# a good transition is in everyone's interest

# session 3 (1:30pm - 3:00pm)

modern foreign languages and the transition from school to university: student perspectives

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[The A-Level Content Advisory Board] reflected a concern which is actually now paramount in Modern Languages education, the problem of transitioning from one level of education to another, which, while it is most talked about in relation to primary and secondary education, is or was none the less acute in secondary and tertiary education.

Pountain, C. (2019). Modern languages as an academic discipline: the linguistic component. *Language*, *Culture and Curriculum*, 32, 244-260 (p. 245)

This session was devised by a team of researchers, led by the MFL Student Mentoring Project team (Cardiff). Three PhD students from institutions across the GW4 network were also involved in planning and preparing material.

### MFL Student Mentoring Project

Lucy Jenkins (Cardiff)	Introduction (p. 1), 'enjoyment of languages' (p. 4); video production
Tallulah Machin (Cardiff)	Session planning
Rebecca Kirkby (Cardiff)	'Advice for other students' (p. 8)
PhD student facilitators	
Rachel Beaney (Cardiff / Exeter)	'Sources of excitement and concern' (p. 5); video production
Eira Jepson (Cardiff)	'Sources of excitement and concern' (p. 5); session planning
Edward Mills (Exeter)	Pack design; literature review (pp. 2-3); 'barriers' (pp. 6-7)

The team is also grateful to Laura O'Hanlon Elms (Cardiff) for her assistance and support.

# About this session

This session aims to complement the previous sessions on language teaching and policy by focusing on a specific 'leakage point' in the Modern Foreign Languages pipeline: the transition from school to university. We have focused on the school-university 'transition' as it is perhaps the clearest point where different sectors enter into dialogue with one another. We therefore hope that the recommendations to emerge from the session will unite specialists from school, university and policy backgrounds alike, in the common pursuit of increasing the number of young people choosing to study languages. In particular, we hope to build on the discussions held during the recent 'Moving Through Languages: Schools and Universities Working Together' workshop in May 2019 as part of the Language Acts and Worldmaking's networking initiatives.

We hope to be able to conclude the session with a series of recommendations in response to the following questions:

### How do our findings about the student experience give us insight into what is happening to the pipeline of languages students?

# How do we, as a group of people from different backgrounds, work together to provide a better transition experience?

To provide insight into the challenges posed by the transition period, we created and disseminated a survey targeted at current and former students of Modern Foreign Languages in UK universities. The survey was completed by 97 people over a three-week period, with respondents ranging in age from 18 to 65. The respondents do not form a representative sample for considering the motivations of students studying languages at A-Level, since all respondents had chosen to study languages; they also, it should be noted, remained sufficiently engaged with the languages 'pipeline' to complete an unpaid survey over the summer break. Nevertheless, we hope that the survey - whose results form the majority of the information contained in this pack - will provide personal and detailed insights into the opinions of students regarding their language journeys.

The observations emerging from this small-scale survey are far from exhaustive, and the summary presented above necessarily excludes certain other concerns highlighted, among them fears over combining languages with science subjects and more general 'transition' issues not specific to Modern Languages (including adapting to moving away from home and not feeling 'good enough'). It is hoped, nevertheless, that they will inform to some degree the discussions taking place this afternoon.

# **Part 1: Contexts and Challenges**

# Student expectations of MFL degrees: a brief review

Since 2011, when Henriette Harnish observed that 'much of the literature (on transitions) focuses on transition to the university in general terms, with little specific reference made to languages' (159), several smaller-scale studies have taken up the challenge, and have sought to investigate the move from school to university study from within the specific context of the Modern Foreign Languages degree. This brief review seeks to summarise the findings and recommendations of these surveys, with reference to additional work carried out since on the transition, with the aim of informing our recommendations.

Looking retrospectively at experiences of transitions in MFL, perhaps the most common theme to emerge from all three studies is that of a mismatch between student expectations of university study and the reality that they encountered following the start of their course. In particular, research suggests that students do not anticipate the prominent role played in Modern Languages degree programmes by so-called 'cultural' content, which is frequently taught in English. All the students surveyed by Gieve & Cunico 'thought, on starting their degrees, that the study of MFL meant primarily learning and being able to communicate in the TL'; at the end of their degree programmes, any frustrations with their student experience were similarly 'connected to their linguistic skills and never to content knowledge or cultural knowledge/competence' (2012: 279-80). Students who are 'entering university with the expectation of becoming fluent', Gallagher-Brett and Canning note (2011: 175), may become frustrated with seemingly-irrelevant 'cultural' content: their survey of 45 A-Level and undergraduate students stresses the broad range of backgrounds from which MFL recruits, with the vast majority of the A-Level students surveyed studying at least one science or social science subject alongside their language(s) and several of the undergraduate MFL respondents having studied both mathematics and at least one other science subject at A-Level. Incoming students, therefore, cannot be assumed to have studied humanities A-Levels; 'it is unsurprising that there are difficulties in motivating students to read in a foreign language when there is little evidence that they are prepared to read novels in their first language.' (2011: 180-183)

