the detailed linguistic formations that can exist in the minute conversational details of sequential interaction (Korobov, 2011). Positioning analysis appeared more suitable than CDA because it assumes such a multidisciplinary approach - emphasising the role of situated discourse in understanding positions and social structures (Warren and Moghaddam, 2018) while focusing on the 'ideological workings of language represented in the world' (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p.33). Using positioning analysis, I could explore the ways in which my participants' spoke about the current social and institutional norms surrounding MFL learning and how these connected to their own different background experiences and accordingly how they shaped their own discourses surrounding MFL value and motivation. I was also interested in finding out how they connected thematically to notions of power, hegemony, control and privilege that were expressed in their conversations.

4.5 Research methods

Data collection overview

Focus group and individual interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method to explore and draw out secondary school pupils and teachers' views towards the MFL crisis - given the anticipated constraints on pupils and teachers' time that the study would demand. Employing shorter follow-up individual interviews with the pupils and longer individual semi-structured interviews with the teachers that were scheduled for the same day as the focus group interviews was a measure selected to make best use of the time that I would have available with the pupils and to maximise the availability of the teachers' time. The focus group interviews with the pupils were thus arranged for the morning of the day of my visit to each particular school, followed by the follow-up interviews with two pupils from each group and an individual interview with the class MFL teacher or a member of the school

leadership team for the afternoon. A schedule of interview questions was designed for each focus group as well as the teacher and staff interviews and the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed manually. The following section of this chapter details the particular decisions that were made during the study with regards to the methodology and their justification. The table overleaf summarises the data collection methods that were chosen for this study:

Data collection:

Data collection method	Schools participating	Participant number	Participant type	Length (mins)	Purpose
Focus group Interviews	A, B, C	4	Pupils	30-35	Explore pupil perceptions of the value of MFL study and discuss their motivation for (dis)continuing its study for GCSE.
Individual follow-up interviews	A, B, C, D	1	Pupils	10-15	Immediately follow-up with pupils to confirm and elaborate/draw out their views towards MFL learning given during the focus group interview.
Semi-structured longer teacher interviews	A, B, C, D	1	Teacher	35-90	Explore teacher views regarding the value ascribed to LL in their school. Explore views on the decline in MFL study in England. Explore the extent to which teachers confirm or reject pupil views.
Semi-structured staff interview	A, B, C	1	School leadership team member	35-80	Explore school leadership's views on the place and importance of MFL study in their curriculum and understanding of the MFL uptake deficit in their school/regionally.

Fig 7. Summary of data collection methods

Focus group interviews

The primary aim of holding focus group interviews was to explore the pupils' attitudes towards MFL study and how they described their own motivation for continuing its study. I anticipated that pupils would also discuss and process the rationales for MFL study that they had been presented with, as well as their previous experiences of language learning which would help me understand why they had chosen to continue its study or not for GCSE. The research questions that I set out to answer also necessitated asking questions about the pupils' perceptions of the value of languages and the worth they imagined it holding for their current and future lives.

Vaughan et al., (1996) write that the use of focus groups for exploratory purposes in qualitative research can provide an intimate environment where each person's point of view can be candidly expressed whilst encouraging each participant to spontaneously reveal opinions that can yield *synergism* - the combined efforts of the group working in harmony - that produces richer data (Hess, 1968). Being in a group environment can also help decrease participants' inhibitions, allowing them to open up and speak more freely (Morgan, 2002). Focus groups are a central method of the theoretical position known as *symbolic interactionism* which posits that people do not arrive at understandings and interpretations of social phenomena in isolation, but through interaction and discussion with others (Clark et al., 2021). Focus groups therefore allow researchers to study the processes through which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it (Clark et al., 2021).

Holding an interactive focus group discussion with my student participants instead of individual interviews therefore seemed a natural method that would elicit more nuanced and richer accounts that would be unconstrained by the predictable question-and-answer formulae that sometimes emerge from individual interviews (Clark et al., 2021). A focus group interview environment with pupils already comfortable with each other's presence and discussing shared experiences would permit an environment where they could challenge, probe and question each other (Cyr, 2016) and potentially result in more topics being broached amongst themselves than by an interviewer or outsider. Eder and Fingerson

(2003) write that interactions in focus groups among children often elicit more authentic accounts as participants must defend their statements to their peers, particularly if their group is made of individuals who interact on a daily basis. I also considered that being part of a focus group interview might encourage the pupils to voice opinions or beliefs that they may not have previously expressed on their own in individual interviews.

Logistics of the focus group interviews

As part of the first stage of the data collection, I had planned to hold four focus group interviews lasting thirty to forty minutes each with pupils from each of the four participant schools. Unfortunately, in the final school, school D, most of the pupils had not returned their parents' signed informed consent forms back in time to take part in the research so, disappointingly, the focus group interviews could not be held. However, one of the pupils had returned her individual signed consent form so I was able to carry out an individual longer semi-structured interview with this pupil instead. This allowed me to gain limited insights into how languages were received by pupils in this school and to use this data as reference point against their teacher's views. In each of the three schools, the focus group interviews took place in the summer term of Year 9 which is the final term in the English school year and when most of the pupils were 14 years old. During this stage in Year 9 in secondary schools, the pupils had already chosen their options and the subjects they wish to study for the next two years at GCSE level and came into the interview knowing their decision.

Focus group interviews were thus held at each of the remaining three participating schools with groups that were primarily composed of four Year 9 pupils. The exception was in school C, where the teacher had recruited a larger group of eight pupils to take part in the research without my knowledge, due to the strong interest that the pupils had in the topic and the considerable number of them who had returned the signed consent forms and expressed interest in taking part. So, a focus group interview of 8 pupils was held. The pupils had been invited to take part in the research by their class teacher who distributed the individual informed consent forms for the pupils to take home for their parents to sign which were

then returned to the class teacher. The class teacher was then asked to select four pupils from those that had returned the signed forms: two were selected that had a strong or positive feelings towards MFL study and planned to continue its study; two were selected from the group who were not planning to continue MFL and had expressed primarily negative views in their lessons towards their learning of the subject. The focus group interviews were scheduled by the teacher during a time when it would not impact on the pupils' school day and for a time of day when there would be sufficient time afterwards to conduct the individual follow-up interviews. These individual follow-up interviews were then able to be held at each school on the same day with two pupils from each focus group, one who had chosen to continue language learning and one who had not, who were selected by myself following a brief discussion with the pupils at the conclusion of the focus group interview.

Interview questions

An unstructured and provisional schedule of semi-structured interview questions was drawn up in preparation for the focus group interviews that was based around understanding how the pupils had arrived at their decision-making towards languages as part of their GCSE choices. I also included a line of follow-up questioning that would draw out the pupils' views on the usefulness of languages in particular life and career situations. I kept in mind that this schedule would serve as a rough guide if the discussion meandered off topic, and resolved to let the pupils guide the discussion as much as possible and to give them freedom to shape the discussion. Walters (2020) argues that in focus group situations, the researcher has to relinquish control and their position as expert in order to allow the participants to highlight the issues they see as significant. To encourage the pupils' to elaborate on their views and to act as an icebreaker, two group activities were drawn up that divided the four pupils into two sets of pairs and encouraged them to work together while discussing their responses aloud. The first activity required the pupils to match together a list of six skills such as memorisation, creative writing, teamwork, public speaking, self-confidence and critical thinking with a list of school subjects that they thought would help develop that particular

skill and then to connect the school subjects and skills they had matched together to a list of six possible careers or job titles. The aim was to elicit further conversation and discussion on the part of the pupils surrounding the skills they felt they had acquired (or lacked) from learning languages compared to other school subjects which hopefully would lead on to questions and further discussion about the activities and tasks they had worked on in MFL lessons. The second activity asked the pupils to work together to firstly select the factors that had affected their decision to stop or continue studying languages from a list of random reasons and then to rank these factors they had chosen in order of personal importance to them from one to eight. The factors provided to the pupils to rank included amongst others their teacher, their parents, their trips abroad, their career plans, subject difficulty, their lessons at school, their hobbies and their friends. From this activity, a natural order of follow-up questions evolved from the discussion that allowed the pupils to ask each other why they regarded each particular factor as important for their language choices. Both activities led on to a list of further questions that probed the following topics:

- What had made the pupils choose to continue/stop learning languages
- How much of a priority languages were for them compared to other school subjects
- How much of a priority languages were for their chosen/possible careers
- What they liked/disliked about their language lessons currently
- What their parents felt about them studying languages
- What experiences their parents had had of learning languages
- Their reflections on their own previous experiences of learning languages
- How often (if ever) they had used their language skills abroad

During the activity stages of the focus groups, I was mindful to intervene in the discussion as seldom as possible except for when the conversation in the group was petering out or I felt that there was an important point to be drawn out from a pupil's comment that was significant for the research (Kandola, 2012). Throughout, I attempted to maintain a consistently neutral stance during the discussions and resolved never to reveal any of my

personal reactions of agreement or disagreement to what was being said, except to nod to encourage participants to speak and to make sure everyone had equal opportunity to express their views.

Limitations of focus group interviews

A possible limitation to holding focus groups interviews with adolescents has been noted as encountering the possibility of gathering only superficial or limited responses during the discussion stage. Further concerns surround the moderator being unable to probe student answers in detail given the time constraints and the desire to keep the conversation flowing. I chose to address this potential imbalance and counter it through the follow-up interviews, that would be held after the group discussion, which I would use to probe the student responses in more detail to gain further insight into their views. Another drawback that has been recognised with holding focus group interviews is that the moderator has potentially less control and influence over the processes or outcomes of the group discussion that take place (Morgan, 1997) than with individual interviews. This may mean that group dynamics often dictate that some members may dominate the conversation while others say little or contribute very little to the discussion. I chose to address such potential imbalances by including the introductory ice-breaker activities into the focus groups, immediately placing the pupils into pairs with an emphasis on collaborating together on the exercises and the subsequent questions ensuring that everyone would have a chance to speak. I was mindful of the extent to which these questions might be judged to have influenced the natural direction of the discussion and to encourage alternative points of view to develop whilst striking a careful balance between control and spontaneity in moderating the group interactions (Clark et al., 2021).

Student individual interviews:

Following the focus group interviews, I selected two pupils for two individual follow-up interviews of fifteen minutes each from each focus group. The semi-structured format of these interviews was intended to provide the pupils with the opportunity to elaborate on any views they had not had the chance to develop during the focus groups and to open up the discussion outside of the more rigid structure of the focus groups and without their peers' presence. I selected the two pupils to participate based on how positively they had interacted during the focus group interviews and on the basis of whether they had expressed any distinct and unique attitudes to language study that were deserving of further exploration. It was hoped that this would provide as broad a spectrum of views as possible. All pupils that were asked to participate in the individual interviews agreed to do so. The interviews followed a semi-structured format (Robson, 2011) in that a short question schedule had been drawn up and I had already developed a sense of the questions that I wanted to ask. The question schedule was not needed however, and I did not always follow a rigid script, as there were many interesting starting points for broader discussion that had emerged during the focus group interviews based on comments that the pupils had made. Interviewing the pupils on an individual basis proved to be a different experience to the focus groups as some of the pupils were more initially reticent to express their views once they had been removed from the group environment. Gilham (2000) confirms that some pupils may feel less comfortable in this environment and will come across as less talkative in an individual interview situation. I found that an advantage of this also proved to be that I was able to elicit more forthright views from some of the pupils when their more dominant peers had been removed from the group. I remained mindful of the social and power divide (Cohen et al., 2011) that emerged through being alone in the room with the young interviewees and attempted to soften my tone of voice and body language accordingly, so I was not perceived as authoritative by the pupils. Kvale (1996) stresses that two important qualities of the successful interview are being sensitive and gentle towards their interview subjects whilst paying attention to the body language of the interviewee to better interpret how they are feeling.

Staff Individual interviews:

After the initial focus group interview visits, I returned to each participant school to conduct two semi-structured interviews with the class MFL teacher and a member of the school leadership team. The purpose of the teacher interviews was to expand on their personal perspectives on the issues that have contributed to the decline in uptake of language learning in England and explore their own views on why there was a decline in uptake of MFL study in their school. These teacher interviews were devised with the aim of answering my second research question: "*What can teachers' self-positioning tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL study in England*?" and qualitative semi-structured interviews thus emerged as the main instrument for exploring these positions that the teachers took up as they discussed their experiences. The theoretical rationale for conducting the teacher interviews was my intention to provide a multi-dimensional approach to complement the pupil responses and provide a more complete picture of the MFL teaching environment in every school, including the opportunities and obstacles that pupils encountered on an everyday basis and that might shape their attitudes and motivations towards language study. Kvale and Brinkmann (2013) cite the advantage of the semi-structured interview as 'allowing much more leeway for following up whatever angles are deemed important' (p. 579). Semi-structured interviews are also beneficial in permitting flexibility in being able to spontaneously adapt the questions the interviewer wants to use and clarify any doubt that the responses have been understood properly (Silverman, 2015). Opie (2004) similarly notes that the benefit of semi-structured interviews is to allow an additional angle of investigation by including the participants' facial expressions and body language that is observed, which sometimes reflects a truer indication of the honest emotions of the subjects.

Teacher interviews

The teacher interviews were intended to provide background knowledge into how well they felt that their school supported and promoted the teaching of MFL to their pupils and

corroborate the views of their pupils where possible. These interviews would further illuminate pupils' attitudes towards FLL and reveal a greater understanding of how the pupils' motivation towards MFL might be understood in the context of how their school represented its value to their pupils. The interviews would also explore the role that background influences can play on pupils' attitudes towards languages including how the teachers spoke about their impressions of parental engagement in their school and parents' perceptions of its value and appropriateness for their children. I thus hoped that the teacher comments would help complement the data and provide insights into some of the (anonymised) pupils' comments during the interviews. All of the teachers that contacted me proved to be extremely comfortable with the idea of talking to a researcher who was exploring the decline in MFL uptake, and many were familiar with the idea of the MFL uptake deficit in secondary schools being a topic of interest to researchers. All of the teachers who responded to the research invitation spoke passionately about the subject of the MFL crisis and I was fortunate that they were more than willing to speak freely on their subject and were more than generous in the time they gave up for the interviews.

School leadership interviews

The interviews with members of school leadership, who worked at the level of selecting school curriculum choices and meeting extraneous performance targets, were intended to clarify how particular details such as school league table measures and school policy can influence the provision of languages in institutions and therefore their impact on student perception and choice. Conducting these interviews was significant as it permitted insights into another level of school operations and revealed understandings of how crucial decision-making in terms of the support, resources and the ethos afforded to MFL teaching in each school might be reflected in the experiences of the pupils. In the contexts of schools, speaking to members of senior management or the school leadership team is a means of accessing expert information based on their wealth of authority and experience (Gilham 2000). More recent language research has also indicated that these members of staff can provide authoritative and authentic voices that confirm the emphasis (or lack thereof) that

an institution places on MFL study (Pickett, 2010; Gayton, 2013). The senior management interviews were intended to expand on the views of the teachers and provide perspectives on the value their institution placed on language learning including the measures that their school had taken to promote MFL study as worthwhile to the background of their intake. Macaro (2008) confirms that the use of interviews with senior staff in language contexts provides a window of understanding into their authority and decision-making in the emphasis placed on language learning within their school. Although the dataset that was gathered from the senior management interviews was eventually incomplete and did not directly contribute to answering a specific research question, I felt that the three interviews conducted proved to be an invaluable component of my dataset that complemented – and in some cases contradicted- the teacher interviews, providing essential information about the strength of their feelings towards MFL teaching in schools and firm impressions of the value of languages that might be transmitted to their pupils. Gathering interview data from a range of participants who represent different roles or stances was therefore invaluable in being able to pull together a stable and thorough picture of the issue being investigated (Walker and MacDonald, 1976).

Designing the question schedule

The interview schedules for both the teachers and the members of school leadership were designed to include the key questions I wanted to ask and included a list of relevant prompts I had designed if the interview veered off topic, but that were intended to be used only flexibly. I organised the wording of my questions on paper, but I allowed the structure of the interviews to be dictated by the nature of the participant responses. I resolved to pay attention to the particular topics or questions that inspired passionate and more verbose responses in the teachers, or where their responses could be drawn out at length. I set out to loosely cover a number of topics that I wished to address during the course of the interview but anticipated that these would be modified as the interview progressed, and different themes emerged - that I encouraged each participant to embellish on as much as possible (Patton, 2002), by asking further questions. Kvale (1996) confirms that probing

questions - following up what has been said by more direct questioning- is an effective method to draw out details that may be unclear from an initial response. After beginning each teacher interview with two broad and descriptive questions that asked the teachers to provide some details about their own teaching backgrounds and the languages provision at their school, a list of question topics was aimed at broadly probing the following themes:

- Teachers' opinions on how languages are promoted and supported in their schools
- How this could be improved, if at all
- Pupils' attitudes towards MFL study at their school
- Alternative subjects that pupils choose at GCSE
- Parents' attitudes towards MFL study and any comments teachers had encountered
- Factors that shape pupils' decision-making concerning MFL
- Factors that relate to pupils seeing/not seeing languages as part of their future
- Reasons behind the decline in uptake of MFL in England
- Any changes in pupil MFL attitudes since Brexit
- Any changes in pupil MFL attitudes since Covid

Interviewing styles

Bradley (2004) emphasises the art of being a good listener when conducting interviews and asserts that interviewers should speak just enough to facilitate their participants' ability to answer. Robson (2011) agrees that an interviewer should be wary of not speaking too much themselves, taking time and space away from the respondents. Drawing on a variety of questioning techniques and styles whilst flexibly adapting their question format can allow a researcher to conduct effective interviewing and gather the richest possible data (Clark et al., 2021). I therefore aimed to keep my question wording strictly neutral at all times and to avoid asking any leading or loaded questions that would result in any responses that I expected or perhaps subconsciously wanted to hear. I left the order of interview questions open and flexible so that if any topic emerged unplanned during the interviews, I would have

the freedom to pursue this line of investigation later and in the meantime a natural and organic flow of conversation could be maintained. This would help to put the participants at ease and enable a good rapport to develop between us. I generally began each interview with a broad question (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) which had the aim of eliciting a descriptive answer from the interviewee about a subjective experience, helping to break the ice and settle them into the interview. Examples of such questions that I used in the semi-structured interviews included: '*Could you describe the foreign language provision that takes place at this school?*' and '*Could you give me a brief history of your MFL teaching background?*' Kvale (1996) states that using different types of questions such as those that are introducing questions and require a descriptive answer, rather than those that seek to discover opinions and attitudes, are a good way of encouraging the conversation to flow and building a rapport between the interviewer and subject. Oppenheim (1992) has described the importance of developing the elusive qualities of rapport and empathy between interviewer and the respondent. Creating a good impression and remaining objective, professional, relaxed and friendly were all qualities that I tried to maintain to draw out as rich and illuminating data as possible from the time that I had with the participants.

Methodological limitations

One drawback to semi-structured interviews as a method of qualitative data collection can be their validity as expressed through the superficial nature of the responses. Brinkmann (2013) has labelled lifeworld phenomena as being rarely transparent and often 'polyvocal' that is to say, contradictory, and permitting multiple readings and interpretations that can cause problems for the researcher to interpret. Assessing the reliability of the responses to semi-structured interviews is a further disadvantage, and consistency can become a struggle to achieve when non-standardised follow-up questions are often asked spontaneously to different participants (Punch, 2013). During some of the interviews, I felt some of the pupils may have been reluctant to express their true beliefs towards MFL study due to the mistaken belief that they were taking part in official school research or that their comments might be

reported to their teacher in some way. I have recognised these, along with other limitations of my research, in greater detail in the *limitations* section of this chapter.

4.6 <u>Participants and sampling</u>

Schools

When it came to deciding which type of secondary schools would be chosen to participate in this study, I knew that I wanted to include a range of institutions within the region of Norfolk that would provide access to a variety of school type and a wider window into pupil home backgrounds and possible MFL learning experiences. I envisaged that this would provide me with a broader range of pupil responses and a more diverse list of factors to which pupils attributed their MFL decision-making. The range of socioeconomic, cultural and community backgrounds that might be encompassed within a wide selection of a Norfolk school's intake of pupils would permit an understanding of how the different variables that affect language learning motivation and attitudes interact. Although I was not deliberately setting out to draw connections with the impact of these variables on student motivation and perception of value, previous research has indicated that these are factors that do feature prominently in student responses and were meriting of further attention in any discussion surrounding the MFL crisis of uptake in England (Gayton, 2013; Lanvers, 2018).

Four schools in the region were recruited for this research study through a general email invitation to participate that was disseminated by the director of the PGCE languages programme at the researcher's university. An email invitation was sent out to local MFL teachers at schools within Norfolk who were contacts of the director and whose contact information was known through the context of their work together. Several teachers replied to express interest in taking part and accordingly contacted me after being given my details. It was hoped that there would be enough interested school respondents for a mixed sample of institutions to be selected but the limited number of replies resulted in having to pick those schools which had responded to the email. Of the teachers that indicated a positive

response to the email invitation, three of the institutions that agreed to take part were academies in the greater Norfolk region and one was an independent school within the same region. Two of the schools were urban based: one a state school; one independent. The remaining two schools were both academies located in rural locations in the county: one in a coastal area with average levels of deprivation for the East of England region and the other in a central rural location with below average levels of deprivation.

The table below provides further information on each type of school participating in this study:

School	State/Independent	Type	Location	No. of pupils	% of FSM	% 5-9 GCSE English/Maths
A	Independent	Selective, co-ed; day	urban	1194	n/a	99% grade 4-9 **all subjects**
B	state	Non-selective; converter academy	coastal	1155	31.8	39.8
C	state	Non-selective; converter academy	rural	1060	18.8	46.4
D	state	Non-selective; sponsored academy	urban	1414	26.7	45.1

Figure 8: Basic information about the four different school types.

School A

School A is an independent co-education day school for pupils aged 4-18 which describes its goals as 'aspiration to excellence and broad participation' among its study body. Its pupils consist of primarily those coming from a white British background but include a large number of overseas and EAL pupils. It is a selective school that does not participate in the

free school meals (FSM) scheme. In terms of its recent academic performances, over 75% of pupils sitting A-levels in 2024 went on to achieve a grade A*- B. 99% of pupils achieved an overall pass rate within the grade boundaries of 9-4 in the school's most recent GCSE results. School A has a strong focus on language learning with a policy of compulsory language study for its pupils on entering the school in Year 7. Pupils choose two languages from a choice of French, Spanish, Mandarin and German that they will study. In Year 8, pupils can choose to drop one language or continue with two and they will continue studying the one language they have chosen all the way to GCSE. It is officially school policy for all pupils to continue studying at least one language at GCSE, however some pupils spoke of their less academic peers who had struggled with languages and had been permitted to drop languages entirely before this stage. Latin and Greek are also offered to all pupils but within a separate ancient languages' department. The current modern languages department offers a significant number of trips abroad for those pupils studying languages as well as providing a language assistant to help pupils in each of the three main languages. Languages are treated as an important part of the curriculum and there are several linguistic based clubs and activities to support and promote their position within the curriculum.

School B

School B is a school located in a coastal area of the region. It is a non-selective mixed converter academy near the coast that caters to pupils predominantly coming from a white British background. The school has an above average provision of pupils receiving free school meals compared to the national average. The school website describes it as 'having a strong sense of community where pupils can develop into well-rounded individuals'. Regarding its recent academic performance, 33.1% of its pupils were entered for the Ebacc in 2024 while 39% achieved a grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE in their 2024 results. Regarding the school's languages provision, pupils are allocated a language to study upon entering the school in Year 7 which they will continue with until the end of Year 9 (Key Stage 3) when they make their language option choices. In Year 9, pupils can choose to continue or stop learning a language completely but higher achieving pupils in the top two

sets are strongly 'persuaded' to continue learning a language at GCSE by school senior management during a one-to-one interview with the pupil and their parents. The school has a strong ethos towards the value of language learning that originates from firm beliefs regarding its value from school leadership and pupils are encouraged to continue to foster an interest in language learning where it is possible for them.

School C

School C is a converter academy located outside the city of Norwich, in a rural area, with a below average proportion of pupils who receive free school meals compared to national figures (24.6%) and has an intake of pupils that are predominantly white British. It is a mixed-gender high school belonging to a multi-academy trust whose admissions policy is non-selective. As part of a broad and balanced curriculum, the school offers the opportunity for its pupils to take part in numerous clubs and societies, including languages. Its website describes the school as 'a traditional community-based school that expects academic rigour from its pupils'. The school's recent academic results indicate that 38.1% of its pupils were entered for the Ebacc in 2024, which is below the national average of 40% in England (Gov.uk, 2024). In the same year, 46.5 % of pupils achieved a grade 5 or above in their GCSEs, above the national average of 45.9%. The school considers itself to have an international languages outlook and is unusual in that it maintains a languages' policy of offering all pupils the opportunity to study two languages in Year 7 and accordingly, all pupils study 3 hours of Spanish and 3 hours of French per fortnight. Pupils are allowed to drop one of these languages in Year 8, based on their previous performance, however a minority of pupils do continue with both languages up to GCSE. A recent policy change dictates that pupils are now allowed to drop languages in Year 9 entirely if they wish to. Around a third of pupils currently choose to continue at least either French or Spanish to GCSE.

School D

School D is an urban sponsored academy located within Norfolk that caters to a range of pupils from different socioeconomic backgrounds that are predominantly white British but with a growing number of EAL pupils in the local community. The school has an above average proportion of pupils that receive free school meals for the national average and describes itself as 'committed to ensuring independent and enthusiastic learning' for their pupils. The school's ethos on its website describes itself as focusing on 'equipping each child as an individual to achieving their academic potential, regardless of any barriers' they may encounter. The school's thinking about modern foreign language provision begins towards the end of Year 6 when prospective pupils are offered a choice of language to study from Year 7 while still in their primary schools. Pupils are invited to pick from German, Spanish and French which they will continue learning through to GCSE if they so wish. Pupils are permitted to stop learning a language in Year 9 but if they continue learning that language they will continue it to GCSE. The school prioritises the study of English and Maths, particularly for its weaker pupils and pupils are often allowed to prioritise their study of Maths and English over language classes. Academically in its most recent results, 25.4% of pupils were entered for the Ebacc in 2024, whilst 45.1% of pupils achieved a grade 5 or above in English and Maths in the same results period.

Background information on the different school types

Academies are a recently created type of public-funded school, who have more autonomy over their own pupil intake, curriculum policies and their budget. They follow the same rules as other state schools on admissions, special education needs policy and exclusions, however, but do not fall under the control of the Local Authority (LA). According to the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 2015), converter academies are schools that were previously assessed as performing well and have converted to academy status. Sponsored academies were schools that were previously assessed as underperforming and became academies to improve their performance and are often sponsored by local businesses and other schools (NFER, 2015). By contrast, state or maintained schools still receive funding from the local authority and are required to follow

the National Curriculum. More detailed information is provided surrounding the inception and creation of academies by the Labour government in the *literature review* chapter of this thesis. Independent or private schools are fee charging institutions that do not have to follow the national curriculum. Independent schools must be registered with the government and are regularly inspected, either by Ofsted or by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (Gov.uk, 2024). They can be mixed or single sex schools and are selective of their pupil intake.

Including a diverse spectrum of school type in my research allows for diverging pupil background differentials to be considered as well as acknowledging two further characteristics that have been noted in previous research as being significant factors in influencing learner choice and motivation towards MFL learning: individual school language policy and its promotion and the range of language options available to its pupils (Parrish, 2017). The range of schools that has been included in this study permit these features to be considered as well as the socioeconomic status background of each school's pupils through recognising the proportion of pupils that are eligible for free school meals (FSM) in relation to the national average. FSM data reveals the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals, which is often used as a proxy for socio-economic deprivation in educational research. This research design also enables the differential of institution background to be considered in the findings of the data. The background of each school in relation to language learning can vary according to the support each institution provides for language learning and the priority it is given in their curriculum according to their history and interests of their teachers. This is likely to vary according to the geographical location of each school type, their number of pupils and their resources.

Pupils

Altogether, interview data was collected from 16 pupils via the focus group interviews. Eight individual follow-up interviews were conducted with the pupils. A sample size of four pupils per focus group was chosen as a practicable number of participants to attend to during the interviews, considering that this was my first experience of conducting focus group

interviews. I decided to maintain smaller group sizes, anticipating that the pupils would have a lot to say on the topic (Morgan, 1998) and noting that I would be able to gather a sufficient range of views from such a sample size. Keeping the sample size of each focus group at four pupils would also help to keep the transcription and data analysis at manageable levels, considering the number of interviews I was holding. Handling and transcribing the data of focus groups has been noted as particularly time consuming (Bloor et al., 2001) given the different pitches and tones of voice all occurring at the same time that the analyst must interpret and process and the relative ineffectiveness of software programmes at transcribing the data.

In each school, the pupils' class MFL teacher was contacted through email prior to the interview and asked to distribute the informed consent forms to the children who were interested in taking part so that they might be signed by their parents. From the pupils who had returned the signed parental and individual consent forms, the class teacher was asked to select the four pupils for the focus group interview. Two pupils were selected on the basis of having chosen to continue language learning for their GCSE; two were chosen who had already decided that they would not be continuing with language learning. For the individual follow-up interviews, two pupils were chosen from the focus group interviews who had expressed the most forthright views on language learning and in the interests of striking a balance I decided to pick one pupil who had expressed primarily positive or supportive views towards language learning and one who had not.

Teachers and school leadership

Interview data was collected from four teachers at each of the four participant schools. In each institution, I requested to interview a member of the school leadership team who was involved in selecting the school's curriculum and had significant input into its policy. These requests were made by emailing the MFL teacher with whom I had established the initial contact and who had responded to the initial email invitation to participate in the research. I had originally hoped that the number of teachers who responded to this invitation would be sufficient for a mixed sample of teacher interviewees but ultimately the sampling consisted

of picking all those who had volunteered. My contact details were accordingly circulated to any members of the school leadership team who might be interested in taking part in the research and who had a particular interest or background in languages. Three of the four schools responded favourably to this request with a suitable staff member to interview. However, in the final school, school D, my emailed requests for an interview with a school leadership team member went unreturned and disappointingly I was not able to secure an interview, having to make do with the MFL teacher interview at this institution. I attempted to offer the option of an email interview instead but as I received no response to repeated requests for an interview, I had to make do with an incomplete dataset. More positively, at each of the remaining three schools I was able to interview both a teacher and a member of the school leadership team. In two of the three participant schools this person either held the position of a headteacher or a director of studies and so were able to provide direct feedback on the provision and regard that languages were held in in that school and a compelling illumination of the MFL crisis from their perspectives and experiences.

4.7 <u>Data Analysis</u>

Handling the data

Each of the participating schools agreed that both the focus group and individual interviews could be audio recorded which meant that I did not have to solely rely on the notes I had made during the interviews. Kayı-Aydar (2019) argues that in addition to audio recording, video recording the positioning analysis taking place can be beneficial to understanding the roles that body language, gestures and non-verbal communication play in positioning. However, as this was unlikely to be agreed on by my participant schools, using my field notes to record these observations had to suffice. Merriam (2009) contends that in such field notes it is often helpful to include a running narrative of the observers' comments that can describe the events that are unfolding. Each audio recording of the interviews was transcribed by hand so as to develop a more intimate sense of the data than a software

programme would allow. Heritage (1984) suggests that recording and transcribing interviews has the advantage of allowing the interviewer to fully concentrate during the interview, making them more effective. Transcribing interview data can be used to capture, re-live information and re-see complex interactions between people (Rex and Schiller, 2009). During the interview phase, I kept a log of field notes that I had jotted down and later returned to and expanded on these points at home during the transcribing phase by adding details and thickening the descriptions of the notes and memos that I had made. The log consisted of a list of positions that were taken up by the pupils in the focus groups and by the teachers in the individual interviews. This included the positions I had identified each participant taking up that were indicated by certain word choices, their turn taking and through highlighting vocabulary that firmly suggested a participant's movement towards a particular point of view or alignment with a certain position.

The data analysis I conducted indistinctly followed a form of thematic analysis first proposed by Clark and Braun (2013). The method involves a multiple stage process that includes the researcher familiarising themselves with the data, performing an initial coding, identifying themes which are then reviewed and defined and evidenced across several datasets and the wider literature. This framework of analysis appeared fitting to use alongside positioning analysis, where the concepts of interest (positions) are actively detected and identified by the researcher, enabling the raw and emergent properties of the data to be captured. Initially, I read each completed transcript through without coding the data. I then performed a general thematic coding of the transcripts to highlight any passages or extracts that stood out to me, cross-referencing any similarities or recurring themes between the transcripts. Miles and Huberman (1984) affirm that coding is an important way for researchers to think about the meaning of their data and to reduce the amount of data gathered. This was almost a line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2004) of the repeated and significant themes that emerged from the transcripts and that could be neatly coded into one-word categories and that referred to pupil motivation or to wider factors that affect the MFL uptake crisis in England, such as 'parents', 'careers', 'exams', ' pupil embarrassment' etc.

Using my log of field notes, I subsequently read through the transcripts and assigned the positions by performing a positioning analysis of the data. This involved noting all the reflexive and interactive positions that were taken up by the pupils during their exchanges in the focus

group interviews. Hazari et al (2015) provide a category of cues for identifying and analysing positions in social situations if 'the actions of individuals clearly provide intelligible clues for the role being claimed by oneself or ascribed to others' (p.738). This includes paying attention to how the rights and duties are ascribed in conversation to individuals (Evans et al., 2006). I noted the most dominant and recurring positions that were assumed by some of the pupils and the (sometimes reluctant) positions that other participants were forced into by nature of the positions that their peers had taken up. In each act of positioning identified, I noted how the positioning occurred (Kayı-Aydar, 2015) and whether each act was active or passive and what occurred as a result of each positioning act. An example of how positioning analysis was typically carried out is included below:

Figure 9 below depicts how a typical identification and analysis of the pupil positionings were carried out on the pupil interactions occurring in the focus group interviews. Each new position that has been assumed by one of the pupils is highlighted in green. The use of oppositional and relational positioning in interaction that emphasise their opposing stances are underlined in bold.

AK: like, even say cooking, if you're gonna cook and then to be able to also speak French and understand better French cooking or something like that…even that….

R: **Yeah but the thing is it takes a long time to learn a language as well, so if like by some chance you actually meet someone who speaks French, Spanish, Italian, those sort of things, it's quite rare..it's quite a** rare occasion. It depends what country you're going to really. It does take a long time to learn a language.

AK: **Actually,** R, I'm going to argue with you that it's not very…rare to find people who speak different languages..cos even just speaking

R: **No, I'm not saying that because even if you learn one..**

AK:..because even if you're just speaking ..

R: language..it's quite rare..

YK: Exactly…it's

L: the one language.. If you learn only one language, so if you only know English, it's… I feel that it's more common to just come across more English.. just English-speaking people..it might just be the..

AK: Yeah, you notice it more. Because your mind's just sort of set to that.

YK: I feel it's..in England..the mindset is kind of that other people know English and that the English are kind of lazy at learning languages….(others laugh) because if you go to another country then people are really good at English, and they've got good English but then when people come here then *we* don't have a clue…(laughs)

R: Yeah.

