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## CHOOSING TO STUDY POST-COMPULSORY MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN ENGLAND: MOTIVATIONS, SOCIOLINGUISTIC TRENDS AND THE CONTEXT OF BAME

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# Choosing to Study Post-Compulsory Modern Foreign Languages in England: Motivations, Sociolinguistic Trends and the Context of BAME

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**Abstract.** Annual Language Trends reports (2004-present) note that uptake of the school subject, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), is in decline in England. These reports stem from the Department of Education's 2004 decision to suspend compulsory MFL pedagogy in English schools at 14 years old. While previous research has focussed exclusively on motivational factors behind choosing to (dis)continue post-compulsory MFL study, this paper investigates any trends or divergences of these motivational factors in relation to extralinguistic factors, namely gender, type of school, socio-economic background, region and ethnicity. Drawing on empirical evidence from an online questionnaire of 319 recent school leavers, this study finds that: (i) MFL uptake is in particular decline at post-16; (ii) (female) students with higher social, cultural and economic capitals, originating from southern regions in England, are the group most likely to continue with post-compulsory MFL; (iii) it is external factors, such as the perceived difficulty of MFL by students and the supposed 'boring' curricula, rather than negative perceptions towards language learning, which are leading deterrents of post-compulsory MFL education; and (iv) when analysing ethnicity as an extralinguistic factor in isolation, the perceived 'Eurocentric' nature of the subject, in conjunction with the (lack of) provision of certain Heritage Languages, remain salient motivational uptake factors for students who identified as part of the Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic community. Therefore, this paper has implications for amendments to educational policies, to build an exciting curriculum and learning environment based on students' preferences and ameliorate uptake of post-compulsory MFL in England.

**Plain English Abstract.** In 2004, the Department for Education decided to make the school subject, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), optional in England, signifying that it is no longer required for students to study MFL in Key Stages 4 or 5 (from the ages of 14-18). Since the introduction of this policy, annual Language Trends reports illustrate that the uptake of MFL from students has steadily been declining. While ample studies have explored possible reasons behind this motivational decline in isolation, little research in England, thus far, has attempted to explore these motivations in relation to extralinguistic factors, to see whether a student's gender, type of school attended, socio-economic background or ethnicity contributes to this decline, if at all. Therefore, this paper expands on existing scholarly effort by examining the relationship between these factors. Results from an online questionnaire of 319 recent school leavers in England, confirms that MFL uptake is lower at post-16, and is particularly noticeable in groups of students with lower social, cultural, and economic capitals in this study. Furthermore, results from this study show that it is external factors, such as perceived difficulty of exams and rigid educational policies (whereby students are limited to certain languages and a supposed 'Eurocentric' curriculum), which act as principal drivers in low uptake, rather than intrinsic negative perceptions towards language learning. Therefore, this paper calls for these educational and school policies to be revisited and modified, in order to make the subject more inclusive and attractive, based on what students want to study.

**Keywords:** modern languages; MFL; student attitudes; educational linguistics; education policy; language learning

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# 1 Introduction

Successive annual Language Trends reports (cf. Tinsley, 2019; Collen, 2020) have long noted a growing decline in uptake of the school subject, Modern Foreign Languages<sup>1</sup> (MFL) in the UK. In England, schools are guided by the Department for Education (DfE), whereby policies stipulate that MFL is taught from the ages of 7-14 (DfE, 2014), leaving the decision to enforce further study in Key Stages 4 and 5<sup>2</sup> up to schools' individual practices. Motivational studies, thus far, have shown that the 2004 decision to discontinue post-compulsory MFL study (ibid.) is the result of a complex 'interplay of factors' (Parrish and Lanvers, 2018): namely, perceived 'usefulness' and tedious curricula, with students often enjoying material and lessons less than other subjects (Graham et al., 2012). Research in Sociolinguistics has found this optionality of MFL to affect students who are disadvantaged economically, socially, and geographically the most, too (Collen, 2020; Henderson & Carruthers, 2021). Furthermore, while statistical reports have shown that members of the Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic<sup>3</sup> (BAME) community are amongst the largest groups of students absent in post-compulsory MFL (Parkinson, 2020), this limited, quantitative research has precluded an exploration into ethnicity as a social factor for motivational decline, or explanations behind this absence. Therefore, this paper seeks to understand this disenrollment in England, so this 'decline' is not exacerbated, and no child forgoes the opportunity of gaining an MFL education on the basis of their class, gender, ethnicity, and/or education. Therefore, this paper raises three research questions:

**RQ1:** What are students' attitudes towards post-compulsory MFL education?

**RQ2:** To what extent, if at all, do these attitudes and motivational factors correlate with other sociolinguistic and extralinguistic factors?

**RQ3:** What are the current trends and attitudes amongst BAME students towards post-compulsory MFL education? And to what extent, if at all, are there

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<sup>1</sup> This paper deploys the term 'MFL' to refer to the school-based, linguistic-focussed school qualifications. However, given that 17.1% of current secondary school students in England do not have English as their first language (DfE, 2021b), I avoid using this label when referring to language learning in general, as studying languages in this context may not be foreign for some students.

<sup>2</sup> Students aged 3-18 in England typically follow a National Curriculum in schools (a set of subjects listed by the DfE which schools in England are expected to implement), which the Government has further categorised into blocks of year groups called Key Stages (KS) (DfE, 2022b). The use of this term in this paper, however, should not be conflated with the official qualifications by which students are assessed, namely 'General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE),' which is the competency-focussed exam taken at post-14 in England, and 'Advanced Levels (A-Levels)', one of the formal qualifications in England at post-16. There are also alternative qualifications which can be gained in these KSs, instead (such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) in lieu of A-Levels at KS5), and thus should still be considered when talking about post-14 and -16 MFL study.

<sup>3</sup> Given the axiological positioning of this research, I recognise the controversies and sensitivities that arise here. For me, ethnicity is fluid, multifaceted and complex, differing between individuals and perspectives, thus, difficult to define. This paper refers to 'BAME' as 'ethnicity' (classed according to the shared cultural expression and identification; Blakemore, 2019) instead of 'race' (defined by communities linked by physical characteristics such as skin colour; ibid.). I recognise that 'ethnicity' is a social construct which does not equal not-white, thus considers white minority ethnic groups (such as White-Gypsy or Irish Traveller) as part of 'BAME,' too. For the purposes of this paper, though, I adopt the term 'BAME' predominantly to maintain and ensure consistency with previous scholarship and other existing governmental bodies (AdvanceHE, 2022), enabling me to benchmark against their data. I disaggregate data where possible and leave it up to respondents to choose to self-identify or not. Limitations of the use of this term pertain principally to the homogeneity of the ethnicities classified within 'BAME,' as it can spotlight and prioritise specific pan-ethnicities (in this case, 'Black' and 'Asian'), risking the exclusion of other ethnicities (Aspinall, 2021). Consequently, this label, along with my interpretation and conclusions, should be taken with caution, so not to generalise, misrepresent, and conflate communities

divergences between respondents based on their belonging/identification with the 'BAME' category?

Drawing on empirical evidence from an online questionnaire of 319 recent school leavers, this paper arrives at the conclusion that students do, in fact, value the usefulness of MFL, often remaining intrinsically motivated to learn languages. It is, rather, the perceived rigid, tedious, and Eurocentric MFL curricula permeating English classrooms, which dissatisfies students. Regarding sociolinguistic trends, this paper lends credence to recent reports from Northern Ireland (NI), indicating that there are significant sociolinguistic disparities, pertaining to gender, school type, and socio-economic background, with motivation differing between these factors.

In what follows, this paper builds on a review of literature examining existing motivational trends and social factors in Section 2. Section 3 evaluates the research design, covering sampling and data collection methods, before presenting the main results of this study in Section 4. Lastly, Section 5 discusses these findings in relation to previous research from Section 2, before concluding with implications for future research.

## 2 Background

Before progressing in this paper, it is imperative that we first understand the current landscape of Secondary MFL in England, to help us identify which areas have scope for further research in this study. Therefore, this section first walks us through the history of motivational trends regarding post-14 MFL uptake, prior to providing an overview of explanations of why these trends may occur. Using the *British Council Language Trends* reports (2004-present), it then explores these trends in relation to any sociolinguistic factors which may appear amongst students when decision-making at post-14 and post-16, drawing on data from other nations of the UK (viz. Northern Ireland) to offer any hypotheses regarding the situation in England. Furthermore, having identified an absence of data and analysis in the aforementioned Language Reports regarding the general absence of students who identify as part of the BAME community in post-14 MFL study – as well as any explanations for this – the third section examines motivational trends amongst this community in isolation. However, due to the current knowledge gap surrounding theories for this motivational decline amongst the BAME community in England, this section draws on previous literature from the United States, to understand why motivational decline is more noticeable in this particular group of students. This section ends by outlining the present study and presenting its hypotheses on the basis of studies conducted in the literature reviewed in this section.

### 2.1 Existing Trends in MFL: Motivations and Uptake

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the reasons for why MFL uptake may be in decline. Most recently, Parrish and Lanvers (2018, p. 282) find the decision to discontinue MFL study by students to be the 'result of a particularly complex interplay of factors': namely, the difficulty of the subject, school MFL policy, and perceived usefulness. This supposed difficult perception of MFL (Fisher, 2001; Graham, 2004; Parrish and Lanvers, 2018) first emerged in the early 2000s, whereby quantitative studies by Fisher (2001) and Graham (2004) indicate that it was not only the supposed difficulty of the exams, but also the perceived difficulty of MFL lessons which deterred English adolescents. In Fisher's (2001) mixed-method study, 59% of the 117 MFL GCSE students questioned, reported MFL to be amongst the most challenging subjects across the GCSEs studied – even for the most able students who were on course for the top GCSE grades. A further third of the GCSE pupils surveyed in Fisher's (2001) study, directly used the adjectives 'difficult' and 'hard', too, when describing their respective MFL GCSE which they were studying. This was further explored in Fisher's (2001) focus groups of 18 A-Level linguists and non-linguists, who explained the insecurity

and negative atmosphere felt by students in MFL lessons at both GCSE and A-Level, supposedly making studying post-compulsory MFL purposeful only if you had a natural flair for language-learning or ‘excelled academically’ (ibid.). More worrying still, this perception held by students grew over the decade, as echoed in more recent studies by Taylor and Marsden (2014), for example. In their study, participants noted the significant jump in difficulty between GCSE and A-Level, as evidenced further in Vidal Rodeiro (2017) who found that that students routinely perform worse in national MFL exams, than other subjects. However, the quantitative methods adopted in much of the aforementioned studies impeded an exploration of pupils’ more nuanced responses, signifying that scholarship is lacking in what aspects of MFL students specifically find difficult. On the whole, though, it is understandable why students are unwilling to pursue post-compulsory MFL study in this context, thanks to this perception of difficulty of MFL by students coupled with students’ increased fear of making mistakes in MFL lessons (Bartram, 2006). This may indeed generate feelings that they cannot — and perhaps may never — succeed in the subject.

Building on this phenomenon, several lines of research indicate that the level of enjoyment remains an unequivocal predictor for uptake, too (Fisher, 2001; Macaro, 2008; Taylor & Marsden, 2014). Here, students are often demotivated due to reportedly ‘mundane and repetitive’ teaching methods (Fisher, 2001). While Macaro (2008) claims that poor and disengaging teaching methods could certainly contribute to the motivational decline, Graham et al. (2012) has found that it is, rather, the supposed monotonous MFL curriculum and assessment constraints which to lead to boredom in an MFL classroom, subsequently causing students to enjoy MFL less than other subjects.

Scholars have commented on MFL in relation to other subjects, claiming that students are generally dissuaded because of the assessment types in MFL (Tinsley & Board, 2015; Kohl, 2019). For example, compared to subjects such as ‘Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM),’ – which have been increasingly promoted by the government to drive engagement (Tinsley & Board, 2015) – Tinsley and Board (2015) have found that MFL A-Levels, in particular, are ‘harshly and inconsistently’ marked. They claim that MFL exams are too ‘unpredictable’ (ibid.), which inadvertently pushes prospective students away from MFL and towards subjects such as STEM. By highlighting how competition for university places (which are dependent upon students’ grades at A-Level) is getting tougher, Tinsley and Board (2015) note how it is ‘inevitable’ that students will select other subjects instead of MFL on the basis it may place them in better stead to be rewarded with the highest grades, and a subsequent better position of getting into university. If we compare assessment types in MFL and Mathematics, for example, MFL assessments at post-14 are fourfold and equally weighted by exam boards to reflect their four determined assessment objectives viz. listening (25%), speaking (25%), reading (25%), and writing (25%). At post-16, however, MFL students are now typically assessed in three unequal components: paper 1 – listening, reading and writing/translation (50% of A-Level), paper 2 – writing (20% of A-Level), and paper 3 – speaking (with the inclusion of an Independent Research Project, 30% of A-Level), which generally showcase students’ application and ‘language in use’ skills, awarding its marks exclusively on the final product (AQA, 2016; Pearson Edexcel, 2016). By contrast, in A-Level Mathematics, only one of the three papers is application-focussed, and marks within an exam can still be allocated for explicit mathematical knowledge and the learning steps (or ‘working out’ process), before the student reaches the final answer (Pearson Edexcel, 2017). That is, there is still scope for marks to be awarded in Mathematics even if the final answer is wrong. Kohl (2019) claims that learner experiences are being negatively impacted further in MFL as students are often supposedly compelled to draw on a wider repertoire of skills in just one exam, by tackling too many tasks in the time available (with many of the texts deemed too enigmatic for students). A-Level exams in Mathematics, on the other hand, are mostly designed in ‘clear and accessible ways’ (Pearson Edexcel, 2017), allowing students to specialise in certain topics they feel strongest in (essentially tailoring exam papers/the course to students’ strengths and preferences), and permit students to focus their revision for the exams more easily, as different aspects of the subject are allocated to specific and separate exams, leaving little overlap of topics (ibid.). Back in MFL,

however, with students typically unable to demonstrate all of their skills in one sitting in post-16 exams, they may well receive a lower grade than they would have achieved in another subject (Kohl, 2019).