The responsibility for these student frustrations, as the studies note, is shared between the school and university sectors. The A-Level specifications are frequently attacked as providing poor preparation for university study, with the acquisition of language skills having become 'more and more been the priority of school language teaching' (Pountain, 2019: 3) at the expense of intercultural understanding, analytical rigour, and higher-order communication skills found in other humanities subjects. The result is that students' limited exposure to 'content' at school 'may do little to prepare them for the much broader, variegated and deeper notion of culture which informs the 'content' models in MFL degree programmes.' (Pountain, 2019: 3-4; Gieve & Cunico, 2012: 279; Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011: 177-78).<sup>1</sup> University languages departments, however, are also identified as partially responsible for the frustrations felt by students, with the suggestion made that the marketing of university language courses in precisely these terms - that is, with MFL as 'purely functionalist, utilitarian skills that will get young people good jobs' prominent in pre-course literature - preconditioning students to consider their degree choices in purely practical terms (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011: 175; Gieve & Cunico, 2012: 280).

In terms of the solutions offered across the literature to these problems in transition, Gieve & Cunico highlight Content and Integrated Language Learning as one method that universities could use to better integrate these two aspects of a MFL degree; they note, however, that 'one must be cautious of adopting a populist approach ... by offering what students think they want (as opposed to what they might need)' (2012: 279, 287). Universities are also encouraged (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011: 184) to reconsider their marketing to prospective students, emphasising the 'interdisciplinary nature of the MFL degree', as well as addressing student expectations at the start of degree programmes, addressing the 'horizontal' and 'diagonal' aspects of the transition by taking into account students' varied experiences of prior study. Harnisch in particular highlights work that might usefully be done in schools, with Year 13 students surveyed requesting closer study of grammar, extra speaking practice, and additional listening activities (Harnisch et al, 2011: 167).

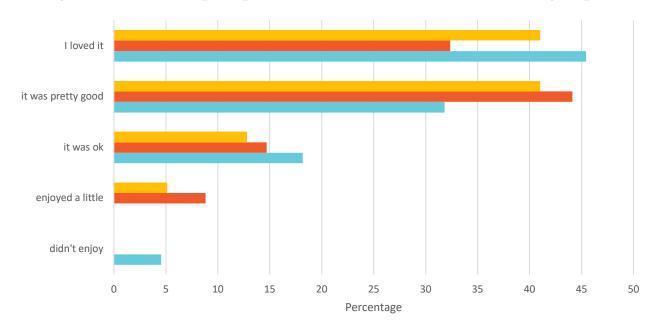
For a full list of references, see p. 8 below.

### A note on A-Level MFL specifications

The relationship between A-Level and university study of MFL is, of course, a contentious issue. Gallagher-Brett and Canning (2011: 178) identify a 'horizontal disjuncture' in expectations of candidates between MFL and cognate disciplines such as English, noting that 'There is no reference in the languages specifications to nurturing students to engage creatively, or to become critical or reflective. Instead the focus is on understanding and communicating [...] It is not a specified aim of History or English Literature to equip students with employability skills, although it is in Modern Foreign Languages.' The more recent guidelines for A-Level specifications do, by contrast, give critical thinking similar billing to language skills, emphasising 'transferable skills such as autonomy, resourcefulness, creativity, critical thinking, and linguistic, cultural and cognitive flexibility' (Department for Education, 2015: 3-4); however, concerns persist over the perceived 'difficulty' of MFL A-Levels, particularly in the linguistic domain. The recent letter to the exams regulator Ofqual, led by Katrin Kohl and published in the Guardian, is supported by analysis that highlights a number of factors unique to MFL A-Levels, among them the 'native speaker factor', issues surrounding the use of 'immersion' and insufficiently-adapted authentic materials, and the excessive importance of exam technique in achieving high grades. (Kohl, 2019: 7-8, 13-16).

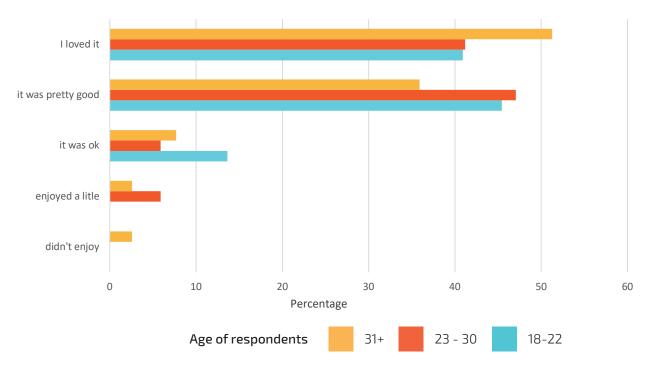
# Part 2: Survey findings

In this second section, we aim to share some of the key findings from our survey, which we have broken down according to a variety of criteria in the hope that the results will inform our discussion and recommendations. Full results are available on request.



## Enjoyment of languages at school level (sorted by age)

# Enjoyment of languages at university level (sorted by age)



4 survey findings minimum mi

# Sources of excitement and concern for university study

This section presents a range of the most frequently-recurring terms across responses to two questions, which sought to gauge students' hopes, expectations and concerns at the point of university entry. The size of each word below corresponds to its frequency across the responses.