In this extract, it can be seen how pupil AK assumes the dominant role of linguist within the group, reflexively positioning herself as knowledgeable and informed about different aspects of French culture and her familiarity with the close interplay that exists between language and culture. In this case, her reflexive (self) positioning is connected to her assertion to the group that in getting to know more about French cuisine and cooking, one is able to develop one's language proficiencies through growing an interest in the L2. In this way, she reflexively positions herself as someone knowledgeable regarding languages and aware of the different contexts that language abilities are useful in. Pupil R, on the other hand, is interactively positioned by pupil AK as someone unaware and ignorant of these connections and unfamiliar with a world where multilingualism is common and widespread. Pupil R has already reflexively positioned himself in opposition to pupil AK's initial remarks as he expresses his unfamiliarity and uncertainty with a world where people speak and use languages successfully on an everyday basis. The distribution of oppositional and relational positioning in this extract (indicated by the underlined text) serves to highlight the extent that these two pupils oppose each other in viewpoint and in values, which is reflected in how their familiarity with different language contexts contrasts. There is a suggestion that this may be linked to their different backgrounds and the final new position introduced in the extract by pupil YK indicates that he is willing to adopt the position that an inherent lack of language ability and effort when abroad might be a particularly English cultural trait.

Part of my first research question sought to explore how learner identity can be produced through a sequencing of positioning moves, so I also paid particular attention to any wider constructs of identity that emerged in the initial coding and analysis. Kayı-Aydar (2019b) writes that the process of recognising identity creation through positioning moves can occur in two different ways. The first is through an accumulation of positions over time that eventually 'stick' and become durable (pg. 104). The second and most appropriate to this study is to focus on a singular context or passage to identify the positions and to connect them to momentarily constructed identities and to ask: '*what is going on at this current moment*?'. The final focus I took in my analysis consisted of combining these two approaches. The last step of the data analysis was then to compare and contrast the codes, themes, positions and identities that had been interpreted and established across each set of transcripts, drawing on the memos and field notes I had made to make wider

comparisons. Finally, I compiled an exhaustive list of themes and then positions that emerged and related to the focus of my first two research questions and to the wider question of the decline in uptake of MFL study in England: pupil motivation, their perceptions of the value of MFL and the messages that pupils receive from parents, home and local community. This then formed the basis for the write-up of the data I had analysed.

Validating the data

Throughout the data collection process, validation of the data collected was ensured by methodological triangulation - the means of providing an alternative perspective that validates or challenges existing findings (Turner, 2011). Triangulation involves cross-referencing one method or source of data with another to increase the researcher's field of vision and to cross validate findings (Clark et al., 2021). Finding equivalence and agreement among different methods and data sources can give the researcher greater confidence in their results and a more robust assessment of the world they are exploring (Denzin, 1970). Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) refer to data triangulation as the collecting of data from different sources or over different times. In this study, cross-referencing was established by collecting data across more than one participant group – illustrating the different standpoints and views that exist towards MFL learning from within the same institution – but representing different voices from different levels of within the school hierarchy. The pupils' views I collected represented those of the individuals at the lowest level of the institutional hierarchy with the lowest degree of input into their MFL learning process. Moving further up an institution's hierarchy, the views of the teachers were responsible for delivering and organising the lesson content in a relevant way were also represented while at the highest level of operations and planning of MFL provision, the views of the school leadership team members were also unveiled and then analysed. This represents what Cohen et al. (2011) call *space triangulation*, extending data collection to span more than one location or culture and it forms an attempt to 'map out, or explain more fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour' by studying it from more than one standpoint (Cohen and Mannion, 1980; p. 254). Gathering interview data from such a range of participants who

represent different roles is vital for ensuring that the researcher is able to pull together a comprehensive picture of the issue being explored (Walker and Macdonald, 1976). The three points of the data triangulation represent the three different viewpoints and roles under investigation and accordingly interact with and influence each other (Walker and Macdonald, 1976). The pupils' attitudes, motivation and decision-making towards MFL can be understood with respect to the teachers' beliefs and actions regarding how MFL is taught and should be delivered in the classroom, and in turn the decision-making and the policy choices made by the school management in terms of support (or lack of) for MFL, policy-making and the language options available to the pupils do influence both the teachers' views about how their job is regarded and the pupils' future decisions. Such an approach to cross-checking and validating the data sources involved in this research indicated the levels of precision and meticulousness that I attempted to apply to my methodology.

Ensuring trustworthiness and soundness

Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose two main criteria for assessing a qualitative study: trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness is made up of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). There have previously been significant discussions in qualitative research dedicated to whether reliability and validity are appropriate criteria with which to measure the 'quality, rigour and wider potential of research achieved according to certain methodological conventions and principles' (Mason, 1996, p. 21). Indeed, Guba and Lincoln (1994) baulk at applying the terms 'reliability' and 'validity' to qualitative research because these terms assume that a singular, typical account of social reality must exist. Instead, they argue that there can be multiple possible accounts of social reality that exist simultaneously. Correspondingly, Kayı-Aydar (2019b) highlights that trustworthiness and soundness in qualitative research that uses positioning analysis as a methodology is less to do with quantifying and 'measuring' the number of positions that are taken up for 'validity' purposes. Instead, positioning analysis has more to do with subjective interpretations of the unique moments (Kayı-Aydar, 2019b) and ephemeral positions that appear in storylines or narratives, sometimes never to be seen again but that

exist powerfully in that particular moment. Because discourse is socially constructed, it has shifting and multiple meanings (Wood and Kroger, 2000) and the researcher's account of that discourse and its positions are only 'one version of its meaning' (Kayı-Aydar, 2019b, pg. 149) and cannot be said to be true or false. Therefore, there cannot be consistently a singular version of an interpretation that exists, because a researcher is always drawing on macro-level discourses and contextual information to understand and complement these positions (Kayı-Aydar, 2019b). This interpretation is a choice (Rex and Schiller, 2009) and it is natural that their choices may differ from one researcher to another and according to the perspectives, life experiences, and macro-discourses a researcher is able to draw on (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2015). This is a possible limitation that has been levelled at positioning analysis.

However, to justify and convince the reader of their position selections and their interpretations, Kayı-Aydar (2019b) states that researchers must articulate their decisions clearly and explain their interpretations carefully to avoid selecting positions that 'prove their point' (pg. 150) or indicate bias. A researcher must carefully explain their choices by elucidating their own stance in the analysis process and the contextual factors that came to contribute to the analysis (Kayı-Aydar, 2019b). This can demonstrate to the reader how certain claims and interpretations are rooted in the text (Wood and Kroger, 2000). This enables readers to check and compare their own interpretations with that of the researcher. Throughout my interpretation of the positions my participants took up and in my handling and analysis of the data, I resolved to ensuring I had fully justified and articulated the choices I had made to maintain the trustworthiness and soundness of my analysis. Focusing on the more obvious linguistic features of speech as well as highlighting the inexplicit non-linguistic cues that appeared in the transcripts and audio recordings, such as the prosody and paralinguistic features, was one way of doing this. I also attempted to elaborate on the contexts and macro-discourses behind each of the choices I had made where possible in my write up.

4.8 <u>Reflexivity and the role of the researcher</u>

During the data collection process, I was mindful of subconsciously identifying in some way with both groups of my participants as a former teacher and learner of languages. Many of their experiences were the same as mine, having learned and taught MFL in secondary schools in England myself. It was tempting in some way to over empathize with the pupils and to project my perceptions of their experiences, particularly the difficulties associated with learning a new language onto any interpretations and conclusions I drew from the findings. I tried to remain as neutral as possible and attempted to avoid over-identifying with their experiences in any way. I tried to maintain impartiality throughout the interview process by avoiding any leading questions that would divert the pupils towards a particular line of response or indicate that I wanted them to answer in a particular way. Robson (2011) states that the use of open-ended questions to generate qualitative data should be used advisedly to ensure that responses are valuable to the researcher. Being familiar with the environment of secondary schools and of working with school-aged children, I also had the advantage of being aware of the pupils' needs and how they respond to particular styles of questioning. In such a situation, I benefited as a researcher from having previous knowledge of how pupils work together in groups and how they respond more positively to different questioning styles that probe and penetrate to elicit important information. It was essential therefore to maintain a distance between myself and the pupils: that any cursory rapport that it was necessary to develop to ensure the interviews went smoothly did not interfere with the research I was conducting and any conclusions I might draw, as well as ensuring that my emotions did not compromise the quality of the data I was there to obtain.

Primarily, such a distinction was maintained through my presence to the pupils as a person who held a position of authority. My age and appearance, combined with my interactions with their class teacher, meant that to them I was an adult on school-sanctioned business whom they all treated with respect. This tacit understanding of my official role created a necessary distance between myself and the pupils but one that sometimes resulted in their reticence and being less forthcoming with their responses. During my analysis, I considered the fine line I had straddled: as a student researcher in the view of the teachers and school leadership, possibly someone who held a certain naivety towards the situations and difficulties they faced

in their daily lives; and the position of authority and as a languages' advocate I occupied in the eyes of the pupils. I felt that each of the participants' perceptions of this distinction might have been evident in some responses I received. I had been in both their positions, and I felt it was necessary to reflect that some of my own personal experiences and some of their attached assumptions about teaching and learning MFL might somehow appear in my analysis and conclusions that I drew from my research. It is important to reflect on being aware of such influences however, and reflexivity involves explaining your own position as researcher in relation to the position of the researched (Al Hindi and Kawabata, 2002). Reflexivity has been defined as the practice of examining one's own 'embodied subjectivities' (Longhurst, 2009, p. 34) in order to gain new insights into research. This includes being reflective about the implications of your values, biases and decisions, as well as the researcher's own cultural and social contexts for the knowledge that they generate (Clark et al., 2021). Adopting a reflexive approach that critically engaged with my own beliefs and assumptions about MFL in the write up was therefore something I sought to do, which I felt helped to rebalance the often-unequal power dynamic that can exist between researcher and researched (Clark et al., 2021).

4.9 <u>Limitations</u>

A persistent question posed about qualitative interview studies is whether the results are generalisable (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Cassell (2005) states that it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the study does not make any claims that cannot be justified and allows readers from different backgrounds and experiences the possibility of recognising similar situations and outcomes. As part of my ongoing desire to indicate my own reflexivity in this research, I have to acknowledge that my findings cannot be generalised with complete certainty especially within the background of MFL research and that they cannot be applied completely from one context to another. Interviewing my participants about their reactions to their language learning experiences and their attitudes raised the question of the limitations in my research design and process that have to be acknowledged. Borg (2006) warns that in qualitative interview studies participants can articulate beliefs about what they may have thought at the time rather than verbalising real emotions that accurately represent

their current thought processes. Mackey and Gass (2015) warn that humans are sense-making beings that tend to create explanations for events, whether they are justified or not. A certain amount of trust is necessary on the researcher's behalf when accepting the veracity of these reports (Calderhead, 1981) and through immersing themselves in the data collection as well as the analysis, the researcher can quickly learn to unpack the assumed or unstated meanings in their participants' responses and discover the subtleties of their intended meaning. I have attempted to do this, where possible in the analysis and discussion sections of this thesis.

Moreover, further limitations that apply to this study are necessary to mention. The data for this study relates to a relatively small number of teachers (n=4) and pupils (n=16) within one geographical area. Given the particularly homogenous ethnic composition of Norfolk - 94.7% of its population identify as white British (ONS, 2021) – and the lack of linguistic diversity that exists (Norfolk Office of Data and Analytics, 2024), the MFL experiences of the teachers and the pupils – and particularly their perceptions towards language learning may not be typical of all learners in the South East of England. At the same time, the ethnic composition and the resulting language experiences and beliefs of some of the pupils at the urban schools featured in this study may not be representative of the more typical rural schools that might be found in the rest of the region. Conducting these interviews in a different region of the UK may have resulted in a different set of data and pupil experiences, particularly outside of the South-East, where student numbers learning languages tend to be lower on average than those nationwide and conditions and pressures are reported to be more challenging for MFL departments and teachers (Tinsley, 2019). I tried to collect as complete a dataset as possible of interviews across the four participant schools, however, it was not possible to do so in each case. Ideally, I would have liked to conduct the last focus group interview with the pupils at the final school which, based on the school and pupil characteristics would have helped to provide a more complete picture of secondary school language learning in the region. The same school also did not offer an interview with a senior member of staff and therefore I was only able to gather the teacher's perspectives regarding how MFL study was promoted and supported by the leadership in their school - leading to a potentially imbalanced view. It is possible to claim that a larger number of schools and teacher participants might have yielded richer qualitative data and a more robust analysis but the limited number of teachers that replied to the email invitation to participate meant that it was necessary to rely on the data

from those who had already given up their time to be interviewed. The generalisability of the conclusions that can be drawn from the interviews with the participating schools are also subject to certain limitations as it appeared that only the schools most committed and dedicated to investigating language learning in the region responded to the call to take part in the research. The aims of the research were framed in terms of exploring the MFL uptake crisis and addressing the uptake deficit regionally so only the teachers at those schools who were interested in such a topic as well as having the time to participate may have responded. Accordingly, this meant that the sample of schools lacked a sample of 'weaker' or lower performing schools in Norfolk where a more diverse range of attitudes towards language learning would have been evident. A broader and more representative sample of school according to background and pupil attainment would have enabled richer comparisons and more profound conclusions to be drawn across different types of school in the region.

Conducting research with young adolescents did not come without challenges and some limitations of the research process have to be acknowledged. Putting the pupils sufficiently at ease in the focus groups to answer the questions in a meaningful and illuminating manner was an initial challenge that may have been reflected in some of their responses. During the same interviews, I reflected that my appearance in a school-sanctioned capacity may have led pupils to believe I was there on an official purpose which accordingly may have influenced some of their responses. This may have occurred despite the fact that I had clearly explained my purpose and the intentions of the study beforehand. Such a feeling might have been a natural consequence of the power differential that can exist between adults and children (Eder and Fingerson 2003). Some of the pupils who had been selected to take part in the study had been chosen based on their supposed negative dispositions towards languages. However, I had the impression that some of their responses did not reflect their true positions and likely echoed the fact that these pupils may have felt they were being tested, or that their responses may have found their way back to their class teacher. This occasionally resulted in more positive responses towards MFL from certain pupils. Holding the interviews in the formal setting of their school environment may have contributed to such a feeling, a location that pupils might associate with giving the expected or accepted answer or what they feel the researcher wants to hear (Morrison, 2013). Unfortunately, the process of gaining access to the pupils to conduct the interviews meant that holding the interviews in the school environment

was inevitable as pursuing them in any other setting would have been too disruptive to their time.

4.9.1 <u>Ethical issues</u>

Punch (1994) summarises the main ethical issues in social research as harm, consent, deception, privacy and confidentiality of data and it was important that all these issues were addressed accordingly through all processes of the data collection in this study.

The research undertaken in this study strictly adhered to the guidelines of each institution that had opted to participate in the research. Firstly, the ethical guidelines, procedures and standards of the researcher's university were rigorously followed for all data collection procedures. Before any research was undertaken, approval was sought and granted from the university's ethics committee via their application process and subsequently, initial informed consent forms were distributed to all potential participants from the sample of schools that had expressed an interest in taking part in the research. BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Institutional Research (BERA, 2024) suggests that educational researchers have a responsibility towards their participants which includes to the institutions and settings in which the research is taking place. For the adolescents taking part in this research, informed consent forms were provided to their parents providing information about the focus of the research and seeking their consent for all the interviews that would be held. The schools were approached firstly through their class teachers, who acted as gatekeepers, and the ethical and safeguarding procedures for each institution were strictly followed. These included ensuring that a Disclosure and Barring Service check (DBS) was independently obtained by the researcher and a copy was provided to each school to verify that I did not hold any criminal records or convictions.

Researching in schools and therefore with children inevitably involves a number of ethical dilemmas surrounding the age of the participants which require careful consideration beforehand (Morrow and Richards, 1996). These principles accompany the traditional and more often-discussed responsibilities that an educational researcher has towards their

participants surrounding consent, minimising all potential harm to the participants and respecting how their confidential information is stored and distributed. The individual information about the pupils taking part in this research was therefore handled appropriately and all pupils taking part in the study were treated fairly and sensitively, recognising the differences that might arise from their different ages, genders, backgrounds and ethnicities. The ethics of ensuring respectful and equal treatment of all participants, regardless of differential background (BERA, 2024) initially proved a challenging hurdle to negotiate in my interviews. I was concerned that my questions or responses might betray a hint of prejudice or class-based stereotypes towards some of discourses that pupils engaged with surrounding the speaking of a foreign language and the ways in which they spoke about their personal experiences of MFL study. I envisaged that there might occur some dissonance between these and the class-based language expectations and experiences that I had been familiar with throughout my own education and life experiences. I therefore strove to ensure complete neutrality throughout my line of questioning the pupils about their experiences and in the responses that I gave to them, making sure that my reactions did not betray any overt curiosity or surprise at their responses that might make the pupils feel uncomfortable or single them out.

Regarding the means of ensuring that my remaining and not insignificant ethical responsibilities to the participants were met, I made every effort to ensure that the research and the interviews I planned to hold would not impact on the pupils' school day and their learning time in lessons. I ensured that as much information about the research and its particular aims were provided to the participants before taking part. This was primarily through the informed consent forms that were provided to pupils and through speaking to their class teacher on the phone before the interview about the aims and ethical guidelines of the study. These forms also ensured that the pupils were aware that they might withdraw or decline to take part in the research at any time and were not under any duress to participate. The forms outlined how the pupils' data would be retained, shared and might be used in any secondary cases after the conclusion of the study. I also endeavoured to make the pupils aware that they were not obligated to take part in any form of the interviews – either individual or the focus groups - and that they were able to opt out of an audio recording of the interviews, an obligation they may have felt was necessary due to the fact

the research was taking place in a school setting. I also paid close to attention to whether any non-verbal cues were given by any of the pupils as to whether the audio recording might make them feel uncomfortable in any way. The fourth state school's pupils failed to return their parental consent forms in time on the scheduled day of the interview which meant that they could not participate in the research. In this case, it was briefly considered whether offering these pupils some form of incentive to take part in the research and to return the signed forms was appropriate. In the event, it was decided that offering these pupils an incentive to participate (in the form of a gift voucher) would influence their own free and willing decision to take part in the research and infringe the integrity of the study.

It was also important to be aware of the power relations imbalance that is inherent in working with secondary age children and assess accordingly how I had to treat them compared with my adult participants. This became important particularly in how the aims of the research were framed and presented in terms of their understanding. Accordingly, I took great care in ensuring that all documentation and oral information about the study and its aims were intelligible for the children and were aimed at a level they might understand. Opt-in procedures for obtaining consent were thus used in every form and document. Dealing with a potentially sensitive topic such the pupils and teachers' individual reactions and personal experiences of their MFL lessons in school often involved being aware of not consciously discussing or hinting at the views of the previous participants in some of the interviews, and this was a hurdle that I felt I had to negotiate sensitively to respect issues of confidentiality. It often required a tactful and nuanced approach to questioning so as not to cause offense and reveal the opinions of the participants to each other.

Conducting research in a small tight-knit community such as the East of England region meant that there were only a limited number of schools that might agree to take place in the study and raised the possibility that some details of the research or of the institutions involved might become public knowledge to other members of that community - despite all the attempts I had taken to anonymise them. Therefore, I took great care to ensure that all personal details or information regarding any of the participants could not be used to identify them and removed any particular comments that might reveal information about them from the write-up. During all stages of communication with the schools, data collection and the write up, the confidentiality of all schools and the participants' personal

information was strictly respected using pseudonyms and anonymisation. All data collected was stored securely on an external hard drive to which only the researcher had access. In accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and GDPR regulations, none of the sensitive personal information stored was disclosed to any third parties.

BERA's (2024) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research state that the researcher's responsibilities towards their participants are not always tied to the conclusion of the data collection process and it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that where appropriate and when requested, they choose the most relevant and useful ways to inform participants about the outcomes of the research. Should any discrepancies of interpretation arise from the findings, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the participants' views are accurately represented. As several of my teacher participants requested feedback at the conclusion of the project and expressed an interest in reading its finished version, I strove to ensure that the views they expressed were always faithfully and accurately represented. As discussed with the participants at the time, a summary of the findings would be available for them at the study's outcome, the language and findings of which will be tailored to the research context of classroom-based language learning so as to make it more universally accessible.

Chapter 5. Results

This chapter presents the results from the three pupil focus group interviews and the eight individual pupil follow-up interviews. It answers the first research question which is divided into three parts. The results from these interviews have not been organised by school but are arranged thematically and illustrated by relevant quotes from the pupils that demonstrate the positions that they have taken up. The purpose of this chapter is to arrange and synthesise the broader themes emerging from across each individual and focus group interview from the positions that the pupils assumed. The chapter is then organised in a way that reveals the answer to each of the three parts of my first research question. A more in-depth analysis of the interview data is discussed in more detail in the section that immediately follows this chapter, *Chapter 6: analysis and commentary of the pupil interviews.*

When presenting these findings, I was aware that I had often identified clear distinctions that could be drawn between the positioning, motivation and perceptions of value of language learning that belonged to the independent school group pupils compared to the two state school groups. This distinction has also been accentuated in the two following chapters through how the data has been presented, which appears to highlight the notable differences in disposition and motivation that appeared between the two groups- which often appear to be more positive and profound in the school A pupils. This was not always the case, however, and often the motivation and perception of the state school pupils towards language learning was less explicit and overt, but equally as present. The presentation of the data in such a way is not designed to highlight or represent these differences in a way that might conform to existing language learning stereotypes of pupil background and institution type, however, but merely to present it faithfully in its original forms, as it was first analysed and in terms of how I perceived the significance of the themes that emerged.

Pupil interview results: Focus Group Interview findings:

RQ1 - How do pupils position themselves and negotiate their identities as language learners regarding:

     a) **their motivation towards continuing to study MFL?**
     b) **their responses to the messages they receive regarding MFL's significance from their institution, home and local community?**
     c) **the future value of MFL to their lives?**

5.1 Research Question 1. Part a)

Pupils' self-positioning towards the factors that affect their motivation towards continuing MFL study.

Summary of pupils overall motivation towards MFL study

The verbal data from the interviews with the independent school (School A) pupils revealed that they were more likely to articulate their overall motivation towards language learning in terms of it being an essential skill that can play an important role in their future career as well as in their pastime activities. The transferable skills that language learning can endow between other curriculum subjects as well as towards learning further languages are recognised as valuable and sought after by these pupils.

The pupils identify ways in which their formal language learning experiences in the classroom can translate into interests and skills in other contexts. Pupil AK (School A) understands that language curiosity can connect with future possibilities for hobbies and further skills and translate into a passion for extra-curricular learning in other fields: *"even*

say..cooking…if you're going to cook and then to be able to also speak French and understand better French cooking or something like that…"

Pupil AK's positioning also expresses her past investment in languages as a skill that she has accrued over many hours - wanting to carry on with learning German so as to not "*lose that as a language"* and that to her, stopping now "*wouldn't be worth it."* For most of these pupils, language learning is seen as an activity of intrinsic merit and less something that involves the necessary collection of a qualification for an enhanced future gain.

The pupils from state schools did not, on the whole, reflect on their language-learning motivation in the same terms and accordingly assess its value from more instrumental positions. The pupils claim positions that avoid referring to language learning in universal expressions and instead invoke pragmatic references to its immediate value to their lives. These responses suggest that their motivation for its study can be limited to short-term academic or future career goal-oriented positions:

> *I'll only use it if I go on holiday cos I'm actually going to Spain in the summer, so I'll have a little bit, but I don't think I need to know everything.*

Within this context, the pupils' motivation always returns to the functional desire to get a good grade:

> *I think it's what you're capable of because I didn't really want to pick a subject that I wasn't able to do and struggle with it and then not get a good GCSE in it.*

For some of the pupils' from School C, their overall motivation towards language learning is expressed from more short-term positions that suggests their motivation for continuing its learning is more transitory and affected by the immediate influences in their everyday environment. These can include their enjoyment of lessons, whether they find the material they cover in class difficult or interesting and even the choice of partner they work with:

> *I think it also depends on the topic we're doing as well as who you're working with in class..if you're working with someone you get along with well, it's more fun and it's easier to learn if you're not doing it with someone you don't really know very well…*

The following section, 5.1.2, synthesises the findings across the pupils' individual and focus group interviews and organises them into themes regarding the most commonly discussed

topics that emerged regarding the pupils discussing their motivation for continuing to study MFL.

5.1.2 Language learning lessons:

Difficulty of MFL

All of the groups of pupils showed an awareness of the difficulty of MFL compared to other curriculum subjects. All of the state school pupils' responses suggest that they find learning the grammar of a new language demanding and the repetition of learning new vocabulary in class frustrating and time-consuming. Writing and copying down in a foreign language is a painstaking operation that evokes boredom for some of pupils who also struggle with basic literacy in their English:

I struggle with my English anyways and learning to put accents on letters and stuff when I'm writing is very difficult and …I just find it really hard when I'm trying to focus on English and on Spanish at the same time.

Independent school (school A) children also acknowledge this evident difficulty and the contribution it makes to fewer of their peers deciding to continue the subject. Many of the pupils from the independent school group saw this as a challenge to be embraced rather than avoided as pupil AK's (School A) comments indicate*: "I think because it's harder, so it's more of a challenge so to speak."* Their responses show tacit understanding that the temporary difficulties they experienced would be tempered by positive long-term benefits:

Even if you don't remember the words, you'll still have the knowledge of the logic of the language, like we were talking about how it links to Maths because it is logical and to have that experience dealing with logic.

The state school pupils' views similarly reflected their positions towards the difficulty of MFL study – languages were described by pupil J (School B) as *"too hard for me"* and his views did not suggest any confidence that he would find the skills to meet this challenge. The pupils

strongly identified with subject positions confirming that an individual's language ability represents a fixed state of affairs and is something beyond their control. This is a comment that highlights high levels of amotivation in these learners and a high degree of attribution to factors beyond their control. The choice of language to highlight these positions - *too hard* - suggests that the pupils construe a ceiling limiting their ability to progress. The words '*for me*' suggests that they perceive a hierarchy of language ability and that learning languages might be an activity which they do not see as appropriate for them.

MFL Lesson pedagogy

Pupils from two state schools (Schools B & C) critiqued the lack of real-world applicability that they saw in their language lesson content. The pupils were critical of the ways in which writing was over-practised in MFL lessons through copying from the board. Pupil K's (School B) comments reflected this frustration: "all *the copying, all the writing..it's too much*".

Pupils from the coastal school (School B) observed that there was an increasing lack of speaking activities in their lessons since Covid, which had led to less interactive and more teacher-centred classroom activity:

> *We used to do a lot of speaking stuff but then obviously because of Covid we weren't allowed to do any speaking tests for Year 8 or for Year 9, until recently. So, we haven't really had a chance to do more interactive things.*

The pupil positions reflect their reaction to the lesson content and material they felt was often irrelevant and uninteresting. Pupil I (School B) remarked on how she could not see that she would need: "*learning how to say a shirt 50,000 times*." During the interviews, the pupils expressed a preference for learning foreign language vocabulary and phrases that would help them on a practical level when abroad, highlighted by pupil K's comments: "*if it were something I felt I needed or would use in the future, I'd concentrate.*"

The remarks of student C from the state school group (School B) expressed the sense of fulfilment and reward that he felt in being challenged in the language learning classroom when the class's progress and learning were tested through more engaging methods and

activities: *"It's hard but then when it's harder I feel you feel better when you get it right…if you know what I mean.."*

All pupils interviewed felt that technology could be more successfully integrated into classroom pedagogy that would increase competition amongst them and improve their motivation. Almost all pupils agreed that using technology more frequently in their lessons would have a positive effect on their engagement and enthusiasm. Many of the state school pupils described responding more positively to lessons where teachers used song, interactive videos and games in the classroom to introduce new topics: *"The computer lessons are the most fun ones. When we get competitive it obviously gets very competitive and intense."*

Such methods can provide a means to introduce speaking activities into the classroom and draw pupils out of their comfort zones. The teachers also remarked on feeling constrained by the conundrum of wanting to make the lessons more appealing to pupils but also covering a large amount of challenging new grammar and vocabulary in lessons.

Fear of speaking and the oral exam

Pupils anticipate that a major difficulty that they face when taking a language GCSE is participating in the oral exam. Pupils from two of the state schools (Schools B & C) spoke about their anxiety of having to speak in class throughout the school year as well as performing end-of-term speaking assessments in front of their peers. Pupil C from the rural state school (School C) admitted that this information about the difficulty of the speaking exam had been passed down from his sibling:

> *Well, I'd heard there was quite a lot of speaking, a lot of speaking exams….. I was just sort of stressing out thinking. Oh no, I'm never going to remember it, by the time it's actually come..*

From their comments, it became evident that the exam's reputation and its form of assessment would singularly deter a significant number of pupils from continuing the study of MFL: *"you have to speak in front of a lot of people and that can be very off-putting for*

some people." Pupil K (School B) described the discomfort he felt whilst speaking another language and his worries of making a mistake in class or in the exam:

I know what to say but it's like it might not be the right pronunciation or I might not say the right thing so it would sound completely different to what I'm supposed to be saying.

For some of these pupils, deciding to select a *safer* subject at GCSE would not induce these feelings of dread and possibly allow them to obtain a higher grade that would improve their higher education options in local colleges and therefore seemed a better option. These pupils, like Pupil C (School C), remarked on the decision to instead choose Geography or History with its focus on writing rather than speaking:

I just didn't think I would do very well at GCSE and if I ended up getting something like I don't know a D or something, someone's going to see that and say, 'oh well, they're not very good at Spanish'.

Conversely, those pupils who had decided to continue MFL spoke instead with confidence about developing strategies to build basic vocabulary into their class speaking assessments that embellished their sentence structure, and slowly progress this to more ambitious language. These pupils reflected on the importance of getting comfortable speaking in front of the class and with their teacher and then moving this into the wider environment of the outside world: "*If you're not comfortable speaking in front of class, you're not going to be comfortable speaking abroad.*"

These pupils had already adopted the position of deciding to embrace the discomfort of speaking in another language and the process of making mistakes, learning from them and having the confidence to carry on. In their experience, "*messing up*" in language learning is a common experience and only by learning through your mistakes is progression made.

5.1.3 Engaging with languages when abroad

An immediate association that pupils make towards language learning is spending time abroad in a foreign country. The independent school (School A) pupils, however, observed that their language skills were equally likely to be used in the UK as they were abroad – acknowledging its status as a multicultural society where everyday opportunities exist to use foreign languages. For these pupils, using languages at home as well as working and living abroad and engaging with the language of that country is a recognisable norm; the positions they take up convey their sense of being acquainted with the familiarity of using a foreign language abroad. Pupil AK's remarks indicate her ease with the possibility of living and studying abroad in the future and how it would act as a motivator to her continuing language study: "*Studying or working abroad could be really good, cos even if you go to university abroad, you're still going to be living in the country where they don't speak English*".

Pupil YK (School A) also lamented the differences between Europeans who benefited from economic and geographical imperatives to engage with the cultures and languages of their neighbouring countries and English people who decide to *"learn a language because we're going away on holiday for the summer".* Such comments show his alignment with a position that recognises the advantages that accompany such a life - in terms of travel and improved life skills and career opportunities. For these pupils, speaking a foreign language when abroad is "*a bit of a two-way give and take situation"* that can lead to forming deeper connections: "*if both people know a bit of the other person's language, it all helps a bit with communication and understanding, what you're trying to get across..*"

Most of the state school pupils identified fewer enduring connections between studying languages and living and working abroad. Their positioning in the interviews appeared to indicate their lack of familiarity with people within their own worlds who had worked and lived abroad. Pupil R's (School C) comments reflected this perception: *"I don't want to work abroad, and I think that generally people don't want to travel for their work or anything."*

These pupils hinted at primarily more reductive notions of being abroad – often associated with their family experiences of being in other countries. Such trips might normally comprise holidays at all-inclusive resorts where knowledge of the local language is not needed. Pupil C's (School C) comments alluded to this position: *"but most people would just be in an all-inclusive fancy TUI hotel, you're never going to need to speak anything."*

Their comments invoked a tacit acceptance that making these associations with the world outside their own community positioned themselves as *exterior* to the foreign culture of the country they were visiting. Taking such a position is also a mechanism to justify their lack of need to learn the local language to fit in. At the same time, some of their classmates who had travelled abroad beyond the usual package holiday destinations did acknowledge that English is widely spoken enough to get by in these destinations, but that trying to speak the local language when abroad would broaden their cultural experience and enrich their time:

> *You can definitely get by if you only know English, but it would be a much better experience, and you'd feel their culture more and it would just be respectful to at least try to learn some of that language.*

The core association towards language learning expressed by the state school pupils centered around going or being on holidays. Pupil C's (School C) comments attested to his satisfaction that his own basic language skills were "*enough to go on holiday anyway*". These comments revealed little understanding of the connection between language skills and possible social mobility or in terms of it being a valuable career asset. Instead, their comments reflected uncertain notions of needing language study to attain exotic careers abroad such as being a pilot or a field medic. The positions they take up suggest that these pupils may envisage that their adult lives will be built at home in the same communities that they have grown up in.

The pupils acknowledge that the ubiquity of global English had affected their motivation to continue studying MFL. Travelling abroad to the destinations they often visited, "*everyone spoke English anyway*" and there existed no real reason to learn to speak their hosts' language beyond making a token effort of a few words: "*Yeah, probably just a couple of words would be nice, like 'hello' and 'thank you'. I think that's about it really.*"

The findings also reveal that the spread of global English as a demotivating factor amongst pupils is not a phenomenon contained to the state school pupils. Pupil YK from the independent school (School A) recalled how disheartened he had felt in the past when speaking French in France and receiving a reply in English:

I think often you might feel a bit insulted that they won't think that your ability in that language is good enough…and that kind of questions how kind of worth it it is to learn their language.

5.1.4 Primary languages

All of the pupils unanimously agreed that they had not benefited from a consistent and quality programme of language teaching during their primary school education. The conviction contained in their responses indicates that such inconsistency has had detrimental effects on pupil motivation and enthusiasm. Several of the pupils at the different state schools commented on "*being completely out of their depth*" in Year 7 when taking MFL for the first time. The findings note that low quality teaching, inconsistent curriculum content and changing teaching personnel has all contributed to hindering pupil progress at Key Stage 2 and may contribute to current pupils' feelings of low motivation and self-efficacy. Pupil B (School C) speculated in one of the state school focus groups that this may have affected how she felt: "*because like, we didn't learn it in primary school did we? we didn't do any languages in primary school…so that gave us a disadvantage.*"

The state school pupils remarked that their current motivation and basic language ability would be much improved if they had entered the school with a much more solid foundation of language knowledge. Pupil IZ (School B) commented that: "*yeah, because we were just thrown into languages, when we got into high school, and we didn't really know too much about it.*"

Their comments capture the confusion and unfamiliarity that some pupils in Year 7 feel, without a consistent curriculum and a dedicated transition phase to secondary school behind them. The same pupil remarked that there had been no semblance of a transition between the language she had studied in primary school and the choice of language that pupils were offered in secondary school:

I did Spanish in year 3 and year 4 and French in year 5 and year 6, had I known I was doing Spanish at GCSE I'd be like 'sod French' I want to do Spanish instead in Primary.

Their teachers agreed that language learning was deserving of a special syllabus at Key Stage Two to provide pupils with a consistent and secondary school aligned regional programme that would ease the transition period between primary and secondary, better equipping pupils entering this environment. Such a programme could also capitalise on what they saw as a critical period of early learning in the children's lives where they are more likely to absorb new languages.