Finally, the perceived difficulty and unattainability of high MFL grades amongst students is worsened by the fact that in languages with consistently fewer students, such as A-Level German, uptake is comprised notably by native speakers, who arguably raise the grade boundaries and contribute to this supposed idea of difficulty by students (*ibid.*). For example, research conducted by Ofqual (2017) highlighted how in A-Level German, nearly half of students who were awarded an A\* were comprised of native German speakers. This signifies that even if an assessment remains too difficult for non-native students, there will still be enough proficient students (consisted mostly of native speakers) who may, indeed, raise grade boundaries and create an impression for non-native students that top grades are only reserved for native speakers, further perpetuating this idea of difficulty. This understandably pushes students towards other subjects in lieu of post-compulsory MFL study, where there may exist a seemingly fairer or level playing field. However, this discourse is complex; while exam boards must not ignore and unintentionally discriminate against non-speakers of the target language(s), anonymity is maintained during exams, thus rendering the data pertaining to the number of native speakers in an exam cohort invisible to exam boards and examiners. It then remains unclear how amendments and implications to resolve this can be implemented.

## **2.2 Sociolinguistic Trends in MFL: Motivations and Uptake**

Historically, MFL study in the UK was something only the elite (or those with a high capital) would do, as until the 1960s, access to MFL qualifications was reserved for those attending selective schools<sup>4</sup> (McLelland, 2018). While selective schools' acceptance process is largely based on academic attainment, selective schools (particularly grammar schools) are believed to be just as socially selective (albeit indirectly) (Binwei Lu, 2020), for reasons pertaining to the general socio-economic status of the family (Cribb et al., 2013), often benefitting those with a higher capital. For instance, economists note how high-income families generally place greater value on schools producing good examination results (Burgess et al., 2015), while working class parents typically emphasise a school with positive community values, often associating selective schools with a certain academic elitism (Cribb et al., 2013). Furthermore, the location of selective schools act as a barrier to access, too, as parents whose desire to send their children to a selective school is substantial enough, will typically pursue strategic house moves to gain entry to such schools (Cribb et al., 2013), further increasing the prices of houses in that area. For example, Cullinane et al. (2017) highlighted how parents would have to pay £45,700 more than the average house price in a catchment area of a top school. Even in the instances where children from a middle-high background are unable to live in the area of their selective school, Cribb et al. (2013) found that their parents are on the whole better positioned to cover travel expenses to enable their children to commute to schools in selective areas. Lastly, selective schools benefit those from a higher socio-economic background because, in some instances, these families see grammar schools, for example, as a more economical alternative to an Independent school. This means they often view entry to a (state funded) selective school as an active investment,

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<sup>4</sup> This paper categorises the various school types in England into broader groups of State schools - including but not limited to comprehensive schools, academies, faith schools, and grammar schools (whereby funding is often allocated by the Government and are free for students aged 16 and under to attend), as well as Independent schools – also referred to as 'private' and 'fee-paying' schools – which are privately funded and are not free to attend (DfE, 2022c). The aforementioned school types can be differentiated further; schools in England can also be 'selective' and 'non-selective'. This paper determines 'selective' to mean a school which admits students on the basis of any sort of selection criteria, usually academic, following the 'common entrance exam' (also known as the 11 plus, and in some instances 13 plus, exam, which is taken near the end of a child's primary education to test their academic ability). These tests are often typical of Independent and Grammar schools (DfE, 2022c). By contrast, a 'non-selective' school typically accepts all students, regardless of aptitude (such as a comprehensive school).

using financial and/or personal connections to gain an advantage by paying for private tutoring for the entrance exam in selective schools (ibid.), which lower income families may not have access to.

In the context of MFL, however, little scholarship in England has attempted to understand this correlation between middle-high classes with high MFL motivation, to my knowledge. While annual trends in Language Reports continuously identify disparities in social factors, they focus exclusively on uptake numbers, precluding explanations of the impact of these factors on motivation (see Tinsley, 2019; Collen, 2020). To understand this impact, this paper draws on studies from other nations across the UK, such as Northern Ireland (NI), whereby focus has been given to understanding the impact of school type, socio-economic backgrounds, and geographical inequalities on uptake. Despite various demographic disparities, these reports still remain vital and applicable to this study, in order to draw hypotheses<sup>5</sup>.

Firstly, Henderson and Carruthers (2021) found school type to play a vital role in post-compulsory MFL decision-making, elucidating that selective schools were more likely to have larger cohorts of post-compulsory MFL students than non-selective schools. That is not to say that post-compulsory MFL uptake is higher on the basis of the selective schools' academic selection criteria, but rather these schools typically have secure and consistent MFL uptake numbers – arguably due to the magnified 'socio-economic stratification' found in selective schools in NI (Henderson, 2020) – which, in turn, leaves little competition against other subjects to secure (already limited) subject funding by the school, and makes them more economically viable to run MFL (Henderson & Carruthers, 2021). Annual Language Trends reports have consistently documented that, in England, selective schools are the environments most conducive for post-compulsory MFL study, too, because these schools are, typically, found to be made up of fewer disadvantaged students with an overall high attainment level, as well as having larger MFL departments (reporting an average of 12.6 MFL teachers in Independent schools, compared to an average of 5 MFL teachers in State schools; Collen, 2020). Consequently, Independent schools (and schools with smaller populations of disadvantaged students, and/or a larger body of MFL teachers) would have more opportunities and resources to run MFL. Collen (2020) found that this socio-economic stratification is high in England, too, as State schools also often enjoy varying levels of international engagement compared to selective Independent schools. As State schools generally receive more disadvantaged pupils than Independent schools, teachers have reported being unable to run school trips abroad because many students may not even possess a passport, have never been on domestic holidays, and due to the general lack of funding in MFL in the State sector, teacher training on running international exchanges remain underdeveloped (ibid.), leaving it financially and logistically unviable to offer as many international opportunities. This can indeed inadvertently affect learner experiences of MFL and uptake.

Similarly, scholarship has drawn on the *Bourdieu* concepts of social, economic, and cultural capitals to explain the impact of these sociolinguistic factors on MFL motivations, too. Bourdieu's three theories of capital (social, economic, and cultural) explores how differences in lifestyles based on people's status or social class (viz. members who occupy similar professional positions or enjoy similar pastimes and interests when residing in similar conditions), can lead to differences in life experiences, as well as access and distribution of certain resources (Bourdieu, 1974). Applying this concept in an educational MFL context, Coffey (2018) found that students who often undertake family holidays abroad are more likely to study MFL, as it provides them with, arguably, higher economic and cultural capital. This may be more likely to have a positive influence on students' post-compulsory MFL decision-making, as students with a higher economic and cultural capital may place

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<sup>5</sup> For contextualisation, it is important to note that there exist vast divergences in school characteristics between England and NI. That is, the 'comprehensivisation' of secondary education in England (whereby the former tripartite system was replaced) was not implemented in NI (Gallagher and Smith, 2000); instead, NI retained an academically selective system, in which secondary-aged students are divided into 'grammar' and 'non-grammar' schools, accommodating 44% and 56% of NI pupils, respectively (Henderson and Carruthers, 2021). Furthermore, compared to the educational landscape in England, migration to NI is strikingly lower thus schools often record fewer students of varying ethnic minorities (ibid.), but NI does maintain a promising and growing Irish-medium sector (ibid.).

more importance on language learning as it fits with their international travelling lifestyle and world view, and would still remain applicable to their lives outside of the classroom (Coffey, 2018). Similarly, Collen (2020) investigated the impact of geographical influences in relation to motivations, finding that MFL qualifications are particularly high in urban areas of England, whereby ethnic diversity remains large. I do not interpret this to mean that large ethnic diversity automatically leads to more post-compulsory MFL students, rather in these areas with greater ethnic diversity, there subsequently often exists greater linguistic and cultural diversity already. This everyday exposure to international cultures could, therefore, intrinsically attract students to the benefits of gaining an MFL education.

### **2.3 Languages for All? MFL in the Context of BAME**

Low enrolment of BAME students in post-compulsory MFL study has permeated English schools over the decades, as evidenced by the fact that in 2007, less than 1% of African, Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students studied MFL at A Level (Vidal Rodeiro, 2009). Despite these statistics, little attention has been given to understanding the relationship between ethnicity and MFL uptake in England. Therefore, this paper deploys scholarship exploring this disenrollment in the United States (US), to identify possible explanations<sup>6</sup>.

Firstly, Moore (2005) found the implementation of a Eurocentric curriculum to be the principal factor behind the motivational decline amongst BIPOC (a term specific to the US which is intended to centre the experiences of ‘Black,’ ‘Indigenous,’ and communities or ‘people of colour’) students in the USA, suggesting students may struggle to connect with content, or draw parallels between their own language, culture, and upbringing. One can infer, therefore, that a Portuguese-speaking student with Mozambiquan heritage, or a French-speaking student from Senegal, for example, may, indeed, be equipped with sound knowledge of the mechanisms behind the target language to succeed in MFL. Both studies by Cenoz (2013) and Finch, Theakston, and Serratrice (2020) support this, as they identified that the MFL classroom is where students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds can excel the most academically and emotionally, often outperforming their monolingual counterparts in MFL tasks and exams. This is because when approaching their MFL studies, they are often able to draw on a ‘broader repertoire of linguistic skills’ (Cenoz, 2013) and are typically benefitted from the code-switching skills which they are already required to deploy in their everyday lives. This, in turn, can boost their performance in MFL lessons and exams as they are already familiar with this skill (Finch, Theakston, & Serratrice, 2020). Furthermore, students may possess an apparent greater predilection for — and greater confidence with — language learning, which can often be attributed to their multicultural background (ibid.). However, I argue that if these students are limited to a Eurocentric curriculum in England (Nuffield Languages Enquiry, 2000) — and subsequently not represented in content material — in some instances, it would be harder for them to feel included in the MFL classroom, even if students have a prominent lead in the subject compared to their monolingual counterparts (Finch, Theakston, and Serratrice, 2020).

Owing to the fact that BAME teachers make up just 14% of the teaching force in England (Weale, 2020), too, the general idiosyncrasy of MFL pedagogy can leave MFL teachers without the sufficient cultural and/or ‘advanced’ linguistic knowledge to teach BAME students — especially those

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to contextualise the sociocultural differences between the US and UK in relation to their respective educational landscapes. Unlike the compulsory school system in England, compulsory education in the US is threefold: comprised of ‘elementary’ schools (grades k-4), ‘middle’ or ‘junior high’ schools (grades 5-8), and ‘high’ schools (grades 9-12). The number of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds attending these schools is disparate between the two countries, too; 34.5% of all pupils in both primary and secondary schools are from an ethnic minority background in the UK (DfE, 2021b), compared to 54% of ethnic minority pupils in the US (NCES, 2022). Note that due to the aforementioned differences in school type in England and the US, these demographic figures account for both primary- and secondary-aged school children holistically, as the measurement of determining the sociocultural makeup between the two school systems becomes more complex, with differing age groups and grade levels.

with knowledge of other languages spoken at home (Guillaume, 1994; Wilberschied & Dassier, 1995; Finch, Theakston, & Serratrice, 2020). Glynn (2007) supports this argument as in his study of why BAME students were not pursuing foreign language courses, responses were simply because they were not understood or encouraged by teachers. Moreover, from a linguistic perspective, Finch, Theakston, and Serratrice (2020) have noted that the increasing number of English as Additional Language (EAL) pupils in MFL classrooms in England has contributed to further levels of linguistic and pedagogical complexity in MFL (Finch, Theakston, and Serratrice, 2020), because teachers' subject knowledge, their perceptions of their own abilities, and timetable constraints with an 'overburdening' schedule, may not permit educators to access the relevant training and/or resources to challenge and stretch these students (ibid.). The *Teachers' Standards* released by the DfE (2011) in England – which sets out the level of practice expected by teachers – require teachers to “have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with English as an additional language [...]; and be able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them.” (DfE, 2011, p. 12). However, Leung (2016) found that despite this requirement, there is a shortage of systematic training for education involving EAL in practice, allowing teachers to access sufficient EAL training only through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses once in the mainstream school setting (Howitt, 2022). This has been found to cause concerns particularly for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), as it leaves many entering the teaching force having little confidence in their practical teaching methods with EAL (Cajkler and Hall, 2012). This is reported in the DfE (2018)'s survey of NQTs' perceptions of how their Initial Teacher Training (ITT) prepared them for teaching, whereby only 39% of teachers surveyed reported feeling adequately trained to teach EAL.

Finally, studies have shown that the style of MFL lessons can be prominent deterrents for MFL motivational decline amongst BAME (bilingual) students. For example, Kleinsasser (1993) noted how MFL lessons are often pervaded by repetitive grammar drills, which can deter students, particularly those who have knowledge of additional languages. Zarrinabadi, Rezazadeh, and Chehrizi (2021) attribute this to the language mindsets adopted by L3 (third language) learners in MFL which can have both positive and negative implications for bi- and multilingual students' motivations and energy investment in the subject. They argue that L3 learners often possess a 'fixed' language mindset (the idea that language ability and perceptions are unchangeable; Lou and Noels, 2017), instead of a 'growth' mindset (the belief that perceptions and ability can change and improve; ibid.), which they believe is more apparent in L2 learners. This is because L3 learners supposedly already possess a greater awareness of their language-learning abilities and performances (including strategies/approaches, successes, and failures) when acquiring L2, thus may be less optimistic and enthused when learning L3 in MFL lessons, than their monolingual peers (Zarrinabadi, Rezazadeh, & Chehrizi, 2021). Therefore, it is understandable why BAME students, who may already have knowledge of a Heritage Language<sup>7</sup> (HL) and an already established set of skills and experience(s) of language-learning, which is arguably more 'advanced' than their peers (Edele et al., 2018), may be unwilling to gain an MFL qualification or value its 'usefulness,' and choose not to be impeded by this perceived obstinate, unchallenging curriculum.

