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FUTURE-PROOFING LANGUAGE LEARNING:

University Students' Attitudes Towards Foreign Languages in Ireland

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary: Key Findings and Implications	2
1. Introduction	4
2. Study Design and Methods	4
2.1 Survey	4
2.2 Focus groups	6
3. Quantitative Findings	8
3.1 Demographic variables and language study	8
3.2 Prior language study and teacher influence	8
3.3 Career prospects and instrumental motivation	8
3.4 Motivational profiles of language and non-language students	9
3.5 Attitudes to AI and English	9
4. Qualitative Findings	10
4.1 Language teachers, school experience and path-dependent continuation	10
4.2 Identity, mobility and career value	11
4.3 Non-language students: interest without language study opportunities	11
4.4 Anxiety, confidence and academic risk	12
4.5 Social perceptions and the perceived place of languages	12
4.6 AI and the continuing value of human language learning	13
4.7 Student recommendations for future provision	13
5. Synthesis: The Student Engagement Triad	14
6. Strategic Insights for Policy and Practice in Modern Foreign Languages Education	15
7. Recommendations for Future Policy Development	16
7.1 Strengthening continuity across sectors	16
7.2 Removing barriers to participation	16
7.3 Strengthening relevance and future value	16
8. Limitations and Conclusion	17

Executive Summary: Key Findings and Implications

This report presents findings from *Future-Proofing Language Learning: University Students' Attitudes Towards Foreign Languages in Ireland*, a mixed-methods project funded by Post Primary Languages Ireland. The project examines why students in higher education choose to continue, discontinue or avoid foreign language study, with particular attention to the transition from post-primary education to higher education. It aims to inform the next phase of *Languages Connect 2017-2026*, Ireland's national languages strategy.

The study combined a survey of 412 students across 10 higher education institutions in Ireland with five focus groups comprising 24 students. The sample included both students enrolled in foreign language study at university and students who were not studying a foreign language. The quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics, tests of association, logistic regression, factor analysis and correlational analysis. Qualitative data from the focus groups and open-ended survey questions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. These instruments examined demographic background, previous language study, current language participation, attitudes to multilingualism, views on AI and English, perceived career value, language anxiety, self-efficacy and motivational constructs based on Dörnyei's L2 (second language) Motivational Self.

The key findings can be summarised as follows:

Language learning trajectories are cumulative.

University-level language study is strongly shaped by prior experience. In the quantitative analysis, 98% of current language students had studied a language before university. This reflects both motivation and structure, as many higher education language pathways require prior experience. However, prior study alone does not explain continuation. The findings suggest that positive earlier experiences help students see language learning as a realistic and meaningful option at university.

Post-primary teachers are central to continuation.

Secondary school foreign language teachers emerged as one of the strongest influences on students' decisions whether or not to continue with languages after secondary school. In the full logistic regression model, teacher influence was the strongest predictor of university language study. The qualitative data reinforced this finding: students who continued often described inspirational teachers, while students who discontinued their language study described rote learning, examination pressure or limited communicative practice.

Language students have stronger future multilingual identities.

Current third level-language learners were distinguished not only by positive attitudes, but by stronger Ideal L2 Self orientations. This is defined as having the capacity to imagine themselves as future multilingual speakers and see languages as part of their identity, career aspirations and wider engagement with the world.

Non-language students often hold positive attitudes towards languages.

Many non-language students recognised languages as useful, interesting, culturally valuable and beneficial for careers. However, this recognition did not always translate into participation. Their future multilingual identities were often weaker, and many saw languages as desirable but optional: valuable in principle, but not central, accessible or realistic within their degree pathway.

Anxiety and confidence shape participation.

Non-language students demonstrated higher language anxiety and lower self-efficacy than language students. Students may like languages or recognise their value while still feeling that they are not "good at languages" or that university-level study would jeopardise grades in their main degree.

Career value is recognised, but not always clearly mapped.

Students strongly associated languages with employability, international opportunities and professional mobility. However, many still associate language careers mainly with teaching, translation, interpreting, business or diplomacy, and struggle to see how languages fit disciplines such as healthcare, science, engineering, law or media.

Structural barriers suppress uptake.

Many non-language students did not avoid languages because they were uninterested. Instead, they reported a lack of language options, timetable clashes, non-credit-bearing provision, inconvenient scheduling or requirements for prior proficiency. Some students are therefore structurally deterred from participating.

AI is not seen as replacing language learning.

Students generally reject the idea that AI translation removes the need to learn languages. AI was viewed as a useful support tool, but not as a substitute for human communication, cultural understanding, humour, nuance, identity, trust or immersion.