5.1.5 Connecting motivation to an intrinsic interest in MFL study

Some of the independent school (School A) pupils interviewed were quick to highlight their independence in their own learning and how their autonomy in the languages' decision-making process had evolved through their passion and curiosity for the subject. Pupil YK (School A) reflected on the limited role his parents had played in influencing his GCSE choices in the initial ice-breaker activity during the focus group interview. In placing the prompt card *parental influence* lowest down his list of decisive influences, he accentuated his own independence and exclaimed that *"none of these factors really influenced my choice!"* Through this statement, he reflexively positions himself as having an inherent commitment towards language learning and showed his desire to claim the position of *linguist* in the group.

The response to his positioning by his classmates confirmed his self-positioning: *"you're just a very linguistic person aren't you"*- a reaction not expressed with disdain but with no little sincerity and goodwill. For the independent school pupils, the thought that one's hobbies and interests might be closely entwined with an activity such as learning a foreign language is not an unusual phenomenon. The pupils accordingly decided that the category *hobbies and interests* would feature relatively highly on their list of influential factors in the prompt cards that represented how their languages decision was made. Also implicit in this decision was the notion that travelling abroad and getting to use a foreign language might form a fundamental part of their hobbies.

For some of the state school pupils, the concept of connecting a subject that it is compulsory to study in school – particularly MFL - to their hobbies was inconceivable and a wholly

unfamiliar notion. When one of the pupils in School C mentioned the possibility of learning a language in their free time in the same activity, it was scathingly dismissed by pupil C: "*could you imagine any of your hobbies or interests being linked to language learning?!*" - a retort that appeared to highlight how ridiculous an idea it was. For some of these pupils, language learning is a topic solely confined to the boundaries of their institute, or occasionally, a world they temporarily enter when they go abroad for a short holiday with their parents in the summer. There was little appreciation for the idea that embarking upon language learning purely for its own sake might evolve into deeper cultural interests such as a passion for French cooking or sport. The interview with these pupils' teacher appeared to confirm this view and he observed that it was unlikely his pupils would ever be heard overtly remarking that they enjoyed MFL lessons in class.

5.2 Research Question 1. Part b)

Pupils' self-positioning towards the messages they receive from home, institution and local communities

5.2.1 Local community

The pupils' comments reveal the positions that they take up towards the diverse messages that they receive and process regarding the learning and speaking of other languages. The state school pupils' positions often reflected their own limited language learning experiences and exhibited attitudes that could be connected to variation in the regional background of their schools and local communities. These positions often echoed insular views that normalised monolingualism as an activity. Such views might act as an explanation for their reticence to fully engage with speaking another language when abroad. For the majority of the state school pupils, monolingual norms to which

they are habituated within their own community can be a dominant influence. Pupil R's comments (School C) emphasised the foreignness of the notion of working abroad and speaking another language:

> *I think that generally a lot of people don't want to like travel for their work or anything, they might go on holiday or something, but I don't think a lot of people see themselves working abroad.*

Some of the pupils made assumptions that "*most people*" in their world aspired to short-term holidays at all-inclusive resorts where only English is spoken: "*most people would just be in an all-inclusive fancy TUI hotel; you're never going to need to speak anything.*" For them, this kind of embedded monolingualism is a natural phenomenon and extending this state of affairs to being abroad would be a natural accompaniment. Any inclination they harboured to connect with people from other countries and cultures was slightly vague and appears to stem from what they have always been told is a desirable advantage of language learning: "*everyone always says it helps you understand people a bit more*". They have indistinct notions of what exactly other countries culture may be, but they know that it involves "*how they live and stuff*".

The pupils' limited awareness of how professional fields can connect to using and working with languages on a daily basis in this country highlight their parochial views. Pupils cling on to beliefs that such multilingual communities must only exist in other countries: "*..it depends where you work as a lawyer because in England you're going to see less people that talk in a foreign language*".

This comment echoes with the expectations and norms of these pupils that the most likely future career goals for a person who planned to continue studying MFL were either as a teacher or a translator and they had difficulty connecting the other possible careers presented to them to MFL in the icebreaker activity.

The independent school (School A) pupils took the view that monolingualism was something to be avoided and were dismissive of the attitude that relying on English at home and abroad was enough. Pupil L commented that:

If you learn only one language, so if you only know English, it's… I feel that it's more common to just come across more English.. just English-speaking people.

For these pupils, monolingualism is a dangerous mindset leading to entrenched practices that engender insular attitudes towards language learning. The pupils' comments that "*the English are more lazy* (sic) *at learning languages*" recognise this as a homegrown trait that they are keen to avoid. Unlike their state school counterparts, they recognise that the diverse and multicultural nature of England today meant that they were just as likely to need a language in their futures living and working in this country as they were abroad. Holding and expressing such progressive views hinted at their own lived experiences that defy the prevailing expectations that might commonly be associated with the region they live in.

All of the pupils agree that it is preferable to try to speak the language when visiting a foreign country. For some of the state school pupils, this commitment extended to making the "*token effort*" of saying a few basic words of greeting to their hosts and not wishing to be seen as "*offensive*" by expecting the hosts to speak their language. For the independent school pupils, their responses suggest that speaking the language when abroad can connect to appreciating and investing more into the culture of the host country and not "*selfishly assuming that everybody else will accommodate your needs*". While their comments reflected similar instrumental desires as the state school pupils to come across as "*polite*" and "*respectful*", the positions they take up indicate more and hint at desiring to belong to an international community and aspiring to show off personal qualities in fields of symbolic value – qualities that demonstrate neo-liberal, progressive and humanist notions of self-development through intercultural contact (Coffey, 2018).

5.2.2 Home background

Independent school pupils take up positions that demonstrate their familiarity with learning languages in their home environment and their acquaintance with the message that language ability is a desirable academic and personal skill as well as an attainable leisure pursuit that can lead to professional enhancement. Their responses suggest that the

messages they receive from their parents generally oppose Brexit and understand that building cohesion and rapport with fellow European citizens are instead desirable connectors that can facilitate their own language learning enthusiasm and ability. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to infer that the message that language holds appreciable value stems from their parents' own positive language learning experiences - as well as persuasive evidence from their careers of how economic and social mobility and language learning are entwined. This was evident in pupil YK from School A's remarks:

> *they've* (her parents) *been to, like, loads of different countries on conferences and they've studied abroad in different countries, like my mum's lived more outside her native country than in it, because she's travelled for work, she's travelled for university, she's travelled, you know, for jobs.*

At the same time some of the independent school pupils admitted to feeling pressure from their parents to pick more academic subjects than MFL that would provide greater economic reward in their future careers:

> *so, in a way if I chose lots of creative subjects to do at GCSE, they might be a bit…not disappointed but…I think they would want me to do more academic ones as well.*

However, other parents simply wanted their child to have the opportunity to study a variety of languages at an early age that they themselves had missed out on. Pupil R in the independent school group (School A) recounted his parents' regret for having missed out on language learning possibilities in their own schooling:

> *because they didn't have that opportunity when they were younger to learn a European language like French, Spanish, Italian, German and those sort of thing…and they just wanted me to have that opportunity.*

The pupils were aware of being able to learn from their parents' mistakes but also to benefit from their influence and experience in this field, giving them the freedom to plot their own future course of language study:

> *I think they maybe they also regret it, not doing more languages, so that kind of makes me think that I should learn from it.*

Pupil YK from School A again drew on the strong influence that her parents exerted on her own enjoyment for languages through asking her to speak their native language at home, to choosing to study German because of her father's own experiences:

> So, *at home, my parents don't want us to speak English. They're like, 'we'd rather you speak our native languages'…my dad said, 'I want you to do German because I can help you with that, also German's a really nice language' and I was like 'ok'*

Similarly, pupil I from the state school B admitted that her parents had played a significant role in her decision-making, being of the firm opinion of wanting her to continue a language:

> *my parents, not forced me.. but they highly encouraged me to do a language…I probably would have been frowned upon if I didn't pick it.*

On the whole, the focus group interviews with the state school pupils presented the impression of a slightly more fragmented parental involvement in the decision-making process. Only three of the pupils in the state school groups across two schools referred to their parents contributing strongly positive messages towards their language decision-making. Other pupils' comments suggest that the limited weight of their parents' influence in this process can be attributed to a certain degree to their own restricted and negative experiences of learning MFL. The messages from their home background towards languages were inconsistent and lacked clarity and such uncertainty seeped into their children's decision-making. Pupil C from School C summarized this indecision:

> They *(parents) have their own opinions and maybe if they were Spanish speaking they would convince you to do it more.*

The state school pupils noted that their parents gave them more freedom than the independent school children in the language decision-making process. According to pupil K, from School B, his parents' involvement in his decision-making was based around terse yet practical advice: "*my parents just said, 'pick what you're gonna need in the future, and what you're most interested in'.*"

Being unable to draw from a basis of firm parental guidance in the decision-making process, these pupils make their choices on completely different terms:

I think it's what you're capable of because I didn't really want to pick a subject that I wasn't able to do and struggle with it and then not get a good GCSE in it.

The state school pupils spoke instead in terms of having the free will and sometimes deliberately taking the opposite path to their parents' advice while '*luckily not being forced to do something,*' rather than benefiting from their experiences. These pupils recognised that their parents had limited language ability themselves and that in their view, this somehow negated the validity of their views regarding their children's decision. Student C from the rural state school (School C) described his mother's attempts to speak Spanish on holiday in mocking terms and reiterated how he did not take her attempts to persuade him to study Spanish seriously:

Well, she thinks she does (knows Spanish) *but she kind of asks me and my stepdad more than she actually knows it, so she doesn't know too much… so I just said, 'I don't want to, it's not part of my career so I'm not going to' so they weren't too happy about that, but they just said, 'each to their own.' (laughs)*

5.2.3 Institution

Pupils have uncertain responses to the messages they receive from their institution regarding the importance and value of language learning. The independent school (School A) pupils commented on the messages that they noticed around their school in the form of promotional posters around the school's language department, encouraging the uptake of MFL for their future economic gain. The pupils processed and mused on these messages and appeared to be not always convinced by as their relevance: "*I mean there's always like posters around school about the economic benefits of more people knowing languages and that's always like the focus isn't it.*"

Pupils disposed towards language learning such as YK reflected that these messages were not always particularly relevant and felt there was too much emphasis placed in school on subjects that will help them obtain a higher paying job: "*it's a factor but then, maybe there's*

too much emphasis put on that, and, because really..you should do what you enjoy as well…so."

State school pupils equally pay attention to the significance placed on languages in the curriculum as a subject that is considered close to English and Maths in importance:

> *when we apply for GCSE ..it does say that languages is a recommended subject, so it is quite high on the list, obviously below Maths and Science, because you have to do it.*

All the independent school pupils appeared to be strongly convinced about their future professional aspirations that might involve languages - during the focus group ice-breaker activities they spoke persuasively about the broad list of career options they imagined using languages for. For the state school pupils their professional aspirations appear more instrumental and defined by their everyday world in which studying MFL for GCSE only leads to the vague possibility of "*anything working abroad*". The only role for languages within professional purposes that the pupils can envisage were becoming a teacher or translator, choices that do not seem particularly appealing. The interview with their class teacher later confirmed that this type of reductive thinking was common among her pupils and that they were likely unaware of professional fields in which language graduates were currently in high demand, such as banking and finance.

Research Question 1. Part C)

5.3 Pupils' self-positioning towards the current and future value of MFL to their lives

Some of the independent school pupils displayed an understanding of the value and the processes behind learning a language that can benefit them in the future. They show awareness that the rewards of persisting with MFL can be long-term, simmering slowly over time and are gradually cultivated into future skills over a period of many years. These are skills that pupil L reflected might make her regret not having continued with languages in the future:

Because looking back in 10 years' time, I'm in the middle of a career or something, looking back I'd think 'oh thank goodness I did that' 'thank goodness I took that language, you know.'

Their comments demonstrate an understanding of the iterative *process* of MFL learning - that success requires patience, repetition and returning to the material over time. This often relies on a significant degree of independent study to reinforce class material. Pupils that are motivated towards continuing language study show an understanding that its rewards are incremental and rewarding of patient progress and hard work:

When you're learning a new language, doesn't there have to be an absolute commitment… like you're doing it every single day, gotta get it right, gotta get this right.

The state school pupils that were planning to continue MFL study also spoke effusively and positively about the wide-ranging benefits they connected to learning languages. They recognised that a large majority of the world was Spanish-speaking and that also having that ability would endlessly enhance their ability to connect with people from different cultures, as well as travel abroad and benefit from future job opportunities. Having a background of speaking one or multiple languages would afford them the advantage of "*communicating with most people from all over the world*" and enhance their cultural experiences of living and working abroad. These pupils were mindful that having language ability offered a skill that was different to those in other subjects, that they could "*put on their CV*" to set them apart in their future job searches.

All the pupils from each school type identified new skills that they had taken from their language lessons and connected these to ones they found themselves using in other lessons. Rote-learning skills such as memorising information and committing vocabulary and grammar patterns to memory were seen as surprisingly transferable benefits: "*I think languages does help with everything overall because you have a lot of memorisation with it and that helps with a lot of things really.*"

Similarly, Pupil E from the coastal state school (School B) group noted that that these types of skills helped her with improving memory and ability to recall information in other lessons

too: *"I've also learned a lot of different methods of how to memorise stuff in Spanish because that is a big part of Spanish.."*

Further independent skills such as logical thinking and reasoning were also highlighted as key abilities, in understanding and working through the rules of a language's grammar that would help them learn other languages:

> *Logical thinking definitely comes in but that's also language because of grammar rules and languages tend to be logical… I speak three languages.. and they both have pretty structured grammar with much fewer exceptions.*

Pupils credit the development of their self-confidence to speaking in class as well as being a factor that has improved their confidence in speaking in public in English. Pupil R's comments from the rural state school (School C) group supported this:

> *There are a lot of different things, confidence is one of them because I think it gives you a lot of confidence to speak, not only in a different language, but your own language as well.*

Their comments suggest that the transferability of MFL skills to other curriculum subjects is more appealing to pupils who are deciding to continue its learning. Pupils highly value and prioritise interchangeable skills in languages, particularly ones that can confer advantages in other subjects in the curriculum for revision purposes and for future academic gains. Transferable oracy skills such as debating and presenting carry greater weight among these pupils not only because of their transferability to other curriculum subjects but also for enhancing their future career prospects. The pupils displayed surprising awareness about these: *"Presenting arguments yeah, that will help in life in general and definitely in English, because you've got to know how to speak to people."*

B. Pupil individual interview results:

The findings of the individual interviews resonated with opinions that chimed with those that the pupils had expressed during the focus group interviews. In the individual interviews,

however, the pupils were alone and without the presence of their peers which gave them more freedom and time to elaborate on their views without any pressure from their classmates. The pupils were given the opportunity during these interviews to talk about any answers they had previously given and occasionally, this was necessary where I sought clarification or expanded detail. An interview schedule of questions was drawn up prior to the individual interview, which I loosely followed, except to interject and improvise when a comment of interest arose or to ask pupils to elaborate where I was unclear on their meaning.

Subsequently, this section of chapter 5 provides an overview of the more notable pupil responses and an analysis of the original themes that emerged from the individual pupil interviews. These responses have then been situated amongst the findings of previous research exploring learners' motivation and their perceptions of value of language learning in England, to provide some context to their answers and to measure the significance of the conclusions that can be drawn from the comments.

Brexit and the pupils' responses to stereotypes surrounding the target language community

The individual interviews revealed that secondary school pupils' motivation towards studying the target language is largely unaffected by their beliefs and opinions about stereotypes traditionally associated with the speakers of the target language and its community. The pupils were quick to dismiss the influence that stereotypes have on their motivation towards the target language, and their desire to continue studying it. Pupil K's (School A) comments reflected this:

> *that's stereotypes that's not actually every person. So, you could go to that different country, you could meet one of your best mates for life or something for example. You never know people could lie about stereotypes; it's a stereotype… it's not real life… it's not true.*

These results contrast with the findings of previous research that reveals that negative perceptions and stereotypes regarding foreign language communities do exist in English

secondary schools and often influence pupils' decisions about how they choose to engage with language learning (Williams et al., 2002). The views of pupil K also contrasted with the personal experiences of two teachers in this study who found that virulently negative views towards foreign language communities had continued to exist within some schools in the same region and in some cases had amplified since Brexit. These comments suggests that xenophobic and negative representations of language learning and foreign cultures portrayed in the wider media since Brexit has not greatly impacted learners' motivation, contrary to studies that exist (Tinsley, 2018; Tinsley and Doležal, 2018). These views of the pupils were, on the whole, supported by the other class teachers who felt that they did not have the impression that their pupils believed the learning of languages were a less valuable pursuit since Brexit.

In fact, the opposite view was occasionally mentioned in class. One of the independent school pupils, pupil YK, expressed concern about the effects of Brexit - that the damage caused to Britain's relationships with our closest neighbours and how we perceived their citizens was significant:

> *I think it has a negative effect and it kind of it almost damages the relationship between different countries and I think that reflects itself in how we treat people from other countries, like I think, knowing the language comes into that...*

His views suggest that he felt the loosening of ties with Britain's European neighbours was a negative one that would lead to fewer jobs and business opportunities in the future and much less interest from British people in wanting to move and work abroad and study their languages going forward, thus permanently weakening our connections.

Limited language choices in school

A significant number of pupils expressed the preference in the individual interviews for their school to offer them a wider choice of language options to study. Some commented that the options available to them were limited to either French, Spanish or German on entering the school in year 7 and that they largely were made to continue on this set path of learning this

language to year 9 at least and possibly beyond it, for GCSE. Beyond the 'mainstream' languages there was little other choice available. Several of the pupils at the second state school spoke about regretting that they had not taken the Mandarin language option that their school had previously offered as part of a government-sponsored 3-year initiative and bemoaned that this programme had now been withdrawn. Other pupils expressed a desire to learn a completely new language such as Ukrainian or an Asian language, such as Japanese or Chinese, because of their global influence and hinted that in the future, more widely spoken languages would be useful to them because of their global popularity and economic significance: *"but obviously, something in the long term that's spoken globally, (would be useful) probably like Spanish or Mandarin or something like that."*

The pupils reasoned that the modern European languages they studied in school were likely chosen because of their similarities to English and the geographical proximity of England to those countries, that enabled cultural exchanges and trips abroad. They reflected that the learning of languages with different alphabets and scripts such as Russian or Mandarin would require different teaching methods and more time to accommodate their teaching in the calendar: *"It would require more effort and longer lessons and things".* Many of the pupils spoke strongly about how much they enjoyed studying the culture of the languages they currently learned, particularly Spanish, and reflected that a strong incentive to learn a new language would be to delve into its culture and learn more about the country.

The pupils' views surrounding the usefulness of the languages they learn and the limited choice they are presented with largely corresponds with the findings of previous research. This has often suggested that learners would prefer a wider range of languages than they are currently offered in schools. The findings also concur with previous studies that indicate that Spanish remains one of the most popular languages to learn due to the status of Spain as a holiday destination and the prominence of Spanish in popular culture such as films and TV series (Gough, 2023). Previous research has revealed that pupils often judge a language's usefulness according to its own merits and that most pupils tend to relate to a language's usefulness in personal terms or in a way that is particular or specific to them (Lanvers and Parrish, 2019). Such findings were evident in my study through the ways in which the pupils I interviewed described Asian languages as increasingly desirable and reflected how they perceive their usefulness in either economic terms (Chinese) or through a particular element

of their culture (Japanese) they might be interested in. Pupils continue to be predominantly instrumentally motivated to learn European languages – which are judged as useful for holidays and short trips (Coffey, 2018). Instrumental motivation for MFL study is noted as predominant in research into English secondary school learning (McPake et al., 1999; Gayton, 2010) and the pupils' desires to learn Ukrainian because of the recent influx of Ukrainian pupils into their school can be read as an example of this. Other pupils indicated preferences to learn languages such as Russian for personal reasons, because it shared the same alphabet as her parents' home language.

Comparing themselves to the model of the native speaker

A recurring concern of the pupils emerging from the interviews was their feelings surrounding their own lack of ability and inadequacy compared to native speakers of the L2. This was indicated by their fears of not being able to speak it perfectly. These fears often spilled over into class when having to speak in front of their peers during oral exercises. For some of the pupils, this self-consciousness emerged through their dread of the oral exam and manifested itself in the choice not to continue language learning for GCSE. This feeling was evidenced by pupil K's (School B) remarks:

> *I know what to say but it's like it might not be the right pronunciation or I might not say the right thing so it would sound completely different to what I'm supposed to be saying..*

The notion that the pupils measured their speaking ability in the L2 against the ideal of the native speaker was one that was later confirmed by the headteacher at the same school (School B) whom I interviewed as part of the senior staff interviews and who had been teaching a regular MFL schedule of classes up to two years prior:

> *I have a crazy notion; I have no idea if there's any evidence for it.. that people think that they're not very good at it because they have the model in their mind of the native speaker so they've got this comparison, they think they're not very good at languages because they can't speak like a native, but I think, actually, you're quite good at it for a*

14-year-old girl in England or a 14-year-old boy. Actually, you're quite good, you're very good!

A different teacher blamed the pupils' overly critical assessment of their own abilities on the now infrequent number of trips and cultural exchanges that the pupils were offered, reducing their opportunities to interact with native speakers. Other teachers attributed this lack of confidence to the lack of opportunity to practice their speaking skills in class recently, partly due to the time they had spent out of schools during the pandemic.

These views and the pupils' fears of not measuring up to an imagined ideal of the native speaker are not unusual findings in second language acquisition contexts. Louw-Potgieter and Giles (1987) write that within language communities, there is often a gap created between the group an individual identifies with, and the status attributed to the individual by others. In L2 acquisition, native and non-native speakers may assign themselves as belonging to either the native or non-native group of a certain language community whilst simultaneously being perceived differently by members of that community (Davies, 2003).

Pupil YK (School A) remarked on his own experiences and the frustration he felt when speaking with native speakers abroad who would switch to speaking English when they encountered someone attempting to speak their language in their own country:

Often you might feel a bit insulted that they won't think that your ability in that language is good enough… but then, if that is the case that lots of people in Europe know English, then that kind of questions how kind of worth it is to learn their language.

The teacher from school B agreed that pupils often maintained an image of the model of the 'perfect' native speaker in their minds that would often be exacerbated by their prolonged lack of contact with them. He feared that these beliefs would only be compounded in the future by his pupils' lack of familiarity and intimate contact with native speakers on a daily basis, given the difficulties that native-speaking teachers had had obtaining work permits since Brexit and the cuts that had been made to the jobs of language assistants in their schools:

I think probably one of the worse long-term effects of this for language teaching is going to be for recruitment of staff, um because a lot of having a teacher in your department who is a native speaker, that is a real asset

The rise of language learning technology inside and outside the MFL classroom

Some of the pupils acknowledged that the rise of language learning apps and online translation devices that currently exist had negatively affected their motivation for language study and consequently their decision to continue learning it. Many of the pupils, such as pupil R from state school B, admitted she could not see the need to dedicate a large amount of time to her MFL homework when she could use a translator app instead:

I think it's just a lot of effort to learn a language that some people don't want to put in for something they could look up on their phone in five minutes..

Pupil C from school B group spoke about his peers who had realised they did not need to put in the work required to learn a language, when translation programmes existed: "*I think it's the rise of translators like google translate, no one can be bothered"*. When questioned about why so many of their fellow pupils were choosing to drop languages, Pupil YK from the independent school (School A) acknowledged how difficult his peers found it and the amount of work required to succeed:

I mean, well, languages are obviously difficult to learn so I think it can be a bit off-putting and sometimes a struggle getting through the vocab and all that kind of thing and the grammar and understanding it.

Pupil K from state school B agreed:

 Kids have all this access to social media and internet, they haven't got to learn it, they can type it into a translator….which is easy for them. If everyone has access to a translator, their thoughts going into it are 'why should I learn bother learning it if I've got a translator?'

Pupil B's (School B) comments seem to similarly suggest the amount of work required to learn a language was cumbersome and instead she looked for short cuts: "*It's very time-consuming learning another language*".

Pupil H's comments from School D supported this notion:

> *Another thing that is stopping people from learning another language is that people think there's always another app that can translate it for you and people are just becoming a bit lazy to do actually it.*

Pupil B's (School B) remarks indicate that many of the pupils now view this technology as an essential language learning resource, even though some of it would not necessarily be allowed in the MFL classroom: "*so, we have a lot of modern resources we have books, we have our phones, we have apps loads of technology that translates languages for us.*"

These views suggest that much of the new digital technology that exists in the form of language learning apps and translation devices is now so indelibly connected to pupil associations with the learning process and how they approach their independent work in MFL. Accordingly, teachers and curriculum planners need to assess how these technologies can be better harnessed and employed to assist pupils' learning and engage them more effectively in the learning process. Literature investigating the potential of these developments has been slow to emerge and there is a dearth of research that currently exists surrounding how teachers can better exploit these technologies used by their pupils to carry out independent MFL work in England and improve their language proficiency and motivation. MFL research exploring the potential of the internet as a language learning tool almost ten years after the turn of the century was still focusing on how access to authentic materials in the target language would revolutionise language learning (Mitchell, 2009). It was not until the mid to late 2010s when teachers started to become more attuned to the issue of their pupils regularly using programmes such as Google Translate for their written work at home (Smith, 2017). Some UK secondary schools have thus reported that their teachers have stopped setting written work for pupils to do at home and instead are consuming valuable class time for its production that could be spent on listening and speaking exercises (Smith, 2017). More recently, research surrounding the use of technology in foreign language learning in general has instead focused on how the more general *ICT* can

be enabled to support foreign language learning in class (Pazio, 2014) and how teachers may employ the range of apps to support informal language users such as *Wordreference.com* and *Quizlet* that now exist (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Rapid developments in the accessibility of generative AI programmes such as ChatGPT since the data collection in this study was carried out have meant that Large Language Models (LLM) programmes are now equipped to translate large sections of texts instantly into a foreign language, as well as having the capability of chatbots to act as language partners or TL models that can generate human-like responses to translation (Bowler, 2025). These changes demonstrate the remarkable developments that have been made in the last few years and reinforce how the concerns surrounding modern technology are now at the forefront of MFL learning nationwide and that teachers will need to adapt to this in their teaching.

The spread of global English:

The findings reveal that secondary school pupils recognise that the modern-day ubiquity of global English acts as a major demotivation for them to continue learning a second language. The pupils expressed awareness that most people in the world that they would meet spoke English, and that the need of those people to learn English was greater than their own to learn a foreign language. This knowledge was not primarily expressed with any regret but in glib terms of self-satisfaction, particularly amongst the pupils who had decided not to continue its learning, such as Pupil C from state school C: *"I think there is a reason why in the UK we're pretty terrible at learning languages it's cos we don't need to (laughs)."*

Many of the state school pupils appeared nonchalant when trying to explain or justify this turn of events: *"like C said, English is spoken almost everywhere, and people don't really want to bother with something that they're not gonna use again."*

Their class teacher confirmed that such detached views were common amongst his pupils. Yet, at the same time, there remained some that ascribed to the notion that it would be more respectful to try to speak a foreign language when abroad. The teacher from the first state school suggested that his pupils' views on the spread of global English might originate

from their own socioeconomic backgrounds and were connected to their own lack of opportunities: "*some of them have said to me*: '*I'm never going to go abroad, or if you go abroad they all speak English anyway*."

Existing research suggests that such views are relatively widespread: the motivation of Anglophone speakers to learn a second language can be influenced by the global status of English (Graham, 2004; Lo Bianco, 2014) and the fallacy that 'English is enough' (Lanvers et al., 2018) is a prominent feature of research exploring motivation in second language learning contexts in Britain. It is moreover not uncommon that British and Anglophone learners may be lured into falsely exaggerated perceptions of the significance of global English (Schultzke, 2014). It was clear from the interviews I conducted that while some of the pupils did hold such exaggerated impressions of the importance of global English and often relied on this feeling to justify their views and (lack of) motivation, others offered a more critical appraisal of the damage that knowing global English might cause. Pupil YK from School A contrasted the UK's over reliance on English as a global language with other European countries' linguistic skills and speculated that its monolingualism might be connected to its entrenched cultural and geographical isolation. His views paint a compelling picture of his personal childhood experiences where linguistic interests, geography and culture have entwined and swelled to form resonant values in an individual. Such views contrasted sharply with the functional, single-use objectives of language learning to go on holidays abroad that some of the pupils from the state schools had referred to:

> *But if you're in a European country you're more likely to travel, or near a border, obviously and I remember, in Switzerland they have 3 different languages so maybe people in Switzerland are more interested in languages because the different languages and the different cultures are so much nearer so maybe that's an aspect….whereas in England we're just like, "let's learn languages because we're going on a holiday for the summer, in a different country", whereas in Europe you might go somewhere for work…*

The minority views of some learners and their recognition of the negative aspects of global English have been noted in previous studies. These views tend to be associated with learners that have grown up in an increasingly united Europe that encourages individual mobility and who may be aware of the disadvantages of English monolingualism (Busse, 2010, p. 185).

For the most part, pupils from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be more capable of recognising that their native English skills are not always an automatic advantage in certain contexts. These pupils are able to adopt critical stances that address the role of global English in their motivation to learn a foreign language (Lanvers, 2017). Research has shown that some of these highly focused and motivated learners are keen to reject the British image of insularity and Europhobia and project more positive and independent self-images of themselves as learners (Taylor, 2013) which can clearly be seen in the example of pupil YK's (School A) comments above.

Chapter 6. Analysis and commentary on the pupil interviews

Introduction

The findings reveal that the pupils assume a number of subject positions in the interviews that highlight how their motivation towards MFL study is constructed as well as their responses to messages they receive regarding its value. Positioning analysis is a useful tool with which to explore how these pupils construct their understandings of the value of languages and their motivation to continue its study because of the inherent nature of adolescent interactions and their often untypical and indirect way of communicating. It is also an appropriate way to explore pre-GCSE pupils discussing a topic as complex and multi-faceted as MFL learning that provokes a range of emotions and reactions because, as Harré and Slocum (2003, p. 34) argue: 'positions can be situation specific, disputed, challenged, changing and shifting'. The nuances of using positioning theory to explore a group dynamic situation is also appropriate in uncovering the views that lie behind the pupils' positioning towards their motivation for a subject that is often polarising - and through exploring much of what remains unsaid as well as what is said. Positioning theory is also a useful approach to explore how discourse and identity construction interact in oral narratives because as individuals position themselves and each other in talk (Korobov and Bamberg, 2004), they observably co-construct and reshape their selves (Kayı-Aydar, 2015). Discourse in positioning theory can therefore be understood in terms of how individuals use the language to act, behave and speak as a way to take on positions that others will recognise (Rex and Shiller, 2009).

Accordingly, the chapter that follows provides an analysis and explores in more detail the positions that pupils took up during their interviews. It examines the discourses surrounding language learning that they more frequently drew on in their interactions. The chapter provides a detailed analysis and commentary on the main themes emerging from the pupil interviews that were presented in the previous chapter. It identifies three main features of positioning theory that were used to highlight the positions that the pupils took up and that draw attention to the issues that they hold important regarding language learning: *the use of*

oppositional and relational positioning to highlight their perceptions of its value and their motivation for language study; the subject positions they assume that distance or align themselves with certain values and how they accepted the rights and responsibilities that evolved from the positions they adopted.

In exploring the themes that emerged from the findings, I was not attempting to present any differences of motivation or depth of belief towards language learning that emerged in either the state school or independent pupils as stereotypical to any particular type of institution or pupil background. It is important to note here that the themes that are presented in the chapter that follows have been selected because of their relevance to developing the conceptual framework that this study employs and to better answer the research questions, rather than any desire to highlight or draw out any differences between the different school types participating in this research that might conform to pre-existing socioeconomic background stereotypes.

Oppositional and relational positioning to highlight motivation and value

Certain features of positioning theory are particularly useful in performing this analysis. The use of oppositional and relational positioning (Kayı-Aydar, 2015) by the independent school pupils is a device that serves to confer linguistic credibility on the pupils within their group who value language learning and draw attention to those that do not. Pupil AK's positioning places herself in direct opposition to some of her classmates, a move that reinforces her own credentials and background within the group as a person familiar and comfortable within a linguistic environment: "*So I speak three languages. So, I speak Italian and Bulgarian, and they both have pretty structured grammar with much fewer exceptions*". Accentuating her pride in her parents' background and their own language ability magnifies this position:

> they've been to, like, loads of different countries on conferences and they've studied
>
> abroad in different countries, like my mum's lived more outside her native country than

in it, because she's travelled for work, she's travelled for university, she's travelled, you know, for jobs..

Pupil L's comments reveal that she is not the only student with an intimacy within this world: *"All my cousins are studying abroad currently, they like studying abroad and one of them is in South Korea at the moment."* At the same time, pupil R (School A) is interactively positioned by his three classmates as the least-informed linguistically, particularly in direct contrast to pupils AK and L. This is emphasised by pupil AK's remarks: *"actually, R, I'm going to argue with you that it's not very…rare to find people who speak different languages".* His unfamiliarity within the world of languages is something that is seized upon by his classmates and through his oppositional positioning, the other pupils assign more powerful positions to themselves, helping them form a more credible language-learning identity.

Their comments invoke the discourses that many independent school pupils typically identify with (Coffey, 2018) - those that symbolise language learning as a path to improving one's social mobility, professional opportunities and the benefits of travel, education and accumulating personal experience. Pupil AK's familiarity in a world that binds MFL study to the role of languages for professional purposes and personal enjoyment is evident and this influence may result from her being encultured within a habitus from an early age that has emphasised and accentuated the symbolic value and the prestige that language knowledge can have. Bourdieu's framework of *habitus* can be useful in this regard to define how the 'dispositions of parents and other modelling agents are absorbed by children in the form of preferences' which shape their choices and become embedded as habituated practices and beliefs (Coffey, 2018 p. 473). The habitus surrounding languages that exists for the state school pupils to exploit is slightly more tentative, however, and built on discourses that reflect their parents' own unfamiliarity with languages. It is demonstrated by the tenuous and instrumental connections the pupils make to exotic jobs abroad such as being a field medic or a pilot, their parents wanting to move to Spain to live because of the weather and short trips abroad to all-inclusive English-speaking resorts.

For the independent pupils, motivation often springs from a deeper well of belief surrounding their own place within such a world and the entrenched position of languages in their home background. Pupil AK's (School A) positioning appropriates and engages with the discourse of academic studies to support her belief that language learning supports

improved brain function and logical thinking: "*I think it **is** proven that it does help your brain with like logic and Maths and things like that…in 'studies has shown'*". In doing so, this positions herself authoritatively within the group in contrast to her peers who defer to her knowledge: "*so, are you saying if you learn one language, it's easier to learn other ones?*"

The positioning of certain individuals in the independent group by their peers can draw attention to their language learning ability, and are readily accepted: "*You're just a very linguistic person aren't you?*" pupil AK tells pupil YK (School A), and his smiling acceptance of this epithet demonstrated the ease that he found within an environment where his language ability would be considered normal: "I ***just*** *like languages*". Conversely, the state school pupils could not imagine a world where their language skills would translate into a hobby. Pupil CO from the coastal school (School B) demonstrated the awkwardness and unease he felt during the interview when his fellow pupils seized on his ability to answer their questions about Spanish vocabulary and, rather than basking in the moment, he clumsily replied: "*I'm not a dancing monkey man!*"

Many of the independent school pupils therefore revealed that their motivation for continuing MFL study is anchored within deeply seated beliefs that accentuate the actual and symbolic rewards that the long-term study of languages can bring. Such rewards have been emphasised to them and shared across contact fields of home and school over a period of time. At the same time, some of the state school pupils also indicated that they were similarly motivated by the same long-term factors but did not manifest the same engagement and participation with valourised discourses surrounding languages that prioritise the accrual of cultural capital (Foucault, 1972) and prestige. Their motivation for the subject was, on the whole, more instrumental in nature and less connected to any intrinsic value they saw in its learning, but instead tied to short-term positions that foreground their concerns with the difficulty of the subject, passing exams and taking short term trips during their summer holidays.

