



**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





[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.





# 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

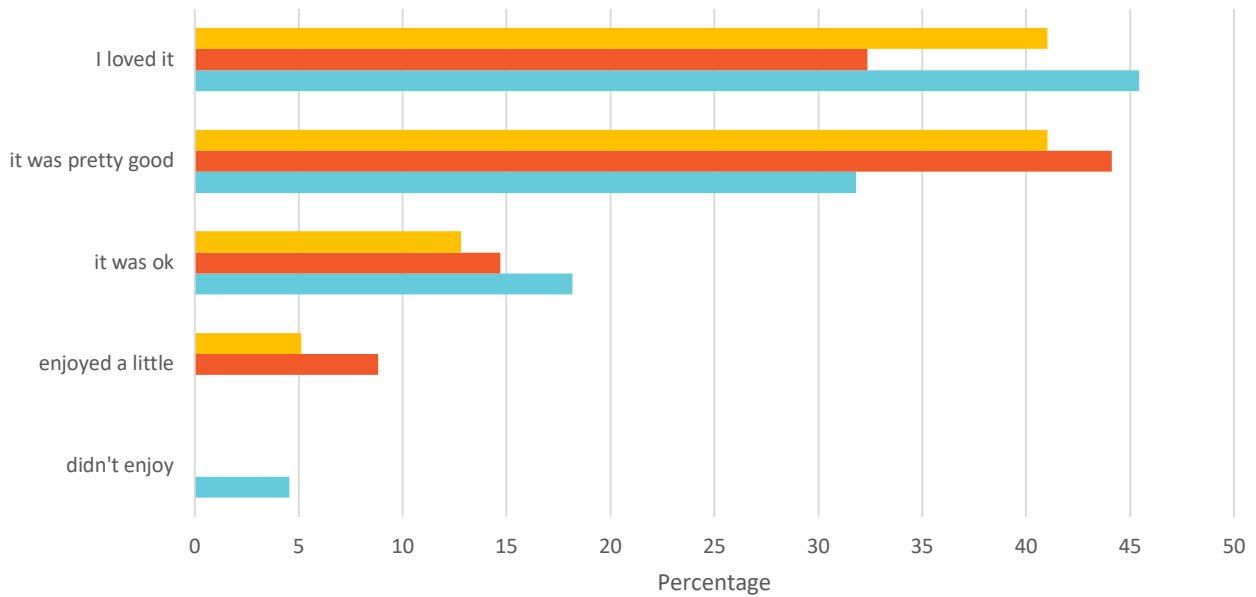




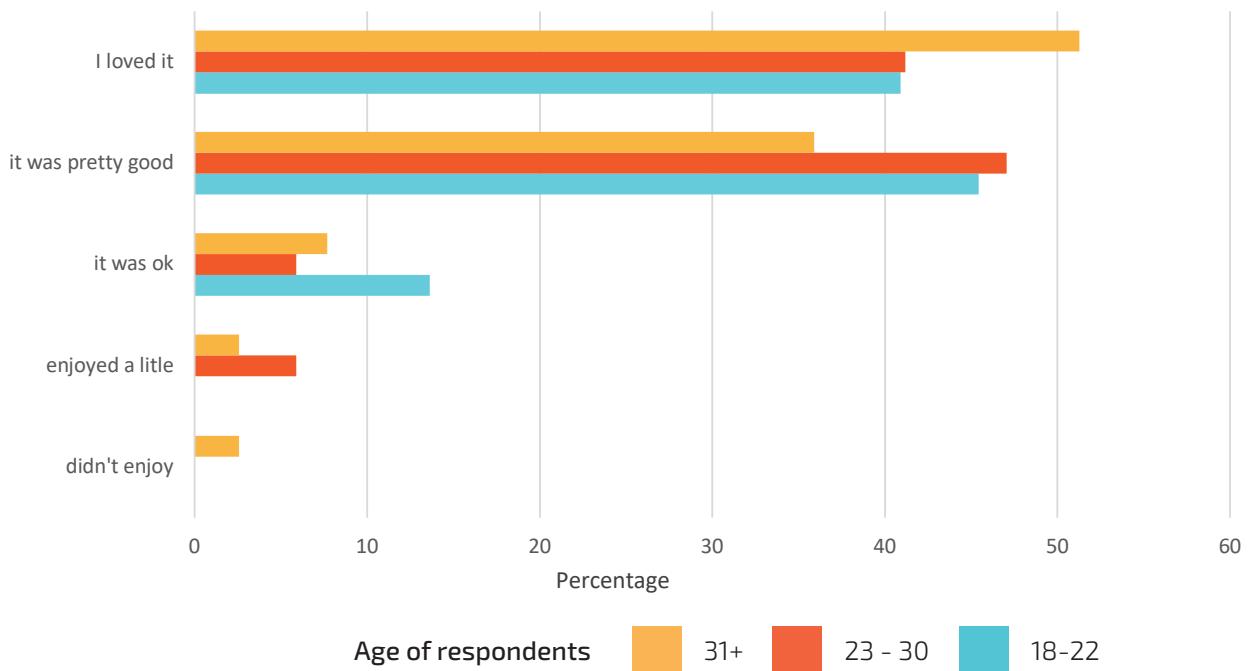
# Part 2: Survey findings

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)



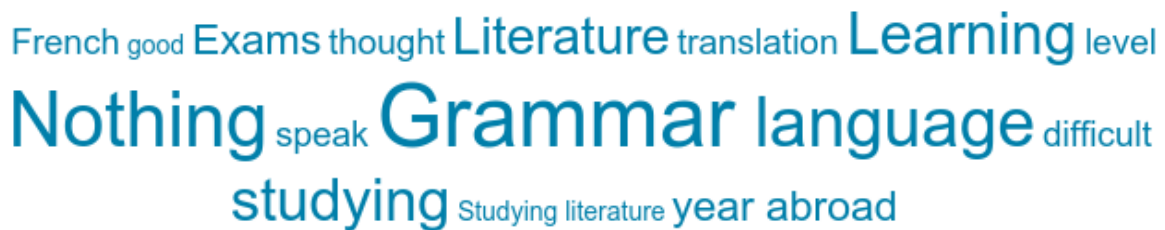
## Sources of excitement and concern for university study

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?



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



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 uncertain 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.



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### 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](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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