Taken together, the findings suggest that strengthening language uptake in higher education requires more than awareness-raising. Many students already recognise that languages have value. The challenge is to convert appreciation into confident participation. This requires early and ongoing, positive exposure to language learning, interactive, motivational pedagogies that promote communication and minimise language learner anxiety, even greater focus on language teacher education, more flexible language pathways at university, and clearer discipline-specific career mapping.



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1. Introduction

This project examined third-level students' attitudes towards foreign language learning in Ireland. Its purpose was to uncover what motivates some students to continue language study, what discourages others from doing so, and how secondary schools and higher education institutions might better support sustained engagement. The project was designed to provide evidence for future language education planning, particularly in the context of the next phase of *Languages Connect 2017-2026* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

The study was guided by three broad questions. First, how do students describe their motivational journey into, through and beyond foreign language study? Second, what are the main motivators, barriers and perceived career values associated with language learning? Third, how do post-primary language experiences and teaching practices influence students' later attitudes and decisions at university level?

The report is intentionally findings-led. While it is informed by national policy priorities (DES 2024, McKelvey et al., 2026) and by Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2019), the background discussion is deliberately brief to foreground the contribution of empirical evidence. The following sections report on the research design, quantitative survey and focus groups. The report then highlights the strategic insights obtained and recommendations for policy and practice.

2. Study Design and Methods

The project used a mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative focus groups. This allowed the project to identify broad patterns across the student sample while also exploring the experiences behind those patterns in greater depth.

2.1 Survey

The quantitative survey was completed by 412 students across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland, with the largest proportion studying at Dublin City University (65.0%, $n = 228$), followed by the University of Galway (11.4%, $n = 40$), University College Cork (10.3%, $n = 36$), and the University of Limerick (8.5%, $n = 30$). Smaller numbers of participants were recruited from Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Maynooth University, Trinity College Dublin (TCD), University College Dublin (UCD), and the Royal Irish Academy.

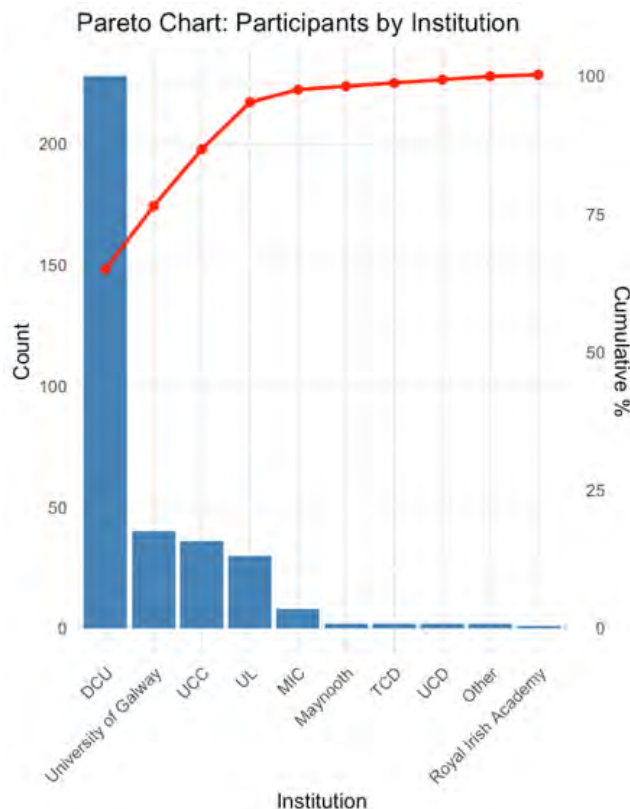


Figure 1. Participants by institution

Participants included both university students currently studying a foreign language (62.4%, $n=217$) and those not currently studying a language (37.6%, $n=131$). The sample included a larger proportion of female students (63.1%, $n=185$) as seen in Figure 2.

Gender Distribution (Q34)

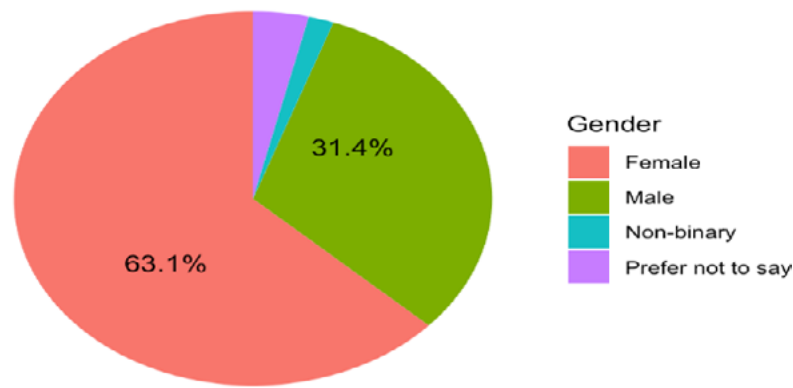


Figure 2. Gender distribution

The most commonly studied languages were Spanish, French, German and Japanese, followed by smaller numbers studying Chinese, Catalan, Italian, Portuguese, Basque, Russian, Korean, Galician and Arabic.