Assuming subject positions that distance themselves or align towards certain values

As the pupils describe and relate certain accessible subject positions in their narratives, they also place themselves in certain positions. This type of positioning can be identified in their narratives by the ways that the pupils evaluate and talk about their language learning motivation and the messages they receive from their home background, institution and local community. The subject positions that the pupils take up during these narratives describe these messages; those that they wish to align themselves with and those that they attempt to distance themselves from. Illuminating the pupil subject positions in response to these messages can be an important resource in exploring learner identity and is framed through a theoretical understanding of identity as narratively constructed with the help of available subject positions in certain settings (Søreide, 2006).

The subject positions indicate values that the pupils want to differentiate themselves from and how they sought to explicitly distance themselves from certain behaviour, ideas and activities. Through their reflexive positioning, many of the independent pupils aimed to resist undesirable practices and traits that they associated with "*English*" cultural habits that may be predominant in their local community. These included monolingualism and the unwillingness to engage with speaking other languages when abroad. Their comments evoke their concerns that these traits perpetuate further small-minded and insular attitudes towards languages and complete vicious cycles of monolingualism. Previous research into MFL learner motivation also confirms that UK learners may be especially aware of the disadvantages of English monolingualism when studying MFL (Busse, 2010).

In assuming such positions, the pupils instead align themselves with beliefs that regard multilingualism and cosmopolitanism as values to be embraced and identify with discourses that endorse this. Aligning themselves with the discourses of cultural practices that valourise travel and speaking a language when abroad can be another variety of this and a desire to indicate group belonging, as Bamberg (2012, p.104) writes: "attribution to characters that imply identity categories can mark affiliation with these categories in terms of proximity or difference".

Attaching themselves to progressive values of tolerance and respect in trying to speak the local language when abroad is another form of delineating individual and group boundaries that exist within the focus group context. While the state school pupils did not similarly perceive blanket English monolingualism abroad as something problematic and to be

avoided, they conceded that it would be more polite and respectful to make token attempts to speak the local language for their hosts' sake and through the fear of being judged as culturally insensitive or rude. These are values that align themselves with the tenets of Byram's (2021) *Intercultural Communicative Competence* in emphasising skills that evolve through language learning that can lead to personal transformation, such as showing cultural sensitivity and relating one's own culture to the foreign culture. Such a sentiment might communicate a desire to belong to the same category ascription as the independent group. By distancing themselves from those not making any effort to engage with the local language, the pupils convey a sense of belonging within a certain group and this results in the "*othering"* of those in the focus group do not go along with the same opinion - eliciting the sense of actively 'framing who is with us and who is not.' (Harré et al., 2009, p. 16).

The discursive fields of institutionally based messages surrounding language learning do not appear to hold symbolic or actual value for either group of pupils. The independent school pupils did not take seriously the messages from their school's languages department that prioritised the learning of languages for future economic incentives. They instead foreground their intrinsic desires to continue its learning. The state school pupils not disposed towards continuing MFL study do not respond positively to the institutionally discursive context that values languages, makes it compulsory up to a certain age and that presumes it to be a beneficial and necessary part of their futures. The pupils' repeated questioning of the relevance of MFL lesson content and the vocabulary they are made to learn is an example of their explicitly doubting its position in the curriculum and its place as an integral part of their futures. Their experiences with institutionally endorsed norms of language career options, that they perhaps encounter in textbooks or from their experiences in everyday life, confirm their expectations that continuing to study MFL in the future will only lead to a job as a language teacher or translator.

The independent pupils were generally receptive to their parents' messages surrounding MFL that are constructed across a unity of discourse (Foucault, 1972) that conflates languages, social mobility and professional gain for the accrual of actual or projected capital (Coffey, 2018). For them, these are important discourses that have been emphasised from a young age from within their habitus. The state school pupils that had decided to discontinue language learning also responded to their parents' influences in this choice. They tended to

cite their parents' limited involvement in their decision but appeared to draw attention to their parents' poor linguistic ability and their own negative experiences of MFL study as a demotivating factor. This reasoning was occasionally used as a justification to explicitly reject the validity of their parents' views and refute their influence in their decision by one pupil. Taking up this position drew comparisons between their classmates who had compliantly involved their parents in the decision-making and whose advice they valued. Such a positioning move by the state school pupils also pinpoints the temporary clusters of identity constructions that emerge through their narratives: stubbornness and independence and a desire to assert their own agency in the decision-making process. As Bamberg (2012, p. 62) writes: 'positioning (oneself) in contrast to these category ascriptions, speakers draw boundaries around themselves—and others - so that individual identities become visible.'

Accepting the rights and responsibilities that come with certain positionings

The value that the pupils express towards language learning and their responses to messages from their home environment concerning languages can be better understood by exploring how the distribution of rights, duties and obligations (Sosa and Gomez, 2013) interact through the pupil positioning during the focus group interviews.

Whitset and Volet (2013, p. 262) write that: 'Positioning theory can explain the details of social interaction with a focus on individuals and their presumed rights, duties, and obligations.' The positions that we take up when we interact with others limit or lead to possible actions and meanings, as well the rights, duties and responsibilities relative to shared cultural repertoires (Kayı-Aydar, 2015). Once a position is taken up or accepted, there are certain rights and responsibilities that come with that position. These may range from an individual's ability to carry out certain actions and hold certain beliefs, to the possibility of allowing certain rights and actions and the views of others (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999). There are thus power issues at stake in relational positions since they can be used to position oneself and others in distinctly different ways and with different rights. Discourse

allows us to create different meanings of ourselves and others (Fraser and Kick, 2000) and because it is actively created through the selection of verbal resources available to us, it actively constructs and reconstructs reality (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2003). Accordingly, it became evident that the self-positioning of some pupils in the focus groups permitted them specific and powerful speaking opportunities that prioritised certain discourses while at the same time denying the rights of others to hold and express certain views and therefore limited the discourses they can access.

Student YK in the independent school group (School A) is interactively assigned the position of the *linguist* within the group by his fellow pupils, a move prompted by his own reflexive self-positioning that language learning is a pursuit worthy of study for its own intrinsic reasons. He responds to this positioning by accepting this role: "I *just like languages*", therefore accepting the rights and responsibilities that come with such a position - which include valourising the discourses that promote and support the learning of MFL towards the rest of the group and positively emphasising core messages that he has imbibed from his home background surrounding their usefulness.

Pupil AK (School A) similarly claims the position of a multilingual person within the group and accentuates this through deliberate positioning moves that emphasise her parents' travel and work experiences and language backgrounds. Kayı-Aydar (2015) states that referring to autobiographical events is a feature of intentional positioning to accomplish specific strategic goals within narratives. Pupil AK (School A) reflexively positions herself as an authority figure on language learning within the group and assumes the duties and obligations that come with this position by highlighting and endorsing discourses that give merit to MFL study by drawing attention to its benefits and transferable skills. Harré (2012, p.4) writes that: 'The rights and duties determine who can use a certain discourse mode' and through the act of discursive reflexive positioning, the manner in which individuals conceptualise, and enact their role and status in a given context (Davies and Harré, 1999) can be influenced. Accordingly, pupil AK establishes that herself and pupil YK will primarily be permitted to use the discourse mode that endorses language study in light of the authority she has positioned themselves with.

Pupil R (School A) is interactively positioned by pupil AK as the *anti-linguist* of the group and a person with limited knowledge of learning languages, thereby assigning him a non-

powerful position. Other group members seize on the relatively less-informed tone that he strikes up with his opening comment: "*so if by some chance you actually meet someone who speaks French and Spanish*". This action and the response of pupil AK: "*actually R, I'm going to argue with you*" limits his ability to voice authoritative positions in the group and assigns him the role of *anti-linguist* who is reduced to asking basic questions and contributing negative comments to the discussion. These initial comments often force him in the remainder of the interactions to take up oppositional positions to his classmates, being critical of their family language background and expressing scepticism at how long it takes to learn a language fluently. Harré and Van Langenhove (1999, p. 18) confirm that: 'sometimes an initial seizure of the dominant role in a conversation will force the other speakers into speaking positions they would not have occupied voluntarily.'

Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) similarly observe that if people are positioned as inept in a particular undertaking, they will not be afforded the right to contribute to the discourse in that area. Harré (2012) observes that positioning theory can highlight practices that inhibit certain groups of individuals from saying certain things or performing certain sorts of acts or actions in discursive practices. Because pupil AK's initial positioning moves go unchallenged by the rest of the group, the discursive possibilities and the resulting learner identities that emerge are therefore primarily limited to ones that uphold language learning as a valuable activity within the remaining group interactions. A predominantly positive tone and messages surrounding language learning subsequently ensue, possibly leaving us with a less complete picture of how the pupils represent messages from their home background and local community influences.

Conclusion:

Performing an analysis of the positions that secondary school MFL learners assumed in the interviews through employing these specific features of positioning theory provides a more complete picture of how the motivation (and intended choice construction) of pupils from different backgrounds and institutions towards MFL study may vary. These findings can help to complete our knowledge of how the discourses surrounding language learning that pupils

draw on and identify with are likely to symbolise different language learning paths and outcomes for different pupils in their futures. One example of this is notable in the disparity between the more profound language connections and discourses the independent pupils draw on and identify with and those that the state school pupils do. In recognising how certain discourses appear in conversation and interaction, we note the wide range of influences that appear and that shape pupil perceptions of language learning's value for them. The use of oppositional and relational positioning by some of pupils in School A is deployed as a particularly effective means of validating the formidable linguistic credentials of certain members within the group. This also highlights the individuals that have stronger modelling agents and more notable family language backgrounds – and describes how these act as compelling forces on their motivation. At the same time, attention and differences are drawn between those members who do not share the same discourses and have not accumulated the same breadth of personal experiences.

Søreide's (2006) understanding of identity as narratively constructed with the help of available subject positions provides a means of understanding in this context how pupils process the messages they receive from their home background, institution and local community - those they wish to align themselves with as well as those they wish to distance themselves from. This is evident in the way that pupils from all schools responded to English cultural traits of being abroad and not engaging with languages and the strength of this response. For some of the pupils this elicited a powerful reaction and a strong desire to distance themselves from what they might see as undesirable monolingual habits. For other pupils, these language practices and traits are more normalised and may be ones that they predominantly associate with their local community – and therefore do not provoke such a visceral response.

Aligning or distancing themselves with certain discourses of cultural practices such as those that endorse the engagement and speaking of languages when abroad is one way of creating identity categories within a group and framing the pupils in the group who do not share the same views or values within certain boundaries. Similarly, the strategic self and reflexive positioning of particular individuals in the group establishes the pupils who are permitted to use certain discourse modes and assume dominant and authoritative speaking positions regarding language learning within the group. This permits some individuals specific and

powerful speaking opportunities that prioritise certain discourses regarding languages while at the same time denying the rights of others to hold and express specific views. The role that positioning theory plays in such an analysis is therefore significant: it is in identifying and understanding how such binary and polarising positions can exist and unfold within the group dynamic. This process also makes it easier for us to identify those pupils that hold less outspoken and positive views in favour of language learning and that therefore are less likely to have stronger influences and motivation towards continuing its study in the future.

Chapter 7: Teacher interview Results.

Research Question 2 - What can teachers' self-positioning in narratives tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL in England?

Introduction

My second research question aimed to better understand the decline in uptake of language learning in secondary schools in England through the ways in which MFL teachers positioned themselves in individual interviews. This section reports the results of the teacher interviews and presents the main categories of positioning that emerged from their responses. The categories aim at illuminating how certain subject positions are used as resources by teachers in narratives to help us to understand the reasons that lie behind the uptake deficit in language learning and in particular, the different factors that can determine pupil choice towards MFL. To prepare these results, the teacher interview transcripts were first read through several times and coded for the most commonly appearing themes. A list of subject positions was then made and indexed according to whether the positions taken up were interactive or reflexive. Next, the findings were categorised into the most commonly appearing positions thematically that the teachers referred to in the interviews and from this, five different categories of analysis were created that represented the significant themes in the MFL teaching landscape that teachers referenced the most. These subject positions were examined in more detail, drawing on the current literature on positioning to produce a coherent analysis that could be used to answer the research question. This analysis is contained in *Chapter 8, analysis and commentary on the teacher interviews,* and it draws on Kayı-Aydar's framework for positioning analysis (2021) that aims to guide researchers in analysing and identifying positions in narrated storylines.

MFL teachers' positioning towards school leadership

The findings reveal that MFL teachers position themselves as struggling to make members of their school's leadership team (SLT) see the value in MFL study and prioritise its status within the curriculum. Teacher B (School D) reflected that MFL has always "*competed for curriculum time*" amongst other subjects and explained that "*it's always been a bit of a battle to fight alongside English and Maths*." Other teachers interactively positioned the members of the SLT in their school as unappreciative that MFL was a complex subject in which most pupils struggled and where they would benefit from more lesson time. Through such interactive positioning, the teachers reflexively position themselves as *frustrated* at the uphill battle they face: "*they assume that pupils will naturally do well in languages…and having had some in our class, they've only just realised it is quite a difficult subject.*"

Teacher V (School B) positioned herself as having to "*fight against the pupils being taken out for Maths and English interventions*" on a daily basis and described herself as being in a "*battle*" with SLT in her school to support MFL's position. By positioning the SLT members at their schools as insensitive to the intricacies of MFL across the context of the wider school curriculum, including the longer time it takes to competently teach four skills across the subject to pupils, MFL teachers adopt the position that their subject is unique amongst other curriculum subjects.

Through their discussion of the interactions occurring at management level of secondary schools, the language used by MFL teachers to describe their relationship with SLT is framed by imagery that conveys a struggle. Many MFL teachers recognise themselves that the end goal of more curriculum teaching hours for their subject is unlikely, given the already demanding constraints on school curriculum time: "*But, pragmatically, that's never going to happen. There are such constraints in the curriculum*". MFL teachers would also prefer to be less bound by the MFL curriculum – and have more time and flexibility to build in the "*fun and interactive*" tasks and activities that pupils actually enjoy and might benefit them in the long run. However, in taking up such a stance that they understand the reasons for the constraints they are working under, they position themselves as reasonable and understanding of the limitations of working in schools in the current climate.

Concerning their subject's decision-making taken at the highest level of the school, MFL teachers position themselves as disappointed and their teaching as disadvantaged by some of the decisions taken - decisions they feel would directly improve the motivation and

uptake of MFL in the school. Teacher B (School D) accused the SLT in her school as having retracted promises made to make all top set pupils study a language which would boost uptake and status of the subject in the school: *"originally there was a big push that any student in top set English or Maths had to do a language although they've kind of backtracked from that."*

Despite facing such difficulties and positioning themselves as discontent with these constraints, MFL teachers on the whole position themselves as individuals primarily motivated by providing high quality teaching and support to pupils. Teachers position themselves as detached from decision-making made at management level of the school, and as individuals who just get on with the job. For teacher B (School D), her language expressed this acceptance that aspiring to improve MFL's status, given the current constraints, was unrealistic and accordingly positioned herself as someone who preferred to just get on with the cards that she had been dealt: *"Pragmatically, that (increase) is never going to happen. There are so many subjects that we have to cover. That would be the pipe dream."*

The independent school teacher (School A) in contrast positioned the relationship she had with SLT as more collaborative and described an environment where its teaching was consistently upheld by a compulsory status in the curriculum, cemented by school language clubs and societies dedicated to raising the awareness of the benefits of MFL and promoting global citizenship. School trips abroad and the school's policy of employing a classroom assistant for each language meant that teachers viewed themselves as working within a supportive environment in which their subject was valued, helping to transmit this message to pupils:

> *I think the general attitude towards modern languages is excellent because they don't have an option to take it. We treat languages as an important subject, we promote languages and we run good trips, that really enthuse the children, we've introduced a linguistic based society to try and promote MFL take-up..I don't think we're disadvantaged; we're given a fair and equal amount of time in the curriculum.*

MFL teachers' positioning towards the parents of their pupils:

All the teachers reflected that the parents of their pupils play the most important influencing role towards the beliefs and the attitudes that their children form towards languages. Teacher H, in the rural state school (School C), believed that he found "*parents supportive on the whole of wanting their child to succeed in languages*" and had never encountered any "*hostility from parents who think that language learning is a waste of time.*" Describing them as "*best equipped to appreciate the longer-term benefits of studying a language*", he felt that some parents were more aware of the personal and professional long-term benefits of learning a language, having experienced the regret of not making the most of their own language learning experiences:

> *The number of times I've had parents say to me at parents' evenings, 'I wish'..and say to their own children at parents' evenings, 'one of my big regrets from my time at school is not doing better at French'.*

The teachers positioned the parents as individuals whose current perceptions and feelings towards MFL are drawn from their own experiences of studying the subject and this was a theme that resonated throughout the interviews. They observed that parents relied on discourses relating to language learning that reflected their own experiences –that resonated its difficulty and beliefs surrounding its lack of relevance. Teacher B (School D) positioned these parents as overwhelmed when faced with their children learning a language with feelings that stemmed from "*not being able to support their child, not being able to help them with homework*". In the same way, several teachers also voiced their concerns that parents would often encourage their children to prioritise their homework in English and Maths over MFL, leading to the feeling that many parents did not consider the learning of languages to take priority compared to the core curriculum subjects.

Teacher V in the coastal state school (School B) recognised the feeling that the parents of her pupils felt defined by their own MFL experiences, and that their feelings often served to perpetuate negative beliefs in their children that languages were an inherently difficult subject:

You often get this from the parents when you're ringing them up saying 'well you know Johnny hasn't worked very well today' you get 'well I found it hard at school', yes but you're not the child, the child is in the..'

Some of the state school MFL teachers credited the parents' anti-language opinions as being shaped by insularity within the local environment and school community. Occasionally, such an anti-language mindset would spill over into their children's views and were expressed in the form of anti-immigrant beliefs and cultural stereotypes. Teacher B (School D) positioned the parents' views as being the genesis for sentiments containing xenophobia towards other countries and foreigners that she often heard in the classroom: *"Quite often I have heard 'I hate German, oh, the Germans started the war, the Germans are all Nazis' from pupils."*

Conversely, the independent school teacher only noted the support and engagement of her pupils' parents towards MFL. The majority of these parents viewed languages as an integral part of the school curriculum and exercised their own agency in their child's learning through supporting their decisions, encouraging memberships of MFL clubs and dedicating their own time to help with these. It appears likely that these decisions were formed through beliefs shaped by life-long experiences with languages as a core part of their personal and professional lives.

Teachers reflected that the majority of positive views and openness towards MFL they experienced were likely to come from parents from professional backgrounds, with the means to travel and personally experience the benefits of travel in their own lives. Teacher V (School B) reflected that parents with previous MFL experience themselves or those coming from higher SES backgrounds were more likely to express positive views:

Parents who really value languages… who travelled a lot, or who have had positive language learning experiences themselves, who generally are really supportive of the school and believe in the whole curriculum.

MFL teachers' positioning towards their pupils

Many of the state school teachers observed that contextual factors from the local community play an important role in shaping their pupils' views towards language learning. They often characterised their pupils as low aspirational, with predestined views of their own limited future employment options. According to teachers, their pupils' views of the outside world were shaped by their own experiences of living in Norfolk and inevitability of following their parents into the same lines of vocational work. The teachers remarked that through engaging and endorsing such discourses, their pupils were able to refuse agentic positions that claimed independence in their future life decisions because they saw their own careers as predestined:

> *I don't need it as a GCSE because: 'I'm going to work fitting windows, I'm going to work with my dad, my dad says I don't need it, I've never left Norwich, I'm never going to travel, I'm never going to have enough money to travel'..these are some of their views.*

Teacher H (School C) reflected that coming from a rural background, many of his pupils already had a *"good idea of what type of work they're going to go into in the future which is unlikely to involve languages".* For him, the pupils' membership of a monolingual community lacking in diversity was accompanied by a strong disassociation with languages and even other cultures: "when *travel and communicating with people from different places isn't on their agenda, they don't see the relevance".*

Teacher V (School B) emphasised the effect that such attitudes ingrained within the local community could have on language learning motivation in her pupils:

> *The problem is that this is a VERY. WHITE. ENGLISH. AREA* (emphasises each word slowly) …. *everyone's from Norfolk…they've not been out of Norfolk, and that's it, never been out and I think it's finding that 'what's the point…when am I gonna use it?'*

Insulated beliefs propagated in the local community also appeared likely to contribute to the disconnect that pupils felt in language lessons and the feelings of detachment they experienced when learning curriculum content that they see as irrelevant:

Or they look at the content of the exam, for example we've been looking at um, the environment and how to reduce flooding ….and some of them are like: 'I'm literally never going to use this vocab Miss, why am I learning this?'

The teachers remarked on the restricted language-learning connections that pupils made to professional fields and considered the limited positive discourse surrounding languages that existed within their worlds. In their experiences, deciding to continue studying MFL could only lead to future careers as a languages teacher or translator, and they had no awareness of industries that openly sought and rewarded high achieving language graduates:

When you ask kids what can you do with, you know…. what job can you get from studying languages..and they'll go 'oh a languages teacher' and that's it. Or a translator…and that's the only thing that they can do. Where actually banking is a big thing that takes on language pupils and... but that's what they see primarily that it goes nowhere.

Restricted cultural experiences can negatively reinforce these limited associations towards using a language on a daily basis. Teacher V (School B) highlighted English-speaking holiday destinations the pupils visited with their parents as cementing their views of the world when they returned back to the classroom:

When they go on holiday to Spain, they go to whatever… Benidorm, where it's a hotel run for English people by English people. They all speak English there. And that's what you get back, that's what they say.. 'I went on holiday to Spain; they all spoke English'.

However, other teachers were keen to emphasise the professional satisfaction they experienced when their pupils were removed from these environments and taken on school trips. Teacher H (School C) spoke about his strong belief that all pupils should be able to enjoy the opportunity and fulfilment of the unique '*life-enhancing skill*' and sense of reward that being able to speak another language successfully abroad brings. Teacher V (School B) noted the surprise of her pupils that:

That idea that not everyone does speak English..you know..they find it quite fascinating but for some it's just such an eye opener, that might be the only time they have been abroad.

Teacher D (School A) remarked how taking the pupils out of an environment where: "*languages made no sense to their lives*" was "the *best bit of her job*" when pupils were taken away on trips and "*they saw the relevance more and I definitely saw the correlation between taking them abroad and then bringing them back into the classroom.*"

MFL teachers' self-positioning towards themselves as teachers of languages

MFL teachers positively identify with subject positions that portray themselves as professionally fulfilled through the passion for their job and that they try to cultivate in their pupils. Many MFL teachers claimed subject positions that depicted themselves as educators who took fundamental satisfaction in helping their pupils' love of languages grow. Teacher V (School B) reflected on the excitement she felt and of the experience "*warming her heart*" when parents recounted a story of two of her pupils practising new vocabulary from their language lessons at home:

> *that's really nice that you've got siblings helping each other at home… and thinking there's a value into doing this which is lovely, absolutely lovely when you see that.. To me, I love it, it's like…oh my god that's just what you want isn't it!*

MFL teachers see themselves as professionals dedicated to their vocation and primarily conceived of their role in class as a bridge between learners and a subject that most found difficult and irrelevant. Being a facilitator who fosters connections between pupils and the subject and strives to make lesson material more appealing were the most commonly occurring positional identities adopted by the teachers regarding their classroom role. Teacher B (School D) described the amount of extra work that went into making lesson resources relevant and appealing to pupils: "*I think we as a department, we try really, really hard to engage pupils through creativity and engaging language resources, and I think they enjoy their lessons.*"

MFL teachers see it as their role to take on greater responsibility that can counteract the negativity and lack of motivation inherent in most of their pupils. They express this agency in

their professional lives by adopting creative lesson approaches to deliver engaging and interactive content to "*win over*" the pupils:

We have to provide the most engaging resources and often MFL are well known for having the kind of most interactive and buzzy lessons and I think we have to compensate for that lack of drive in the kids.

Within a school department, teachers position themselves as having the most day-to-day contact with their pupils and place significance on their ability to motivate and engage pupils in lessons, echoed by teacher V's (School B) remarks:

I think we have currently very strong MFL teachers and senior leaders, but I think it is the people down on the ground that make the most difference with the kids.

Integral to this unique role is nurturing a relationship with their pupils that centres around building rapport, being approachable and presenting lesson content in an appealing style and not further alienating their pupils away from languages, as teacher D (School A) reflected:

I think that perhaps even more (important) than lesson and lesson content, it's teacher. What you can't influence is the relationship that the pupils have with the teachers. You can support the teacher to be able to be approachable whatever, but I think quite a lot of decisions are based on the teacher.

The absence of such a relationship was noted in the independent school where I was informed that the majority of MFL teachers worked part-time and their absences from school were more keenly felt by the pupils. Teacher D (School A) described this as a disappointing situation that filtered through to the pupils and was felt throughout "*in the energy of the department and in lessons*" to having detrimental effect on the clubs and school trips that the department was able to run.

MFL teachers' positioning towards other figures in the MFL landscape

The section that follows in this chapter presents a summary of the main themes that emerged from the remaining positions that the teachers adopted in their individual interviews. Unlike the preceding section which examined in greater detail the teachers' positioning towards the primary figures and people in the secondary school environment, this analysis presents a thematic description of the positions that the teachers assumed towards rather more contextual factors such as UK government policy, Brexit, Covid and the general primary school teaching landscape. These positions are categorised as emerging towards the context of the teachers' immediate working environment constraints as well as towards other, less often discussed individuals. This section of their responses offered a less detailed opportunity for analysis as the teacher responses to these topics were often more sparing and less expansive.

Positioning towards government policy makers

MFL teachers position themselves as frustrated and critical towards fragmented government policy that exists towards MFL teaching in schools. In many ways, these feelings have been precipitated by the removal of languages as a compulsory element of the curriculum in 2004. Teachers reflected on this period since that has been characterised by policies that undermine the status of languages in the curriculum. Teacher H (School C) questioned this decision in emotive language reflecting his aggrieved feelings:

> Surely *the longer you've got to do a language, the more likely you're then going to take it to the next level?…. I think the sooner languages are made optional, that's inevitably going to hit uptake quite hard...*

He described a situation where national level changes could filter through to school-level policy decisions causing a knock-on effect of low enthusiasm and motivation:

*The new thing that's probably affected GCSE take-up specifically with our curriculum model, that has been copied from national level, has probably been these (*non-compulsory*) choices going from Year 8 into year 9 which are fairly new.*

MFL teachers strong identify with subject positions of themselves as undermined by government MFL policy regarding the new GCSE exam syllabus introduced in 2016. These changes altered the way that GCSEs were assessed, bringing in the grades of 1-9 and reformed grade assessment boundaries, making the foundation paper more difficult. Teacher H's (School C) comments reflected this frustration:

The questions on the exam are just really, really hard. Unnecessarily so, we realise that to get people through these exams, we're gonna have to be really good at them to get anywhere and I think that compared to other subjects that's a big disadvantage that we have.

Teacher B (School D) acknowledged that changes to the exam had negatively affected pupils' enthusiasm and motivation for the subject: "*I think a lot of that is also to do with the exams…the exams are so hard, it really puts them off*" and made the pupils realise a good grade was much harder to achieve. Teacher V (School B) agreed that the foundation paper changes were being particularly hard, and did not cater for learners of a lower ability: "*I think it's hard. I think it's hard. I think the changes we've seen in the GCSE; the foundation paper is too difficult.*"

Throughout these conversations, teachers spoke in emotional and expressive terms that positioned themselves as resentful towards government language policy. Teacher V described national policymakers as "*having lost the plot*" over the changes to the foundation paper, while teacher H suggested that MFL teachers' reputations had suffered through poor pupil performance in the new exam.

Reflecting on how government MFL policy had since affected their teaching in lessons, the teachers described themselves as constrained by a narrow exam syllabus and prescribed curriculum content that did not permit them freedom. They believed that they were "*lacking the space and time*" to adequately prepare pupils for the critical GCSE oral exam that the pupils "*find (it) really daunting and dread being taken out of class to do*".

Positioning towards primary language teachers

MFL teachers believe that progress in MFL teaching has been impeded by government policy towards primary language learning, describing it as inconsistent and counter intuitive. The teachers position themselves as frustrated that a critical period of learning in their pupils' lives has not yet been consolidated through a definitive languages' curriculum at Key Stage 2. This was reflected by teacher V's remarks: "*what is it that the government and Ofsted actually want?*". The teachers conveyed critical and confused attitudes towards government policy in some primary schools where no language specialists existed, and the schools were forced to rely on: "*peripatetic language teachers or language teachers that just hop in or out*". All the teachers across the schools I visited agreed that such experiences can prove "*really boring and disheartening*" for pupils.

MFL teachers observed how local primary schools had "*avoided the responsibility*" to deliver a consistent provision of language teaching to children, despite this being a government requirement. Teachers frequently describe encountering pupils arrive in secondary school with no experiences of learning a language "*which shouldn't be happening now, but it does*" or where the experiences "*haven't been so good, hasn't been useful, hasn't been accurate, hasn't been fun*". Some questioned why the teaching of languages starts much later in England than in other European countries and teacher B (School D) reflected on this period as a time where opportunities to solidify key learning in early development are missed:

> *They all come in on zero and we just start learning languages too late, it's that kind of critical period hypothesis isn't it, when the brain kind of solidifies…I think the age of 11 is just too late to be learning languages.*

Positioning towards Brexit

The subject of Brexit had a mixed bearing on the teachers' responses. Some teachers made indirect connections with the rise of anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiment in their previous schools to discourses surrounding Brexit evident at the time of the

referendum. However, the majority of teachers did not cite its influence as being particularly strong or noticeable in the attitudes of their pupils or parents. Teachers do not credit Brexit with being a significant discourse that has altered the views of their pupils negatively or precipitated an overtly more hostile attitude towards language teaching in schools. Most of the teachers believed that the majority of negative views they had heard towards language learning had existed in schools prior to Brexit. Regarding their own responses to teaching conditions since Brexit, teacher H (School C) positioned himself as not significantly altering his teaching of languages or the approach he had taken: *"I don't think my approach to teaching languages has changed at all as a result of Brexit"* but he did adopt the position of being concerned by its potential consequences on recruitment and supply of teachers from the EU:

> *I think probably one of the worse long-term effects of this for language teaching is going to be for recruitment of staff, um because having a teacher in your department who is a native speaker, that is a real asset.*

The independent school teacher (School A) noted similar concerns regarding the obstacles that Brexit had created regarding hiring language assistants in their school and the knock-on effect that this had had on pupil engagement in the subject. She described herself as concerned after reading reports regarding the crisis in MFL recruitment that Brexit was showing signs of affecting and worried how this would affect the school's ability to hire language assistants in the next academic year.

Positioning towards Covid

Many MFL teachers cited disruption to language learning caused by Covid during the last two school years as damaging the teaching of languages in their schools. MFL teachers reflected that pupils' learning has been constantly disrupted through missing schooling due to Covid-related absences. As teacher H's (School C) comments reflect, these ill-effects might manifest themselves in many ways, such as deficiencies in basic literacy and oracy that pupils would have been expected to develop by this stage of their education:

You've also got quite a lot of people who start high school who…having missed so much of their primary education, their ability to concentrate isn't as good, maybe they haven't been using the time as productively when they've been at home, maybe they've been on devices a lot and not really working, things like that.

The teachers reflected that such skill deficits were becoming more common and could be measured by their pupils' slow progress in language lessons across the four skills. Teacher B (School D) noted the startling lack of confidence in speaking ability that was evident in her pupils since Covid, induced through missing natural opportunities for pair and group work in class, and that were often visually aided by the model of the teachers for difficult pronunciation. Teacher H (School C) positioned himself as facing an unknown situation where the significance of Covid-enforced absences had a greater effect than previously imagined: "*who knows what the long-term consequences of Covid are on this generation of young people?".* Outside of these adverse effects, the teachers also reflected on two further significant Covid-related outcomes affecting MFL teaching in schools: enforced staff absences from lessons resulting in a reduced timetable for pupils and the inability of the school to get pupils enthused in MFL while trips abroad were no longer offered.

Chapter 8: Analysis and commentary on the teacher interviews:

Introduction:

The section that follows presents an analysis and commentary of the positions and themes that emerged from the teacher interviews. It examines in detail the subject positions that the teachers assumed towards the individuals and the contexts of their individual working environments. The chapter presents an analysis of how the positions that teachers take up can be used to understand how they wish to be portrayed as professionals operating amidst the constraints of the decline in uptake of pupils studying languages. Next, the chapter presents the different identity constructions of themselves as teachers that they wished to claim. Through again using select features of positioning theory, the section discusses how the key concepts of subject positions, storylines and emotionality evolved through the positioning analysis to better understand the teachers' reaction to the uptake deficit in MFL learning. Finally, the last section of the chapter summarises all these findings to provide an answer to the second research question: '*What can teachers' self-positioning in narratives tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL in England?*'

Subject positions

The findings illustrate that MFL teachers refer to several subject positions highlighting the positional identities they take up through the construction of their professional selves. Positioning theory enables us to understand how the teachers' positionings help to create their ongoingly produced selves as they speak about the decline in uptake of MFL in England as professionals in the classroom and in the wider school context. As Wood and Kroger (2000. p. 47) argue: 'Positioning is an important concept in consideration of the way in which people are both producers of and produced by discourse'. The discourses that the teachers create and invoke help us explain their understandings of the current uptake deficit in MFL

learning through highlighting the ongoing issues that teachers face in their professional lives, in the MFL classroom and in the wider school arena.

In these narratives, teachers depict how a significant demotivator has been their own reduced agency in the classroom, describing how government directives, prescribed curriculum content and changes to the GCSE exam have impinged upon their freedom as practitioners and exacerbated their relationship with school leadership. In the UK, recent educational policy change has seen the introduction of a new curriculum and reformed qualifications at GCSE with assessment for these qualifications being moved away from coursework to exams, bringing a new grading scale of 9-1 (Skinner et al. 2021). Such moves and the ways in which they have been implemented in schools along with increased levels of managerialism has had a negative effect on teachers' morale and sense of professional identity, leading to an erosion of autonomy and impact on their mental well-being (Day, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Brady and Wilson, 2021). When relating the effects of current educational policy changes on their teaching practice, MFL teachers describe being restricted by changes and by current curriculum material and use language that reflects this discontent and their lowered self-esteem.

The increasing school management accountability requirements that accompany educational policy reform have contributed to a deterioration of relations between teachers and leadership, undermining teachers' sense of professionalism (Skinner et al. 2021). Such feelings are only likely to escalate given the impending introduction of the new MFL GCSE exam syllabus in 2026 that includes a prescribed set-list of words to be taught to each paper in the GCSE exam. Through adopting these positions, teachers claim positional identities that portray themselves as independent practitioners desiring the freedom to integrate their own interactive and innovative lesson content. Subject positions that the teachers take up also represent how they would like to be perceived as teachers: creative, flexible and independent.