## 2.4 The Present Study

Taking into consideration research previously highlighted, the present study aims to assess the relevance of the aforementioned motivational and sociolinguistic factors on the most recent school leavers in England. Given the relatively small body of literature investigating ethnicity and language uptake in England, too, this study seeks to identify any divergences between respondents with regard

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<sup>7</sup> I use Heritage Languages, also known as community languages, as a generic term to embrace languages typically learned at home during childhood, but which are not the dominant language spoken in society. e.g., Urdu in the UK; Spanish in the United States.

to motivational factors, based on their identification with the BAME category. To assess the motivational trends amongst the most recent school leavers, this study draws on part of the quantitative experimental design of Parrish and Lanvers (2018), adopting many of the same motivational items found in their questionnaire (see Appendix One). This enables the results from the current study to be easily benchmarked against previous scholarship, examine whether the results from this investigation corroborate previously investigated data, and identify if any new trends emerge. As this present study is inspired by that of Parrish and Lanvers (2018), it can be hypothesised that the principal deterrents for motivational decline amongst English adolescents in this study will align with those found by Parrish and Lanvers (2018). That is, the perceived uninspiring curriculum married with the supposed difficulty of the subject will triumph in being the key factors for motivational decline. However, unlike previous research, the implementation of qualitative research in this study will help to further understand why motivational divergences occur.

### **3 Methodology**

Having identified the shortcomings of previous research, this section aims to outline the methodology implemented in this study along with any potential limitations. First, this section evaluates the suitability of quantitative research designs in this context, and specifically the implementation of questionnaires to successfully meet the aims of the study. Second, this section considers significant issues and downfalls within methodology, such as data analysis procedures, sampling, and ethical considerations.

#### **3.1 The Nature of Quantitative Research**

Quantitative methodology (in particular questionnaires) is frequently utilised in Linguistics to effectively measure people's attitudes and perceptions of languages (Rasinger, 2018, p. 128). Unlike qualitative methods, such studies generally generate large amounts of reliable data which is simple to process (ibid., 129). As the researcher is typically not present during the completion of questionnaires (thus may not directly influence responses), quantitative research can also reduce researcher bias (Bryman, 2008), further rendering it a suitable research method for this understudied empirical study. Furthermore, questionnaires have been praised for their ease of tabulating and coding of answers, leaving little room for subjectivity by the researcher (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 26), which would typically have been more present in qualitative research (Rasinger, 2018, p. 129). This further justifies the implementation of quantitative research over qualitative research – more specifically focus groups – in this study, as it ensures little misinterpretation of answers (whether intentional or unintentional) occurs by the researcher. It must be noted here, though, that quantitative research does, indeed, present many downfalls for researchers on the basis of questionnaire design and subjectivity, too, whereby questions are sometimes formulated and phrased in a particular way by the researcher to meet their own research needs. That is, they sometimes include questions which are too leading, overly complex, and/or ambiguous (Bartram, 2019, p. 2). Further limitations in quantitative research pertain to its apparent invalid nature, whereby data is infiltrated with acquiescent, generalised, or superficial responses, which may not accurately reflect reality (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 26; Bartram, 2019, p. 2), as a result of these leading questions. This weakness was considered and limited (but by no means nullified) in this study, with the inclusion of ranking scales and open-ended questions.

#### **3.2 Measuring Motivation**

This paper bases academic motivation (a 'cognitive and behavioural drive to meet academic goals'; Kovach, 2018) on a 'self-determination continuum' (SDT) (Kotera et al., 2021), wherein students'

motivations can be conceptualised as *intrinsic* (motivated by satisfaction or pleasure of an academic task, often finding it meaningful and worthwhile) and *extrinsic* (motivated by external or instrumental factors rather than the task itself) (ibid.). Indeed, the nature of motivation is multifaceted, and thus can present difficulties when categorising types of motivation, with many often overlapping. Therefore, as this study is inspired by that of Parrish and Lanvers (2018), this study continues to adopt the SDT theory as it allows a more holistic view on language learning, recognising that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are not mutually exclusive (Parrish and Lanvers, 2018). To determine the different types of motivation, Parrish and Lanvers (2018) draw on an SDT instrument known as the Academic Self- Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ-A) (Ryan and Connell, 1989), which has been successfully used to categorise the aforementioned motivation types in a school context. This study implements the modified table of Parrish and Lanvers (2018) to identify MFL students’ position on the continuum, as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1:** *The self-determination continuum and modified SRQ-A responses based on motivations in Parrish and Lanvers (2018).*

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

### 3.3 Participant Selection (Sample)

319 respondents were recruited via snowball sampling method to an online questionnaire, which was primarily disseminated to peers through social media (namely, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram). The final sample of respondents ( $n = 280$ ) were all over the age of 18 (245 females; 34 males; 1 non-binary persons) and hailed from all regions of England, as seen in Table 2<sup>8</sup>. While every effort was made to create a diverse sample, which remained a ‘subset and representative of the whole

<sup>8</sup> 39 respondents left this question blank.

population' (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 60), the questionnaire was, ultimately, self-selecting, leaving the researcher with limited control over these variables.

**Table 2:** *Final sample of regions in England (n = 280).*

<b>Region in England</b>	<b>Number of respondents (percentage of sample)</b>
North East	3 (1%)
North West	36 (13%)
Yorkshire and the Humber	23 (8%)
East Midlands	10 (4%)
West Midlands	49 (17%)
East of England	16 (6%)
London	53 (19%)
South East	65 (23%)
South West	25 (9%)

Diversity could be seen in nationalities, too, whereby 67% of respondents identified as White (British/Irish/Other); 21% as Asian/British Asian (Indian/Pakistani/Chinese/Sri Lankan/Bangladeshi/Other); 4% as Black/Black British (African/other); 8% as Mixed ethnic groups (White and Black Caribbean/White and Asian/White and Black African).

Although respondents attended a diverse range of non-selective, government-funded State (single sex/mixed) schools; selective, state-funded Grammar (single sex/mixed) schools; and selective, fee-paying Independent (single sex/mixed) schools, there remains an overwhelming overrepresentation of those in the State sector (see Table 3). However, given that those in Independent schools make up just 7% of the English school-aged population (ISC, 2021), this sample still remains representative of England.

**Table 3:** *Final sample school type attended by respondents*

<b>School Type</b>	<b>Number of respondents (percentage of sample)</b>
State (single sex)	22 (8%)
State (mixed)	170 (61%)
Grammar (single sex)	28 (10%)
Grammar (mixed)	6 (2%)
Independent (single sex)	41 (15%)
Independent (mixed)	13 (5%)

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Maintaining good ethical practices remained a top priority throughout this study. Therefore, ethical approval was immediately sought and granted from the University of Birmingham College of Arts and Law Ethics Committee before research was undertaken. Prior to partaking in this study, participants were presented with a detailed informed consent form outlining the nature of the research undertaken and informing that they were at liberty to withdraw at any point. Participants were also not allowed to start the questionnaire until they had confirmed they understood the aforementioned ethical procedures.

### **3.5 Questionnaire Design and Procedure**

The online questionnaire<sup>9</sup> was constructed on the survey software, Qualtrics, launching on 24 February 2021. Participants were required to complete the questionnaire in their own time, answering 24 semi-structured questions. Firstly, they had to provide background information to document candidate diversity, followed by any knowledge and experience of HL. Next, they were asked to reflect on their personal experiences of MFL education in secondary schools, indicating whether they did/did not study it post-14. Piped questions in Qualtrics facilitated the direction of the questionnaire, which differed from participant to participant, depending on their personal answers. That is, participants who chose not to study MFL post-14 were presented with a characteristic ranking scale of influences to indicate their ranking of reasonings behind their decision, from 1 = most important, to 5 = least important. No further action was required by these participants. For those who did study MFL post-14, this procedure was repeated, but were then directed to specify their experiences of MFL at post-16, with additional ranking scales to further explain their decisions, as seen in Figure 1.

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<sup>9</sup> A complete version of the questionnaire can be found in the Appendix Two.

**1.b. You selected No. What factor best influenced your decision? Rank your answers from most important (1) to least important (10).**

- 1** Not needed for degree choice - (e.g. Medicine)
- 2** Prefer to do it on own in free time at one's own pace (e.g. with Duolingo)
- 3** Parental influence - they deemed it not necessary as I already had knowledge of another language (e.g. Heritage Language like Urdu, Portuguese etc.)
- 4** Lack of motivation - I found languages boring and unengaging
- 5** I didn't consider it important after Brexit
- 6** Wasn't a diverse discipline - both curriculum content & teaching staff/peers
- 7** Poor teaching/no teacher suitable to teach
- 8** My Further Education centre (college, sixth form) didn't offer preferred language
- 9** Exams too difficult - jump from GCSE to A Level too high
- 10** I wasn't aware of the benefits of languages jobs-wise
- 11** Not enough subject space - already chosen 3 A Levels

**Figure 1:** *Example of Ranking scale and items.*

A pilot study was conducted to test reliability and identify questions that may be misinterpreted. Consequently, certain sections were removed to overcome ambiguity, and open-ended questions were inserted at the end, to increase the validity of the study.

## 4 Results

This section provides an overview of current trends in MFL uptake, pertaining particularly to the research questions:

**RQ1:** What are students' attitudes towards post-compulsory MFL education?

**RQ2:** To what extent, if at all, do these attitudes and motivational factors correlate with other sociolinguistic and extralinguistic factors?

**RQ3:** What are the current trends and attitudes amongst BAME students towards post-compulsory MFL education? And to what extent, if at all, are there divergences between respondents based on their belonging/identification with the 'BAME' category?

## 4.1 Students' Attitudes towards Post-Compulsory MFL Education

### 4.1.1 Perceptions of MFL at Post-14

Respondents were first asked to rank five pre-determined motivators behind choosing to study MFL at post-14 (see Tables 4-5). To determine the importance of the motivators, I counted the respondents for each motivator per rank, and I ranked them from largest motivator (when picked by the most respondents as #1 motivator) to smallest motivator (when picked by the fewest respondents as #5 motivator). For example, to determine which was the top-ranked (#1) motivation amongst respondents at post-14, I examined which motivation had the greatest number of respondents who ranked it as #1. The motivation "I found it more interesting than other subjects." had the greatest influence on respondents' post-compulsory decision-making, as 103 (42%) of the 246 respondents awarded this motivation the top (#1) rank. In the instances when a motivator was chosen by most respondents in more than one ranks, the highest rank was taken into account, and the next highest motivator was picked in the lowest rank. Furthermore, in the case of ranking data wherein there exists two motivators with the same number of respondents under one particular rank (see Table 9, rank 7), I have allocated the motivators a joint ranking, and proceeded to the next rank numbers for the rest of the subsequent data. Tables 4-5 illustrate the breakdown of some principal motivations behind choosing to study

MFL post-14. Overall, data here shows that the obligation to study MFL by schools had little impact on respondents' decisions, as 64% of respondents ranked this as their least important factor (#5) when decision-making. Instead, respondents found MFL curricula to be more exciting than other subjects and felt they would perform better, academically, in MFL, which positively impacted their decision-making the most.

**Table 4:** *Ranking of motivations by respondents behind choosing to study MFL at post-14 – raw count (n = 246).*

Motivations (Question)	Ranks (with raw count of respondents)				
	1	2	3	4	5
I found it more exciting than other subjects	<b>103</b>	76	49	13	4
It was the only language available at school	27	29	44	<b>74</b>	72
I thought it would be the language I'd get the best grade in	43	<b>101</b>	68	29	5
It was compulsory - I wanted to study it	62	39	<b>77</b>	60	8
It was compulsory – I didn't want to study it	11	1	8	69	<b>157</b>

**Table 5:** Final ranking of motivations by respondents behind choosing to study MFL at post-14

Motivation behind choosing to study MFL post-14	Ranking
I found it more exciting than other subjects	1
I thought it would be the language I'd get the best grade in	2
It was compulsory - I wanted to study it	3
It was the only language available at school	4
It was compulsory – I didn't want to study it	5

The same set of motivations were displayed to the respondents who chose not to study MFL post-14, too. Unlike Tables 4-5, respondents here (in Tables 6 and 7) ranked the optionality of MFL to be the determining factor behind discontinuing with post-compulsory MFL (#1). That is, they chose not to study MFL simply because they were not required to at school. The content within MFL impacted non- linguists' decision-making here, once more; however, respondents in this group reported that the subject of MFL as a whole was conversely too difficult and unexciting<sup>10</sup>, ranked #2 and #3, respectively.

**Table 6:** Ranking of motivations behind choosing not to study MFL post-14 – raw count (n=19)

Motivations	Ranks (with raw count of respondents)				
	1	2	3	4	5
I didn't find MFL exciting enough	5	3	7	2	2
Languages (and/or language teachers) weren't available at my school	1	2	3	2	<b>11</b>
I didn't think I would do well/exams were too hard	4	<b>5</b>	4	6	0
It wasn't compulsory at my school	<b>6</b>	7	2	3	1
My parents thought a different subject would be better suited	3	2	3	<b>6</b>	5

<sup>10</sup> While this study did not elicit information pertaining to exam boards, it is important to consider the impact of exam specifications on uptake; content enjoyment may, indeed, vary amongst different boards with varying curricula.

**Table 7:** *Final ranking of motivations by respondents behind choosing not to study MFL at post-14.*

<b>Motivation behind choosing not to study MFL post-14</b>	<b>Ranking</b>
It wasn't compulsory at my school	1
I didn't think I would do well/exams were too hard	2
I didn't find languages exciting enough	3
My parents thought a different subject would be better suited	4
Languages (and/or language teachers) weren't available at my school	5

Therefore, this, in line with responses in Table 4, signifies that the decision to study post-compulsory MFL at post-14 is complex and remains dependent upon students' own perceptions of MFL. More specifically, whether MFL content remains exciting and attainable enough compared to other subjects, as well being dependent upon students' individual perceptions of their own abilities to perform well in MFL.