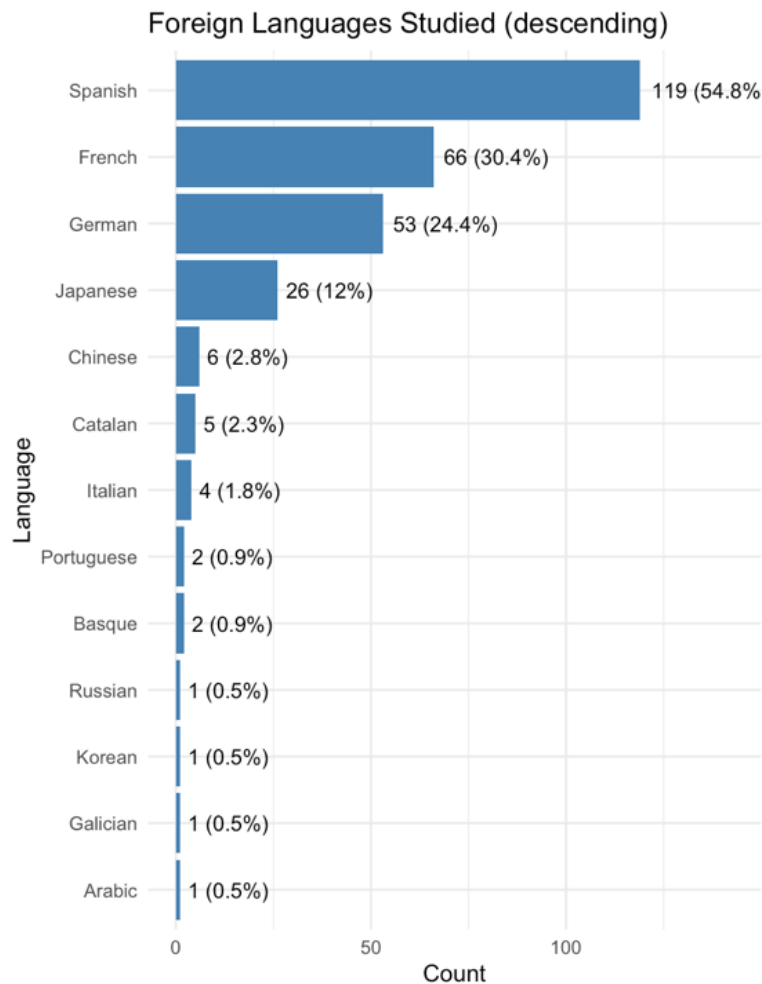


Figure 3. Foreign languages studied

The survey captured additional demographic information related to area of study, prior language study, study outside school, SUSI grant status (as a proxy for socioeconomic status), residential background and multilingual home background.

¹ Please note that none of the questions in the survey are obligatory for ethical reasons so the numbers of responses may vary across the survey.

Table 1. Demographic variables

Demographic Variables	Response Categories	Percentage	n
Area of study	Humanities	54.8%	160
	Business	20.5%	60
	Social Sciences	16.4%	48
	STEM	5.5%	16
	Health Sciences	1.7%	5
	Other	0.7%	2
	Arts	0.3%	1
Studied languages for more than 6 months outside of school	No	64.4	188
	Yes	35.6	104
SUSI grant	No	60.9	165
	Yes	39.1	106
Residential background	Suburban	40.8%	119
	City rural	30.5%	89
	Rural	28.8%	84
Linguistic background	Monolingual English	64.6	188
	Multilingual	35.4	103

It also included items on attitudes towards language learning, views on AI and the place of English as a global language, perceived career value, teacher influence, experience of learning Irish, self-efficacy, anxiety, motivation, intended learning effort, Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self. Here, Ought-to L2 selves refers to the attributes that a L2 learner believes they should possess in order to meet the expectations of other L2 users.