MFL teachers identify strongly with subject positions that portray themselves as dedicated professionals who take intrinsic personal satisfaction in incremental improvements in their students' proficiency and progress towards learning modern languages. In many of the narratives concerning their role, teachers present a clear recognition of and claim identity constructions of values that portray themselves as individuals with special competencies

within the school environment, operating a hands-on role at the *ground level* of the classroom and teaching a subject that is fundamentally different to other subjects within the curriculum. Positioning themselves in such a way illustrates their agentic nature as practitioners who work hard to create and devise stimulating and creative lesson resources, tailored to their pupils' abilities to encourage their motivation and participation in lessons.

Teachers identify with subject positions that situate their role as going beyond their classroom responsibilities. In drawing on discourses regarding theories of education that emphasise child linguistic development and through highlighting periods of time they have spent with local feeder primary schools, the teachers are keen to position themselves as concerned by the universal language provision that is made to pupils in their region. In demonstrating these values, the teachers show understandings of expectations and practices that align with the position of teacher that go beyond that of merely fulfilling classroom responsibilities. Such identification with overt subject positions are solidified by empathy they show towards their pupils' learning experiences - "really *worrying and disheartening for them*"- and show that they go beyond their duties as actors in the classroom.

By drawing heavily on the regional factor and its influences, teachers connect to and re-shape discourses that refer to British linguistic and cultural insularity and how 'the lack of another language puts British pupils at a disadvantage' (Byrne, 2008 pg. 8) in a world and international market where monolingualism is 'the exception rather than the norm' (Coleman, 2009 p. 122). Many teachers connect the low motivation and enthusiasm for MFL in their pupils to regional influences and interactively position them as inward-looking when facing linguistic and cultural diversity, believing that these attitudes can be propagated through their local environment and parental beliefs. Through the interactive positioning of their pupils, the teachers locate themselves in the membership of a group that does not share these values. Categorising people in this way and creating membership categories can indicate locally relevant attributions and characteristics and help to identify positions in narratives (Kayı-Aydar, 2021). Depperman (2013, p. 15) writes that membership categories can be used 'as a resource of ascribing properties, of explaining and evaluating actions, and expectations regarding category members'. Through interactively positioning their pupils in this way, teachers are able to explain the challenges they themselves face in teaching in such

a region and their positioning provides validation for the difficulties teachers face in their job on a daily basis. Distancing themselves from the pupils' views allows the teachers to identify with subject positions that align with their own values - such as multiculturalism and openness towards other cultures and present themselves as diverse individuals who do not share the same values.

Story lines

While some positions emerge naturally out of social contexts and conversations, each social episode follows 'already established patterns of development' which Harré and Moghaddam (2003) call story lines. Kayı-Aydar (2021) argues that story lines incorporate another analytic tool that helps to identify how the structure of narrated story lines position individuals or reaffirm their self-positionings during narratives. Story lines are 'the ongoing repertoires that are shared culturally' (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2015, p. 188) and that emerge out of conversations around a certain topic that help us to learn more about the narrators or characters in the narratives. These story lines may develop through the organisation or structure of narratives, including openings, internal transitions and paralinguistic clues such as pauses, deep breaths and searching for words (Kayı-Aydar, 2021). These story lines can be viewed as the narrative development through which positions emerge around a central frame - in my interviews, notable storylines that emerged surround the *frame* (Harré et al., 2009) of 'the teaching of MFL in schools' and the topic of 'the place of MFL in the curriculum'. During the interview with Teacher B (School D), subtle changes in tone of voice, her sighing, searching looks around the room and her derisive laughs when posed questions regarding senior management and the status of MFL in the curriculum indicated that a shift in storyline was taking place that emphasised her adjustment in positioning from the previous topic. Wagner and Herbel-Eisenmann (2009, p.4) explain the nature of story lines as contingent and 'whenever one person enacts a certain story line, the others in the interaction may choose to be complicit or they may enact a competing story line'. As her interviewer, I chose to let this storyline develop for as long as possible by giving considerable

space to allow these paralinguistic features to emerge and the new positions that the teacher was taking up to become apparent.

According to Kayı-Aydar (2015), story lines can be important because the positions that people assign to themselves are impacted by the storyline developing in the conversation. When new characters or a new topic is introduced, it gives the narrator a new opportunity to (re)position themselves and a new storyline can develop. During the interview with teacher B, it became evident through the contextual element surrounding her narrative and the emotion she conveyed, that the emerging storyline centred around the concept: *teachers of MFL feel underappreciated and that their subject is not valued in the curriculum.* Although such story lines can be momentarily constructed, their emergence during an early stage of the interview allowed an important insight in identifying patterns and interpreting meaning from this particular participant's story lines.

Emotionality

Emotionality is another concept that has emerged in positioning theory through which the positions that participants adopt in narratives are more easily discerned in identity construction by the emotions that they display. In conversation, individuals 'narrate past experiences and re-live and reflect' (Kayı-Aydar, 2021, p. 5) on what has happened as well as recall relationships with key persons in their lives and such narrations are 'inextricably emotionally structured because emotionality is an inextricable element of nature' (Kleres, 2011, p. 12). This interpretation aligns with the view that identities are constructed in social interaction and presented through one's actions and emotions (Gee, 2008). Emotions that were evident during the retelling of a story or recounted during a narrated event allowed my participants to position themselves in certain way and gave indications of possible patterns of positions or storylines that might emerge. Kleres (2011) argues that emotions in narratives can be analysed on the level of the lexicon (emotional words, phrases) the syntactical (sentence) and the paralinguistic (non-verbal communications, gestures). Although the teachers in my study were not asked to explicitly verbalise their emotions according to any particular prompted topics, the naturally emotive nature of the subject led

to valuable results in identifying and interpreting their positions in storylines where teachers' spoke about the 'educational changes they face and (how) management issues can result in emotional well-being challenges' (Skinner et al., 2019, p. 12).

The teachers' repeated use of similar language attested to the variety of emotional responses that these topics provoked. The lexicon that teachers used to describe their perceptions of MFL's position in the curriculum frequently conveyed the suggestion of being in a "*battle*" or a "*struggle*" with management, to secure its status and positioning themselves as having to "fight" to secure more curriculum time. Teachers spoke about the "stress" and the "*panic*" that punctuated their thoughts when they considered taking on organising a trip abroad for pupils with all the extra work, planning and pressure it might entail. Reflecting on recent educational policy changes to the GCSE exam led teacher V (School B) to exclaim in a rising tone about the government that *"I think they've lost the plot*!"*, displaying emotions that positioned herself as flustered and overwhelmed with government policy towards MFL learning. Similarly, the use of rhetorical device by teacher D from School A: " *I mean..what is it that the government and Ofsted want?!"* reflected the incredulity in her intonation and positioned herself and her colleagues as unnerved and being made to feel insecure by the government in their professional lives. Although such overt displays of emotion were not common in all of the teachers' responses, their presence served to reinforce the teachers' positions regarding particular topics. Although these displays of emotion were often located at the beginning or end of each teacher's responses, they did not always induce any significant shift in story line structure and indicated the teachers' emotional commitment (Deppermann, 2015) to the identity positions they had assumed.

Research Question 2 - What can teachers' self-positioning in narratives tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL in England?

These findings reveal that teachers' self-positioning in narratives and the positional identities that they adopt in conversation can be interpreted through the presence of discourses that center around what teachers see as ingrained institutional and systemic obstacles at the

heart of secondary school MFL teaching in England. Teachers repeatedly positioned themselves as frustrated at the lack of curriculum time dedicated to MFL within their schools. The teachers also positioned themselves as disagreeing with department decisions taken at school leadership level that provide obstacles to the cohesion and flexibility of their pupils' learning. Examples provided of the issues over which teachers often clashed with school leadership included the inability of their higher ability pupils to easily transfer across to sets (classes) that suited their ability better and their pupils being given a wider choice of languages to study. One teacher cited an example of her frustration with school leadership over the Portuguese students in her school being unable to take Spanish as an MFL because of scheduling and timetable conflicts. These teachers clearly believe that resolving such organisational and administration issues would encourage a larger number of their students to take up MFL at GCSE. The findings confirm that teachers believe that allowing MFL a greater number of hours in the school timetable would not only improve its status amongst pupils but permit them to cover more content in their lessons and avoid having to rush through the syllabus. The teachers felt that they would be able to use this time to devote more time to teaching the critical skills of listening and speaking which were often overlooked and under practised in class.

This study's reports of the clashes between MFL teachers and leadership over the organisational structure of departments and certain subjects within schools are not a new finding (Ball, 2003). Previous studies suggest that trusting and supportive professional and collegial relations between teachers and management do enhance teachers' effectiveness in lessons and their commitment to their subject (Skinner et al., 2021). The positions that these teachers adopted revealed that their self-esteem and satisfaction in their professional selves were often diminished by the emotions provoked by such conflicts. Reports of further sources of friction between MFL teachers and school leadership have recently included the new accountability measures introduced in schools by government policies such as the *Ebacc* and *Progress 8* – and the pressures that teachers face over these. These new performance measures have often highlighted fears in schools amongst management that the predicted lower grades of MFL pupils will bring down overall school league table performances. As a result, this has put added pressure on professional relationships within MFL departments (Skinner et al, 2019), as the teachers also alluded to in their comments.

Many of the narratives that emerged surrounding MFL are constructed around teachers' positions that languages have been gradually deprioritised in the curriculum since 2004. The teachers in this study were quick to attribute the removal of MFL from the compulsory KS4 curriculum as a notable cause in the decline in uptake– reasoning that uptake would automatically improve if the compulsory position of languages in the curriculum was restored. At the same time, teachers position themselves as battling to ensure the continued status of languages in the curriculum amidst a background of educational policy changes that have meant good MFL grades are now more difficult to obtain for many pupils - and therefore a less attractive option. The teachers assume positions that imply these changes are often unnecessary and act as destabilising forces on their teaching and accordingly, the motivation of their pupils for the subject. The positions they take up imply that teachers believe that a more stable MFL environment would benefit pupils better and accommodate the inherent difficulties they saw in trying to teach a difficult subject - the need to cover more content than other curriculum subjects and successfully teach all the four skills at the same time. The teachers spoke about the complicated and unusual processes of having to accommodate an oral and listening exam in the school year before the exam period had officially started and while pupils were still taking regular lessons. These results support previous findings that in the classroom, pupils continue to perceive MFL as a more difficult subject (Graham, 2004) than others in the curriculum and continue to be put off by its perceived harsher grading in the exam (Lanvers, 2018). It is also evident that pupils now make limited career associations towards jobs that are available to them as a result of studying languages (Fisher, 2001). The teachers' positions towards national policymakers indicate their beliefs that previous policy changes have often been unnecessary and ill-thought through. An often-cited example of recent changes were the alterations to the new MFL GCSE exam, the news of which had filtered through to pupils and had served to dissuade a large number from continuing the subject. The pupils' terrified reactions to the oral exam were a further example of this, a finding that has been recognised in previous research through pupils' fears of participating orally in FL lessons and being ridiculed by peers (Bartram, 2006).

On a pupil level, teachers' positioning of their pupils as inward-looking and disengaged with MFL study resonate with the findings of previous research on this topic. Coleman (2009)

writes that the social climate which had supported and engendered positive attitudes towards foreign language study had peaked around the mid-1990s in England. In 2008, The Council of Europe invited teachers to challenge in their practice the portrayal in the British media of the UK as an insular, monolingual community which saw no need to change (Council of Europe, 2008). The teachers in this study attributed the prevalence of similar monolingual attitudes they witnessed in their pupils to the compelling influences held by their parents – who often encouraged their children to enter the same vocational line of work they had taken up – which cemented their children's views that learning was an irrelevance. The genesis of these insular attitudes in their pupils towards languages can be traced to their parents' beliefs. The same views were also connected to the ingrained attitude systems that might emerge from their local community towards multilingualism by the teachers. The teachers spoke about these influences with a certain fatalism - as if it would be difficult for their pupils to escape these vicious circles of community and parental influences, negative attitudes towards languages and following their parents into the same line of work (and possibly, beliefs). One teacher reflected that in class, the pupils' views could seep into how they spoke about cultural stereotypes and occasionally, outright xenophobia – and again noted that the origin of some of these remarks might be the political views of their parents. These are findings that have been expressed to a certain degree in previous studies that reveal that pupils make certain connections between learning languages and cultural stereotypes that exist (Williams et al., 2002). Other teachers, however, primarily drew more limited direct links between the negative and xenophobic discourses that had emerged since Brexit and the lack of language motivation in their pupils. The most significant effect of Brexit that these teachers anticipated on language learning at the current time was its consequences for the recruitment and supply of highly trained teachers from the EU, which would potentially remove the benefit of having a native speaker amongst their staff.

Teachers' depict the inherent insularity they saw in their pupils through their limited travel experiences as well as their choices of holiday destination: "*hotels in Benidorm where all the staff speak English*". This was also a description used by some of the pupils to describe other English people - but not themselves. These comments revealed some of the teachers' own class-based assumptions towards their pupils' personal lives and attempted to draw a

distinction between the pupils and themselves. These remarks again suggested the fatalism and inevitability that some of the teachers clearly believed surrounded their pupils' language futures - that the holidays and destinations they visit play a part in moulding the discourses available to them and their families. They also strongly believed that monolingual influences in their communities would continue to reinforce the existence of such discourses. The teachers clearly believed that positive language role models in the home and family background do exert positive influences on pupils' language learning motivation and their decision to continue language study. The teachers were sympathetic when they heard parents talk about their regret for not making the most of their own language learning experiences at school - meaning they could not help their children. This is because teachers understand that positive family support for languages from an early age can positively affect pupil motivation, and that the presence of parents who have enjoyed their own language experiences at school and have travelled personally and professionally are more likely to pass down these positive experiences to their children.

The findings reveal that teachers believe that their pupils would continue to reject MFL learning as a viable GCSE option for them unless they are able to receive this support. Unless pupils are themselves supported to establish more tangible connections to using the L2 outside of their own communities – where they are given the opportunities to see language in action, on trips abroad and school exchanges for example, this trend would continue. The findings of this study that the spread of global English continues to be a demotivating factor for pupils choosing their GCSE options in L1 English countries is not new result and has been widely reported previously (Lanvers, 2018; Busse & Walter, 2013).

The teachers either strategically claimed the positioning of 'languages are a deprioritised subject in the curriculum' or rejected it. Several of the state school teachers responded to this position in emotional terms and it was interesting to note that it was also a position claimed by the independent school teacher as being significant despite the compulsory status of languages in her school. This suggests that a significant divide in motivation levels across the different types of schools did not exist, despite the differences in compulsory status of languages and socioeconomic background. The independent school teacher remarked that despite languages being compulsory to GCSE, much of the parent body urged their children to prioritise the STEM subjects due to their perceived greater economic

incentives later in life. Research suggests that these types of economic incentives for MFL learning can be more clearly communicated to pupils through their parents over ones that emerge from any influence the school may have (Lanvers et al., 2018).

Teachers' positioning of the transition between primary and secondary school as inadequate is not a subject that has been extensively addressed in previous research. This is despite findings that have illuminated the problems that primary schools have faced in modern language provision and the lack of teacher training and supply of adequate numbers of trained teachers to satisfy this requirement (Courtney, 2014). It is clear that several teachers associated the failures in the primary-secondary transition as being responsible for the inadequate language proficiency and confidence they saw in their pupils when they arrived in the school. Several of the teachers were disappointed that this critical phase in the children's learning was not being capitalised on. At the same time, the teachers firmly believed that school absences and gaps in their learning due to Covid had had a detrimental effect on their pupils' language confidence and abilities and had set many of their pupils back in their learning. This was particularly noted in the speaking ability of some pupils. Previous research into these findings suggests that the full effects of Covid on language learning has not yet been adequately assessed in the post-pandemic years, despite some reports on how it has helped to accelerate the integration of digital technologies into the MFL classroom (Hanna et al., 2020).

Chapter 9. Discussion

Introduction

This chapter synthesises the key concepts that have been discussed in this study and ties together the conceptual framework used in chapter three, the results of this study in chapter five and the analysis and commentary on the pupil interviews in chapter six. It presents how previously discussed theories of motivation in L2 learning are applicable to this study's findings, and particularly how elements of Dörnyei's *L2 Motivational Self System* (2005), can be reconceptualised through the use of positioning theory and reapplied to the context of MFL learning in secondary schools in England. Both theories contain implications for how pupils can view and improve upon their self-images as L2 learners. Connected to this concept, a model for how pupils respond, aspire and can interact differently with the culture of the L2 community in their MFL lessons is presented and suggestions for how a dedicated and compelling vision of pupils' MFL selves in classroom practice might be realised. Next, the chapter introduces a reworking of the concept of MFL learner identity so that four different constructions of MFL learner identity that emerged during this study are presented. Finally, the chapter reveals how constructions of the pupils' agency can be illuminated through the study's findings and reconceptualised through this research to provide new perspectives on pupil agency regarding the decline in uptake of MFL study in secondary schools in England and pupils' decision to continue MFL study or not at GCSE.

9.1 Motivation

Dörnyei's *L2 Motivational Self System* (2005) provides an appropriate model through which to consider these findings and to understand how secondary school pupils speak about their motivation to study MFL and conceptualise images of its value. The third element of Dörnyei's model, the *L2 Learning Experience,* which draws on factors related to the everyday classroom learning experience has already been discussed in greater detail in the findings

chapter of this thesis, so I will turn my attention to the first two elements: the *Ideal L2 Self* and the *Ought-to L2 Self*. The findings reveal that a considerable degree of pupils' motivation to learn MFL remains predominantly *ought*-centred, a term which references the external-oriented dimensions of motivation within *the L2 Motivational Self System*. This feature describes how pupils respond to MFL study in the face of outside pressures and imagined imperatives of others - and was a finding which emerged over both types of pupil interview in both school types. At the same time, the state school pupils' motivation for language learning did not appear to overly feature the dimension of an imagined *ideal* self or what they would like to become as L2 learners.

The motivation of pupils towards classroom-based learning that was predominantly *ideal*-based tended to originate amongst the independent school group, but this was not always the case - suggesting that socioeconomic background status of institution did not necessarily play an important role in the motivation of these pupils. Some of the independent pupils spoke about their inherent and profound enjoyment for language learning, having grown up in environments that prioritised and valued it as an activity for its own sake. The state school pupils were also able to speak positively about looking forward to using a language on their trips abroad and a minority linked their decision to continue learning MFL with the communication skills and connections they might form with people from all over the world. In the case of some of these pupils, this was expressed as a desire to partake in richer cultural experiences inherent to language study and broaden their cultural horizons. Pupils from both types of schools expressed a desire to be respectful when visiting foreign countries (and their citizens) by trying to speak the language of the host country when abroad, displaying values that align with Byram's (2021) model of *Intercultural Communicative Competence*. The independent school pupils extended this view by attempting to distance themselves from traits such as English monolingualism when abroad, although this was done in a self-deprecating way.

The internalised cultural curiosity that the state school pupils display can be combined with their linguistic aspirations, indicating that although they might not draw from influences within the same type of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986) as the independent school pupils, they *do* wish to connect and engage with their European contemporaries post-Brexit and do display *international posture* (Yashima, 2002), defined as a willingness to engage internationally and

an interest to travel overseas for work and stays. A finding regarding *ideal*-self motivation exclusive to the independent school pupil group was their recurring references to language ability as a 'skill' and something they would not want to lose. Correspondingly, the independent school pupils appeared to have a more concise sense of how they imagined languages fitting into their future lives. Girls from both the independent and state school groups expressed the idea of persevering with learning languages now for a future gain and understanding that they would be glad they had continued with in the future. This connection between pupil expressions of temporality and the *ideal* self is one that has been previously explored in a similar context of L2 learning in secondary school pupils in the UK (Gayton, 2013).

The independent pupils primarily spoke about their motivation for MFL study in terms that entwined their desires for further academic achievement with self-growth and linguistic accomplishment. These are consistent indicators of *integrated regulation* in *Self-Determination Theory* (Ryan and Connell, 1989) - the closest possible point to intrinsic regulation where the benefits of the action become fully internalised. The comments of these pupils indicate that they are able to display the highest degrees of awareness about their learning - and of what is needed to succeed in languages. The state school group did not express their motivation in the same terms, although one of the pupils' expression of MFL as a 'challenge' to be conquered mirrors a finding of research that has previously explored higher education MFL contexts in England (Campbell and Storch, 2011). The *ideal*-self concept also proves helpful in terms of understanding the depth of language-learning attitudes in the independent group through the ease with which they connect and associate extracurricular cultural activities such as cooking with their learning of MFL.

Amongst all the pupils from each type of school, pupils from state schools B and C were likely to exhibit stronger degrees of *external* or *introjected regulation* where it appeared that their motivation was most likely influenced by their desire to simply comply with what they were asked to do in their language learning lessons and the expectations that their parents and the school had of them. At the same time, there were certain pupils in the same groups that indicated that their motivation towards language learning was likely to demonstrate examples of *identified regulation,* which tends towards intrinsic or the more self-determined forms of motivation. This suggests that some of the state school pupils can be influenced by

factors such as the desire to achieve future professional success through their MFL studies or of getting a good grade in languages and further improving upon their chances of accessing higher education. The motivation of several pupils from School B could be described as characterised by *amotivation,* or the state of lacking the intention to act (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Their comments of some pupils that repeatedly described their language lessons as "*hard and boring"* and their descriptions of some of the activities they took part in in class as "*aimlessly writing"* summarised the feelings they experienced in lessons.

The ways in which both groups of pupils tended to account for their successes and failures in languages learned also tended to converge in the same way. Typically, pupils exhibiting a greater degree of *amotivation* are more likely to feel like they have less control of the task in hand and are less likely to participate in it. This type of motivation is often identified as the least autonomous or self-determined, and individuals exhibiting *amotivation* are likely to display emotions that demonstrate their reduced awareness of the value of the task to them and the control they have towards influencing it. This was particularly evident in the pupils from school B whose often causal and maladaptive attributions towards their own successes and failures in MFL lessons were more likely to be guided by *loci* external to the learner and that are unable to be influenced by their own behaviour. The pupils from School B who were more likely to attribute their successes and failure in MFL to factors beyond their control were also most likely to have lower levels of intrinsic motivation. The comments of one pupil that language study was "*too hard*" for *me"* are reflective of the low levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy that has been reported in some low-achieving pupils in England in previous studies (Graham, 2004), and that appear alongside the belief that previous ability and natural talent is necessary for success in languages. The pupils within school B in my research who displayed stronger *amotivation* and who appeared less self-determined were less likely to cite their own effort or strategies in their MFL lessons as possible and realistic success attributions. The most commonly cited causes of the pupils in this school towards their MFL struggles were the attributions they made towards the content of their language lessons (irrelevant) and its pedagogy (boring), but also occasionally the lack of support they had received in primary school. These attributions appear in direct contrast to some of the pupils in the from the independent school (School A) who were quick to attribute their successes in MFL to factors under their own control and down to their own efforts - such as

their extra-curricular language strategies and work they did outside class. However, some of these pupils also acknowledged that their successes and motivation in language learning was due to their home background environment and the advantages that this had conferred on them. The above-mentioned comments of one pupil (*"too hard for me"*) hint at his perceptions of the lack of appropriateness and suitability of languages to his life that might be made by some pupils and these comments appear as another negative attribution. This classed-based inference is a potential new finding of this research, but unfortunately it was not possible to explore this dimension any further in the pupil's remarks due to the quick-moving nature of the focus group interview.

Surprisingly, instances of *ought*-motivation orientations amongst the state school pupils did not contain evidence of external pressures that originate from within the discourses of their peer group - as previous explorations of the literature have revealed (Gayton, 2013). Several of the pupils from state school B strongly pushed back against the majority views within their peer group that suggested that language learning in class was 'boring' or 'hard' and that challenged them to speak about its positive aspects. Similarly, the independent school pupils were keen to make clear that they avoid exhortations to continue studying languages that are attached to instrumental discourses disseminated by their school - such as the study of languages for economic reasons. State school pupils also reported being influenced by the same pressures from within their school or language department: it was noticeable when they felt expected to continue with languages due to the school's ethos and selection policy.

The *ought-to* self can also be relevant for understanding the strength of parental influence on language learning motivation and choice: in the independent school group, their MFL choices are supported and enabled by their *habitus* where travel, language learning and professional mobility are normalised (Lanvers, 2017) and desired. Often these imperatives were noticeably strong when the pupils spoke about their parents' firm wishes for them to continue MFL study. For state school group C, however, this lack of compelling influence from their home background was evident. Most of the pupils either preferred to make their own choices or cited their parents' own lack of language skills and negative experiences as compelling factors in wanting to make the decision their own. *Ought-to* self dimensions are useful when attempting to explain individual choice at institution or classroom level within the state school groups. The external imperatives of choosing a good career and improving

their future study prospects are also realistic concerns for these pupils, when considering whether to continue with MFL study and are not findings exclusive to this research (Busse and Williams, 2010). Examples of further *ought-to* motivation in the pupils' remarks are helpful for understanding the individual factors that can influence their decision-making. The school B pupils frequently referenced MFL lesson content and vocabulary they were taught as irrelevant and lessons that they found *"hard and boring"* which are findings that are not original within MFL motivational research contexts (Evans and Fisher, 2009; Graham, 2004). Similarly disparaging comments about the content of their MFL lessons were not noted in the independent school group interviews, however, as the pupils seemed to be more understanding of the limited time that teachers were afforded for MFL in the timetable, and were therefore more understanding of the limited time that was available to pursue all the activities they would have preferred to do.

9.2 Reconceptualising Dörnyei's future self-guide in MFL through positioning theory

The *integrative* element of L2 motivation theories, that is - the learner's genuine interest in the L2 community and a desire to grow closer to the target language community (Dörnyei, 2009) - has traditionally been treated with scepticism in classroom contexts where foreign languages are taught and where learners do not automatically have direct contact with the native speakers of that language (Ushioda, 2006). Similar doubts and uncertainty surround the relevance of Dörnyei's (2005) images of *selves* to MFL learning contexts in England. Critics have often argued whether encouraging the self-concepts of learners as competent and fluent language users for an imagined and idealised future goal are helpful and relevant to the lived experiences of many secondary school pupils in England (Parrish, 2020) who exclusively view the subject as a forced undertaking that is enabled by the subject's compulsory status up to Year 9 (Gayton, 2010). In a similar way, I noticed that the ways in which some of my own participants often spoke about and imagined their future MFL selves as language users only existed within the constraints of their institutional learning environments. Their individual backgrounds reflected that they were sometimes hampered by specific contextual barriers — the lack of subject choice, irrelevance of teaching material,

lack of positive parental experiences (Martin, 2020) that have been noted in previous research (Parrish, 2017; Taylor and Marsden, 2014). Despite this, a discernible vision of an *ideal* L2-self did emerge from many of my participants - more unambiguous in some contexts yet defined by its lack of clarity in others. Its nascence implies that pupils' future motivation for MFL study in England might be addressed through paying attention to how pupils negotiate this vision of themselves as MFL learners in conversation and trying to understand why this vision is stronger in some pupils and some institutions, rather than others.

A closer reading of Dörnyei's notion of the *self-structure* reveals that language learners' visions of their *ideal* L2 Self are often defined by more than simply the pursuit of a set of developmental goals related to the L2, but instead as *encapsulating the essence* of what individuals experience and undergo in goal-oriented behaviour (Dörnyei, 2009). Thus, it is the experiential element of selfhood that is inherent to the way in which the *possible selves* of the learner may evolve and be defined and often includes the images and senses of what learners actually experience when they engage in motivated behaviour (Dörnyei, 2009). According to Dörnyei, a learner's possible selves are then transformed into *self-states* that learners experience as reality, and I noted this ongoing construction of the pupils' self-states in my interviews. *Positioning theory* provides an appropriate lens through which to reconceptualise Dörnyei's (2015) *future self-guides and vision* through an MFL perspective and to understand how pupils in England speak about their self-visions (or lack of) for MFL. Positioning theory, with its inherent focus on how individuals transform or construct the self through narrating their lived experiences, (Wortham, 2001) enabled an exploration of the implicit positions that the pupils took up in conversation. It revealed that while some pupils negotiated the image of their best possible MFL selves, others' positions revealed a more limited vision that they believe appropriate for themselves. With the aim of learning more about how this vision of pupils' *ideal* L2 selves might exist and be encouraged in the future, positioning theory provides a helpful tool for future researchers in signposting and exploring the temporary and singular episodes and realities expressed through learners' tacit positions and the implicit views they claim in conversation.

9.3 <u>Discrepancies of vision of L2 Learners.</u>

Through exploring the pupils' *positioning* - i.e. ' the basic mechanism through which a self and identities are acquired in social interaction in terms of practical, emotional and epistemic commitment to identity categories' (Deppermann, 2015, p. 372) in conversation, I noticed that there existed a certain intensity and clarity of language vision that was expressed by some pupils over others. This analysis reveals that the strength of any interiorised MFL self-imagery and vision that pupils hold for themselves was better expressed by some pupils over others and can often be defined by their institution type as well as how they perceive their own abilities, backgrounds and the barriers to their progress. Positioning theory, with its focus on uncovering the fluid aspects of self (Kayı-Aydar, 2019) that are 'constructed, enacted and produced' moment to moment (pg. 19) provided an appropriate method to perform this interpretation and helped to delineate the different images of pupil self-vision that constantly evolved during the interviews. Taking Dörnyei's (2015) outline of the elements and contextual conditions through which a learner's vision of their L2 *ideal* self might be realised, three distinct categories of learner (vision) emerged:

1. *The learner expressing a highly internalised and developed sense of vision for their ideal MFL self*

2. *The learner expressing a highly evolved vision for their future self - but which does not include MFL*

3. *The learner not expressing (and apparently lacking) a developed and compelling vision for their ideal MFL self*

Those learners expressing a strongly operationalised and evolved sense of L2 vision were more likely to be found in the independent school group but the capacity to visualise such a strong sense of vision was not exclusively limited to these pupils. These pupils were more likely to express their ambitions for and their innate enjoyment of language learning that harmonise with the expectations of their *habitus* (Dörnyei, 2015). Such a vision may be

effectuated by positive personal experiences of travel and other cultures from an early age, or from their parents' backgrounds where professional mobility and languages entwine. These pupils positioned themselves towards the vision of their future MFL selves in terms that evoked strong sensory associations (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova, 2014) with the rigour and challenge of learning a new language. They cited examples such as overcoming their own fears of making mistakes in public and persevering to achieve their goals to provide evidence of this. Sensory elements can form a key component of effective visions that can help to outline a rich and textual picture of what success for these learners feels like (Levin, 2000).

Conversely, those pupils belonging to the final category did not express a strongly operationalised sense of supreme MFL vision to keep them on track and one that is less ably supported by the influences within their habitus. This was apparent when these pupils discussed their decision-making and the role of these influences upon their choices - parents, siblings etc. These learners also apparently lacked the ability to express any interiorised or vivid self-images of themselves as successful language learners through sensory expression. Implicit feelings in the pupil remarks confirmed by their teacher established such an impression: (*they feel that*) "*never gonna need it, never gonna use it…*" For these learners, perceptions of themselves as competent and flourishing users of MFL in the future are unrealistic and distant, and not plausibly substantiated and realised (Dörnyei, and Ushioda, 2021) through past actual and concrete successes in language learning. Findings of previous research suggest that the capacity of these pupils who lack stronger self-imagery to express their self-images as MFL learners in the future may be weaker than those of their peers and may also be related to their learning preferences in the classroom (Al-Shehri, 2009). The findings indicate that MFL teachers can seek to employ alternative methods in MFL classrooms in the future to help to cultivate these successful self-images in their pupils - such as through auditory and oral activities in classroom practise as well as visual.

Those pupils belonging to the second category were more likely to unreservedly express why they did not have precise and determined MFL future visions in their lives. Their visions of an ideal and interiorised successful MFL self that were expressed through the positions they took up were much more tentative and distant, and sometimes non-existent. Often, the positions the pupils assumed cast doubt on their own abilities to succeed in MFL: "*If I'm*

having trouble with one language, I'm never going to be able to learn two". Other reasons that the pupils gave for feeling that they would not need languages in their professional lives included their reliance on alternative future careers they wish to pursue instead, in sport, business or engineering: " *for my career, I feel that I'm just not gonna need it".* Such explanations may stem from these pupils wishing to obstruct their visions of an *ideal* MFL self from emerging and consequently, there only existed limited hints of a future vision of their MFL selves. Their justifications and the positions they took up serve to indicate that these pupils are negating the existence of a *feared possible self* (Dörnyei, 2015.) - i.e. the feeling that possible negative consequences exist for failing to achieve a desired end-state - the presence of which is beneficial in motivational dimensions as it serves to energise the learner's image of the desired future self (Oyserman and Markus, 1990). The activation of these pupils' visions for an *ideal* MFL self is thus removed by the lack of a feared possible self – in their case, failing exams and disappointing their parents - and is sustained by their indifference towards continuing MFL study. By justifying and rationalising their choices not to continue learning MFL according to their own reasons, the possible negative consequences of failure are removed, which in turn affects the way in which the pupils speak about their motivation.

9.4 Conditions for the image of ideal MFL self to be realised

Consistent with Dörnyei's vision of the *ideal* L2 self, the findings of this study indicate that there are four conditions with the MFL context that need to exist before a vivid image of the pupils' *ideal* MFL self can emerge, and a strong vision for their successful language learning can be created.

Plausibility

The image and vision of a pupil's *ideal* MFL self should be plausible and realistic for it to exist. Expectancy-value theories of motivation assert that the greater the perceived

likelihood of goal-attainment, the higher the degree of an individual's positive motivation. This motivation in an MFL-learning context can be strengthened by regular and significant opportunities provided for the learners to engage with speakers of the TL community and use the TL for tangible benefit in a range of practical and authentic settings, which might include school trips, cultural days and in-person events and online exchanges with partner schools. A common theme that emerged from the findings was that MFL teachers believe that many of their pupils fail to see the value of MFL due to the limited exposure and authentic opportunities they have in class and in real life to use the language and engage with other cultures. Such feelings may be connected to the relative cultural insularity and the geographical isolation that exists within the region in which this study took place. Yet when the same pupils were taken on trips abroad, one teachers remarked that it was '*the best part of my job'* when she saw how absorbed the pupils became and how their engagement improved when they saw for themselves the relevance of speaking and using the TL in a foreign country. Dörnyei (2009, p.36) writes that ' in order for self-images to energise sustained behaviour, they must be anchored in a set of realistic expectations'. Pizzolato (2006) agrees that what pupils are actually able to become may be regulated by what they *feel* they are able to become. In MFL learning contexts, these expectations can be developed in secondary school learners by providing pupils with appreciable and consistent opportunities to use the TL in authentic and original settings with the aim of improving their linguistic contact and thus boosting their self-esteem and confidence.

The existence of a feared self

In order for images of a compelling and *ideal* MFL self to exist within learners, the *ought-to* motivational dimension of a feared self should be promoted to encourage the mindset that MFL acquisition is a valued and worthy skill. The *feared*-self in motivational contexts also works in guiding behaviour but rather, in terms of making the individual realise the negative consequences of failing to achieve a desired-end state (Dörnyei, 2001). For a *feared* self to exist, pupils should be encouraged to view language learning as a prized skill, the absence of which may limit their future career opportunities as well as the possible future

enhancement of their lives. Encouraging pupils to see MFL learning as a desired skill may be achieved by activating the other factors in this list that can encourage an *ideal* MFL-self mindset to develop. The findings reveal that amongst all the pupils, the independent school group were more likely to speak about language learning in terms of a valued skill that they "*wouldn't want to lose*" in the future and referred to the subject in the same cultural enrichment terms as a musical instrument – as something that they had worked hard to develop, and which requires constant practise to uphold. Reaching such an end state for some of the state school pupils may be more difficult to achieve given the absence of tangible negative consequences and undesired end results that currently arise from its study in schools in England. The removal of MFL as a compulsory element in the curriculum from GCSE and beyond has resulted in the absence of possible negative outcomes and obligations for the pupils currently studying in Year 9 who know that they may give up the subject next year if they are finding it difficult. These findings suggest that these pupils may also typically have less expectations from their parents to succeed in a subject that they themselves did not enjoy. Reintroducing MFL as a compulsory element in the curriculum would appreciably allow the *feared possible selves* of the pupils to materialise in their motivation and encourage their willingness and commitment to their study (Hock et al., 2006).