Q8. What were you most looking forward to about studying languages at university?

Improving opportunity knowledge people Becoming fluent fluency Learning new language French language skills Learning abroad language different year abroad history culture scratch study able communicate literature year spoken history literature countries fluent travel excited Developing

Q9. What were you least looking forward to about studying languages at university?

# French good Exams thought Literature translation Learning level Nothing speak Grammar language difficult studying studying literature year abroad

These word clouds are also also printed on the walls; during the session, please add your own ideas, thoughts and comments to the word clouds using the Post-It notes provided.

# Barriers to pursuing a languages degree

Question 12 of the survey asked students whether they had experienced any 'barriers' in applying to study modern languages at university. This broad and undefined term elicited a wide range of responses, which broadly fell into two areas of focus. **Barriers to reaching the application stage** centred, unsurprisingly, around students' prior experiences with studying languages. Respondents noted that studying languages to A-Level or equivalent was itself not an easy task, given (for one respondent) the unsatisfactory manner in which the subjects were taught:

> The repetitive, exam-focused nature of (GCSE and A-Level language) classes is enough to make anyone shy away from wanting to put themselves through another few years of it via a languages degree.

A more common concern was the difficulty encountered by students in continuing their language studies to A-Level in the first instance, in the face of challenging circumstances for language-learning beyond GCSE:

- > My school's language department was quite underfunded. There have been multiple attempts to close the A-Level program so I was undertain as to whether there would be a course for me to study.
- > I had to attend different schools to obtain my A-Levels in French and Spanish since there was not enough demand.

The specific entry requirements for Modern Languages posed problems even for students who were keen to study the subject at university. In particular, languages A-Levels as a 'hard option', combined with the impossibility of studying certain languages *ab initio*, were mentioned:

- > The perceived difficulty of MFL A-Level exams (was a concern)
- > I struggled with my A-Levels: I didn't get the best grades

The majority of barriers experienced by students, however, related not to being able to apply to Modern Languages courses in the first instance, but instead to **whether a degree in Modern Languages was the right choice for them**. Unsurprisingly, financial concerns were a prominent topic among respondents, with the additional expenses of the Year Abroad causing some to have reservations:

- > Cost it's four years instead of three and even though we didn't pay the same tuition for our year abroad, we were still going to different countries, which cost a lot of money.
- Wider question of costs beyond maintenance loan which can be incredibly costly (specifically accommodation and travel expenses on the year abroad) that required my parents' financial support.

Surprisingly, two respondents called into question the 'value' of a Modern Languages degree in comparison to travelling to a country where the language was spoken. The 'value' of a Modern Languages degree was often framed within the context of increased fees across all subjects from 2012-13, although in the former case, respondents appeared to associate the MFL degree exclusively with acquiring fluency in one or more languages, having neglected to consider (or perhaps having been unaware of) the broader benefits of a languages degree:

- > Financial cost was a huge barrier particularly as I knew I could learn a language via travel/working abroad etc.
- > New university fees and being unsure as to whether to just move to a country of the target language
- > Initially I doubted my decision due to the higher fees

For other respondents, however, spending time abroad during a degree was a source of anxiety rather than a viable alternative to a languages degree, and constituted a 'barrier' to overcome during the subject selection process:

- > The 'barrier' of moving country but I took that as a positive and exciting change, however it took some getting used to
- > Studying abroad at 18.

While financial concerns were the single most frequent 'barrier' reported by students, however, a similar level of concern was also reported surrounding others' reactions to the decision to study languages. Fears that joint degrees were seen as 'lesser', or that languages as a subject was not 'pure' enough, were raised; particularly prominent among misconceptions, however, were pernicious ideas concerning the utility of MFL qualifications, or the careers that were open to languages graduates:

- I think there is not much knowledge about how languages can be used in different careers, growing up most people told me that I would only be able to become a teacher
- > I still regularly get asked what I'm going to do with my degree as many people seem to think I must go into teaching
- > Languages degrees are often derided as 'mickey mouse' qualifications which are not as useful as other 'more practical' degrees. As I was also good at maths, there was pressure on me to do that as it would supposedly be more useful to future employment.

You will find a wide selection of comments taken directly from the survey regarding this question in notecard form in your pack on the table. You can identify the 'barrier' cards by looking for the symbol to the right.



## Advice for other students considering language study

Question 17 asked participants to provide advice for anyone considering further pursuit of a language at university. You will find a selection of responses to this question in notecard form in the pack on the table. You can identify the 'Advice' cards by looking for the symbol to the right.

### Surprises for students in their study of languages

Question 10 of the survey asked participants to comment on anything that surprised them about their languages study. You will find a selection of responses to this question in notecard form in the pack on the table. You can identify the 'Surprise' cards by the lightning-bolt symbol.

### **Bibliography and selected further reading**

- Department for Education (2015). Modern foreign languages: GCSE AS and A level subject content [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/610131/GCE\_Subject\_Level\_Conditions\_for\_MFL\_\_April\_2017\_.pdf.
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