#### *4.1.2 Perceptions of MFL at Post-16*

When asked about perceptions at post-16, respondents ranked eleven pre-determined possible motivations behind not studying MFL (see Tables 8-9). Rankings here reflect similar trends to those who discontinued with MFL study at post-14, as the perceived difficulty of the subject remained amongst the top half of rankings once more, ranking #4. What topped this set of rankings, though, was how at post-16, a qualification in MFL was seemingly not required for respondents' degree choice (#1), followed by respondents reporting not having adequate space in their subject options to choose MFL (#2).

**Table 8:** *Rankings of motivations behind choosing not to study MFL post-16 – raw count (n = 73).*

Motivations (Question)	Ranks (with raw count of respondents)										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
I was influenced by parents who deemed MFL study to be unnecessary	2	2	3	5	4	11	8	4	<b>14</b>	13	7
My Further Education centre didn't offer the preferred language(s)	5	2	4	7	7	9	<b>9</b>	9	8	7	6
I thought teaching was poor	4	5	9	7	<b>11</b>	12	10	6	4	4	1
It wasn't needed for degree choice	<b>31</b>	19	8	4	4	3	2	1	1	0	0
Lack of motivation - I found languages to be 'boring'	12	10	11	6	7	2	9	5	6	3	<b>2</b>
I didn't have enough space in subject options	10	<b>18</b>	14	12	7	2	2	3	3	2	0
I prefer to learn languages in my own time	3	4	<b>12</b>	7	10	8	9	9	4	6	1
I didn't think MFL would be important after Brexit	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	4	10	<b>13</b>	42
I found the discipline to not be diverse enough (both curriculum and teaching/peers)	0	0	1	6	3	<b>12</b>	9	17	8	13	4
I wasn't aware of the benefits of studying MFL jobwise	1	4	1	8	9	6	3	<b>8</b>	12	11	10
I thought exams would be too difficult and I wouldn't do well in them – the jump from GCSE to A-Level was too high	5	9	10	<b>11</b>	10	7	10	7	3	1	0

**Table 9:** Final ranking of motivations by respondents behind choosing not to study MFL at post-16.

Motivation behind choosing not to study MFL post-16	Ranking
It wasn't needed for degree choice	1
I didn't have enough space in subject options	2
I prefer to learn languages in my own time	3
I thought exams would be too difficult and I wouldn't do well in them – the jump from GCSE to A-Level was too high	4
I thought teaching was poor	5
I found the discipline to not be diverse enough (both curriculum and teaching/peers)	6
My Further Education centre didn't offer the preferred language(s)	7
I wasn't aware of the benefits of studying MFL jobwise	8
I was influenced by parents who deemed MFL study unnecessary	9
I didn't think MFL would be important after Brexit	10
Lack of motivation - I found languages to be 'boring'	11

The same set of motivations were positively inverted and distributed to respondents who had studied MFL at post-16 ( $n = 160$ ), as seen in Tables 10 and 11<sup>11</sup>. Even though obtaining good grades at GCSE remained amongst the top-ranked motivations, it was an *identified* factor that ranked highest, with students' own desire to obtain fluency topping the rankings (#1).

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<sup>11</sup> While this paper has collected responses under the motivation 'other,' an examination of these responses has not been conducted as it is beyond the scope of this paper, especially since they were ranked as #10.

**Table 10:** *Rankings of motivations behind choosing to study MFL post-16 – raw count (n = 160).*

Motivations	Ranks (with raw count of respondents)									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I wanted to become fluent in the language(s)	<b>99</b>	31	8	9	4	5	2	2	0	0
It was one of my best grades at GCSE	18	<b>38</b>	30	25	24	13	8	4	0	0
It was a useful subject to have jobs-wise	5	11	<b>35</b>	23	31	25	23	5	2	0
I had an inspiring teacher	8	19	21	19	<b>30</b>	32	8	12	9	2
I found the content interesting	10	22	29	<b>40</b>	23	22	10	3	1	0
I already had a background in that language	3	8	6	7	8	14	<b>27</b>	<b>32</b>	43	12
Parental influence – they thought languages would open doors in the future	2	1	2	2	10	16	<b>27</b>	<b>45</b>	52	3
I wanted to live abroad in the future	8	27	21	24	15	16	19	17	<b>12</b>	1
It complemented my other subjects well	1	1	7	10	15	<b>17</b>	34	38	33	4
Other	6	2	1	1	0	0	2	2	8	<b>138</b>

**Table 11:** *Final ranking of motivations behind choosing to study MFL post-16.*

Motivation behind choosing to study MFL post-16	Ranking
I wanted to become fluent in the language	1
It was (one of) my best grade(s) at GCSE	2
It was a useful subject to have jobwise	3
I found the content of MFL to be interesting	4
I had an inspiring teacher	5
It complemented my other subjects well	6
I was influenced by parents who deemed MFL study as important	= 7
I already had a background in that language	= 7
I wanted to live abroad in the future	9
Other	10

Tables 8 and 10 indicate, therefore, that external factors played a greater role for respondents who chose not to study MFL post-16, than for those who did, as the perceived ‘difficulty of the subject’ (#4) and the supposed ‘poor teaching’ (#5) remained amongst the top half of principal deterrents for non- linguists. Amongst post-16 linguists, however, identified and intrinsic motivations persisted, as they generally chose to study post-16 MFL because respondents wanted to ‘obtain fluency’ (rank #1) and felt an MFL qualification would be more ‘useful’ for them (#3). These were ranked as more salient factors for post-16 linguists than whether the subject was ‘interesting’ or not (#4). This also differed to non-linguists who reported prioritising a different subject/career pathway, thus being unable to study MFL.

To help us further understand these perceptions towards post-compulsory MFL study, qualitative responses were elicited from respondents. They focused particularly on attitudes towards the MFL curricula, the perceived value and importance of post-compulsory MFL study, the experienced quality of teaching in MFL, and the supposed difficulty of the discipline — all of which (positively and negatively) affected their post-compulsory decision-making.

#### *4.1.3 Dissatisfaction with a Limited MFL Curriculum*

Respondents in this investigation commented heavily on the post-compulsory MFL curriculum studied. Respondents (1-4) explained how, in their experiences, MFL curricula and lessons were perceived as ‘uncreative’ (2) and ‘boring’ (4), with the sole purpose of lessons existing to essentially train linguists to perform well in exams, instead of being valuable for respondents’ wider ramifications beyond education and academia (3). To this end, respondents here suggest providing opportunities in MFL lessons to intertwine additional elements of teaching (such as culture, literature, linguistics etc.) into the fundamental teaching of grammar and vocabulary. They believe that this will create a potentially more exciting curriculum which is perceived as more pertinent to respondents in this study.

- (1) ‘It’s a shame, but the way languages were taught was based on memory recall of grammar and vocab with no opportunity to learn about culture, poetry, society etc.’
- (2) ‘It was fun to learn and speak, but the British education system doesn’t require you to be creative, instead we learn specifically to pass exams.’
- (3) ‘Learning languages at school doesn’t prepare you for language use in the wider world.’
- (4) ‘In my school, a lot of students did not choose to do a language at GCSE/A Level because they thought they thought the curriculum was boring. I think this is difficult to tackle, but I support the initiative to teach more Linguistics in schools which can highlight the importance of understanding different languages and cultures, as well as the benefits of multiculturalism. As this is something different to what the current curriculum offers, it might improve engagement.’

#### 4.1.4 *The Perceived Value of an MFL Qualification and 'Subject Hierarchy'*

Similarly, some respondents went as far to say that gaining an MFL qualification was supposedly so futile, they felt they could become better linguists through independent study, instead. When asked in this study (see Appendix for full questionnaire), “Why do you not regret discontinuing with MFL at post-16?”, non-linguist respondents (5-9) explained how many felt dissatisfied with the topics and material covered in MFL lessons and curricula, so they enjoyed the autonomy of choosing to learn elements of the target language(s) which are, once again, supposedly more relevant to them. Respondents (5-9) indicate below that the increasing ubiquity of language-learning applications (such as Duolingo) had met their language-learning goals and aims more successfully than if they had studied post-compulsory MFL. Furthermore, another respondent (8) suggested that little value is placed on gaining an MFL qualification because it may, in some instances, be perceived as too easy, especially if MFL lessons are permeated by repetitive grammar drills. This apparent predictable nature of MFL lessons can, consequently, give the illusion of MFL being a ‘soft subject’ (8), and be placed lower in the ‘subject hierarchy’ by both schools and students, which can inadvertently dissuade students when decision-making.

- (5) ‘I carried on with language learning after GCSE independently on apps such as Duolingo. I’ve since travelled Europe and managed fine relying on a mix of my GCSE knowledge and language skills gained on my own without the need to gain an A-Level qualification.’
- (6) ‘I enjoyed learning French at school, but the topics covered were quite uninteresting. Studying on my own (with the help of apps and interactions with native speakers) has prepared me much better [than MFL A-Levels] to have natural conversations in the language.’
- (7) ‘I didn’t study French at A-Level but kept it up in different ways through apps, films, societies at university etc. I even spent some time in France during my gap year which I feel helped way more [than MFL at A-Level] as I got to effectively immerse myself directly in the culture and become more fluent.’
- (8) ‘I’m fluent in French and got an A\* in GCSE French solely on my memory alone! I just think learning languages [at post-14] isn’t challenging enough; it should be compulsory to do some translation or politics modules about the country alongside it. That is why I saw MFL as a ‘soft subject’ and chose more useful/valuable subjects at A-Level, instead.’
- (9) ‘I would rather learn a language separate to my studies, not as part of my studies. As such, I continue to pursue a deeper understanding of the Urdu language in my own time.’
- (10) ‘I feel support going into MFL at A Level was non-existent at my school. Focus was instead given to STEM-related subjects and subjects related to ‘popular’ degrees. I loved learning Spanish, but it wasn’t a viable option at my school compared to other subjects.’

#### 4.1.5 *The Quality of Teaching in MFL: the Good and the Bad*

The quality of teaching in post-compulsory MFL remains a determining predictor for uptake, amongst linguist and non-linguist respondents alike. It can be deduced from comments (11-15) that respondents were more likely to pursue an MFL qualification, if they had a teacher who encouraged students, creating an environment in which all students can thrive irrespective of their ability, and who presented MFL material in engaging and entertaining ways.

- (11) ‘My secondary school teacher was awful, didn’t believe in me nor encourage me leading to me getting a lower mark than I should have.’
- (12) ‘I received a D grade [at GCSE] and due to the poor teaching the entire class did not do well, too.’
- (13) ‘My teachers at school were terrible. If I wasn’t inspired to take up MFL study through external factors. I would not have studied them. I genuinely believe the reason MFL is not popular is because of the way it is taught.’
- (14) ‘I was very fortunate that during my A-Levels my French teachers fostered the connection I was trying to make between my studies of French and History. This strongly influenced my decision to study both at university.’
- (15) ‘I only truly started enjoying language learning at my school when I got a new teacher in year 9, who really inspired the whole school with regard to language learning. It’s a shame that the quality of MFL learning seems to be based on individual teachers.’

#### 4.1.6 *A Balancing Act: Difficulty of Post-Compulsory MFL as a Subject and Exams*

As seen in Tables 7-8, the supposed ‘difficulty’ of post-compulsory MFL exams remained a salient factor for non-linguists when decision-making at post-16. Respondents (15-21) in this investigation indicate that this perception of ‘difficulty’ can extend beyond exams/assessments and be applied to MFL as a whole subject, holistically, too — a sentiment shared amongst both linguists and non-linguists alike, with many noting the apparent ‘considerable jump’ (18) between post-14 and post-16 study. Non-linguist respondents chose to discontinue formally gaining a qualification in MFL, therefore, to stand them in supposedly better stead to gaining higher grades overall — even if they did not want to officially discontinue learning languages. Therefore, it can be concluded that performance and experience of MFL at GCSE plays a role in decision-making, as if respondents felt they would struggle at GCSE, they may do again at A-Level. This perception is further supported by respondents who did continue with MFL study at post-16, as respondents (16-23) display that although many enjoyed MFL A-Level(s), it felt more of a challenge and was more demanding time- and commitment-wise compared to other subjects. Some also felt ‘greater pressure’ (20) to reach their desired language level goals, which ultimately became too stressful to balance alongside their other subjects.

- (16) ‘I wasn’t good at [MFL] at GCSE so didn’t want to risk compromising my A-Level grades with the difficult exams and content.’

- (17) ‘The [MFL A-Level] exams were not worth the stress it caused me at GCSE, so I decided to drop it. I haven’t regretted it since.’
- (18) ‘I’m really dyslexic so language learning is really hard for me. Therefore, I don’t think I could have ever performed well in the [MFL A-Level] exams – they would have been far too much of a jump in difficulty from GCSE.’
- (19) ‘I really enjoyed French [at A-Level] and thought it was a hugely important life skill. However, being made to practically become fluent in two years meant it took up most of my free time and was very stressful.’
- (20) ‘I had a bad learning experience of MFL [at A-Level]. I felt there was a lot more pressure, a lot more work, but much less support by teachers.’
- (21) ‘I loved doing French A-Level however it was a lot more pressure and stress than my other A-Levels (Maths and History).’
- (22) ‘Languages take a lot of dedication and commitment to learn, and I think that’s what puts most people off – it can be difficult to balance alongside other subjects.’
- (23) ‘I don’t think MFL is difficult per se, but just think lack of time in MFL is the biggest issue. I believe lots of people can do well in MFL, you just have to put in much more effort to learn content compared to other subjects, which is maybe what detracts people.’