Instrumentality

The findings reveal that instrumentality forms a significant dimension of pupils' motivation towards MFL. Their imagined career and future academic successes act as a strong pull towards their achievement in MFL for some pupils and energise their commitments to its study. This was particularly noted during the icebreaker activities that took place during the focus group interviews, where the pupils spoke about the pragmatic utility of learning a language in universal terms and stressed the transferable skills they would gain from it. For a few of the pupils, they expressed the idea that achieving a good grade in a language GCSE shone as a mark of academic rigour that they had tackled a difficult subject and succeeded, and they hoped that this would stand out to employers. In employment terms, this could mean establishing and making the pupils aware of more concrete links that exist between

MFL and realisable job fields that they might not have been previously aware of. Some of the teachers were more inclined to support the view that their pupils had confided to them that MFL's reputation as a difficult subject would lead them to drop it before GCSE and avoid getting a bad grade. For the minority of these pupils, however, *long-term* instrumental motivation (Kyriacou and Benmansour, 1997) focuses on acquiring the L2 and developing language skills as a precursor to their expected future professional achievement. This was a feature primarily noted amongst the independent school pupils, where the subject was compulsory and instrumental motivation in the form of academic pressure and parental expectations can form a substantial element of their *ideal* L2 selves and act as strong imperatives when there is a noticeable lack of other, more internal dimensions of motivation.

Integrativeness

Integrativeness, in the original sense of the concept provided by Gardner (2001) in his theory of L2 motivation, refers to the desire to learn a language so that one can communicate and grow closer to the target language community. Although *integrativeness* is distinct from the concept of *integrative motivation* which has since been questioned in L2 motivational studies due to its ambiguous terminology (Dörnyei, 2009), there were clear indications from my findings that *integrativeness* still appears a relevant concept in MFL motivational circles. Dörnyei (2009, p.22) writes that *integrativeness* 'reflects a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community' and I found this sentiment echoed in my findings through the pupil's comments and the implicit positions they took up towards the L2 community. The model of the native speaker was frequently held up as something to aspire to by some pupils, indicating their strong associations of an *ideal* L2 self with mastery of the L2 - and that any other version was insufficient. This can be reflected in their own negative self-views of pupils as incompetent speakers who have a fear of speaking aloud in class in the L2 in front of others. This suggests, as Dörnyei (2009) has implied, that attitudes towards members of the L2 community in MFL is an important component of motivation and the more positive a learner's disposition

towards the L2 community and its speakers, the more attractive their own vision of their idealised L2 speaking selves becomes. Therefore, attitudes towards members of the L2 community are an important aspect of pupils' vision of their *ideal* MFL self and resonate strongly, not only through the high regard in which learners hold those who can speak the L2 competently, but also through their outlook towards its culture[1]

The extent to which these two aspects were connected was noticeable. Those pupils that assumed positions indicating a strong interest in the TL community and an aspirational interest in growing closer to its culture were more likely to position themselves as having strongly self-held images of themselves as fluent L2 speakers living and working in that country in the future. Correspondingly, those pupils that only indicated a superficial or limited interest in the culture of an L2 community did not position themselves towards holding successful images of themselves speaking and using that language now or in the future. It was not conclusive if these self-images might be linked to positive or negative stereotypes the pupils held towards that country's culture. Cultural curiosity and L2 learning have previously been connected to different motivational orientations in studies (Noels et al., 2000) which suggest that other goals of learners such as travel, friendship and knowledge within the L2 community may sustain motivation.

Accordingly, a picture of the pupils' expressed intercultural curiosity and images of the L2 community slowly emerged and is organised overleaf. The pupils who expressed the weakest interest in the L2 community are noted under the first heading and those pupils who express the strongest interest in integrating with the L2 community are towards the end of the list:

[1] Cultural interest forms an important motivational index on an earlier longitudinal study carried out by Dörnyei et al. (2006) in which several other significant attitudinal dimensions to motivation were measured, including: *direct contact with L2 speakers, vitality of L2 community*, linguistic self-confidence and milieu.

Connecting pupils' intercultural aspiration to their MFL self-image:

1. _Intercultural awareness-_ Pupils express awareness that exists on a basic level of experiencing difference when being abroad on trips and holidays. Pupils display some understanding of different countries' cultures and cultural differences. i.e. - _in Spain they take siestas and eat dinner later._

2. _Intercultural appreciation_ – Pupils express some knowledge of and a desire to access other countries cultural and heritage items above a basic level through films, TV, movies, books etc.

3. _Intercultural empathy_ - Pupils express their understanding and empathise with learners and speakers of foreign languages when abroad and indicate a desire to try to speak their language when in their country. This may be linked to not wishing to appear like a stereotypical English person abroad. Pupils use phrases such as 'politeness, nicer' 'respectful', 'arrogant'. This is connected to the pupils' views about English people's low language ability abroad.

4. _Intercultural interaction-_ Pupils expressing a desire to connect and form deeper friendships and build relationships with people from other cultures as part of a wider European or worldwide programmes that support a community of connection that is founded upon mobility, languages, youth, travel and other cultural tropes etc.

5. _Intercultural integration_ – Pupils express and display familiarity with and are extremely comfortable with the idea of independently moving abroad for career purposes and successfully learning different languages across different countries for professional and economic mobility purposes. These pupils express complete willingness to engage with this and integrate with other cultures.

Fig. 10. Table showing how pupils' expressed intercultural aspiration can be connected to their own MFL self-images

These findings suggest that a considerable gap exists between the pupils who are curious and interested in the TL community and its culture and those learners who are less interested. Motivational theories suggest that the latter types of learners may hold more negative self-images of themselves and therefore find it harder to envision themselves communicating in the TL competently in the future. Byram (1997) proposed a model of *Intercultural Communicative Competence* that stressed the importance of incorporating the teaching of culture into MFL lessons to assist the learning of the language. Introducing such a model into the MFL language classroom has been suggested as helping pupils develop an appreciation for the language and culture of the L2 being studied. It can also increase awareness of their own culture and help to develop skills that would allow them to be competent, adaptable communicators in the future. Byram's model suggests that the focus should not be purely on preparing pupils to communicate without mistakes, but to communicate openly, forging relationships that would allow them to thrive in the foreign cultural context (López-Rocha, 2016). In the classroom, this means focusing on the context in which communication occurs and not solely on the language as a means of communication (Hennebry, 2014), thus sparking pupils' interest and helping them to develop *ICC* skills of *discovery and interaction* (Byram, 1997) that promote knowledge of cultural practices as well as independent inquiry and curiosity. Embedding appropriate classroom activities and opportunities for pupils to become more competent in terms of their cultural knowledge, interactions and interests can help improve their linguistic competence and critical communicative skills (Lopez-Rocha, 2016) as well as helping to sustain their levels of motivation and engagement in MFL learning.

9.5 <u>Promoting a dedicated and compelling vision of pupils' MFL selves in classroom practice</u>

How can learners in secondary schools in England be enabled to create the vision of their ideal MFL selves in the classroom?

These findings suggest that gradual changes in approach to MFL classroom practice can positively help to operationalise secondary school pupils' images of their *ideal* MFL selves, thereby improving their motivation and engagement and having a reformative influence on its declining uptake nationally. Demystifying the model of the native L2 speaker as a fluent ideal that pupils must live up in class to is one way of increasing learners' confidence in oral classroom activities, and reframing the idea that as language learners the L2 language they produce should be perfect and fault-free from the beginning. MFL teachers should accordingly re-examine how they apply error correction of the spoken TL in their classroom as a way of growing pupil confidence and developing the willingness of more pupils to speak aloud in class. The gradual introduction of smaller, more regular speaking activities during class time to break the ice at the start of lesson can increase pupils' familiarity with using the TL on a daily basis and help boost their self-esteem and confidence. This can also reduce the fear and the dread with which many of the pupils spoke about the oral exam – which was often cited as a major demotivator when pupils considered whether to continue MFL study for GCSE. Introducing and sustaining regular online contact with native speakers of their own age in European countries is another way to provide a realistic and tangible outcome for pupils to measure their oracy progress, as well as an opportunity to engage culturally with the TL community and form connections with contemporaries of a similar age and share cultural knowledge. Other extra-curricular opportunities for engaging with the TL community and broadening pupils' cultural horizons should be encouraged and facilitated for all learners whenever possible: school clubs and school trips can provide immersive experiences - and the teachers in my study noted that their pupils became more enthused about language study after their recent trip abroad. Where such trips abroad might not be possible, then virtual cultural exchanges online and tours can offer alternative methods – such as virtual excursions to a museum in Madrid, for example. Encouraging cultural

activities and holding miniature cultural days in the classroom from an early age is another beneficial approach that can broaden the pupils' sense of their self-image and making the L2 community more vivid and powerful in their eyes. Bringing in French or Spanish items to the classroom such as food can spark cultural curiosity in pupils from a young age and enhance their cultural exposure if it is done in a meaningful way that connects to language production rather than a tokenistic idea. This ensures that all learners are at minimum offered the opportunity to engage with native speakers of their own age and shown a window into foreign cultures that they may not have imagined existing outside their own defined perspectives that might be formed within the constraints of their local community and habitus.

Regarding classroom practice itself, perfecting the pupils' vision of an *ideal* MFL self can also be achieved through creating their positive self-images as learners and encouraging them to visualise their own language successes. It is important that for these self-images to energise sustained MFL-focused behaviour, they should be anchored in a set of realistic expectations (Dörnyei, 2009) that can be based on past or current experiences. The state school pupils that were not planning to continue language learning displayed positive self-images of the previous times they had succeeded in the MFL classroom when they recalled situations where they had risen to meet the challenge of a difficult task. Operationalising such a vision that enables pupils' autonomy and confidence in their learning often involves creating a *positive imagery approach* (Arnold et al., 2007) either through positive reinforcement and support of the peer group or through the teacher's role. This might be through introducing manageable bitesize and starter activities in the classroom for pupils that are less confident that introduce success and builds their self-esteem on an incremental scale. Lessons that are held in the TL only, where the teacher omits all other language other than the language being practised, can be more challenging for lower-level pupils but with slow integration, can yield results. A previous lesson where their class teacher used the TL as the medium of instruction was recognised as being eventually enjoyable and successful amongst the independent group pupils, after they had initially struggled with words they did not know. Such a method of acquisition immerses the pupils in the TL initially through simple classroom instructions and repetition, then through more complex activities by making language real for them and giving them a chance to develop their own built-in language

system (Jones, 2017). One way of doing this involves using smaller communicative tasks that facilitate peer and collaborative work in the classroom, which are often underused by teachers, and which can start to encourage the independent use of the TL amongst pupils themselves.

9.6 Narrative Construction and negotiation of learner identity

As the pupils position themselves in different ways through the subject positions they assume and assign themselves, they simultaneously construct and negotiate different possible identities that are produced by the accessible narrative resources (Søreide, 2006). These identities can also be understood as flexible *clusters* that reveal themselves through the relevant subject positions the learners assumed in their interviews (Kayı-Aydar, 2015). Positioning theory, which focuses on the social construction of identities and the world through discourse (Kayı-Aydar, 2019) provides a useful lens to explore how learners construct positional identities in educational settings by examining how their identity construction emerges through positions that cluster around a discourse (Søreide, 2006). Positioning theory and its close concerns with how the *self* is constructed and takes shape through discursive possibilities (Davies, 2000) is therefore closely connected to understanding identity as a changing and dynamic activity as learners actively negotiate, resist, modify and refuse positions (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006).

Ontological narratives, or the stories that people tell in an effort to make sense of our experiences and how they would like to be understood (Somers and Gibson, 1994), are narratives that we use to construct and negotiate individual identities (Lieblich et al., 1998). When we tell and interpret ontological narratives, we also construct narrative identities that draw on different kinds of narrative resources for identity construction (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Historically and socially constructed identity categories are one available form of narrative resources in which subject positions can appear more or less explicit within discourses that we prioritise and draw on (Weedon, 1997). These different subject positions can provide an insight into people's images, expectations, practices, opinions and values and are therefore central to how we construct different understandings of the world and our

place in it (Søreide, 2006). Thus, exploring how secondary school pupils' language learner identities are constructed can allow for a deeper insight into the motivation and value that they hold for MFL study to emerge and how they respond to different messages regarding its significance. Consequently, such an analysis allows a better understanding of why the uptake crisis of MFL learning continues to exist in England.

In the analysis of the focus group and individual interviews, four major constructions of learner identity emerged through the positions the pupils assumed and are represented in the box below.

a) *The learner who intrinsically believes in and connects with the value of MFL while deriving personal enjoyment from its study.*

b) *The learner who sees the personal and academic future gain and value to their study of MFL.*

c) *The learner predominantly ambivalent about MFL study who is able to justify alternative career paths and study choices*

d) *The learner who does not enjoy MFL study and sees no future personal relevance or value in its study.*

Figure 11: The four different constructions of learner identity.

The identity construction of *intrinsic learner of languages* was solely identified among the independent school group and emerged through the self-positioning of two pupils and their interactive positioning of their classmates. This identity construction was narrated through the two pupils' autobiographical stories and positions them as learners intrinsically motivated to continuing its study and individuals who connect its value across various fields that include school and cultural activities. This identity construction positions these pupils as predominantly at ease with their own language abilities, able to respond eloquently and critically to public discourses dissecting its value and at the same time willing to act as a guide or as resources to their classmates who might not share their same views. The pupils' claiming of these positional identities was enhanced by their use of oppositional and

relational positioning in the narratives, drawing attention to some of their classmates'
linguistic deficits while highlighting their own proficiencies. The ontological narratives these
pupils tell are rich and varied, taking in discursive fields that highlight the aspects of a
childhood growing up with languages and within an education system that prioritises and
has made compulsory its study.

The most commonly occurring positional identities that emerged from the state school focus
groups and individual interviews regarded instrumentality - how MFL learners in state
schools represent their desires to improve themselves and use the study of MFL to enhance
their personal positions. The most outspoken pupils towards languages in this group
expressed their motivation for its study in instrumental terms about what it might help them
achieve in the future and in terms of the possible economic reward in career terms. For
some of these pupils, language learning is the vehicle that might provide an ability to travel
abroad, connect with other cultures and receive better professional opportunities. For
others, they were aware that languages were a keenly judged mark of rigour on their CV and
provided them with wider options at local higher education colleges. There was little
expression of enjoying the challenge and *puzzle* that the independent group expressed of
enjoying MFL learning on its own intrinsic terms.

The third identity category of *ambivalent learner* was primarily identified in the two state
school groups that took part (Schools B & C). Through assuming subject positions towards
MFL study that downplayed their enthusiasm for it and accentuated their interests in other
academic subjects that would '*help them more'*, the state school pupils assumed positional
identities that allowed them to justify their lack of involvement in MFL and their low effort in
lessons. Some of the pupils from both groups instead negotiated positional identities that
imagined new and exciting future roles for themselves in fresh domains: pupil C in the rural
state school group spoke passionately about having his career path set out as an RAF pilot
which precluded any possibility of language use. Similarly, the extent to which pupil K
planned to forge a successful career as a professional sportsman could not really be known
but the positional identities that this decision allowed him to assume discharged him from
any responsibilities in the domain of MFL study. Through emphasising his career plans in
alternate fields this negated him from having to engage with the learning of MFL. Such
positioning can be understood as an attempt to portray their talents as lying in different

fields, to present themselves in the best possible way and show that they are acutely aware in deciding which self to convey and how to formulate it (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

The final identity category of *learner who sees no personal relevance or future value in MFL study* was distributed evenly among the different school types. Many of the pupils who claimed this identity construction expressed the feeling that MFL study was '*too hard for me'*- evoking their sense of feeling displaced within the world of language learning. One of the independent pupils negotiated this identity construction through rationalising that the difficulty of language lessons was something beyond his control and that the boredom he felt was induced by his lack of confidence and inability to tackle class material. The responses indicate that when pupils feel out of their depth in language lessons they are more likely to locate such feelings as beyond their control and residing exclusively in the activity of studying languages. The majority of pupils from the coastal state school (School B) described class material as '*hard and boring'*- feelings they attributed to '*writing aimlessly'* in class and perceiving languages as irrelevant for their imagined futures. As these pupils negotiate their responses to MFL, they respond to identity-construction narratives that emerge in real time through the narrative opportunities made accessible (Davies and Harré, 2001) in their focus group interview. The pupils predisposed to language learning refused to accept explicit criticism of the subject from those opposed to it and openly challenged their views through a process of negotiation and discussion: "*It **is** hard but then when it's harder I feel you feel better when you get it right".* This process of claiming different identity constructions therefore takes place through a process of positive identification, recognition and negotiation of the available positions and are 'a product of the social force a conversation is taken to have' (Davies and Harré, 2001, p. 262).

9.7 <u>Agency</u>

It was difficult to explore the pupils' positioning towards their motivation for MFL without considering how they might articulate and enact their agency – that is: the different ways in which they spoke about how they chose and justified their language learning choices. Given that I had set out to explore the factors that influence the important decision that pupils

make at the age of 14 in England to continue with learning languages or not, it felt also appropriate to explore any discussion of their agency in this decision that emerged – which is defined as 'people's ability to make choices, take control and pursue their goals as individuals, leading to personal transformation' (Duff, 2013, p. 411). When considering *how* pupils' spoke about their agency in the context of a focus group interaction, it became evident that this would involve more than just reflecting on the pupils' capacity to 'act purposefully in their world' (Rogers and Wetzel, 2013, p.92) but also scrutinising how the contextual conditions within which agency is achieved can be significant (Priestley et al., 2012) – conditions that might include the institutional and home environment constraints they spoke about in their interviews. Lasky (2005) writes that agency is shaped by social interactions and achieved in particular situations and in certain contexts that allow them to do so. Positioning theory is thus inextricably linked to agency in that certain subject positions can permit individuals to speak and act and exercise agency in different contexts or inhibit them from doing so (Kayı-Aydar 2019). Individuals can also exercise or reject agency by assigning certain positions to themselves or other individuals in conversations in which multiple discourses that evolve shape the possibilities of actors' agency in a group (Davies and Gannon, 2005). Accordingly, the relationship between positioning, discourse and agency emerged through my research as fundamental as well as being one that is mutually constituted and meriting of further attention.

Positioning moves that enable or restrict agency

Previous research has found that through being positioned in certain ways and resisting certain positionings, the agency that language learners exercise in their experiences and interactions can be enabled or constrained in certain spaces (Kayı-Aydar, 2015). This view of agency imagines it as a social construct that is developed and engaged in certain relationships with others and social discourses (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). Viewed through this lens, the findings reveal that the positionings of certain pupils - such as AK in the independent school group - can be seen as an attempt to establish a dominant position within the group by 'speaking her own agency into existence' (Davies, 2000, p.68) and inverting the discourses

that are available for the rest of group to draw on. Through such reflexive positioning, she gains access to subject positions in which she has the right to speak and be heard. Similarly, the self-positioning of pupil C in state school B in contradicting his classmates' attempts to criticise their MFL lessons marks him out agentively as someone disruptive, who 'breaks old bonds' in navigating and counteracting the current discourses that are available to the group (Davies, 2000). In this case, these are discourses that uphold the view that language learning is not a valued and worthy activity. The connection between positioning and agency is therefore inseparable and mutually shaping. As certain positions allow individuals to exercise agency in specific contexts, they can also limit or allow the agency of others by assigning them certain positions (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). As pupil AK assigns powerful and agentive positions to herself, drawing on discourses that valorise language learning, at the same time her own positioning restricts that of her classmate, pupil R, reducing his ability to choose the acts of positioning that are available to him (Bomer and Laman, 2004), which limits his own agency: "*no, no..I'm not saying that*". In such a way, her positioning moves limit the strategies he has available to transform the discourses through which he is constituted (De Fina et al., 2006) and somewhat restricts his right to speak in the group interactions.

Positional identities as markers of agency

Miller (2010, p. 467) writes that 'one cannot act in ways that are deemed relevant or significant, unless one has a relevant identity position from which to act'. Just as one's agency is constituted through and in terms of their access to the subject positions available to them (Kayı-Aydar, 2019), the identity positions that language learners claim in narratives determine the choices they make in their decisions and how they enact their agency in the decision-making process. Pupil YK discursively constructed his positional identity as an intrinsic learner of languages whose interest in the subject extends beyond the reach of any external motives: "*I just **like** languages; I find them interesting*". This positioning is afforded to him interactively by pupil AK's comment: "*you're just a very linguistic person, aren't you?*" and such a positional identity subsequently enables him to demonstrate the agency he had

exercised in his decision to continue learning a second MFL: "*I feel like none of these really affected my choice much.*" This demonstrates how positional identities are connected to agency and can be used to demonstrate agency in specific positions – often seen as a desire to highlight independence or your own positive agentic behaviour in a certain situation. This desire to highlight his linguistic independence from his parents can be read as a marker of agency and is indicated by his use of the first-person pronoun and subjective verb in his linguistic stance:

"Because *I* lived in Switzerland, *I* speak French" and "*I* feel like, if *I* stopped German now, it wouldn't really be worth it."

Similarly, pupil AK presents the same choice as a conscious well-considered act that coheres with the positional identity she has discursively constructed in the narrative: "*I think I want to carry on with it, so I get to a level where it will be useful in the future.*" Such independent choice construction and the concise rationale behind it point to the positional identity she has claimed as the daughter of proficient linguists and growing up in a background surrounded by language learning. At the same time, pupil R is marginalised through the interactive positioning of his classmates in the interviews and left unable to exercise any agency that conclusively indicates his own role in his decision-making. Accordingly, the positions that language learners take up in narratives, whether self-constructed or imposed, may shape how their agency in reflected in their MFL decision-making and how they speak about making that choice. By assuming positional identities that embody certain characteristics and that demonstrate independence and action in particular circumstance, these positional identities can be used to demonstrate agency.

The linguistic capacity to act.

Previous research exploring how agency is discursively constituted has explored how linguistic constructs position actors as (in)agentive within ideologically defined spaces (Miller, 2010). These include poststructuralist approaches to exploring agency in language learning which focuses on its co-construction by the sociocultural environment and those

around the L2 learner (Ros I Soli, 2007). Other studies have argued that agency and subjectivity cannot exist prior to their production in linguistic practices (Davies, 1991; Butler, 1997). Butler (1997) extends these arguments to contend that all actors are permitted to operate to the extent that they are constituted 'within a linguistic field of enabling constraints' (p.16). Miller's (2010) study further examined how the habitual linguistic constructs across her participant interviews positioned her interviewees as 'agents who rationally and responsibly make self-generated choices and acted on them' (Miller, 2010, p. 465).

Through examining the ways in which her participants spoke about themselves and about their life choices, she focused on exploring how they perceived and constructed their own capacity to act. Poynton (1993) similarly argues that the linguistic means through which participants' agency comes to be constituted cannot be overlooked because the habitual use of certain lexical choices can 'involve highly specific grammatical features at the level of the individual clause that can carry significant meaning.' (p.7). Considering this interpretation, it struck me that *how* my participants spoke about themselves and linguistically constructed their choice-making would be equally as revealing with regards to their agency as the positions they took up that restricted or enabled each other's agency within the group. Subsequently, my attention was drawn to the recurring and sedimented linguistic constructs (Miller, 2010) of the pupils that emerged in the focus groups and how their choice of language positioned themselves as active participants in their decision-making.

An analysis of the habitual linguistic constructions that the pupils used to speak about the decisions they had taken towards continuing MFL for GCSE established that notable markers of agency were present in their lexical choices. The independent school pupils were more likely to express their decision to continue or stop MFL in first person clausal predicates (Scheibman, 2002) that portrayed them as agents of their own actions - typically using the personal pronouns *I, me or we.* These observations were made solely through the participants directly addressing topics that described the action of making a deliberate and considered choice. Their choice of language to describe these decisions: - "*I **wanted** the challenge", "I **decided** to carry on" and "I **chose** subjects that..*" are decisive actions that position them as agents of action predicate constructs and identify their capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001), indicating a degree of control over their own behaviour (Duranti, 2006).

Such agentive utterances mark them out as individuals capable of rationalised choice who draw on a wealth of factors and future imagined goals that lie behind their decision-making and that have consciously influenced their thought processes. Their linguistic choices are strongly supported thematically by the rationales they present behind their decision making. Some of these pupils are keen to emphasise that the decision to continue languages was entirely an independent one and downplay their parents' involvement, even in the cases where their parents had initially been responsible for cultivating their interests.

Some of the state school pupils' linguistic choices, however, suggested less control over this decision-making and were less likely to mark them out as agents of actions (Scheibman, 2002). Instead, the choice construction lying behind their MFL decision-making that they articulated was more likely to constitute instrumental short-term orientations about not needing it in their immediate futures or reactions to school-oriented factors that contained a predominantly negative valence: "*I find it boring…I couldn't see myself using it*" and "*I struggle with it. When it gets too hard you just give up eventually and then you think you will lose interest*". The absence of similar predicate clauses to the independent group in their responses indicates that some of the state school pupils can be viewed less conclusively as agents of their own actions but as individuals whose decision-making is more instrumental and hesitatingly constrained as they reflect on their own particular spatio-temporal motives (Coffey, 2018).

Reflective thinking and agency: Archer's theory of internal conversation.

Previous research has examined how the ability of learners to internally reflect on their learning is connected to their agency and the ways through which this enables them to exercise their autonomy in the language learning process (Vitanova et al., 2013). Language learners' autonomy - that is 'their capacity to take control over one's own learning' (Holec 1981, in Benson 2007, p. 22) was not a subject that I had set out to explore in the interviews, but I felt that a connection could be drawn between how pupils spoke about their capacity for autonomy in MFL learning and their agency with which they reflected on their MFL learning and its decision making - given that their self-confidence (or lack of) in their own

capacity to tackle MFL at GCSE might naturally be connected to the factors that influenced them to continue learning a language. Gao (2013), drawing on Archer's (2003) theory of *internal conversation* proposes that a particular element of language learners' agency - the internal conversations and deliberations they have - can help us examine how learners are enabled to exercise autonomy through thinking during action and post-event in the learning process (Gao, 2013). In this section, I posit that we can learn more about pupils' commitment to certain paths of MFL learning by paying attention to how their agency enables them to discern and deliberate on their concerns in narratives.

Gao's (2013) framework describes the interaction that occurs between language learners, certain contextual and structural conditions and their agency and consists of four different components: *context* – which refers to societal discourses about language learning and political conditions; *setting* - the immediate environment for language learning such as the classroom and the social relationships contained therein; *situated activity* - the interaction between learners and the contextual resources in settings and *self* – where the learners' biographical experiences are contained, including their will as well as their desires. The four different components of the framework interact with each other over time to constrain or enable the pursuit of learning which can lead to changes in learners' will and capacity to act (Gao, 2013) and to exercise autonomy in their learning. As a result, the exercise of autonomy is always emergent and relative to individual learners in particular contexts, 'because the exercise is always subject to ongoing contextual mediation' (Gao, 2013, p. 228). Language learners can modify the contextual and structural conditions, however, transforming them into either supporting or constraining ones for the pursuit of their learning. Differing degrees of agency in learners enable them to make decisions by conducting critical internal conversations, in which their ultimate goals and concerns for their learning are identified and form part of the quest to identify a vision of their *ideal selves* as learners (Dörnyei 2009) - or attributes they would ideally like to possess.

Gao's framework describing the interaction between agency, reflective thinking and contextual/structural conditions is outlined overleaf:

Time

Context (L2 learning discourses, political conditions)

Interaction, mediation, enablement

Setting (Classroom, social relationships)

Situated Activity (interactions +contextual resources)

Autonomy

Self (Agency, Biographical experiences, will, desires

Reflective Thinking/ internal conversation.
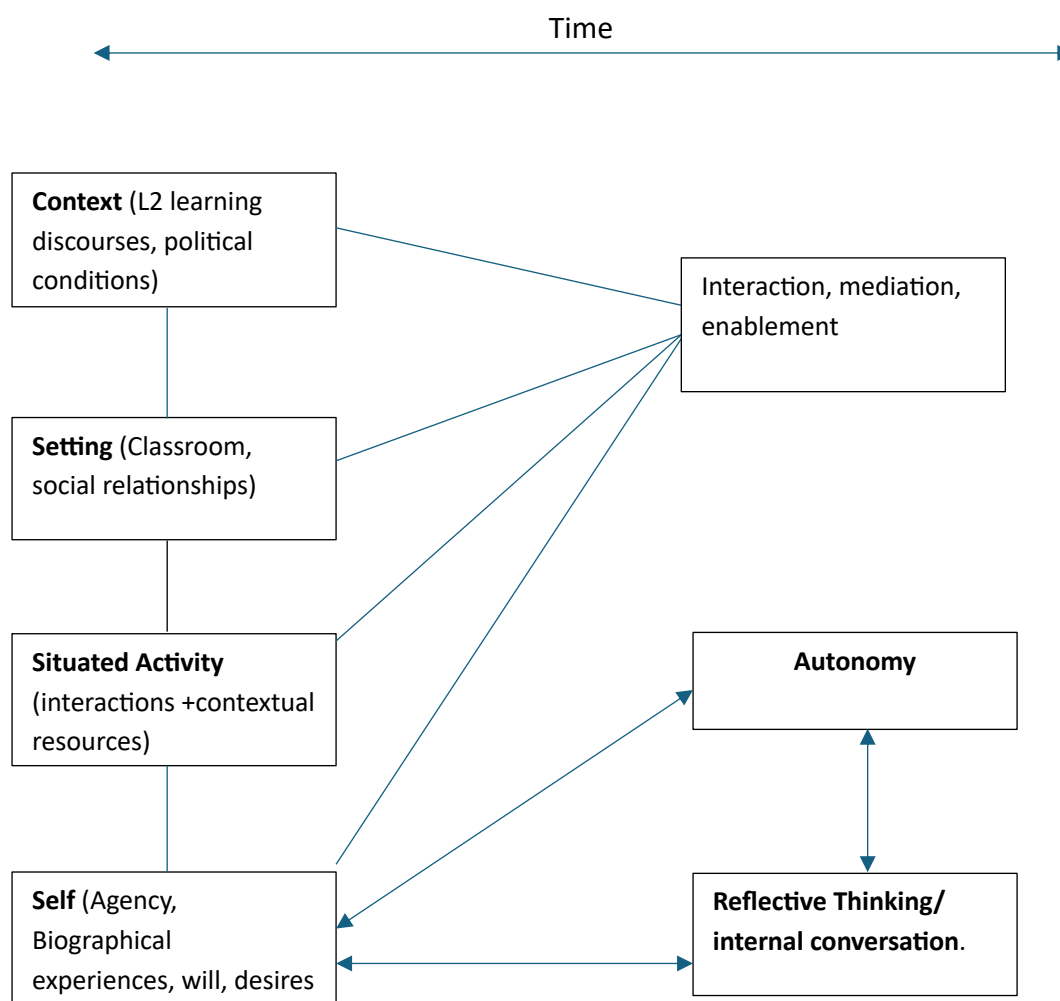
Figure 12: Gao's framework of agency, reflective thinking and contextual/structural conditions (Gao, 2013).

Accordingly, language learners constantly evaluate these contextual and structural conditions (through reflective thinking) before committing and recommitting themselves to following a course of action in their learning (Archer, 2000) which may include (re)involving themselves in the learning process and its decision-making. I noted with interest the contextual elements of the above framework that my pupils seemed to reference most frequently during the focus group interviews: *self*, *situated activity* and *setting;* and in understanding how their agency in their MFL learning can be underpinned by how they deliberate on their concerns.

The inner dialogue and reflective thinking of the independent school pupils regarding language learning centred around the opportunities it presented to them, and that undertaking such a challenge would require a wholehearted engagement on their part: "*when you're learning a new language, doesn't there have to be an absolute commitment*?" Their dedication to this commitment also recognises the unique opportunities that language learning might bring in the form of travel, lifestyle changes and future professional success: "*I mean it's an opportunity isn't it*?" Any understanding and expression of the contextual constraints they might face were dismissed and only spoken about in terms of embracing the challenge that lay ahead: *"I think because it's harder, so it's more of a challenge so to speak?"* and their remarks on any structural constraints they encountered in the form of lesson pedagogy or teacher ability were summarily dismissed: "*I mean, what's wrong about the teacher?",* and minimal time was spent on negotiating these structural conditions.

A closer examination of the reflective thinking of some of the state school pupils, however, reveals how they became preoccupied with their perceptions of the structural and contextual conditions they feel impacted upon their learning. These concerns primarily emerged around certain contextual and structural constraints that they assume to negatively affect their learning in lessons. The narratives reveal that these learners consider their autonomy and their MFL decision-making based on internal conversations in which they critically assess how these constraints impact their learning. These concerns centre around the *setting* and *situated activity* component of Gao's (2013) framework - structural constraints such as the lack of choice of language in their MFL lessons: "we *literally don't get to choose*" and the subject material they are presented with in class: *"If we're doing just a lesson where it's just going over the same stuff.. it's quite boring.*" How they deliberate on these constraints, however, does confirm that the pupils' autonomy regarding their own learning can be strongly influenced by the internal conclusions they draw: "*I weren't gonna use it, so I weren't enjoying it. If it were something I actually needed, I'd concentrate.*"

According to Archer (2003), and similar to the deliberations of the independent school pupils, it is through this process of internal dialogue and the self-discovery period that the state school learners enact their agency and make independent decisions in the learning process. However, unlike the independent school pupils, some of the state school pupils become rooted in this phase of 'evaluating the contextual and structural conditions' before

committing themselves to the final step of identifying their ultimate goals and taking control of the learning process (Gao, 2013). As these pupils remain at the phase of evaluating the contextual and structural issues before committing to any ultimate goals, therefore their efforts to demonstrate a full commitment to these goals is always mediated by these contextual constraints (Vitanova et al., 2015). Their ultimate goals in their learning – and how close they come to representing an *ideal self* (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009) – might include a desire to achieve a certain level of fluency to get a better grade at GCSE or a distant ideal of working abroad in the future and using MFL. This does not mean that these learners are not exerting agency in their learning at all, however, as it is through this initial phase of self-reflection that they are able to critically assess the contextual constraints that limit their learning.

The different components of the framework emerge as structural constraints and provide an obstacle that some of these pupils fail to overcome which may lead to future changes in their will and capacities to act. However, the very reference to feeling constrained by these contextual conditions is in fact an expression of agency as the pupils are speaking about their learning being impeded by certain conditions. As in the case of the independent school pupils, modifying the contextual and structural conditions is still possible, and transforming them to enabling ones for the pursuit of learning can still take place - through a dialogue of negotiation and compromise in which the ultimate goals that they pursue at all costs (Archer, 2000) are recognised and deferred to. The deliberation and negotiation period of the independent school pupils reaches the final stage of confirming these ultimate goals and visions (Gao, 2013), by identifying their top priorities as a life-long commitment to learning languages that understands the long-term skills and benefits it will bring. Reaching this commitment is enough to demonstrate that these pupils have successfully completed the ongoing contextual mediation and navigated their response to the external discourses that surround language learning.