In terms of the types of analysis that were conducted, descriptive statistics were used to characterise the sample and response distributions. Exploratory factor analysis established the underlying structure of the survey and provided evidence of the constructs of future language selves. Correlational analyses explored relationships between the resulting factors. Chi-square tests examined associations between key demographic variables and outcome measures. Logistic regression models were then employed to identify the independent predictors of selected educational outcomes while controlling for potential confounding variables. The survey included two open-ended questions (answered by language students (n=185) and non-language students (n=103)), which were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

2.2 Focus groups

The qualitative phase consisted of five focus groups with 15 language students (62.5%) and nine non-language students (37.5%). Participants were enrolled on a range of degree programmes (Table 2), including language (Applied Language and Translation Studies (29.1%, n=7), Bachelor of Education in Irish and a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) (8.3%, n=2), International Business (8.3%, n=2), Law and a MFL (8.3%, n=2), International Relations (4.1%, n=1), Post-primary Master in Education (4.1%, n=1)) and non-language degrees (Law and another subject (16.6%, n=4), Multimedia (8.3%, n=2), Biology (4.1%, n=1), Social Science, Education (4.1%, n=1), Irish and English (4.1%, n=1)).

Table 2. Focus group participants

Focus group	#participants	Language students	Non-language students
FG1	7	• International Relations & German • Bachelor of Education in Irish & Spanish • Applied Language & Translation – German & Japanese • Law & Spanish	• Multimedia • Social Science & Cultural Innovation • Biology
FG2	5	• Applied Language & Translation – French & Japanese • Applied Language & Translation – Spanish & Chinese • Applied Language & Translation – Spanish & Chinese • International Business & Spanish	• Law & History
FG3	5	• Post-primary Master in Education – German • Bachelor of Education in Irish & French	• Law & Media • Multimedia • Law & Politics
FG4	3	• Law & Spanish (on Erasmus during FG) • Applied Language & Translation – German & Japanese (on Erasmus during FG)	• Law & Media
FG5	4	• Applied Language & Translation – French & Spanish • Applied Language & Translation – German & Japanese • International Business & Spanish	• Irish & English (not a modern foreign language)

The focus groups explored language learning histories, motivations, school experiences, transitions into higher education, perceptions of careers, barriers to participation, views on AI and suggestions for increasing language uptake. These responses were analysed thematically and integrated with the survey open-ended questions.

3. Quantitative Findings

3.1 Demographic variables and language study

Chi-square tests of association were conducted between the demographic variables and language study. They did not show a significant association between gender and whether a student was currently studying a foreign language. This cautions against automatic assumptions that language study is influenced by gender, even though gendered perceptions did appear in the qualitative data (Section 4).

Area of study was more strongly associated with language participation. Humanities students were more likely to study languages, particularly German and French, while Spanish was more commonly studied by students in Business and Commerce.

Neither SUSI grant status nor multilingual home background significantly predicted whether a student was studying a foreign language. This does not mean that these variables are irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that access to language study options, previous educational experience and motivational development must be considered alongside demographic variables.

3.2 Prior language study and teacher influence

One of the clearest quantitative findings is that prior language study strongly predicts continuation into university language study. Almost all current language students had studied a language before university: 98% reported prior language learning experience. Prior language learning was also common among non-language students, but it was less strongly associated with continuation into higher education. This suggests that previous language study is an important condition for university-level participation, but not sufficient on its own to ensure continuation. The transition from post-primary education to higher education therefore represents a key point at which existing language-learning pathways are either maintained or discontinued.

The full logistic regression model identified secondary school foreign language teacher influence as the strongest predictor of studying a language at university. This means that teacher influence was more strongly associated with current language participation than the other variables included in the model, highlighting the importance of post-primary language experiences in shaping students' later decisions about whether to continue with languages.

The strength of the statistical model is important. The analysis did not simply describe students' views; it tested which factors were associated with current language study. Teacher influence and career prospects remained especially important when considered alongside other variables, while some demographic variables were less clearly predictive. This strengthens the conclusion that educational experience and motivational development are central to continuation.

3.3 Career prospects and instrumental motivation

Career prospects were one of the strongest influences on students' decisions to study languages. In the quantitative analysis, students associated language learning with employability, international opportunities, competitiveness and professional mobility. The factor analysis also identified a coherent instrumentality-promotion construct, made up of items relating to improved job prospects, employer value and professional success.

This indicates that career-related motivation is an important dimension of students' attitudes towards foreign language learning. However, while both language and non-language students recognised the general value of languages, this recognition was stronger and more closely connected to participation among students currently studying a language.