#### 4.1.7 *Choosing to/not to Study Post-Compulsory MFL Again*

Having explored the aforementioned reasonings behind choosing/not choosing to (dis)continue with post-compulsory MFL study, non-linguist respondents at post-16 ( $n = 78$ ) in this study were then asked to declare whether they would make the same decision not to study MFL at post-16 again, if they could choose their options once more, or if they do regret their decision. This investigation found that 30 (38%) respondents out of the non-linguist sample ( $n = 78$ ), declared regretting their decision to not pursue a qualification in post-16 MFL, compared to the 48 (62%) respondents who did not regret their decision. This indicates that the aforementioned perceptions towards MFL as a subject and qualification still remain somewhat negative, as respondents would still choose not to study it.

#### 4.1.8 *Interim Summary*

Section 4.1 has explored potential reasons for the motivational decline at post-14 and post-16. Overall, both linguists and non-linguists appreciated learning languages, but had differing views about official MFL study. When ranking reasons behind discontinuing post-compulsory MFL education, non-linguists expressed how they did not study MFL primarily because it was not needed for their desired career pathways, thus prioritised other subjects ahead of MFL. Numerous respondents further commented on the supposed difficulty of the subject, exams, and lessons which, ultimately, deterred them from studying MFL at post-16, having recalled negative experiences at post-14. Lastly, respondents also noted how the role of the teacher and perceived tedious MFL curricula - wherein little space is given to creatively explore different aspects of the target language(s) — contributed as factors in their post-compulsory decision-making, as some respondents would consequently place

little value on the discipline and choose not to study it officially, as they felt they could learn the language and meet their language-learning goals more successfully outside of school.

## 4.2 How Sociolinguistic Factors Affect Uptake

This study also sought to examine the sociolinguistic makeup of respondents and explore any patterns and tendencies in relation to motivational factors. Therefore, to determine this relationship, respondents were asked to declare some demographic information.

### 4.2.1 Gender

Tables 12 and 13 indicate that there was a notably higher proportion of females who studied MFL at post-14 (83%) and post-16 (62%), than males who accounted for just 10% and 6% of the total sample, respectively.

**Table 12:** *Proportion of respondents at post-14 – By Gender (n = 272).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
Male	26 (10%)	7 (3%)
Female	225 (83%)	13 (5%)
Non-binary	1 (0.4%)	0

**Table 13:** *Proportion of respondents at post-16 – By Gender (n = 246).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
Male	15 (6%)	11 (5%)
Female	152 (62%)	67 (27%)
Non-binary	1 (0.4%)	0

### 4.2.2 Region

Regional trends (Tables 14-15) were also apparent in respondents' decision to study post-compulsory MFL; in both instances, students in South East and London were more likely to study MFL than those in North East or East Midlands, for example. However, upon closer inspection of individual regions, there remains a vertiginous drop in MFL uptake in the North West, Yorkshire and West Midlands, whereby around half of respondents in these regions discontinued MFL at post-16.

**Table 14:** *Proportion of respondents at post-14 – By Region (n = 272).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
North East	3 (1%)	0
North West	33 (12%)	2 (0.7%)
Yorkshire and the Humber	21 (8%)	2 (0.7%)
East Midlands	9 (3%)	1 (0.4%)
West Midlands	44 (16%)	3 (1%)
East of England	15 (6%)	0
London	44 (16%)	7 (3%)
South East	60 (22%)	3 (1%)
South West	23 (8%)	2 (0.7%)

**Table 15:** *Proportion of respondents at post-16 – By Region (n = 246)*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
North East	2 (0.8%)	1 (0.4%)
North West	18 (7%)	12 (5%)
Yorkshire and the Humber	14 (6%)	7 (3%)
East Midlands	7 (3%)	2 (0.8%)
West Midlands	30 (12%)	14 (6%)
East of England	13 (5%)	2 (0.8%)
London	24 (10%)	18 (7%)
South East	41 (17%)	18 (7%)
South West	19 (8%)	4 (2%)

#### 4.2.3 *Type of School Attended*

Regarding the relationship between school types and MFL uptake (Tables 16-17), respondents who attended a (mixed) State school remained the largest group of respondents to discontinue MFL study. By contrast, all respondents who attended (both single sex and mixed) Grammar schools, closely

followed by those in (both single sex and mixed) Independent schools, studied MFL at post-14. Interestingly, while previous scholarship has indicated that respondents who attended an Independent school were more likely to pursue post-16 MFL study as they are supposedly the school type most (financially) viable to offer and promote the subject (Henderson and Carruthers, 2021), this is not reflected in this study; uptake numbers here in (both mixed and single sex) Independent schools had decreased from 51 to 30. That is, 67% of those who attended Independent schools at post-14 had discontinued MFL study at post-16.

**Table 16:** *Proportion of respondents at post-14 – By school type (n = 272).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
State (mixed)	148 (54%)	16 (6%)
State (single sex)	20 (7%)	2 (0.7%)
Grammar (mixed)	6 (2%)	0
Grammar (single sex)	27 (10%)	0
Independent (mixed)	12 (4%)	1 (0.4%)
Independent (single sex)	39 (14%)	1 (0.4%)

**Table 17:** *Proportion of respondents at post-16 – By school type (n = 246).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
State (mixed)	104 (42%)	39 (16%)
State (single sex)	14 (6%)	6 (2%)
Grammar (mixed)	4 (2%)	2 (0.8%)
Grammar (single sex)	16 (7%)	11 (5%)
Independent (mixed)	8 (3%)	3 (1%)
Independent (single sex)	22 (9%)	17 (7%)

#### 4.2.4 Socio-Economic Background

With regard to socio-economic factors, Tables 18-19 suggests that MFL uptake at both post-14 and post-16 was most common amongst groups of respondents whose household income was above the national average<sup>12</sup>. That is, 190 of respondents with a household income above the national average opted for post-14 MFL study, compared to the 39 respondents whose parental income was below the national average<sup>13</sup>. By no means does this signify that respondents below the average income were lacking, though; 25% of this group continued on with their study at post-16. A large number of respondents also preferred not to declare their familial income, nor were many aware. Therefore, while uptake was seemingly highest amongst respondents with a household income of £78,000 and above (accounting for nearly a quarter of respondents at post-14), it is impossible to determine accurately which socio-economic group prevailed.

**Table 18:** *Proportion of respondents at post-14 – By socio-economic background (n = 272).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
Less than £10,000	4 (1%)	3 (1%)
£10,000-£20,999	25 (9%)	2 (0.7%)
£21,000-£25,999	10 (4%)	0
£26,000-£35,999	23 (8%)	2 (0.7%)
£36,000-£51,999	36 (13%)	1 (0.4%)
£52,000-£77,999	40 (15%)	4 (1%)
£78,000 or more	55 (20%)	3 (1%)
Unsure	48 (18%)	5 (2%)
Prefer not to say	11 (4%)	0

<sup>12</sup> I follow the government's estimate for average household income to be £31,400 by the end of 2021, as reported in the 2021 census (Croal, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Please note that the questionnaire contains an error in the question pertaining to 'socioeconomic background.' Where this paper refers to the term 'national average' herein, conclusions around this will be made from the '£36,000-£51,999' threshold and above. This is because this paper's group for the national average remains too broad and does not reflect the aforementioned government's definition of the national average (£31,400). That is, data is lacking within the '£26,000-£35,999' salary range; it is not known what respondents' exact parental income figures are in this group and if/whether this falls above or below the national average. Despite this researcher error, however, focusing on the groups from £36,000 and above does not affect or impact the results and/or conclusions, thus still remains supportive in this paper's hypotheses and arguments.

**Table 19:** *Proportion of respondents at post-16 – By socio-economic background (n = 246).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
Less than £10,000	4 (2%)	0
£10,000-£20,999	14 (6%)	10 (4%)
£21,000-£25,999	7 (3%)	1 (0.4%)
£26,000-£35,999	20 (8%)	3 (1%)
£36,000-£51,999	25 (10%)	10 (4%)
£52,000-£77,999	28 (11%)	12 (5%)
£78,000 or more	33 (13%)	20 (8%)
Unsure	33 (13%)	15 (6%)
Prefer not to say	4 (2%)	7 (3%)

#### 4.2.5 Ethnicity

Focusing our attention on ethnicity (Tables 20-21), participation rates at post-14 were strikingly high in nearly all ethnicity groups. However, uptake was highest at post-14 amongst White-British students (making up 60% of the post-14 sample); comparatively, uptake was lowest amongst two ethnic groups: White-Gypsy/Irish Traveller and Black/Black British Caribbean respondents — zero respondents from these communities pursued post-compulsory MFL study. Nevertheless, there are clearer trends at post-16; respondents from a White-British background remained the largest group to study MFL post-16 again, comprising of half (50%) of the post-16 sample. By contrast, nearly half of the total BAME respondents (43%) discontinued with post-16 MFL study, with the number of BAME linguists decreasing from 78 BAME linguists at post-14 to 38 BAME linguists at post-16. Digging deeper into individual ethnicity groups below, disparities are seen particularly within the Asian/Asian British (Pakistani) group. At post-14, respondents here recorded the third highest uptake numbers; however, at post-16, they dropped down to the sixth place, recording a notable loss of uptake numbers.

**Table 20:** *Proportion of respondents at post-14 – By ethnicity (n = 272).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
White – British	163 (60%)	9 (3%)
Asian/Asian British – Pakistani	13 (5%)	2 (1%)
Asian/Asian British – Indian	28 (9%)	1 (0.8%)
Mixed ethnic groups – White and Black Caribbean	4 (1.5%)	2 (0.8%)
White – Other	8 (3%)	1 (0.4%)
Black/Black British – African	8 (3%)	1 (0.4%)
Asian/Asian British – Other	7 (2.6%)	1 (0.4%)
Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi	0	1 (0.4%)
Mixed ethnic groups – Other	7 (2.6%)	0
Mixed ethnic groups – White and Asian	6 (2%)	0
Asian/Asian British – Chinese	2 (0.8%)	0
White – Irish	2 (0.8%)	0
Mixed ethnic groups – White and Black African	2 (0.8%)	0
Asian/Asian British – Sri Lankan	1 (0.4%)	0
Black/Black British – Other	2 (0.8%)	0
White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller	0	0
Black/Black British – Caribbean	0	0

**Table 21:** *Proportion of respondents at post-16 – By ethnicity (n = 246).*

	<b>Yes (percentage of total sample)</b>	<b>No (percentage of total sample)</b>
White – British	120 (50%)	39 (16%)
Asian/Asian British – Indian	9 (3%)	18 (7%)
White – Other	7 (2.9%)	1 (0.4%)
Black/Black British – African	6 (2.5%)	2 (0.8%)
Mixed ethnic groups – Other	6 (2.5%)	1 (0.4%)
Asian/Asian British – Pakistani	5 (2%)	8 (3%)
Asian/Asian British – Other	3 (1%)	4 (2%)
Mixed ethnic groups – White and Black Caribbean	3 (1%)	1 (0.4%)
Asian/Asian British – Chinese	2 (0.8%)	0
Mixed ethnic groups – White and Asian	2 (0.8%)	3 (1%)
Mixed ethnic groups – White and Black African	2 (0.8%)	0
Black/Black British – Other	1 (0.4%)	0
Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi	0	0
Asian/Asian British – Sri Lankan	0	1 (0.4%)
White – Irish	0	0
White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller	0	0
Black/Black British – Caribbean	0	0

#### 4.2.6 *Interim Summary*

Section 4.2 has illuminated any trends between students' sociolinguistic characteristics and post-compulsory MFL uptake. Overall, this section has documented that while plentiful male students studied post-compulsory MFL, the largest group of students pursuing both post-14 and post-16 MFL study is comprised mostly of female students. Furthermore, geographical trends emerged in this section, as post-compulsory MFL uptake was highest amongst students hailing from the southern regions of England. Additionally, this investigation confirmed that the socio-economic status of a

student can affect their post-compulsory decision-making, as there remained a slight divide between those who are and are not formally studying MFL: data suggests that respondents whose parental income was above the national average were more likely to study post-compulsory MFL. There was greater variation between students' school types, though, as respondents who attended a (mixed) State school remained the largest group of respondents to discontinue MFL study in this investigation, compared to the consistently high uptake numbers amongst students who attended (both mixed/single sex) Independent schools at post-14 and -16. Lastly, examining ethnicity as a factor in isolation, participation rates at post-14 were considerably high in nearly all ethnicity groups, but there remains a general absence of BAME students in post-16 MFL study in this study, who decided not to continue after post-14 education.

### **4.3 Current Trends and Attitudes towards MFL amongst BAME Students**

#### *4.3.1 BAME Perceptions of MFL*

Given the vertiginous drop in BAME students continuing with post-16 MFL study ( $n = 38$ ) compared to post-14 ( $n = 78$ ), it was important to understand their attitudes towards MFL study, to examine why this group, in particular, is deterred by further MFL study, identify any trends and also, so this decline does not worsen. Results from this group (Tables 22-23) show that while the top motivations align with those in Table 9 (whereby the 'unnecessity for degree choice' and 'inadequate space in subject choices for MFL' rank #1 and #2 once again), striking divergences are evident in the remaining factors and ranks: unlike the overall non-linguist motivations, preferring to learn languages in one's own time (#3), not being able to study respondents' preferred language in their respective Further Education centre (#4), and (negative) influence by parents (#6), remain more integral to contributing factors for the group of respondents who identified as part of the BAME community.