Temporal-structural aspects of agency

The ability of human actors to adjust 'ritual and purposive action according to temporal contextualisation' and changing sequential processes that occur in social interactions (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 999) are among multiple dimensions of human agency explored in current research. Evidence of how these temporal-structural constraints might impinge on language learners' agency towards MFL study and their decision-making emerged in my findings through how the participants spoke about their goals and future plans. Previous notions of human agency have concentrated on its habitual form - in which "actors' abilities to recall and apply taken-for-granted schemas of action" that they have developed through past interactions result in their ability to make practical judgements among possible alternative trajectories of action (Emirbayer and Mische, p.975). The projective dimension of agency, however, extends the view that human actors are capable of more than repeating past routines based on previous expectations but instead are the inventors of new possibilities for thought and action (Joas,1993) that are represented through their dreams, goals and aspirations.

Recurring elements of this projective element of agency emerged in my findings that merited further exploration. Kayı-Aydar (2015) states that defining a sense of agency can allow people to take concrete actions in pursuit of their goals, and these concrete actions were particularly prominent in the responses of the independent school pupils that justified their decision-making. The pupils confidently imagined languages as firmly embedded in their future lives and envisaged its value to them – future benefits they visualise becoming apparent at undefined points – in the form of possibilities that include travel and professional opportunities. These beliefs draw on the concept of *anticipatory identification* (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) in which patterns of possible development become available in an often vague and indeterminate future horizon. The pupils cannot be certain of the extent to which languages will feature in their future careers, but they take concrete steps to ensure that they will be prepared if it does. The pupils project their hopes and objectives regarding language learning goals in future terms of not wanting to lose it as a skill and being grateful that they had continued its learning, and these views serve as further examples of their ability to project this *future-oriented* approach towards their learning.

Some of the state school pupils were more likely to invoke the habitual aspect of agency that suggests that their decisions have been influenced by their formative experiences of language learning. For these pupils, present actions are always permeated by the conditioning experiences of their past (Mead, 1932 in Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) and some of the pupils directly attributed their decision to stop learning languages to their own previous negative experiences of the speaking exam. Swidler (1986) has built upon Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) to illustrate that significant formative experiences such as class background play a significant role in how actors come to know how to act in certain social worlds (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Some of the pupils' remarks implied they questioned their place in the world of languages and doubted whether it was an appropriate activity for them. These comments allude to the notion of *categorical location* in which learners locate their experiences according to their identity and values (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). The pupils appeared quick to negatively collate their own previous experiences of MFL study with those of their parents to justify their decision. Such a finding suggests that certain emergent events sustained through habit and repetition and constructed through ongoing temporal passage can indeed be the catalyst for empirical social action in actors (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

While the independent school pupils were able to articulate a projected vision of their future MFL learning that presented new possibilities, another form of agency was present in the responses of the state school pupils: the present day situationally based component of agency that governs our day-to-day responses to the challenges we face. The pupils' responses to the emerging challenges of the evolving situations that characterise their secondary school learning experiences in which 'normative exigencies of lived situations exist that contradict each other and require changes in strategies and direction' (Emirbayer & Mische, p.994) was reflected in how they articulated their choices. Many of the pupils spoke about opting against continuing to learn a subject they felt had no relevance to their lives and whose lessons they described as challenging, rigourous and boring. The independent school pupils' replies did not capture the same sense of frustration at the short-term challenges that defined their learning experiences, and many of the pupils spoke instead about rising to meet the difficulty of the challenge for their long-term gain. This discrepancy in agency between some of the pupils in his lessons was also noted by the MFL

teacher at the state school (school C) who remarked that those pupils whose parents had a background of successful learning or teaching languages were more likely to uphold views that valued the long-term benefits of its learning.

Chapter 10.Conclusion

Introduction

In this study I set out to answer the following research questions:

1. **How do pupils position themselves and negotiate their identities as language learners regarding:**

   a. **Their motivation towards continuing to study MFL?**
   b. **Their responses to the messages they receive regarding MFL's significance from their institution, home and local community?**
   c. **The future value of MFL to their lives?**

2. **What can teachers' self-positioning in narratives tell us about the decline in uptake of MFL in England?**

3. **How do the findings to questions 1 and 2 help to explain the decline in uptake of MFL that has occurred in England over the last 20 years?**

The first two questions of this study have been answered in the *results* chapters of this thesis. In this final chapter, I will answer the third research question of this study: *How do the findings to questions 1 and 2 help to explain the decline in uptake of MFL that has occurred in England over the last 20 years*? In order to answer this question, I will provide a summary of the main findings that emerged from the pupil and the teacher interviews in this study, from which notable conclusions and new perspectives can be drawn that help to illuminate the causes of the decline in uptake of language learning in England. The synthesis

of this material will form the basis of answering the third research question. Finally in this chapter, I will explore the implication of the findings for teachers, heads of department and school leaders as well as policymakers, and outline the future directions that further research on this topic can take.

The findings suggest that examining the causes of the decline in uptake of MFL learning in England from the different perspectives that can emerge from pupil and teacher positioning can provide valuable insights into an issue that has intensified over the last twenty years. The different ways in which this study has pursued this topic can help to understand some of the root causes of the decline at institutional level, as well as providing recommendations for language policy and classroom practice that can positively impact pupil motivation and uptake in the future. The majority of the conclusions reported in this chapter have already been noted in the *results* chapter of this thesis, but some singular comments that are emerging for the first time are also present and explored in this conclusion, which evoke significant and compelling themes.

Research Question 3 - How do the findings to questions 1 and 2 help to explain the decline in uptake of MFL that has occurred in England over the last 20 years?

10.1 Understanding the factors that have emerged from this study and help to explain the decline in uptake of MFL learning from the perspectives of teachers and pupils:

This research has identified the following factors that may explain the decline in uptake of MFL learning from listening to the perspectives of teachers and pupils in secondary schools: *systemic and institutional issues affecting the delivery of MFL in schools, the role of individual teachers, MFL lesson pedagogy, difficulty of the new GCSE, how secondary school pupils see the relevance of MFL to their lives, the role of background influences on pupils' choices, pupils attitudes towards MFL since Brexit, primary languages, technology in the MFL classroom, the compulsory element.*

In the section that follows, these factors are described in turn:

Systemic and institutional issues affecting the delivery of MFL in schools

A majority of the MFL teachers in this study expressed frustration over the systemic issues and tension that exists between their departments and school leadership and suggest that these genuinely impact on their ability to deliver consistent and engaging programmes of MFL. Teachers spoke of the uncertainty that surrounded their relationship with school leadership who often undervalue and fail to appreciate the complexity of MFL learning in schools. This tension often emerged in terms of the hours afforded to MFL in the curriculum and its status compared to other subjects. The MFL teachers often reported their struggles to prioritise their subject in the eyes of pupils, many of whom were often removed by senior leadership from lessons for extra English and Maths help. The inherent difficulty of MFL as a subject was repeatedly emphasised as an understandable reason as to why many pupils choose not to continue with the subject. All of the MFL teachers recognised that languages are a difficult and unique subject to learn and understand that their pupils' sense of accountability for their future academic results is a primary reason why many decide not to continue its learning. The teachers alluded to MFL as being intrinsically incompatible and unsuited to its timetabled hours in the curriculum, a finding that is corroborated by research suggesting that languages are a relatively 'time poor' subject (Roberts, 2024) compared to other subjects. Teachers cited the levels of active learning and consolidation that are independently required to succeed in MFL and the skills of memorising, concentration and self-confidence that need to be cultivated, alongside a strong base of grammar and vocabulary. The question of how much curriculum time should be devoted to MFL in the school timetable has previously been considered (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) where it was recommended that schools should be offering a minimum of three hours of L2 teaching per week. However, this figure is notably higher than those of several of the schools that participated in this study. A few of the teachers expressed their frustration at the difficulties they faced in trying to embed the more fun and interactive elements of the language such the teaching of culture and the literature alongside the prescribed curriculum content - that

they hoped would attract pupils to languages and encourage them to continue with it. Low teacher self-efficacy, frustration and demotivation that results from these organisational issues in schools can impact on teachers' professional efficacy in the classroom as well as their stress levels (Carty and Rifeser, 2017) and wellbeing (Conti, 2016). These findings are noteworthy when considering the importance that teachers placed on their individual role in the classroom and the degree of influence they exert on pupils' enjoyment and engagement with MFL.

The role of individual teachers

MFL teachers portray themselves as individuals who are responsible for energising and driving pupil engagement and enthusiasm in lessons. This finding indicates that pupils' confidence, motivation and language learning choices are in fact connected to the role of the individual teacher, despite the pupils not suggesting that this was a significant factor for them.

Teachers recognise that their ability to build a rapport with their classes is one of the singular most important factors in influencing pupil motivation, engagement and choice in pupils. Several of the teachers spoke about how passionate and driven teachers in their department had connected with pupils, sparking an interest in even the most discouraged and demotivated learner in MFL learning. This finding resonates with previous research that recognises the effectiveness of individual teachers as one of the most significant factors in determining pupil outcome (Molway, 2020) in MFL.

MFL teachers' concerns over the future recruitment and supply of new teachers to the profession are growing and are indicated as having an effect on pupils' decisions in language learning. The inevitable disruption to the recruitment of European nationals to teacher training since Brexit has been a significant influence on the consistency and quality of MFL teaching in English schools (Tinsley, 2018). Research suggests that it has negatively impacted the ability of pupils to establish consistent learning routines and accordingly affected their self-confidence (Tinsley, 2018). Interviews with school leaders confirmed that language learning progress could often be interrupted by teachers leaving to become heads of

department elsewhere, or that supply teachers for languages were often common. One of the headteachers revealed that this often led to gaps in pupils' knowledge which would only be discovered close to the critical exam period. Previous studies confirm that recruitment and retention of MFL teaching staff has traditionally been an issue over workload concerns and the constant introduction of new accountability measures that interfere with teachers' ability to deliver lessons (Molway, 2020). The deficits that exist in teacher training recruitment figures in England are noted as a recurring feature of research into the decline in uptake of MFL in England (Cooke, 2019). The independent school teacher also confirmed that her school had been affected by their inability to hire language assistants since Brexit and speculated that this was a feature that was likely to affect pupils' self-confidence and attainment in speaking activities.

MFL lesson pedagogy

The findings from this study echo those from previous research over the last twenty years that has found that MFL teaching methodology in England often fails to engage pupils (Norman, 1998; Pachler, 2000). Other studies such as Coleman (2013) and Lanvers & Coleman (2017) have noted that causes for the declining take up of languages in England are often connected to language policy and pedagogy reasons. In this study, some of the pupils cited the irrelevant and outdated lesson content that deterred them from continuing with languages - often for what some felt was the constant prioritising of skills such as writing over others. Teachers and school leaders also feel that pupils' disinterest with languages might be attributed to the boring and outdated text books ("*very tokenistic use of culture, a sprinkling of Francophonie"*) used in their schools and the prescriptive and formulaic teaching that such resources dictated. The findings propose that MFL pupils possess their own understanding of the language knowledge and skills they deem important to learn and that will be useful to them in the future. Several pupils believed that a stronger focus on transactional vocabulary based on real life experiences or emergency situations would be more beneficial to them. The teachers' comments also highlighted this lack of practicality as

an issue in assessment – and recognised that only 10/70 marks in the oral exam have a focus on transactional conversation.

Correspondingly, the pupils expressed their collective and individual bemusement at some of the topics and vocabulary that did appear in lessons as this comment from one of the pupils suggests: *"if it were something I thought I needed I'd concentrate"*. This data suggests that the continued framing of languages as an academic subject rather than vocational, through policy discourse and rhetoric, which can equip pupils with specific applied knowledge and practical skills that may be of benefit to them in the future is problematic. (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016). An over-focus on certain disciplines and skills at the expense of others (the reading of literature at GCSE, for example) is contentious for some learners who speak about and justify their choices through an instrumental lens and therefore struggle to see the real-world applicability of MFL. The restricted connections that many pupils thus make to real life careers and jobs can be read as an example of this - many believed that the only options available to a learner who chose MFL were as a teacher or translator. The class teacher's comments affirmed the views that her pupils had little awareness of the opportunities that might be available to them in the world of finance or other distinguished fields which often sought language graduates.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been an influential teaching methodology in MFL classrooms over the last two decades, with its emphasis on meaning-focused interaction and a choice of activities that reflect real life communication (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016) and use of authentic texts and tasks. When applying CLT in the classroom, it is encouraged that topics and activities should be perceived as relevant and personally meaningful by learners (Richards, 2006), in order to encourage purposeful exchanges. To achieve these exchanges and interaction, games and role play in the MFL classroom have been promoted as teachers seek increasingly diverse methods to sustain pupil engagement. This study did not spend considerable time exploring whether any specific MFL teaching pedagogy might affect pupil choice to continue learning a language, however, and therefore cannot make any claims with absolute certainty. Nevertheless, the few questions in my study that did address this subject found that pupils did not articulate any explicit criticisms of the specific teaching methodologies that were applied in their MFL classroom. Aside from those pupils who claimed they found their MFL lesson '*boring*' without any justification, the

majority claimed that they enjoyed language lessons and recognised that their teachers always tried to introduce engaging lesson material.

The views of teachers agreed that they often worked extremely hard to produce creative and relevant material that would make MFL lessons more attractive to pupils and *'compensate for their lack of interest in the subject'.* Accordingly, a teacher remarked that many of her pupils exclaimed that they hated MFL, but really enjoyed having her as a teacher and liked her personally - which the teacher accredited to the atmosphere of fun and competition that she had introduced in lessons. Wingate (2018) notes that creating an atmosphere of fun and games in the language learning classroom can sometimes be problematic and risk enabling an MFL classroom culture of 'low expectations, lack of challenge and light entertainment' (pg. 452) where the use of games and quick rewards lead pupils into forming the impression that MFL learning is easy and fun. Such perceptions can be counter-productive when pupils become demotivated and realise that they are not equipped to cope with the difficulty that more challenging work brings. This fact was underlined by the headteacher I interviewed who expressed her frustrations that MFL lessons often lacked the *rigour* that would equip pupils to form a solid base of grammar knowledge and tackle activities that pose real challenge and requiring linguistic ability. This study does not lay claim to exploring how the effectiveness of any particular teaching methodology in the classroom can be connected to pupil decisions to continue learning MFL. However, from the interview responses, it appears evident that pupils do enjoy and would benefit from targeted material with authentic, competitive and communicative tasks brought into the MFL classroom that would enable them to gain that elusive sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that they hinted at in my interviews - and the pleasure they derived when they knew they had tackled something difficult and succeeded.

Difficulty of the new GCSE

The difficulty and the severe grading of the new MFL GCSE exam, which has existed in its current form since 2016, clearly acts as a demotivator for some pupils when choosing whether to continue its learning. The 2016 changes to the MFL GCSE saw the old grading

system of A*- G replaced by a numerical system of 9-1 that has made the new grade boundaries appear much more unobtainable to pupils, as well as changes in difficulty to the foundation tier papers in listening and reading. A new programme of study (DfE, 2016) that prioritised translation skills and the teaching of *great literature* has introduced even greater challenges for teachers, many of whom have had little experience of the teaching of literature and translation below the ages of 16 -18 (Dobson, 2018). The 2022 changes have primarily been met with similar reactions - surprise at an introduction of the foregrounding of unprepared speech (Marsden and Hawkes, 2024) in the oral exam as well as a broad and prescribed list of lexical items of 1250 and 1750 words for the foundation and higher tier papers respectively, from which the reading and listening exams must be created. The teachers that took part in this study expressed dismay at how difficult the new GCSE exam appeared to be – and how they felt that a good grade at GCSE would be beyond most of their pupils. They voiced their frustration that the listening and reading papers were now unfeasibly difficult and that many of their weaker pupils had been unable to achieve a pass grade on the foundation paper. The teachers and headteachers' concerns regarding the 2022 changes (due to come into place from 2026) were also evident with many believing that such a prescribed list of vocabulary was unnecessary. Such fears and concerns have evidently been passed down to pupils who remain aware of the difficulty of the new MFL GCSE from those who have previously taken the subject, such as siblings and peers, and are unsurprisingly choosing not to continue it at the earliest opportunity. Research that exists on a national scale exploring teacher feedback to these changes and their impact on pupil motivation offers the same strong conclusions and echoes many of the findings of the interviews of this study. Language teachers nationwide believe the new list of GCSE topics are mostly impractical and irrelevant to their pupils' lives and cause them to lose interest in lessons (TransformMFL.com, 2018). They remain concerned that many of their intermediate ability and weaker pupils will be left demoralised and discouraged by their GCSE MFL experiences, leading to many more being dissuaded from continuing the subject in the future (Tinsley, 2019).

How secondary school pupils see the relevance of MFL to their lives

If the findings of this study within this research setting can be taken as broadly representative of the experiences of pupils studying MFL across Norfolk, they strongly suggest that many pupils in Norfolk do not see the relevance of learning languages and do not foresee many opportunities to engage with MFL learning in their future professional and personal lives. This leads to many deciding not to continue its study. This belief was more commonly expressed amongst the state school pupils who envisaged scarcely using languages in the future, aside for short trips abroad for their summer holidays. Such a reaction can be connected to the typically low utilitarian demand for language learning that exists amongst Anglophone speakers (Lo Bianco, 2014) as well as the ubiquity of global English (Kramsch, 2014) and the pupils' recognition that often 'English is enough' (Lanvers et al., 2019; Crystal, 1997). This belief, although more predominant amongst the state school pupils, was also recognised to a lesser degree in the independent school pupils - suggesting that it may not be related to socioeconomic status (Lanvers, 2016) as much as previously thought. The relative geographical isolation and lack of cultural diversity within Norfolk, combined with its low social mobility (Social Mobility Commission, 2016), can be interpreted as significant factors in the genesis of these beliefs as well as the notable absence of any tangible opportunities to improve and practise language skills. Teachers express their beliefs that regional influence is strong on this cultural entrenchment, indicating that the local community and the absence of language role models do play a part in pupils' decision-making and perceptions. Two of the teachers talked about the positive influence that school trips had had on their pupils and recognised them as having altered their pupils' perspectives towards languages more positively when they returned to school.

For a significant number of pupils within the state school groups taking part in this study (Schools B, C & D) , the relevance and utility of language learning is often framed in non-specific utilitarian terms – for example: gaining a language qualification as a prerequisite for a future career not related to MFL and as a mark of rigour for future employers or to improve their higher education prospects. The low aspiration of the pupils in the third state group (School D) were cited as a major factor by their teacher in their decision not to continue with MFL. For her, many pupils had prearranged jobs working with their parents in their businesses or in vocational careers and who knew they would have no need for language learning. For the most part, the emergence of popular discourses that emphasise

language learning as a practical means to improve their future and relevant employment opportunities (Molway, 2020) was largely not reflected in the pupil findings. Evidence of this can be noted in the tenuous and limited connections pupils draw between MFL learning and high value professional fields of employment such as finance. These findings suggest that more work needs to be done to ensure that these connections are made available to pupils from *all* backgrounds. However, the instrumentality of such discourses as a motivation to continue MFL can be easily refuted by those pupils who reject a use for this future transactional capital (Coffey, 2018) for example, those who planned to work with their parents.

The responses of the independent school pupils indicate that they were more likely to talk about the 'educational, social, linguistic and cultural enrichment' benefits (Scarino, 2014, p. 299) that can be derived from learning languages – evident in their positive opinions regarding how their early childhoods had been enhanced by living abroad and entwining travel, culture and linguistic opportunity. The familiarity of these pupils with discourses that advance the learning of languages for cultural enrichment and social capital (Coffey, 2018) allows them to speak openly about their aspirations for further obtainment of such capital in the future. Such views consequently demonstrate that some independent pupils may be capable of a more profound and inherent motivation towards MFL study that means that the lasting legacy of their language learning may rest with cultural aspects as well as linguistic competence (Koro, 2016).

The role of background influences on pupils' choices

Background influences continue to play a significant role in determining pupils' choice-making towards language study and amongst those, parental and family influences are particularly powerful factors. The genesis of this influence often stems from the home backgrounds of learners who grew up speaking another language in England or abroad and the professional experiences of their parents as using languages as a form of social mobility. Many pupils speak about this influence in terms of their parents' familiarity and fluency with one or more languages, and their desire to pass on the enrichment and fulfilling cultural

experiences that can accompany studying and using a language - as well as instilling *International Posture* (Yashima, 2002) in their children. The findings suggest that these powerful influences were more likely to be found amongst the independent school group where learners are more comfortable engaging with discourses that not only prioritise the learning of languages for future social and cultural capital (Coffey, 2018) but are also endorsed by their institution. However, the positions that some of these learners assume reveal that they are equally equipped to consider and dismiss discourses that they do not wish to engage with, or they do not think appropriate for them - such as learning languages for a future economic reward. They are equally familiar with engaging with discourses that advocate the learning of languages purely for the innate enjoyment it can bring.

Such dispositions were not only evident among the independent pupils. The dispositions of some state group pupils are also formed from the less typical and dominant modelling agents within their *habitus*- such as parents, family members - whose influence is more faltering towards their decision making. Yet the impact of home as well as community influences and expectations still form powerful forces that impact on these pupils' decision-making in setting and normalising their own linguistic aspirations and expectations. The connections that some of these pupils form towards language learning might not always be particularly profound and can be influenced by their personal experiences – e.g. speaking Spanish at their parents' holiday villa in the sun and the TUI holidays and trips to Benidorm in English-speaking hotels - but were evident, nonetheless. Such language motivation and connections and do not always spring from a particularly deep well of belief regarding its future usefulness in their lives. The self-perpetuating negative refrain of some of the state school pupils' in School B of '*never gonna use it, never gonna need it'*, when asked by their teacher why they were planning not to continue MFL delineates the limitations of their self-restricted language world that they imagine. Moreover, further limitations emphasised by their comments: "*too hard for me"* hints that some learners may not view language learning as an appropriate activity for them. It was unfortunately not always possible given the time constraints to follow up on what the source of such beliefs might be. Surprisingly, however, the rationales that the same group offer for MFL learning were not always contained to instrumental dimensions - the desire to show respect to other cultures when speaking a language abroad is an example of this and has been noted before in previous research

(Lanvers, 2018). The pupils' tendencies to relate themselves to 'the international community (of language speakers) rather than a specific L2 group' is another example of how this can be understood (Yashima, 2009, p. 45).

The findings reveal that prior parental language experiences and abilities do not always correlate with their children's sustained motivation and success in the subject. The comments of the teachers confirmed that several of their pupils were flourishing in the subject despite their parents not having provided any positive input or support with their homework. The teachers' comments also confirmed the views of previous research that some parents often feel incapable and unconfident in their ability to support their children succeed in MFL learning (Chambers, 1999; Jones, 2009) due to their own limited language abilities. An interesting finding of this study is that the teacher interviews in the third state school (School B) revealed that many of the pupils easily absorbed the negative views of their parents towards language learning and foreigners. These can be expressed in the form of extreme right wing political views and a general xenophobia towards other countries and cultures - and which they often articulated in MFL lessons. Although schools work hard to counteract these views and stop them spreading to other pupils, the teachers believed they were endemic to the local communities and undoubtedly influenced the pupils' views regarding continuing language study.

There is limited research that exists exploring the connection between parental orientations towards language study and their effects on their children's motivation to learn MFL in secondary schools. The studies that do exist (Martin, 2023) support the conclusion of this research and found that parents' negative motivations towards language learning can be transmitted to their children and that failing to attach important importance to language learning at home often results in perceived indifference in the learner. These findings support the perspectives of the class teachers who strongly believed that their pupils benefited from initial engaged levels of parenting and involvement in their MFL work at home - either through helping them with their homework or ensuring that they had done it.

Pupils' attitudes towards MFL since Brexit

The teachers' remarks confirm that pupils' views towards MFL learning in their schools have not been significantly transformed since Brexit. Although one teacher admitted that negative views were noted in her previous school around the time of the referendum; by the time this research took place, however, these views were much less obvious. The few negative attitudes that did remain had always existed and had not proliferated since 2016. Many of the teachers noted that Brexit was unlikely to appear on their pupils' radar and would not be something that they would normally pay attention to. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that negative discourses towards language learning resulting from Brexit do not act as significant and transformative influences on these pupils' MFL decision-making and cannot be claimed to have significantly contributed to the decline in uptake of language study in England. This finding runs contrary to the explicit anti-language sentiment that was anticipated when this research was in its formative stages and has been expressed in other MFL classrooms nationwide since the 2016 referendum (Tinsley, 2018). Although many of the pupil research participants in my research did intimate negative self-images of the English as incompetent learners of languages when they travel abroad, such images were generally not depicted in an overly negative light; Instead, they were referenced self-deprecatingly, and in terms of factors that would motivate them to speak more of a foreign language when travelling abroad. The findings of the individual interviews also reveal that pupils do not subscribe to negative stereotypes of native speakers of the TL that can be perpetuated by the media or in popular culture. All of the pupils interviewed claimed that unsympathetic stereotypes surrounding the citizens of European countries would not feature prominently in their minds when making their decisions. Although pre-Brexit studies exist that have drawn links between xenophobia in British society, Euroscepticism and the lack of motivation towards language learning that has always existed (Coleman, 2009), research taking place since Brexit has failed to substantiate these links and warn that an overfocus on such themes 'disregards evidence for alternative explanations of poor language learning motivation' in England (Lanvers, 2018, p. 102) such as inadequate MFL policy and practice.

Primary languages

Teachers and pupils' concerns over the provision of MFL teaching in primary schools in England and the language transition to secondary school are clearly noteworthy findings supported by previous studies. Since 2014, the statutory requirement for all pupils in KS2 to access MFL teaching in England has existed (DfE, 2013). Teachers paint a bleak picture of primary language teaching in their region that is either non-existent or intermittently implemented, with no coherent transition strategy in place for pupils who enter into the local state secondary school in their area. Teachers attributed this inadequate primary school teaching and provision of languages to a number of factors: a limited number of specialist and trained MFL teachers at primary level; the absence of a statutory and centralised MFL curriculum at KS2 for pupils; teaching that is error strewn, unconfident or inconsistent and schools that either rely on games in class or ignore the statutory requirement entirely. All the teachers agreed that opportunities to provide a consistent and fulfilling programme of MFL teaching in primary schools are being squandered - opportunities that might help to create a level playing field for all pupils on entering secondary school and equip them with the knowledge and desire to continue studying MFL.

Pupils in the interviews noted similar issues. Their experiences of being taught MFL in their primary schools had been sporadic and inconsistent and often focused on a single language that they later discover they will not have the opportunity to study in secondary school. Such experiences leave pupils feeling discouraged and out of their depth when they arrive in secondary schools. Pupils recounted their often trivial and superficial experiences in primary schools: learning how to count to ten, or of superficial cultural experience in lessons, such as the odd lesson that featured a teacher bringing in croissants to eat. Given these experiences, and the fact that issues remain over the ultimate proficiency benefits of MFL at school leaving point (Courtney, 2014) there is clearly an urgent requirement to improve and develop the MFL learning provision in primary schools. Motivation and enjoyment of pupils during their MFL lessons in primary school are usually noted as high (Courtney, 2014) on the basis of their good relationships with their teachers and high self-efficacy (Chambers, 2016) and these are foundations that can be capitalised on. One of the state school teachers in my interviews (School D) invoked the *critical period hypothesis* from early childhood to adolescence that occurs in language learning where a child's brain (from the age of four) is seen as particularly receptive for acquiring languages (Sharpe and Driscoll, 2000). Several of

the teachers agreed that MFL teaching starts unusually late in primary schools in England (From age 7) compared to our European counterparts. Such an argument is not a new finding in educational research (Hunt et al., 2005) however, and depends on other factors such as the linguistic continuity that might be established in the pupils' transition to secondary school (Martin, 2000). The status and time that primary schools may afford the teaching of languages and the absence of an official accompanying languages' National Curriculum document for MFL study at KS2 offer further challenges. The decision in 2012 to introduce a statutory requirement for all maintained primary schools to teach a modern language lacked key decisions around the choice of languages to be taught, the time to be allocated to language teaching and its core content (Ayres-Bennett and Forsdick, 2025). The KS2 Languages programmes of study (DfE, 2013) lacked critical guidance in these issues and suffered from brevity and has resulted in the great variation of provision that now is evident in primary schools nationwide. The document has since not been updated in over ten years and proposes limited guidance for teachers in class, mandating only that pupils aim to make progress in "*one language*" with no regard to what they might be able to continue to study on entering secondary school. Its indistinct aims for pupils such as "*appreciating stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language*" recommend no further guidance to teachers and accordingly it is no surprise that many feel they lack the confidence to implement the pedagogic demands of the subject on a regular basis in schools (Finch et al., 2020).

Technology in the MFL classroom

The teacher interviews reveal that digital technologies and ICT have an important place in the MFL learning environment and that a considered and targeted introduction of such activities into classrooms can benefit pupil motivation and improve their engagement with languages. Teachers spoke about their struggle to find time to integrate ICT-based approaches and digital tasks into their lessons given the limited contact hours they have with pupils in an already crowded curriculum. Pupils confirm that they prefer such activities and tend to speak about language lessons that feature ICT in more positive terms - such as those which involved a competitive element using technology. Knowledge surrounding the

impact of digital assisted teaching on language acquisition in MFL contexts is limited, however, and there exists a lack of research-based approaches into how ICT integration in MFL should take place. Research from classroom-based practitioners suggests that teachers should assume the individual responsibility to judge when ICT-based approaches in their lessons are there to enhance learning, or merely operate for the sake of being innovative in the eyes of others and appearing 'up to date' with modern learning techniques (Conti, 2015, paragraph 11). Further research exploring the use of ICT and digital tasks in MFL suggests that if these activities are not introduced as part of a reasoned process, they can be implemented at the expense of other important skills in the language classroom such as listening fluency and grammar 'proceduralisation' – developing and embedding cognitive control over grammar structures in real life situations. (Conti, 2015). One means for teachers to address the ICT question might be to create MFL department-wide digital schemes of work that are embedded in curriculum design and that can identify the most appropriate digital tools that accompany a particular topic and how they should be embedded in particular lessons with feedback from other teachers.

There is no doubt that MFL classrooms in England have adapted well to the rapid advent of technology in secondary schools since the turn of century. One example of this being the shift from modern languages departments relying on overhead projectors with acetates, to interactive whiteboards for whole class teaching (Hawkes, 2009). Coping with the rapid emergence of protean and modern new technologies available to MFL learners outside the classroom such as apps and translation materials is a different matter, and pupils often fail to differentiate between those that ensure authentic interaction and communicating understandable messages (Smith, 2017) and those that recycle unoriginal language. The evolution of these technologies has been so swift that some MFL teachers have struggled with an appropriate response - often to the extent of abandoning the setting of written work at home (Smith, 2017). Equally, the findings of this study show that translation programmes and apps continue to affect pupils' engagement and motivation for MFL learning and were often described by the pupils as providing them with an easy short cut to producing their own independent and original work.

Research shows that the above drastic measures may not always be necessary and more innovative approaches that adopt measures of compromise towards translation programmes

can flourish. Integrative classroom strategies that embrace structured and monitored use of *Google Translate* and similar apps by pupils in lessons to translate, summarise and re-write original passages of the L2 so that they learn to manipulate texts is one example of this (Smith, 2017). The interviews also indicate that the setting of classroom cultures where the 'gamification' (Werbach and Hunter, 2012) of ICT and digital technology resources are indiscriminate and normalised can affect learners' expectations of MFL learning and of their own performances. Such cultures may also convey misconceptions about its rigour and the models of learning through which languages are usually acquired - i.e. through engaging and human real-world interaction rather than digital environments.

Since the data collection in this study was conducted, the prevalence and rapid growth in the accessibility and translation capability of generative AI tools and the rise of Large Language Models (LLMs) in the classroom such as ChatGPT, which are able to work with large sets of text and generate human-like responses to translation problems, showcase the remarkable developments that have been made in the last few years. These changes will have resonant consequences for the learning and teaching of MFL in secondary schools going forward and the ways in which pupils go about practising a language in class and working at home. The allure of LLM-based chatbots and their ability to role play as a languages' teacher or conversation partner as well as offering a useful tool for corrections or explaining vocabulary or grammar points (Bowler, 2025) may be ineluctable for pupils that struggle with their languages' homework and are faced with a difficult piece of written work to complete in a set amount of time. Practical language assessments that are most vulnerable to the advances of such technologies and assessment objectives, particularly the GCSE exam, may need to be revaluated going forward given the competition that AI programs now offer in providing an immediately accessible automated translation service in foreign language contexts (Woore et al., 2025). Conversely, this may also mean that the role of the MFL teacher in the classroom will inevitably have to adapt and become more significant: as teachers that integrate and promote the use of digital technology and apps in their classroom to keep pupils engaged, but also in providing oversight and mediation in the teaching process (Bowler, 2020), by checking for inaccuracies in phrasing, providing nuance and explanation in grammatical rules and idioms, and offering a model of human-to-human connection and empathy.

The decision by the Labour government to remove MFL from the compulsory part of the secondary curriculum in 2004 clearly continues to remain contentious among stakeholders in the secondary school environment. A proportion of the teachers taking part in this study argued with reason that the uptake of MFL nationwide would logically improve if all pupils were still made to study a MFL at GCSE. They cited the maturity and linguistic skills that pupils would develop given the extra two years of studying a language. This solution does not address questions of motivation and engagement in pupils, however. These teachers' beliefs also do not appear to have taken into consideration the views of their pupils towards being made to study a subject that many do not appear inherently inclined to pursue. There remains limited convincing evidence that suggests that the long-term engagement, motivation and attainment of pupils in language learning would improve if all secondary school pupils in England were suddenly coerced into continuing its learning. The findings reveal that the pupils interviewed in this study predominantly held the view that they would prefer more choice in their language learning - either through increasing the number of language options available to them to study, or the choice of not being able to study a language at all. A few teachers also subscribed to this view based on their own experiences – that the compulsion of pupils to study languages might have a counter-productive effect and would not address fundamental questions of why young people in England continue to be unenthused towards studying languages.

On the other hand, the independent school teacher spoke of how maintaining the compulsory status of MFL at her school had helped to drive and maintain a culture of respect that esteemed its study among parents and pupils. It therefore appears equally justifiable to claim that poor perceptions of the subject relating to its optional status in the curriculum have helped to cement pupils' opinions that languages are a subject less meriting of their attention. The teachers in my study that undeniably subscribed to this line of thought believed that renewing MFL's compulsory status would improve its position in schools and amplify the resources their institution might dedicate towards it. As a by-product this would minimise the daily battles they had with senior management over its importance in the curriculum. It appears undeniable that an improved position of

compulsory status for languages in the KS4 Curriculum would emit compelling and resonant societal messages from the government towards the importance of MFL in the face of the dominance of global English and 'English is enough' rationales that abound amongst learners. Sending these message can also improve the resources that are directed towards schools' MFL budgets that would help to tackle recruitment issues of home-grown language teachers that currently exist (Ross, 2024). Furthermore, the findings suggest that individual institution policy itself can be important – messages regarding the compulsory study of two languages at KS3 in some schools did appear to play a part in their pupils' thinking and several of the pupils cited these messages as having registered in their minds.