**Table 22:** *Rankings of motivations behind choosing to study MFL post-16 by BAME – raw count (n = 38).*

Motivations (Question)	Ranks (with raw count of respondents)										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
I was influenced by parents who deemed MFL study to be unnecessary	2	2	2	4	2	5	5	0	6	6	1
Lack of motivation - I found languages to be 'boring'	4	6	6	3	3	1	4	2	3	2	1
My Further Education centre didn't offer the preferred language(s)	2	0	2	5	5	5	3	5	2	2	4
I thought teaching was poor	0	3	4	4	5	5	5	3	3	2	1
It wasn't needed for degree choice	18	11	2	0	1	2	0	1	0	0	0
I thought exams would be too difficult and I wouldn't do well in them – the jump from GCSE to A-Level was too high	2	3	6	5	4	3	6	4	2	0	0
I didn't have enough space in subject options	6	8	4	6	5	1	2	1	1	1	0
I prefer to learn languages in my own time	0	2	8	1	5	4	3	4	4	3	1
I didn't think MFL would be important after Brexit	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	2	8	20
I found the discipline to not be diverse enough (both curriculum and teaching/peers)	0	0	0	3	1	3	1	7	2	3	0
I wasn't aware of the benefits of studying MFL jobwise	1	0	0	3	3	4	1	4	8	5	6

**Table 23:** *Rankings of motivations behind choosing not to study MFL post-16 – By BAME.*

<b>Motivation behind choosing not to study MFL post-16</b>	<b>Ranking</b>
It wasn't needed for degree choice	1
I didn't have enough space in subject options	2
I prefer to learn languages in my own time	3
My Further Education centre didn't offer the preferred language(s)	4
I thought teaching was poor	5
I was influenced by parents who deemed MFL study unnecessary	6
I thought exams would be too difficult and I wouldn't do well in them	7
I found the discipline to not be diverse enough (both curriculum and teaching/peers)	8
I wasn't aware of the benefits of studying MFL jobwise	9
I didn't think MFL would be important after Brexit	10
I found languages to be 'boring'	11

Qualitative answers from members of the BAME community in this study expanded on respondents' (negative) decision-making. Unlike the overall motivations, respondents from this group (24-39) commented specifically on the impact of diversity within MFL classrooms, intrinsic and extrinsic perceptions towards the subject, and the impact of Heritage Languages — all of which played a greater role in their decision-making. Similar to Section 4.1.3, BAME respondents here (24) further highlighted the supposed tedium associated with MFL curricula and restriction regarding skills demonstrated, expressing a preference for study of alternative elements, such as Translation, to further excite students and enhance the curriculum.

(24) 'I love learning languages but ultimately found lessons boring. I wish MFL lessons and curricula incorporated other skills such as translation skills and training too. I'm fluent in Hindi/Urdu and love it especially when I'm watching Bollywood films with English subtitles and think 'that's not what they mean' or 'if they said this, it would have been better to this sentiment' etc.'

(25) 'I think the way languages are taught in schools made me lose interest and passion for the language. It would've been too much stress, if I had taken a language at A-Level, as I did not enjoy the lessons that much at GCSE – I

enjoyed other subjects more (Latin and Sciences).’

- (26) ‘I wasn’t really interested in languages at all, at least the languages that were on offer weren’t that interesting to me.’

#### 4.3.2 *(Lack of) Diversity in the MFL Classroom as a Factor Affecting Uptake*

This study also spotlighted how the diversity in the MFL classroom, or perceived lack thereof, remains a salient predictor for uptake, too. One respondent who identified as part of the BAME community (27) felt they were not included in MFL, and thus chose not to pursue a formal qualification in it. However, it is unclear from these comments who some respondents felt ostracised and discouraged by (for example, by teachers and/or peers at school, or by members of the family and/or wider BAME community who hold negative perceptions towards MFL), and whether it was the MFL lessons or MFL subject content material, in which they did not feel represented in.

- (27) ‘MFL at school was a predominately white subject. It’s a shame the education infrastructure doesn’t facilitate/encourage a larger intake of BAME into language and the arts subjects.’

#### 4.3.3 *Attitudes towards MFL as a Discipline amongst the BAME Community*

In the same vein, some respondents in the BAME community (28-30) explained how, in some instances, there remains extrinsic negative attitudes towards MFL as a discipline, which in turn dissuaded them from pursuing post-compulsory MFL. Respondents here commented on the subject’s perceived worth and value in comparison to other subjects viz. STEM-related subjects. Though accounting for a small minority of responses, the overall theme amongst these answers is that obtaining a successful job and career is of great importance to some members of the BAME community. Thus, students are often supposedly pressured to prioritise subjects which are perceived as more vocational, subsequently leaving MFL out of consideration. That is, even if respondents did intrinsically want to study MFL, extrinsic pressure ultimately prevailed.

- (28) ‘Sometimes attitudes towards [MFL] from family members growing up gave me the idea that it is a ‘soft subject’ which made me worried about job prospects, so I chose not to study it because of this stigma.’
- (29) ‘Though I continued with MFL study at A-Level and then degree level, I had little support from the BAME community because it isn’t vocational and “doesn’t lead anywhere,” but I chose my own happiness over my family’s and extended family’s.’
- (30) ‘In my personal experience, [people from the BAME community] can sometimes be dismissive of an MFL qualification/don’t think there’s much of a point, and put pressure to take a specific pathway e.g., medicine or law instead.’

#### 4.3.4 *The (Lack of) Provision of Heritage Languages in the MFL Classroom and Uptake*

This study also sought to explore whether any BAME respondents ( $n = 93$ ) had knowledge of a Heritage Language and investigate whether the respondents had the same attitudes towards gaining a qualification in HL, as they do towards gaining formal MFL qualifications, or not.

First, BAME respondents were asked to declare whether they did/did not have knowledge of a HL: of the 93 BAME respondents, 71 (76%) reported having knowledge of a HL, compared with the 22 (24%) who did not. There was a variety of Heritage Languages acquired by BAME respondents in this study, including (but not limited to): Urdu ( $n = 15$ ), Hindi ( $n = 10$ ), Gujarati ( $n = 7$ ), Telegu ( $n = 4$ ), Farsi ( $n = 3$ ), Tamil ( $n = 3$ ), Arabic ( $n = 2$ ), Spanish ( $n = 2$ ), Cantonese ( $n = 1$ ), Mandarin ( $n = 1$ ), Patois ( $n = 1$ ), Russian ( $n = 1$ ), and Zulu ( $n = 1$ ). It is important to note also that a number of respondents here ( $n = 11$ ) had knowledge of more than one Heritage Language, too.

Respondents in this study were then asked to declare whether they had gained a qualification in their respective Heritage Language (such as a GCSE), or not, and an explanation behind their decision: although 76% of BAME students in this study reported having knowledge of a HL (as seen above), 13 (18%) of the 93 BAME respondents went on to pursue a qualification in HLs, compared with the 58 (82%) respondents who did not.

To further understand why students with knowledge of a HL are generally not pursuing formal study of these languages, qualitative answers were elicited from this group of respondents (31-36). A pattern emerged from respondents (31-36) here; many of whom expressed the importance of learning their respective HL and desire to study the language(s) officially. However, respondents here felt they were unable to do so because they did not have access to centres which taught HLs or offered HLs as a subject/qualification. Of the 58 BAME respondents who reported knowing a HL but did not formally gain a qualification in it, 36 (62%) of the qualitative responses collected from this group directly mentioned how their HL was “unavailable to study at school.”

(31) ‘My school didn’t offer Punjabi GCSE as I went to a white majority school. I didn’t even know I could. I would’ve liked to, though.’

(32) ‘My school wouldn’t allow me to take a non-European language for GCSE.’

(33) ‘I think languages are so useful in travelling, reading, and generally having access to another culture and way of thinking. I grew up speaking Punjabi and would have liked to formally study it and regret doing it in my free time (although also not offered as an option at school).’

(34) ‘I wanted to gain a qualification [in the HL], but I couldn’t read or write it and I had no formal education in it at school like I did with French and Spanish.’

(35) ‘[The HL] wasn’t offered to me at school. I did check as I would’ve liked to.’

(36) ‘[The HL] wasn’t a popular language at my school so there was no option to gain a GCSE in it.’

#### 4.3.5 *The Desire to Study Languages Outside of the ‘Big 3’ (French, German, Spanish)*

In the same vein, a number of respondents (37-39) commented on their appreciation for language learning but discontinued with post-compulsory formal language study because of the languages on offer. That is, they would have formally gained a qualification in MFL at post-16 but were unable to do so at their education centres.

- (37) ‘The languages on offer in my school at the time (French and Spanish) would not help me in my medical job, whereas knowledge of Romanian or Polish, for example, would really help.’
- (38) ‘I would have studied MFL at A-Level, but I am interested in other languages that weren’t available at Sixth Form.’
- (39) ‘I do like learning languages but not the languages my Sixth Form offered.’

#### 4.3.6 *Interim Summary*

The data presented in Section 4.3 demonstrates that students who identify as part of the BAME community are generally absent from post-16 MFL study. Once again, qualitative responses in this section expand on the negative perceptions towards the study of MFL (this time perpetuated by parents, institutions and/or communities) which, in turn, remains a greater factor for motivational decline. Furthermore, respondents here also appreciated language learning, but were further detracted from MFL study due to the languages available at further education centres. Given that a large proportion of BAME respondents in this study declared having knowledge of a Heritage Language (76%), some respondents commented that they would have valued gaining a qualification in their Heritage Language(s) more than the ‘big 3’ (French, German and/or Spanish) which are typically favoured by most schools. Lastly, BAME respondents here mentioned not feeling included in the MFL classroom which also remained a culprit for motivational decline at post-16 (though it was not specified who they felt discouraged by — peers, teachers, and/or MFL curricula/material circulated by the exam boards?).

## 5 Discussion

This study aimed to explore current motivational trends towards post-compulsory MFL in England, focussing particularly on the impact of sociolinguistic factors and how this affects those in the BAME community. In summary, this study aligns with previous research (Parrish and Lanvers, 2018); results from this study concur that the perceived uninspiring MFL curricula by students and supposed difficulty of MFL, remain the biggest contributors to motivational decline. Regarding sociolinguistic factors, this study finds that group of students pursuing post-compulsory MFL at both post-14 and post-16 is comprised largely of White(-British) females. Furthermore, while there remains a slight socio-economic divide between those who are and are not studying post-compulsory MFL, there exists larger variations between school types. That is, students from a selective school (Grammar and/or Independent), in this study, were more likely to have MFL on their school profile. Finally, geographical tendencies occurred; post-compulsory MFL uptake was highest amongst students coming from the southern regions of England. Focusing on trends within the BAME category in isolation, this paper found there to be a general absence of students who identified as BAME studying MFL at post-16. What follows in this section, therefore, is a critical discussion of the main findings in relation to the aforementioned research questions, which are also considered in light of the existing theories, scholarship, and empirical research. This section then concludes with an outline of the limitations of this study and any implications for future research.

### 5.1 Motivational Trends in the MFL Uptake

Much of the motivational factors behind choosing to discontinue studying post-compulsory MFL in this paper corroborate existing literature, whereby the (lack of) enjoyment of MFL in schools,

difficulty of exams, and poor teaching remain amongst the top five factors for motivational decline (see Parrish and Lanvers, 2018; Taylor and Marsden, 2014; Fisher, 2001). Although Fisher's (2001) initial survey into MFL motivations was conducted in 2001, it still remains applicable to the present study, insofar as highlighting possible reasons for motivational decline. Fisher (2001) found that MFL was not a favourite amongst pupils, even if they did appreciate learning languages, due to the perceived disengaging curriculum, compared to other subjects (Fisher, 2001). This is echoed in the present study, whereby 62% of respondents who chose not to study MFL post-16 did not regret their decision, as seen in Section 4.1.7 of this paper. Respondents who did not continue with post-compulsory MFL study commented on both the subject's supposed usefulness and rigidity, which negatively affected their decision. Unlike studies by Parrish and Lanvers (2018), qualitative data here show that respondents do in fact value the usefulness of languages, often recalling positive experiences regarding language *learning*. However, this does not translate to official *study* of MFL in schools. Respondents feel it is external factors, such as fixed, exam-focused school policies<sup>14</sup>, whereby little room is left to develop transcultural competencies which renders MFL supposedly futile. That is, respondents feel they could grow as better linguists through individual language study, where they learn supposedly more useful language<sup>15</sup>, through language apps or direct immersion in the country (or countries) where the target language is spoken. They believe this will, in turn, help them achieve a greater level of fluency, which, for them, a qualification in MFL cannot. It is important to note, though, that while language learning apps may appear more attractive because of its quick and easy access to language learning and immediate feedback, general lack of overt corrections, and avoidance of a potentially stressful classroom context, apps, such as Duolingo, also implement the use of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation drills to reinforce language learning. Therefore, while students may find these apps supposedly more useful, the premise itself does not differ greatly from a MFL classroom.

More attention could, indeed, be given to developing transcultural curricula, though, whereby perceived mundane elements of language learning are presented in innovative and more engaging ways. For example, Cazzoli (2022) has highlighted England's large focus on, and prioritisation of, acquiring sound proficiency of the Target Language(s) (TL), without consideration of the cultural makeup of the countries, wherein these languages are spoken. Instead, Cazzoli (2022) suggests that schools should be working alongside exam boards and educational publishing bodies to prioritise creating interculturally aware linguists and exposing students to diverse perspectives, by drawing extensively on the capital of linguistic and cultural diversity already present at most schools (Cazzoli, 2022). That is, MFL departments are typically made up of a body of multilingual students and staff (particularly if the school has access to native TL Teaching Assistants), which can be integrated and utilised as much as possible to achieve sufficient linguistic and cultural immersion (ibid.). While I appreciate that this is a significant first step towards intertwining culture into language learning, which may indeed render MFL more exciting, I believe it is not enough for students to be labelled 'culturally aware' on the basis of possessing the ability to recite facts and statistics about a language and the country's (or countries') makeup. Instead, I believe students should be taught how to reflect

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<sup>14</sup> Reactions towards these fixed, exam-focussed policies from educators arrive after the recent announcement of post-14 MFL content reforms which will be implemented in 2024. Students taking GCSE French, German and/or Spanish will be prescribed predetermined lists of 'high frequency vocabulary' (DfE, 2022a), of which at least 85% appear in the reading and listening elements of MFL exams (ibid.). Educators have expressed their disapproval of these reforms as though it encourages accessibility to students who may have previously struggled with the vast, open-ended content of MFL GCSEs (Martin, 2022), it remains 'prescriptive and grinding' (ibid.), focussing mainly on rote-learning and memorisation. This could, indeed, prove counterproductive and leave both students and teachers too exam focussed. Finally, this discourse raises two important questions: Firstly, *what* is defined as 'useful' vocabulary? Second, *who* decides what is 'pertinent' and 'exciting' and *for whom*?

<sup>15</sup> I take the respondents' interpretation of 'usefulness' with caution, though; for me, grammar and vocabulary retention, for example (which respondents refer to as 'boring' or 'ineffective'), remains unequivocally fundamental in providing the foundations for learning any language, and thus cannot be avoided.

and think critically on this cultural knowledge, too, to effectively engage with the culture(s), deploy their newfound TL skills and become well-rounded, globally adaptable, robust linguists.

Furthermore, extrinsic factors, such as poor teaching and perceived difficulty of exams, further contributed to the negative perception of post-compulsory MFL study in this study. Respondents highlighted how, in some instances, little support was given by teachers in the MFL classroom, especially when grasping more challenging concepts, which ultimately deterred students from wanting to continue MFL study. More worrying still, one respondent in this study noted the alienation they felt as a dyslexic student and how unattainable a post-compulsory MFL qualification seemed for them, thus rejecting the subject in favour of others which they deemed as more accessible. Naturally, this one respondent cannot represent an entire community of students with learning difficulties, but it does raise the question: is enough support and training is given overall by exam boards and schools to sufficiently equip teachers with the adequate tools to render MFL as inclusive and accessible as possible, bridging the gap between GCSE and A-Level, and helping all students overcome that supposed 'jump,' irrespective of their learning abilities?

This overall perception of MFL qualifications being challenging aligns with previous research, though, whereby students in MFL typically score 0.5-1 grade lower compared to other subjects (Myers, 2016; Vidal Rodeiro, 2017). To understand how young people make choices at post-14 and 16, Blenkinsop et al. (2006) identified a series of educational mindsets, viz. the confident aspirational, the indecisive worrier, the unrealistic dreamer, the determined realist, and the comfort seeker (among others). They identified that 'the comfort seeker' student focusses on the outcome of their decisions, possesses a low risk tolerance, and would rather take choose subjects which they enjoyed, which then creates little pressure on them during their GCSE/A-Level years (Blenkinsop et al., 2006). In their study, this type of educational mindset was the second most frequently identified amongst their sample of secondary school-aged students. This 'comfort seeker' mindset can also be applied in the current MFL context: this pernicious combination of lower grades overall (as seen in previous literature), with students' experiences of discouragement from MFL teachers (in both literature and this study), justifies why students would not want to study a subject they feel they could not fare well in.

However, we cannot ignore how a minority of respondents in this study highlighted how they felt the current post-compulsory MFL curricula is, in fact, *not challenging enough*. They suggest that, in their experiences, uptake is in decline because content is too easy which in turn makes curricula and lessons, once again, supposedly boring and futile. One respondent noted how MFL exams did not permit students to adequately showcase their linguistic skills, but rather remained a simple test of memory recall and/or rote learning skills. Further responses encouraged the implementation of new elements of language study (such as Linguistics and/or Translation) into post-compulsory MFL curricula to not only increase interest amongst non-linguists, but to stretch the minds of those who are considered more advanced, too. Sheehan et al. (2021) investigated the feasibility of implementing elements of linguistics into A-Level MFL classrooms, reporting that interest towards MFL did increase, as students welcomed the opportunity to engage intellectually with the history and/or structure of the target language(s). They also documented that the study of linguistics as part of their A-Level course augmented students' language-learning skills (Sheehan et al., 2021), too, as students reported acquiring a deeper understanding of specific aspects of the TLs (ibid.). Therefore, by bridging the gap between language skills and content, the introduction of linguistics into post-compulsory MFL curricula could, indeed, be a plausible first step towards improving engagement in MFL study, particularly amongst the most able students. We must remember, though, that the majority of respondents in the present study reported finding the existing MFL curriculum challenging. Therefore, perhaps the aforementioned linguistic elements could be introduced as specific pathways to take within MFL A-Level, for example, rather than become a mandatory component, so not to further overwhelm students with new aspects of linguistic study which they have not studied before.

Finally, Brexit, its aftermath and subsequent effect on MFL uptake, has been feared in MFL motivation studies, with research indicating that Brexit caused a supposed negative shift in attitudes towards MFL study (Broady, 2020). Interestingly, findings from this study dispute this claim altogether, as Brexit was considered the least important factor for motivational decline. However, it is important to note that a sample of respondents in this questionnaire may have completed their A-Levels prior to the Brexit era, whereby this concept would not have been applicable.

Overall, this paper concurs that the national decline of post-compulsory MFL has been attributed to growing negative attitudes and perceptions by students towards the systematic and policy issues within MFL.

## 5.2 Sociolinguistic Trends in MFL Uptake

Regarding the impact of sociolinguistic factors on MFL uptake, the present study aligns with ample studies from other anglophone contexts (viz. NI), insofar as discrepancies in school type are concerned. That is, respondents, in this study, were most likely to study post-compulsory MFL if they had attended a selective school. Henderson and Carruthers (2021) recounted similar results, whereby over half of NI non-selective schools (56%) reported having zero candidates for MFL in the ‘big 3’ (French, German or Spanish) in 2017/18. I do not take this to imply that students, in the present study, are ‘missing’ in English state schools, but rather, dwindling entries and subsequent diminishing cohort sizes are more prevalent in these schools, rendering them, perhaps, less financially viable to offer and run MFL, than selective schools, wherein there is less competition between subjects (Henderson and Carruthers, 2021). Data in this study supports this (see Section 4.1.4), wherein a respondent stated how they would have loved to have continued with post-compulsory study of Spanish, but felt it was not feasible at her school, where greater focus (and consequently funding) is supposedly given to STEM-related subjects.

In the same vein, this study highlighted the impact of socio-economic background on uptake, too. It revealed that the group of students who were more likely to continue on with post-compulsory MFL had a familial income above the national average. This corroborates previous evidence, illustrating that uptake is often highest amongst the most financially advantageous social groups, while conversely, remaining lowest amongst Free School Meal Entitlement populations (Collen, 2020; Henderson and Carruthers, 2021). To explain this, *Bourdieuian* concepts are gaining credence among scholars, insofar as exploring ways in which attitudes towards MFL pertain to economic and cultural capitals. In a study of learners’ attitudes towards MFL in state and Independent schools in London, Coffey (2018), reports the significant impact of economic and social capital: families attending the Independent school, where languages were taught, often undertook multiple European holidays, annually. Therefore, gaining a qualification in MFL could, arguably, be better valued for those with a higher economic capital, as it remains highly compatible with their travelling lifestyle and world view. By contrast, in the school where MFL was not offered, students reported coming from families who did not enjoy international mobility for leisure, and placed little importance on studying MFL.

This study also reported various geographical disparities regarding uptake, with uptake being favoured extensively by students in the southern regions of England. Collen (2020) discovered similar regional differences; an overwhelming percentage (65%) of students study post-compulsory MFL across inner London boroughs, yet only 43% of students study in the North East. The media has depicted this as the generalised ‘North-South’ divide (Coughlan, 2017). However, by choosing to focus their article on geographical inequalities in isolation, Coughlan (2017) fails to consider wider demographic disparities which could, indeed, affect uptake in the North: namely socio-economic inconsistencies or cultural and linguistic diversity which varies geographically (Graham, 2017). Therefore, given the greater linguistic diversity in London (Office for National Statistics, 2018),

general higher rates of tourism, and greater access to international flights, it is understandable why uptake may remain higher there.

### 5.3 Trends in MFL: the Context of BAME

Examining ethnicity as a factor in isolation for motivational decline, this study confirms the findings by Vidal Rodeiro (2009), insofar as documenting a vertiginous drop of MFL uptake by the BAME community at post-16. Motivational factors for this group did not drastically deviate from the overall motivations, as the perceived boring curriculum, once again, remained a salient factor. However, divergences in this study are prevalent in the latter half of the motivational rankings, whereby the (lack of) provision of (Heritage) languages in school remained more important to BAME students. For example, 76% of those who identified as BAME reported knowing a HL; however, when asked if they pursued - or would consider pursuing – gaining a qualification in it (given that many are provided by the main exam boards), only 19% of these respondents chose to carry it on.

There are many reasons for the motivational decline of post-compulsory MFL study amongst ‘BAME’ students. While Moore (2005) found that BIPOC students in the United States were less likely to relate to a Eurocentric curriculum (Moore, 2005), qualitative answers in this present study revealed that it was a combination of both the ‘racially exclusive’ European curriculum<sup>16</sup> coupled with the importance placed on European languages by schools which deterred BAME students from pursuing post-compulsory MFL study in England. That is, even if students remained intrinsically motivated to gain qualifications in a language, it was often unviable, as HLs were perceived as inferior to the ‘big 3.’ Respondents in this study further commented on how schools often do not do enough to encourage a larger intake of BAME students into language and arts subjects, too. Collen (2020) and Carruthers and Nandi (2020) support this finding that schools often place non-European languages at the bottom of the ‘language hierarchy.’ This begs the question of whether BAME students would be more inclined to gain an MFL qualification, if the right or most valuable languages to them were offered at school? However, as seen above, non-selective schools typically struggle to gain funding to run MFL; therefore, financial constraints could, indeed, hinder the possibility of studying HLs, rendering this discourse more complex. Furthermore, while it is unclear from the aforementioned responses who the respondents were being discouraged by, this finding aligns with Glynn’s (2007) study, wherein BAME students discontinued with MFL study after feeling misunderstood and discouraged by schools.

In the same vein, BAME non-linguists in this study expressed a high preference for independent language learning over formal language study, which influenced their decision to discontinue with formal MFL study. Further conclusions can be deduced in this context, thanks to the aforementioned interplay of HLs. That is, language apps, such as Duolingo, often provide a greater array of languages at users’ disposal, which, in turn, presents students with the opportunity of mastering languages more pertinent to their aims and desires (especially in the case of BAME students with knowledge of a HL), than the ‘big 3’ (French, German and Spanish) dominating English schools.

Lastly, the apparent unnecessary of an MFL qualification remained a top predictor for (lack of) MFL uptake at post-16 amongst students who identified as part of the BAME community, reflecting a similar trend to the overall motivation, too. This signified that an MFL qualification was not

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<sup>16</sup> During the time of this paper being written, important talks encouraging the *Decolonisation of the MFL classroom* were becoming more prevalent across the country. Here, academics, teachers and policy makers came together to discuss how to ‘counteract racially discriminatory practices in the Secondary MFL classroom’ (Panford, 2021). Ultimately, Panford and Irvine(2021) suggest that while teachers can actively promote diversity themselves by incorporating and considering diverse histories and ethnic, cultural and religious diversity in their lessons, it should fundamentally become the responsibility of the Government and exam boards to review subject and exam materials effectively to promote inclusivity (ibid.). While these recommendations have yet to be implemented, these discussions have contributed to a broader debate promoting inclusivity in the MFL classroom, which, once acted upon, could indeed promote uptake amongst BAME students.

undertaken, as respondents reported pursuing a career which required a different set of subjects. However, amongst BAME respondents, parental influence was a greater motivational factor when decision-making, with general negative attitudes towards MFL generally stemming from both the respondents' family and wider community (instead of schools). Qualitative responses here illustrated how MFL can, in some instances, be perceived as a 'soft subject' with supposedly little job prospects, thus for them, can be seen as supposedly futile and not worth studying, compared to more 'vocational' subjects such as 'STEM'. Reasons behind the increased uptake of 'STEM' subjects and consequent decrease of MFL (and arts) uptake amongst BAME students<sup>17</sup> — whether driven by cultural differences or biases (institutional or individual) — remains unclear in existing scholarship. Supported by responses in this study, one theory pertaining to relative risk aversion by BAME students has gained prominence amongst scholars. McMaster (2017), for example, theorises that BAME students are amongst the group of students who are most likely to make financially beneficial decisions to study subjects which supposedly have more secure job prospects and a higher financial return (McMaster, 2017). McMaster (2017) notes that minority ethnic students are less likely to receive high degree classifications and are more likely to be unemployed after graduation (Runnymede Trust, 2014). Therefore, given the apparent additional barriers generally experienced by BAME students, it is understandable why a vocational degree and subject may be more attractive to this group as it presents greater security when entering the job market.

A further theory explores the idea that parental educational and professional backgrounds can perpetuate this negative perception of MFL, thus influencing BAME students' post-compulsory choices. For example, Archer et al. (2012) found that when BAME students are choosing their A-Level subjects, they may, indeed, be more influenced by family to study subjects which are already familiar to them and their familial background. This means that if a student's father had studied a STEM degree, there would often exist a relative 'science capital' within the family (Archer et al., 2012), which can further perpetuate and (directly or indirectly) influence the next generations of students to study a subject which parents or elder family members have experienced to be a perceived 'success.' While this remains a credible theory behind negative perceptions towards MFL by some members of the BAME community, data including parental background and their respective education and career trajectories, if any, is lacking in this study. Thus, future qualitative research could explore the aforementioned sentiments further, and focus specifically on whether student and parental attitudes mediate the relationship between post-compulsory subject choices, particularly in MFL and the arts. This is so effective interventions are implemented, and no further students forgo an MFL education, as a result of their ethnicity.

## 5.4 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Whilst the current study remained significant in highlighting current motivational trends, there are several limitations to consider. Firstly, although this study improved the validity and reliability of previous research (especially with the contribution of qualitative answers), the sample for non-MFL respondents was considerably small. Similarly, respondents who identified as BAME constituted for less than half of the overall sample. While this was expected, generalisations based on these findings should be made with caution, as they account for just a small minority. Nonetheless, given the paucity of research in this manner, it does not significantly impact results, but instead acts as a plausible first step towards ethnicity and language uptake research in England. Furthermore, this study failed to

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<sup>17</sup> Note here that the relationship between 'ethnicity' and participation in 'STEM' is complex. While I refer to minority ethnic students as 'BAME' generally, there often remains disparities between ethnic groups in uptake of STEM-related subjects. For example, while Chinese and Indian students are more likely to study STEM-related subjects, African, Caribbean and Bangladeshi girls are notably underrepresented here (McMaster, 2017). Therefore, conclusions and theories made in this section should be interpreted with caution and generalisations should not be made, so not to conflate communities.

recognise various significant GCSE and A-Level reforms which occurred throughout this decade, which may have, indeed, impacted respondents' decisions. Finally, while this study has attempted to explore any extralinguistic factors in relation to post-compulsory MFL uptake, it has not fully considered socioeconomic factors, insofar as the number of family members, postcode and potential entitlement to free school meals are concerned. Therefore, these results should, once again, be interpreted with caution. Given the time, word, and resource limitations, though, these identifications and analyses remained too large for the nature of this project.