Re-examining government policy decisions can illuminate the compulsory question further. An original justification for the Labour government's decision to make the study of languages optional after the age of 14 was that there existed many pupils of different abilities in secondary schools, some of ' whom were wholly unable, unsuited or uncapable of learning a language' (McLelland, 2018, p. 8). The teachers in this study appeared to confirm this view - that many of their weaker pupils or those learning English as a first language did need the extra time to develop their skills in English and Maths and were frequently taken out of their language lessons. The views of pupils regarding the limited provision of language teaching they received at primary school also suggest that government policy towards reversing the decline has been hasty and ill thought through. Organically imbuing a love of languages in learners through their compulsory study at KS2 does not appear to have worked and has failed to address the decline in uptake. The opaqueness of purpose of subsequent government policy to remedy the decline in uptake such as introducing the now mandatory *Ebacc* in schools 2015 have only served to confuse the compulsory question further.

Although language learning levels in England are now reaching precarious levels since the 2004 decision, the issue remains complicated and questions of how to resolve the fundamental causes of the decline remain unclear. Immediate efforts to reverse the compulsory status of languages would have no impact on the difficulty of the current MFL GCSE exam, for example, which might further demoralise and discourage those pupils (Woore et al., 2020) who are forced to continue with such a demanding subject. In this researcher's mind, it still remains inconclusive, therefore, that applying a culture of forced participation would naturally result in attaining the widely held and often stated goal of

organically growing pupils' desires to continue the learning of languages to KS4, and in fostering the lifelong enrichment and enjoyment of the personal, cultural and professional benefits that knowing and using a language successfully can bring.

10.2 Situating my findings relative to previous research into learners' motivation for MFL study and their perceptions of its value

Coffey's (2018) study into how pupils speak about their MFL choices within the structural constraints of different school contexts also found that independent school pupils speak most positively regarding their motives for continuing to learn a second language (L2). These motives could be connected to parental encouragement to study languages and positive modelling from parents and siblings who speak or have learned another language. Some of the pupils in my independent group indicated their desire to show respect to the L2 community through practising their language when abroad - findings that have been echoed in previous studies into L2 motivation (Lanvers, 2016). Pupils from a maintained school that Coffey interviewed similarly reported predominantly negative motivation towards MFL study that connected its learning to limited instrumental usefulness for their professional ambitions - often based on simplistic notions of their career relevance: i.e. people who study languages want to be a language teacher (Coffey, 2018).

Poorer motivation that exists among English secondary school pupils towards learning a second language has been comprehensively documented in previous research. To a large degree, this lack of motivation has been understood in the context of global English and the perception of pupils that 'English is enough' (Lanvers, 2017). Studies undertaken in England report that motivation for learning MFL at primary level is high (Martin, 2012) but at secondary level, research has found that languages are often indicated as difficult and pointless by pupils (Lanvers, 2013). Self-efficacy has been reported as lower in pupils across secondary education in England (Graham et al., 2012) and the knowledge that they may give up languages at GCSE since 2004 has also impacted negatively on student motivation from the ages of 11-14 (Evans and Fisher, 2009).

Student reactions of boredom to the rigour of studying languages are well documented (Chambers, 1999; Fisher, 2001) in the literature and their complaints about mundane and repetitive teaching methods (Williams et al., 2002) were not new discoveries that emerged through my research. L2 motivational dimensions are noted as diminishing further into the secondary school experience, affected by low pupil opinion of MFL lesson pedagogy and content which is often characterised by assessment-focused and repetitive teaching (Evans and Fisher, 2009) that offers little opportunity for interaction and speaking practise in class (Wingate, 2016). Student perceptions also increasingly abound that languages are persistently marked one grade harder than other subjects (Myers, 2016) and these charges were supported by the pupils in my focus group interviews who spoke about picking easier subjects. Several of the pupils in the coastal state school (School B) focus group expressed the feeling that languages were "*too hard for them*" and pupils' belief that language aptitude is a special gift that is the preserve of a select few is a notion that has also been recognised in second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001).

The introduction of language learning at primary school since 2014 as a compulsory requirement has proved generally popular with pupils (Tierney and Gallestegi, 2005) despite primary schools facing issues of teacher shortages and ensuring a smooth transition to secondary school. There is conflicting evidence on how the transition to secondary school affects pupil motivation with lower enjoyment, self-efficacy and boredom being reported (Graham et al., 2014; Courtney, 2014) and these findings align with the views of the pupils in my focus group interviews. There are few studies in previous research that overtly reference pupils' fears of the MFL oral exam but some of the state school pupils from my research expressed nervousness that their attempts to speak the L2 might not sound perfect. As noted in the *conceptual framework* chapter of this study, Dörnyei's (2005) *L2 motivational Self-System* suggests that some learners imagine their 'ideal self' as a proficient L2 speaker and this inconsistency between their actual and ideal selves can be problematic for their L2 motivation.

Among such research there is evidence to suggest that a social divide in pupil motivation and parental support among those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds exists in Britain (Gayton, 2016). There are limited studies that explore the influence of parental attitudes on L2 motivation in England, but the ways in which parents rationalise the purpose of their

child's language education in those that do suggest that their lack of support can be connected to their own poor language knowledge (Bartram, 2006). Parrish and Lanvers (2018, p. 282) note that 'for pupils, the decision to learn a language is the result of a particularly complex interplay of factors' that may include national and school MFL policy and parental and family attitudes. Their study (2018) found that despite the current harsh operational contexts that schools find themselves functioning within, they can encourage MFL motivation in pupils through the choice of subjects offered and creating an environment where the subject is not seen as only suitable for higher-achieving pupils. School practices of selecting or encouraging high-achieving pupils to study MFL can inadvertently encourage the same pupils to adopt motivational orientations that are detrimental to their continued progress in the language (Parrish and Lanvers, 2018). Previous findings note that the messages that teachers send can similarly shape student motivation for the subject, not just in their teaching quality and style but also through their language learning beliefs (Cowie and Sakhui, 2011) and personal qualities. This finding was claimed by the teachers in my study but any evidence for their claim was not reflected in the pupil interviews.

How pupils respond to their parents' messages regarding MFL learning is less decisively confirmed in previous research. Jones and Jones (2001) found that some parents do not attach importance to MFL as a subject and this perceived indifference can transmit to their child's attitudes. More recently, Jones (2009) reported little correlation between pupils' motivation and performance in MFL learning and negative parental attitudes towards target language communities and their respective languages. Martin's (2023) study into the role that parents play in shaping their child's experiences of learning an MFL in secondary schools in England found that parents who have studied a language before and do attach importance to its study could be successful in guiding their children to continuing the subject at GCSE.

10.3 <u>Implications for policy and practice:</u>

A key finding of this research shows that the transition of language learning from primary to secondary school is not seamless; it appears poorly structured and inadequately handled,

according to the reports of pupils and teachers in this study. The findings also suggest that the teaching of languages in primary schools may itself be ineffective, hampered by the lack of statutory curriculum and pupils that begin a programme of learning too late compared to their European counterparts. Teachers themselves, are often poorly prepared and lacking in confidence. Therefore, overhauling the teaching of languages in primary schools in England is an immediate recommendation of this study, as well as devising a specific primary curriculum for languages and a detailed programme of study with tangible attainment targets for pupils that indicate measurable language skills. It appears an urgent necessity to create a coherent languages' programme of study by region (or by academic trust within schools) that enables pupils to consistently learn the same language throughout their primary school experiences, and which synchronises appropriately with their subsequent secondary school education. The transition itself to secondary school can be better handled by appropriate coordination and cooperation between the two schools. This could be facilitated by secondary school MFL teachers spending a dedicated period of time in primary schools to ensure a smooth transition and collecting information about pupils' language experiences and abilities. Amassing a portfolio of information about their incoming pupils' prior abilities in languages, as well as their language backgrounds (i.e. – ESL or not) and their language interests would be an appropriate first step. As part of this process, diverting more resources to primary school teacher training to regularly ensure that a quality trained cadre of candidates are recruited and developed, who possess advanced language proficiencies and can deliver a targeted programme of knowledge that is skills-based and with a practicable and communicative emphasis to pupils.

The interim report of the *Curriculum and Assessment Review* (CAR) published in early 2025 (DfE, 2025) pledged to undertake a deeper analysis to diagnose the specific issues affecting each subject and raised concerns over the efficacy of MFL teaching at primary level as well as the transition to secondary school. More recent research that has followed the Review has highlighted one possible solution as dropping the KS2 statutory requirement to make substantial progress in one language at KS2 (Woore et al., 2025). This study does not propose that such a drastic change is necessary, however, and instead suggests that the KS2 statutory requirement should be maintained, alongside developing a new statutory national curriculum for KS2 language learning that promotes pupils' understanding of the world of

languages, through igniting their curiosity and fostering transferable skills such as confidence in oracy and vocabulary and grammatical understanding. This has already been successfully tested at KS2 level by the introduction of programmes in several schools such as *WolloW* – 'World of Languages, Languages of the World' – a free languages curriculum developed by current MFL teachers that is designed to encourage curiosity, enjoyment and understanding of languages at KS2 and KS3- and has now begun to spread nationwide. The *WolloW* programme, which now contains a complete set of resources from Year 5 to Year 9 (Claughton, 2025) has helped to teach pupils *about* languages, how they work and where they come from, as well as how languages are at the very core of the curriculum - and link to many other subjects. This approach includes exploring what knowledge pupils may already have about languages and encourages them to bring their knowledge about their own languages into the classroom: to use them, think about them and value them. This inclusive approach to connecting all pupils' heritage languages to the languages that are taught in schools can have advantages for MFL teaching too: in encouraging pupils to see connections and patterns that develop across languages and grammatical rules, promoting intercultural competencies and helping them to feel included and their home languages to have increased status within the MFL classroom. This can also promote a more inclusive approach to language teaching with regards to the local community: by drawing on the diverse linguistic expertise and metalinguistic awareness of EAL children already in the class and the assistance of the local community and parents in offering support for heritage language classes. This would mean that schools might be less likely to rely on the linguistic expertise of one trained individual teacher and help to solve a major issue within current KS2 MFL teaching: recruitment. Promoting the inclusion of home and heritage non-European languages within mainstream MFL education settings through this approach can also begin to address the difficulties that presently surround obtaining a qualification in languages taught at home at GCSE level (Fahim et al., 2023).

The severe grading and the difficulty of the MFL exam remains a strong demotivator for pupils in the process of deciding whether to continue language study or not. Until this factor is addressed, it seems likely that the decline in uptake will only continue to worsen. The extreme grading of the subject by examiners at GCSE is one factor where this can be addressed, where results are seemingly distorted by the significant numbers of native

speakers who sit the exams (Kohl, 2019); GCSE exams, particularly the listening, are frequently judged as inaccessible, with too much content - considering the limited curriculum time available to teachers and have been noted as being often designed to trick or trap learners (Woore et al., 2020). Simplifying the exam papers is one solution to this problem and ensuring that exam boards work together studiously to adjust the level of linguistic difficulty of the exams for *all* learners (Kohl, 2019).

The 2025 *CAR interim report* (DfE, 2025) states that the national system of assessment in all subjects is 'broadly working well' (p.8), a suggestion that has been refuted by a 2025 study exploring the recommendations of the review (Woore et al., 2025). This thesis consequently proposes that the current system of GCSE assessment in MFL be reformed to reconsider the status of language proficiency as a skill, rather than as knowledge, and be assessed in accordance with how pupils' skills are assessed in other domains, such as music or sport – in terms of learners working their way up to grades or of incremental improvement over time. Such a reform to MFL assessment at GCSE might be based on a framework that previously existed - the Languages' Ladder Assessment Scheme (LLAS) (Woore et al., 2025; Hunt, 2025) which was discontinued in 2013, and aimed to motivate students by offering early and achievable pathway to successes in languages. The regular milestones that the LLAS provided aimed to provide clear pathways to final qualifications through the use of 'can-do' proficiency statements at a range of linguistic levels that were allied with the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) (Woore et al., 2025) and covered a range of abilities from entry level to GCSE. The potential reformation of the current assessment system to a competence-based one could in the future be extended to KS3 also, in offering pupils the possibility of obtaining certificates of proficiency at the end of Year 9 - which in effect would serve as an accreditation of their linguistic proficiency up to that stage - and also act as beneficial to future employers. This could be verified according to the pre-existing LLAS framework, tracked by the pupils' teachers, and would help to foster positive attitudes in pupils fuelled by their early language successes thus helping to build their confidence. It would further address the problem at KS3 where learners currently undergo three years of learning and may stop learning a language at the end of the year with nothing concrete to show for it - which is no doubt often a demoralising and pointless exercise.

Restructuring the oral exam and moving it to a time of year when pupils are not still following the regular school curriculum would be beneficial and help to remove some its associated stresses, as well as allowing learners to control how many times they hear the recordings in listening exams. Refreshing the content of curriculum and examinations to make them interesting and more relevant to the things that teenagers care about is another urgent priority and may help to assuage concerns that both the MFL exam and its curriculum are elitist and are designed to accommodate middle class lifestyles (Woore et al., 2020).

The findings of this study align with previous research that suggests that the speaking component of learning a language, alongside the GCSE oral exam itself, remains a source of immense anxiety for pupils. The significance of emotion in SLA contexts was first suggested by Krashen's (1982) theory of the Affective Filter and subsequent research has stressed that language anxiety can be a negative emotion within L2 learning, of which speaking is the most anxiety-producing element (Marzec-Stawiarska, 2015). Pupils themselves recognise that their lack of progress in speaking the TL adversely affects their motivation towards studying foreign languages (Bower, 2019). The teachers in this study were quick to emphasise that many of their pupils were strongly dissuaded from continuing MFL to GCSE solely due to their perceptions of the oral and the degree to which they dreaded speaking in a foreign language in front of their peers. A further recommendation of this study, therefore, is that the speaking and listening components of the GCSE curriculum be separated from the reading and writing and be presented as two separate modules for study and assessment in the exam at the end of KS4. Separating the listening and the speaking into a separate component from the reading and writing, with each module containing their own dedicated time in the curriculum, would accentuate the importance of each skill and improve the status of MFL within secondary schools and amongst other subjects in the curriculum. It would help to embed the notion amongst parents and school leadership that MFL is a unique subject, distinguished from others in the curriculum by its four separate skills, that are each difficult to master and deserving of their own curriculum time.

However, the benefits of such a move would not solely be symbolic. Detaching the listening and speaking into an individual taught and practical module in the school curriculum would help to demystify the negative perceptions that overwhelmed many of the pupils in my study towards speaking a foreign language and help to assuage the fear that particularly

many boys felt towards the embarrassment of making a mistake in front of their classmates, which previous studies also confirm (Thompson and Mutton, 2023). It would also help to remove much of the fear that pupils currently associate with sitting listening and speaking tests in class and help to incrementally develop their familiarity with taking oral assessments. Furthermore, this change would provide pupils with a dedicated period several times a week in which to grow their confidence in oracy and for teachers to gradually practise strategy interventions, including: increasing the target language used in class as well as improving attitudes towards using it; paying closer attention to pupils who are particularly struggling and teaching pupils adaptable strategies to succeed in oral practice, such as how to manipulate the language better. Splitting the reading/writing and the listening/speaking components of MFL study into two separate elements that are taught and assessed separately at GCSE would permit pupils sufficient time to practise each individual skill, something that both teachers and the pupils in this study felt that they had been denied since Covid. In time, such a division of the two modules in languages might come to be viewed and accepted in a similar way to which the modules of English and English literature are often separated and taught by schools at GCSE. The recently announced proposal for all schools to teach separate sciences at GCSE (The Times, 2025) are intended to emphasise the value and consequence of the individual science subject to pupils, as well as offering them the opportunity to devote sufficient time to their study - that the rigour and the breadth of each subject demands. There is no reason why the separation of language skills cannot come to be seen in the same light. Taking an assessment and receiving a final grade in each of the two separate modules of listening/speaking and reading/writing would also be beneficial to employers looking to hire linguists for particular roles or in industries that required certain skills. It would also help to enhance the employment and future academic prospects of those pupils who tend to excel in one of the different skills over others.

The concerns of the teachers in this study surrounding the position of languages in their schools centred around an absence of support from colleagues and a lack of understanding of the intricacies of language teaching and learning. A recommendation of this study, therefore, is that school leaders and MFL heads of department should work together to create a culture that sustains and values MFL teaching within their institution and affords it such status in the curriculum that pupils recognise its value. This might be through creating a

specific programme of MFL-based professional development for teachers organised through the same Local Education Authority (LEA) schools or through an Academy's trust. Such a culture could also be emphasised through increasing the hours of MFL in the curriculum or a compulsory policy of pupils studying two languages when entering the school in Year 7. The creation of after school or lunchtime clubs related to MFL, as well as promoting cultural exchanges and trips abroad when possible can help this culture develop. The schools that I visited where members of the leadership team or headteacher had a background as a languages teacher or an interest in language learning showed evidence of having such cultures in their schools. I was struck by the strong ethos towards languages that resonated throughout. From the teacher positioning in interviews, I gained the impression that such an ethos often begins with language teachers themselves, setting expectations in class for good behaviour and standards of using the TL in class that emphasised the participation of all pupils and refusing to normalise expectations that languages are an inferior or irrelevant subject. It is therefore imperative that the government seeks to resolve the MFL teacher recruitment crisis that exists and urgently addresses the deficit in recruitment of capable, motivated and proficient home-grown language teachers entering the profession. Confronting this issue would help to resolve the fundamental problems that teachers in this study cited, such as relying on inconsistent supply teachers in their region - often resulting in gaps in pupils' learning. Teacher recruitment is clearly a complicated political and economic issue that involves resource re-allocation but solving it would undeniably also help to tackle the low morale that exists in the profession amongst current teachers.

Within lessons themselves, pupils sometimes spoke of irrelevant and uninteresting content of the curriculum as well as vocabulary and topics they felt they would never need to use. Curriculum content of the *Ebacc* and the content of the GCSE exam have been accused of promoting the study of arcane topics in MFL lessons such as 'school rules' and 'recycling'. The findings of a new review ordered by the Labour government (The Times, 2025) suggests that the potential removal of the *Ebacc* may result in a shift towards more vocational subjects being prioritised within schools, and an untying of more conventional subjects, such as MFL, from their traditional elitist associations. In this researcher's opinion, this move is essential for a subject where uncertainty has always surrounded the obvious career paths for secondary learners and for those with an MFL degree (Lanvers, 2017). Another

recommendation of this study, therefore, is that the links between possible career fields that would welcome linguists and MFL learning in schools are strengthened, and learners are made more aware of the deep well of opportunities that might await them. These might be in industries and fields in which a language qualification is valued or local vocational opportunities where linguistic skills are required. Such opportunities can take place through encouraging industries to hold open days for soon-to-be school leavers and promoting partnerships between schools and local companies that use languages in their workplaces. These opportunities have the potential to be eye-opening for learners from certain backgrounds who may be unaware of their existence. Further recommendations for classroom practice are previously discussed in the *discussion* chapter of this thesis.

10.4 Directions for further research:

The current study focused on the positions that secondary school pupils assume in conversation as a means of understanding how their language-learning choices are made and exploring the factors that have contributed to the decline in uptake of MFL in England. There are several avenues for future research directions that therefore seem evident. Further studies would benefit from a deeper exploration of the specific factors that influence how student choice is made in language learning and a better understanding of how the relationship between the two exists. The role of parents' attitudes and MFL classroom experiences were found to be particularly significant influences on pupil perceptions of MFL in this study and are therefore further examples of two possible future directions that research into the decline in uptake of language learning might take. Parents' attitudes towards language learning can be explored through interviewing parents in more depth about their own language experiences or through questionnaires for their children to take home. Observation of secondary school MFL lessons can be a useful tool through which to understand how pupils experience and respond to their MFL learning and also a means of validating the language learning pedagogy that teachers refer to in the individual interviews. Positioning theory offers a further avenue of exploring these experiences by focusing on the positions that pupils take up in language classroom discourse. Exploring the interactions that

occur in this setting can be beneficial because classroom discourse is naturally occurring and offers a window into how pupils and teachers engage academically and socially in this context (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). Research exploring MFL classroom discourse and narratives can provide plentiful opportunities for better understanding how positions are constructed in the spontaneous, authentic and everyday classroom conversations that occur. Future research will augment our understanding of the pupil responses and perceptions of MFL beyond those that occur in conversations where the participants have been brought together specifically for research purposes. Choosing to focus on a specific facet of MFL learning in lessons, such as how grammar or culture is taught, might prove particularly fruitful through paying attention to how pupils position each other during different teaching episodes and which linguistic practices are valued by pupils over others. This thesis has presented the use of positioning theory in new contexts and identified specific modes of positioning that describe student motivation and identity that can be applied to MFL learning contexts. These understandings can now be used and adapted by other researchers looking to explore other L2 learning contexts, and potentially other contexts in secondary education.

The low level of pupil motivation expressed towards certain areas of the MFL curriculum and its learning, such as the oral and the speaking exam, suggests that a focus on these might prove profitable and provide valuable research data into the elements of MFL that pupils struggle with. The primary MFL learning environment has been relatively unexplored in this context and would certainly merit further exploration to assess to what extent the views my participants expressed held weight. Such an analysis could also provide a deeper understanding how to improve MFL provision and learning in the primary context.

10.5 <u>Conclusion</u>

This study has explored how secondary school pupils in Norfolk speak about their motivation for learning languages and how they justified their MFL decision-making as a way of understanding the decline in uptake of languages in England. Through its use of positioning theory to examine the momentary constructed positions and identities that learners assume

in focus group discourse and narratives, it has examined their perceptions of the value of language learning and provided insights into how learners' agency is constructed in their decision making and learning. Analysing the positions of teachers has permitted further perspectives into their beliefs on the causes of the decline in MFL learning to be gathered as well as an increased awareness of the challenges they face inside and outside of the classroom to emerge.

The study has provided conclusions that enable us to better understand the factors that affect pupil motivation for language learning in Norfolk and has contributed to the body of work that exists on the decline of uptake of language learning. Analysing the temporary positions that pupils take up, reject and defend in conversation has provided insights into how learners view the relevance of languages in the post-Brexit period as well as enabling suggestions for policy and practice for how to improve motivation in pupils that can address the question of the deficit of uptake. The findings reveal that among the multiple factors that can affect pupil decisions to continue language learning and their perceptions of its value, the absence of tangible connections that pupils form to TL culture and life through *intra* and *extra*-classroom experiences are problematic. Creating tangible and real-life links to the world of work and more opportunities to use the language in real-life or virtual interactions can enable pupils to form more realisable connections with the value of MFL - and may help them to escape insular influences that exist. Doing this can provide a window into the life-enhancing skill that everyone learning a language should get to experience, and in the words of one of the teachers in this study, "the deep sense of personal satisfaction you get from learning to use a language successfully".

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Appendix 1 – Focus Group Interview sample questions

1st activity- Match the careers/jobs with the skills you need and the school subjects that help develop that skill- Discuss amongst your group

Why do you think languages are necessary for this career/not needed for that career? Why might languages be needed here?

Can you explain why you have matched this skill with languages?

1. Are there any other benefits to learning a language apart from for your future job or career plans?

2. Which languages do you think are useful to learn? Why?

3. What job would you like to do in the future? Will knowing languages will be useful for this?

2nd activity - Rank the factors that influenced your decision to continue or stop learning languages' in order of importance – Discuss amongst your group

Can you tell me how this factor influenced you the most to continue studying 2 languages?

Can you explain how this factor was not an important influence on your decision?

4. What made you choose to continue/stop studying languages?

5. How much of a priority are languages for you compared to other school subjects?

General Questions:

1. Everyone in the rest of the world speaks English today. Do you think it still worthwhile to learn other languages?

2. How do you feel when you are in your languages' lessons?

3. What do you (not) like about language lessons?

4. What do your parents think about you studying languages?

5. Do your parents ever help you with your language work? When?

6. Do your parents ever speak about their experiences about learning languages?

7. How do you think your language lessons could be made more interesting?

8. Do you think it is important to speak the language of another country when you go abroad?

9. You are on holiday in Spain, and you need to ask someone for directions in Spanish but the person you ask answers you back in English. How would that make you feel?

10. Can you think of a time when you achieved something difficult in your language lessons. How did that make you feel?

I: Why did you choose to continue studying languages next year for GCSE?

H: Well, I think..coming from an Asian family myself, I think languages are really important, especially in the everyday world as well, and it could be some use for me, when I'm older as well yeah so I just think it's a fun thing to do as well.

I: Is languages something you enjoy; do you enjoy your lessons?

H: Yeah, I like to think of it as a code because it's something you don't know and you're learning it, and you're sort of cracking the code and then using that code as well.

I: What was the one thing that made you want to do languages next year?

H: Probably because in Year 7, we were told to choose a language and then I just really started enjoying it and then I just thought 'why not?'

I: Do your parents speak any languages?

H: Yeah, so at home: my parents are originally from India and Pakistan, so they speak Urdu at home, Hindi, Punjabi, a bit of everything really. But yeah…

I: And what do you think your parents think about you wanting to carry on with languages next year?

H: I think they're quite happy with it, I think they would say it is good and you should be doing it, it's a useful skill and yeah, I think they're just happy with it.

I: So, are you doing Spanish next year, or French?

H: Spanish.

I: What do you think you might use languages in the future? Is it something you want to carry on studying or…?

H: I think so, yeah. I really enjoy travelling quite a lot. I think for my age I'm grateful I'm very well-travelled and I think it's just useful to have, say you see someone foreign who needs help and it's just a good way to communicate as well.

I: When you say you have travelled a lot, which places have you been to?

H: Well, I've been to Dubai a few times, Turkey as well, around Europe, all around the UK…trying to think now, Malta, Singapore,

I: Oh, wow so lots of places. And when you go to those places, are you interested in learning about the language at all?

H: Yeah, not I think…because if it's just a holiday then maybe just a few words or common phrases used..but if it's somewhere maybe I may consider moving to then I think it's important to learn the language.

I: And what do you think the benefits are of learning another language, not just for you but in life?

H: Probably communicating with people and making new friends, just to be able to talk to more people and to be more social, yeah.

I: In your life, can you see yourself working abroad, living in another country, is that something that would be interesting to you?

H: I can, cos obviously there are so many places I still want to go to and I can imagine myself living there, and actually talking to people, yeah.

I: Any particular place where you'd like to live?

H: Probably Tokyo, I don't know why. Maybe Spain, I have thought about Spain.

I: Just going back to learning lessons in school, what do you like and don't like about language lessons?

H: Umm, I'd say I like how the teachers are really supportive, they also try to make the lesson really fun as well and we play so many games. I think one thing I don't like is trying to

remember things because obviously in Spanish there are so many tenses as well, yeah and it's just a bit hard to remember sometimes.

I: So, do you think languages is harder than other school subjects maybe?

H: Yeah, absolutely harder than other school subjects.

I: What makes you say that?

H: I think it's just, because if you think about even though it has the specific words for every word, you also have to think about the tenses, the arrangement of the words, there's just a lot more components that come into play.

I: When you think about doing it next year for GCSE, is there anything that you had heard about it, good or bad before you decided to do it.

H: Not really, I just think it's something I want to try out and just go for it.

I: Did you do languages in your primary school?

H: We did do languages for a little while, but it wasn't really a permanent thing, it was just once a week, one hour, a French teacher would come in, teach us something.

I: So, there wasn't really regular lessons:

H: No.

I: Did it help you do you think, knowing a little bit before you came here, or not really.

H: Um, not really cos I think the last time I did Spanish before high school was infant school and I don't remember any of it, whereas in primary school I did French, I mean I do remember a lot of the terms and stuff, but it didn't really help me a lot in high school.

I: When you're thinking about the future, do you think languages is something you'd want to keep studying or have it as a hobby.

H: I think it's more of a hobby for me. It depends on whether you already have your career planned out and how that also comes into it. So I actually want to do medicine but I have been thinking about maybe moving abroad then yeah, I think languages would be another thing that comes in useful.

I: So, if you want to do medicine, do you think languages is a subject that ties in with your future career or not really?

H: Maybe one or two things, you have a patient who speaks another language I think it is: it's a good skill to have but I wouldn't really use it in a career way.

I: So, when you prioritise which are the most important subjects in school for you?

H: Probably the core subjects, Maths, Science, English, yeah. I think of languages as more of a hobby subject, just..it's skillful but more of a hobby.

I: So obviously these days in school, for pupils your age, not a lot of people are choosing to do languages and it's becoming less popular, do you have any idea why that might be, just in general?

H: I think it's just school in general would be like that in a way. I think maybe it's just stereotypes of things and on the internet and social media as well, it makes people less likely to want to speak a language and be less sociable outside.

I: What about your friends, do they like learning languages or not really?

H: Um, not really to be honest…I think they think one language is enough..

I: What, English?

H: Yeah.

I: So obviously, these days in the world, everyone speaks English and when we go to places like Dubai or other places in Europe, everyone speaks English so do you think that really in England, here , we need to learn another language?

H: I think it's a good skill to have because another thing that is stopping people from learning another language is that people think there's always another app that can translate it for you and people are just becoming a bit lazy to do actually it, but I think that if you can have the mindset to do it then you should definitely learn a new language.

I: If you think about the people or stereotypes of a different country, does that make you want to learn a language more or less? If you think about French or something, if you know something about that country, does that make you want to learn it?

H: I think if the stereotypes are good, and you hear like how great the holidays over there are, then yes, that does that make you want to learn a bit more, whereas if the stereotypes are bad, I think you want to avoid it a lot more.

I: When you came to choosing languages, did your parents have any influence on that decision, or did you speak to anyone else?

H: Um, not really. I think they just said '*do what you wanna do, go for whatever language*' cos of course you have the option to do whatever language you want. I did originally pick German but because I was in a higher set for Spanish, like the higher sets have to do Spanish, when I got put into a higher set, my second option was Spanish and I got to doing this and then in Year 9 when we picked our GCSE options again I continued, I just chose to continue doing Spanish because I think, actually..maybe this is something I like to do.

I: Your friends, wouldn't be an important influence on you to continue doing something?

H: Maybe say, if my friends were from a completely different country, which some of them are, yes, I think I would learn a language there to maybe create that bond as well.

I: Is who you're going to have as a teacher an important factor for next year?

H: Yeah (laughs) I think everyone worries about that a lot.

I: What about your friends being in the class, is that a factor?

H: It is at first, but then you start getting used to the class, you do start to get used to the atmosphere and the environment, yeah..what you're dealing with exactly..

I: You said teacher is quite important, in a good way or bad way?

H: (laughs) I think, in a good way, yeah..in a good way. It's just basically depending on whether you like the teacher or not really, but yeah I think in terms of the teaching methods as well, I think it's important.

I: Is there anything about language learning you find really hard? Which thing do you worry about?

H: Probably the listening, I feel like that one's hardest, maybe cos what you hear in a classroom the teacher's enunciating on everything whereas if you go into the outside world they speak it a bit quickly or differently because they don't realise you're just learning it. So..yeah I think it is a bit harder, I think listening, especially.

I: And if you could learn languages in any way, to make it easier for you and your classmates to learn, what do you think the best way to teach pupils languages?

H: Maybe using games, maybe using scenarios as well I think, would be really good because it's all about the communication, so if you actually had scenarios and hypothetical situations it would make it a bit easier to understand what exactly they were saying and doing.

I: So, the way that you learn at the moment…is it more through?

H: It's more through textbooks..

I: Is that a fun way?

H: It *is* fun…every now and then Miss will also add in games so yeah it does get quite competitive, um but yeah I think right now what we're doing is good, I think it could be a bit better though.

I: Thank you, that's all my questions.

Mr Robert Sakhrani

PhD Researcher

17th March 2022

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

United Kingdom

Exploring the factors that influence learner choice in language learning.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Robert Sakhrani, and I am a researcher at the University of East Anglia. I am researching the factors that influence whether you take MFL or not at GCSE. I would like to give you some information about my study so you can decide whether you would like to take part or not. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with friends/relatives. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Your parents will also be asked for their permission for you to take part in this study. Thank you for reading this.

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a study about why pupils decide to continue learning a language or not. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a student in a secondary school in Year 9 who is making your GCSE choices.

This form tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this form to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Mr Robert Sakhrani.

This will take place under the supervision of Dr Spyros Themelis (S.Themelis@uea.ac.uk], [01603 591733).

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be asked to take part in a group interview with other members of your class about your languages classes that will last around 20- 30 minutes.

During the interview, you will be asked about your language lessons in school. You will be asked whether you enjoy your lessons or not. You will also be asked questions about how useful you think learning languages is for you and how useful you think it is for your future. You will also be asked why you have chosen to continue or stop language learning for GCSE study and the reasons that helped you reach this decision.

An audio recording will be taken.

You will have the opportunity to review information generated about you prior to publication.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

This will involve taking part in a group interview with other pupils in your class of 20 minutes during your school day that will not be during lesson time.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent at any time. You can do this by letting your teacher know before the interview takes place that you have changed your mind. If you have decided to change your mind during the interview you can let the interviewer know that you would like to withdraw from the study.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

If you take part in a focus group, you are free to stop participating at any stage or to refuse to answer any of the questions. However, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual comments from our records once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

There are no direct benefits to you but if you take part you will be helping us to find out about the different reasons that affect why learners decide to continue with learning languages or not.

You will help to improve the dialogue between policy makers, parents and schools on the importance of continuing language study for GCSE and help us address the reasons why many pupils in England choose not to continue language study.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

All your personal data that is collected and regarding your participation in this study will be kept strictly confidential.

The transcript of the interview that you participate in will be collected and stored on a password protected hard drive in a locked office that only I have access to.

An audio recording of the interview will take place but will be used for analysis only. It will be immediately deleted off the recording device and stored on a hard drive that is password protected and kept in a locked cupboard for the duration of the research.

Only myself and my immediate project supervisor will have access to the hard drive and to your information and the data collected.

You will not be identifiable in any publication or report regarding the research findings as the data will be grouped together and any identifying information will be removed. Anonymity of all the participants will be respected throughout all the stages of the data collection.

When the study is complete, I will send you a summary of the findings if you request this on this form below. The results of the project will form the basis of a doctoral thesis and will potentially be published in academic journals. You may request copies of these publications from me at r.sakhrani@uea.ac.uk

The data collected during this study will be retained and stored after the study ends on an external hard drive that only I will have access to. The data will be stored for a maximum of 12 months after the study ends. The data will also be stored in a University of East Anglia repository to allow it to be made available for educational purposes.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for a maximum of 12 months beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your name or any identifiable information about you.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Mr Robert Sakhrani (r.sakhrani@uea.ac.uk) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by including your email address on the form at the bottom of this page .

This feedback will be in the form of a one page summary of the findings

This feedback will be at the completion of the project.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Mr Robert Sakhrani

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

r.sakhrani@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning [*xxxxx, School of Education and Lifelong learning, xxxxx@uea.ac.uk.*(01603 xxxxxx)

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(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to your class teacher. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 17th March 2022.

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If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by an email sent to your school.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent, I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study, and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published but that any publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- Agree to my interview data being transcribed and would like to receive a copy of the transcribed data so I can read it before it is used.
- I consent to receive a one-page feedback form of the data collected which can be sent to me at the following email address: _____

I consent to:

Audio-recording   YES   ☐   NO   ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

                                   YES   ☐   NO   ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

               _____

☐ Email: _____

....

Signature

....

PRINT name

....

Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Second Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent, I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study, and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published but that any publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- Agree to my interview data being transcribed and would like to receive a copy of the transcribed data so I can read it before it is used.
- I consent to receive a one-page feedback form of the data collected which can be sent to me at the following email address: _____

I consent to:

Audio-recording   YES   ☐   NO   ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

                                             YES   ☐   NO   ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

                _____

☐ Email: _____

....

Signature

....

PRINT name

....

Date