To this end, future qualitative study could be given to further understanding and improving, BAME motivations towards MFL, achieved through interviews, for example. Though not addressed here, future research could build on Graham et al.'s (2012) study by comparatively exploring motivations in relation to other, more popular subjects (which respondents in this study noted as more exciting), highlighting what features are perceived as more attractive and why. These suggestions would facilitate the identification of MFL specification discrepancies, enabling policy makers to implement effective interventions and play a role in potentially transforming MFL pedagogy. In the same vein, future study could follow on from current discourses encouraging the *Decolonisation of the MFL Classroom* (see footnote 18), by exploring the feasibility and idea of moving away from the 'big 3' group of languages (French, German and Spanish), and offering languages which perhaps may be seen as more pertinent and useful to students, particularly those part of the BAME community (of whom 76% reported knowing a HL in this study but refrained from gaining a qualification in it due to rigid school policies and lack of availability in schools). Similarly, respondents of all ethnicities in this paper commented on the desire to study transnational and transcultural material wherein their TL is spoken, as they feel this education would help students become more engaged in MFL and render them supposedly better globally aware than from the content currently covered in MFL curricula. To this end, future research could build on Cazzoli's (2022) argument of maximising resources existing in MFL departments, by exploring the role of TL Teaching Assistants in schools and their effectiveness in MFL classrooms, for example, as well as evaluating current TL teaching approaches and curriculum design. Building on MFL pedagogy, multiple respondents in this study further commented on the supposedly poor quality of teaching they experienced which dissuaded them from pursuing post-compulsory MFL study. Previous literature has also highlighted that, in some instances (such as with students whose L1 was not English), MFL teachers have felt the least prepared to teach this group of students, compared to other disciplines (Hewitt, 2022). Worse still, this paper has seen that pre-service training in this area is somewhat lacking, despite it being stipulated by the English DfE. Therefore, future qualitative study could interview current educators of EAL students to effectively comprehend the current situation, discern what aspects of preparation are supposedly lacking from current ITT, suggest effective implications, and revisit and redesign the training materials distributed on ITT courses. Additionally, although ethical constraints prevented collaborating with school-aged children in this study, a study on a greater scale, could further test the existing findings on the current and/or next generation of linguists and educators, assessing the effectiveness of governmental reforms. Finally, this study focussed solely on a small subset of the English population. Therefore, an amplification of this study could comparatively examine the robustness of wider MFL curricula across all four nations of the UK, to discern various functionalities and recognise any interventions required.

Although the aforementioned considerations have broader implications for further MFL research, the empirical evidence showcased here has, on the whole, successfully highlighted a national motivational decline in pursuing post-16 MFL study, not entirely because of sociolinguistic factors, though; but rather the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as supposed rigid school policies and perceived boring curricula. Therefore, this paper concludes by calling for amendments to school and educational policies, insofar as building a curriculum which extends beyond Europe to enhance inclusivity, as well as providing the pedagogical tools, training, and support for educators to effectively do so.

## 6 Conclusion

This empirical study has exhibited robust findings, lending credence to previous research, insofar as documenting that, while there remain plenteous highly motivated students pursuing post-compulsory MFL in England in this study, there, ultimately, remains a national motivational decline, particularly at post-16. Deep analysis of the motivational factors behind this decline in this study, signified that students are, generally, intrinsically motivated to learn languages but are dissuaded from gaining qualifications, due to negative perceptions of curricula, lessons, and supposed exam difficulty. Furthermore, sociolinguistic trends occurred, indicating that gaining qualifications in MFL is, typically, limited to those with higher economic and cultural capitals (Carruthers & Nandi, 2020). Lastly, this paper confirms the general absence of BAME students in post-compulsory MFL in England. Building on previous theories from the United States, it concludes that motivational trends do not differ based solely on respondents' identification with the BAME category, as students do, generally, want to study MFL. Instead, it is external factors, such as rigid school policies impeding the study of non-European HLs, for example, which do not avail. However, the increasing attention surrounding the *Decolonisation of the MFL Classroom* discourse in England — wherein focus is dedicated to revising the current MFL curricula, forcing exam boards to promote the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of the target language countries, including those beyond Europe (Panford, 2021) — indicates the essential first step taken by the relevant bodies towards tackling the ethnicity decline in post-compulsory MFL uptake, and promoting interventions to counteract this.

Although this study has contributed to the reliability and validity of existing research, it would be fruitful for future research to build on this current study, by adopting additional qualitative methods, to explore motivational factors in relation to other subjects, in turn enabling effective reforms to be made. Given the relatively small sample of those who chose not to study MFL and those who identified as BAME in this study, too, this need for qualitative methodology and further study is particularly essential to avoid generalisations. A qualitative study (such as the implementation of focus groups with both students and teachers alike) would further promote a controlled environment, enabling the researcher to determine an accurate and representative sample and effectively elicit responses, so to avoid disparities that occur with the self-selecting nature of the snowballing research methodology.

While this article does not naturally lend itself to definitive conclusions about the vastly differing experiences of (socially, racially and financially) disadvantaged and minoritised students in post-compulsory MFL in England, the research in this study has, ultimately, successfully provided rich contextual and empirical evidence in support of its hypothesis and illuminated gaps in existing literature. Overall, this study acts as an invaluable and unequivocal first step towards tackling the so-called 'MFL Crisis' and improving recruitment to post-compulsory MFL in England.

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## 8 Appendices

### 8.1 Appendix One – Motivational Items in Parrish and Lanvers (2018)

The following appendix contains the response options for the motivational item: ‘As far as you can remember, how important were each of these things when you decided whether to take a language or not?’ as seen in Parrish and Lanvers (2018).

1. Getting an EBacc
2. Being seen as an academic student
3. Whether I liked the teacher
4. Whether my friends were doing it
5. Whether I thought I would get a good grade
6. How much I liked the subject
7. Choosing subjects I thought were important to know
8. How useful I thought it would be

### 8.2 Appendix Two – Copy of Questionnaire

#### Section One: Background Information

The following questions ask for demographic information. Please answer as accurately as possible.

Q1. How would you best describe your gender?

1. Male (including transgender men)
2. Female (including transgender women)
3. Non-binary
4. Prefer not to say
5. Other

Q2. What nationality do you best identify with?

1. White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
2. White – Irish
3. White - Gypsy or Irish Traveller
4. White – Other
5. Asian / Asian British – Indian
6. Asian / Asian British -Pakistani
7. Asian / Asian British – Chinese
8. Asian / Asian British - Sri Lankan
9. Asian / Asian British – Bangladeshi
10. Asian / Asian British – Other
11. Black/Black British – African
12. Black/Black British – Caribbean
13. Black/Black British – Other
14. Mixed/multiple ethnic groups - White and Black Caribbean
15. Mixed/multiple ethnic groups - White and Asian
16. Mixed/multiple ethnic groups - White and Black African
17. Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – Other

Q3. What is your parents' annual household income on average?

1. Less than £10,000
2. £10,000-£20,999
3. £21,000-£25,999
4. £26,000-£35,999
5. £36,000-£51,999
6. £52,000-£77,999
7. £78,000 or more
8. Unsure
9. Prefer not to say

Q4. Where in England did you go to secondary school?

1. North East
2. North West
3. Yorkshire and the Humber
4. East Midlands
5. West Midlands
6. East of England
7. London
8. South East
9. South West

Q5. What type of school did you attend?

1. State (mixed)
2. State (single sex)
3. Grammar (single sex)
4. Grammar (mixed)
5. Independent (single sex)
6. Independent (mixed)

Q6. Is English the first language you acquired as an infant?

1. Yes, only first language
2. Yes, English was my first along with another language
3. No, I learned English later in my childhood/life

Q7. Did you grow up with knowledge of a Heritage Language?\*

\*A language typically learned at home during childhood, but which is not the dominant language spoken in society. e.g., Urdu in the UK; Spanish in the United States

1. Yes
2. No

Q7a. You selected **Yes**. Please specify which Heritage Language you know. Please select all that apply:

1. Spanish
2. Mandarin

3. Russian
4. Cantonese
5. Korean
6. Arabic
7. Tagalog
8. Hindi
9. Urdu
10. Tamil
11. Japanese
12. Portuguese
13. Other

Q7b. Did you gain a qualification in your Heritage Language? E.g., a GCSE in Arabic, Urdu or Bengali etc.?

1. Yes
2. No. Please specify why \_\_\_\_\_

### **Section Two: Experience of MFL in Schools (post-14)**

The following questions ask about your experience of MFL in secondary school (post-14). Q1. Did you take a GCSE in a Modern Foreign Language (MFL)? Please respond to each question using the scale below. Please answer open and honestly, there are no right or wrong answers.

1. Yes
2. No

Q1.a. You selected **Yes**. Which language(s) did you take your GCSE in? Select all that apply:

1. French
2. German
3. Spanish
4. Other

Q1b. Why did you take that specific language(s) over the others? Please rank your answers from most important (1) to least important (5).

- I found it more exciting than the others (1)
- It was the only language available at my school (2)
- I thought it would be the language I'd get best grade in (3)
- It was compulsory - My school made me do one but I wanted to (4)
- It was compulsory - BUT I didn't want to do one (5)

### **Section Three: Experience of MFL in Schools (post-16)**

The following questions ask about your experience of MFL in secondary schools (post-16).

Q1. Did you choose to study a language post-16? (i.e., at AS/A Level, IB or University?)  
**Please respond to each question using the scale below. Please answer open and honestly, there are no right or wrong answers.**

1. Yes
2. No

**Q1b. You selected No. What factor best influenced your decision? Rank your answers from most important (1) to least important (10).**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Parental influence - they deemed it not necessary as I already had knowledge of another language (e.g., Heritage Language like Urdu, Portuguese etc.) (1)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Lack of motivation - I found languages boring and unengaging (2)
- \_\_\_\_\_ My Further Education centre (college, sixth form) didn't offer preferred language (3)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Poor teaching/no teacher suitable to teach (4)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not needed for degree choice - (e.g., Medicine) (5)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Exams too difficult - jump from GCSE to A Level too high (6)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not enough subject space - already chosen 3 A Levels (7)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prefer to do it on own in free time at one's own pace (e.g., with Duolingo) (8)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I didn't consider it important after Brexit (9)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Wasn't a diverse discipline - both curriculum content & teaching staff/peers (10)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I wasn't aware of the benefits of languages jobs-wise (11)

**Q1c. Do you regret not carrying on with MFL post-16? Please explain why/why not.**

1. Yes\_\_
2. No\_\_

**Q1d. Hypothetically, if you had carried on with MFL post-16, what would your motivation(s) have been for doing so? Please rank the following from most important (1) to least important (10).**

- \_\_\_\_\_ I would've wanted to become fluent in the language (1)
- \_\_\_\_\_ It would've been (one of) my best grade(s) at GCSE (2)
- \_\_\_\_\_ It would've been a useful subject to have (3)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I would've been motivated by an inspiring MFL teacher (4)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I would've found content interesting (5)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I'd already had a background in that language (6)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Parental influence - I would've been taught that languages open doors in the future (7)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I would've wanted to live abroad in the future (8)
- \_\_\_\_\_ It would've complemented my other subjects well (9)
- \_\_\_\_\_ It might've helped me get a job after school (10)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other (11)

**Q1b. You selected Yes. What factor best influenced your decision? Rank your answer from most important (1) to least important (10).**

- \_\_\_\_\_ I wanted to become fluent in the language (1)
- \_\_\_\_\_ It was (one of) my best grade(s) at GCSE (2)
- \_\_\_\_\_ It was a useful subject to have jobs-wise (3)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I had an inspiring teacher (4)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I found the content interesting (5)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I already had a background in that language (6)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Parental influence - they thought languages would open doors in the future (7)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I wanted to live abroad in the future (8)

\_\_\_\_\_ It complemented my other subjects well (9)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (10)

Q1c. Do you regret carrying on with MFL post-16? Please explain why/why not.

1. Yes \_\_
2. No \_\_

Q1b. You selected **No**. Why didn't you choose to study a language post-14?

Please rank your answers from most important (1) to least important (5)

\_\_\_\_\_ I didn't find languages exciting (1)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Languages (and/or language teachers) weren't available at my school (2)  
\_\_\_\_\_ I didn't think I would do well/exams were too hard (3)  
\_\_\_\_\_ It wasn't compulsory (4)  
\_\_\_\_\_ My parents thought a different subject would be better suited (5)

Q1d. Do you regret not carrying on with MFL post-14? Please explain why/why not.

1. Yes\_\_
2. No\_\_

Q29 Any other comments?

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Thank you for completing this questionnaire. If you are happy to be contacted by the researcher for a follow up interview, please leave a name and email address to be contacted by:

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## **About the Author**

Zara Fahim is an MPhil Theoretical and Applied Linguistics student (by advanced study), specialising in Romance linguistics at Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics and St John's College, University of Cambridge. The work of this paper, though, was completed during her time at University of Birmingham, when studying for the BA Modern Languages (French, German, Italian) degree, graduating in 2021. Originally having a predilection for pedagogical, educational and racial linguistics (including attitudes, sociolinguistics and Heritage Languages), she has since revisited her multilingual roots and is now focussing her research interests on theoretical syntax, comparative Romance linguistics, Italian dialectology and contact issues, particularly between the Germanic and Romance families.

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