3.4 Motivational profiles of language and non-language students

The quantitative findings also showed clear differences in the motivational profiles of language and non-language students. Language students reported stronger Ideal L2 Self orientations, stronger integrative motivation —desire to learn a language in order to connect with its speakers, cultures and communities— and higher L2 self-efficacy. They were more likely to imagine themselves using languages confidently in the future and to see multilingualism as part of their future identity.

Non-language students also showed some positive attitudes towards languages, including recognition of their career and intercultural value. However, their future multilingual identities were generally weaker, and languages were less strongly integrated into their self-concept. They also reported higher language anxiety and lower L2 confidence than students currently studying a language. Figure 4 shows a detailed cluster analysis of motivational profiles based on statistical data.

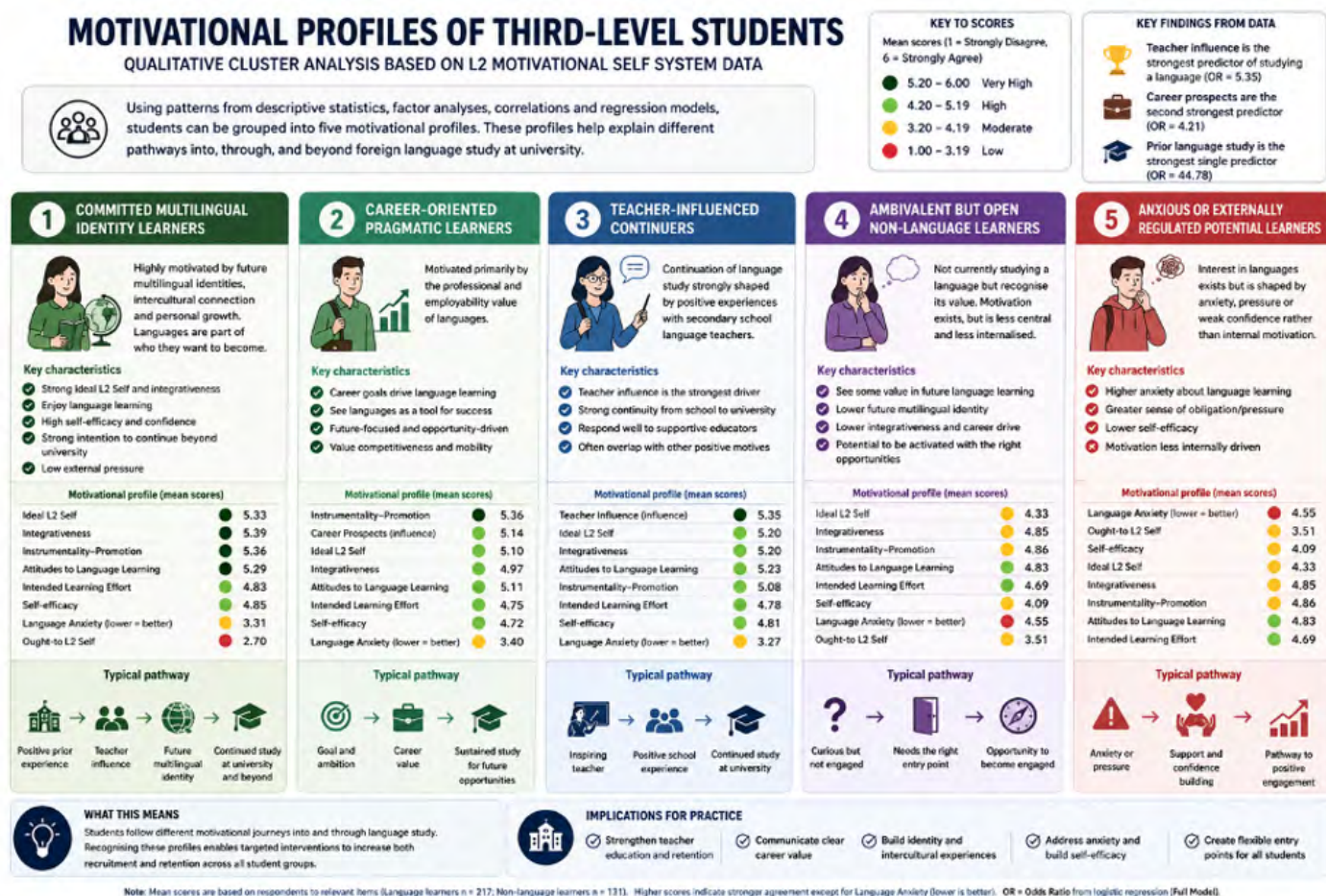


Figure 4. Motivational profiles of third-level students

3.5 Attitudes to AI and English

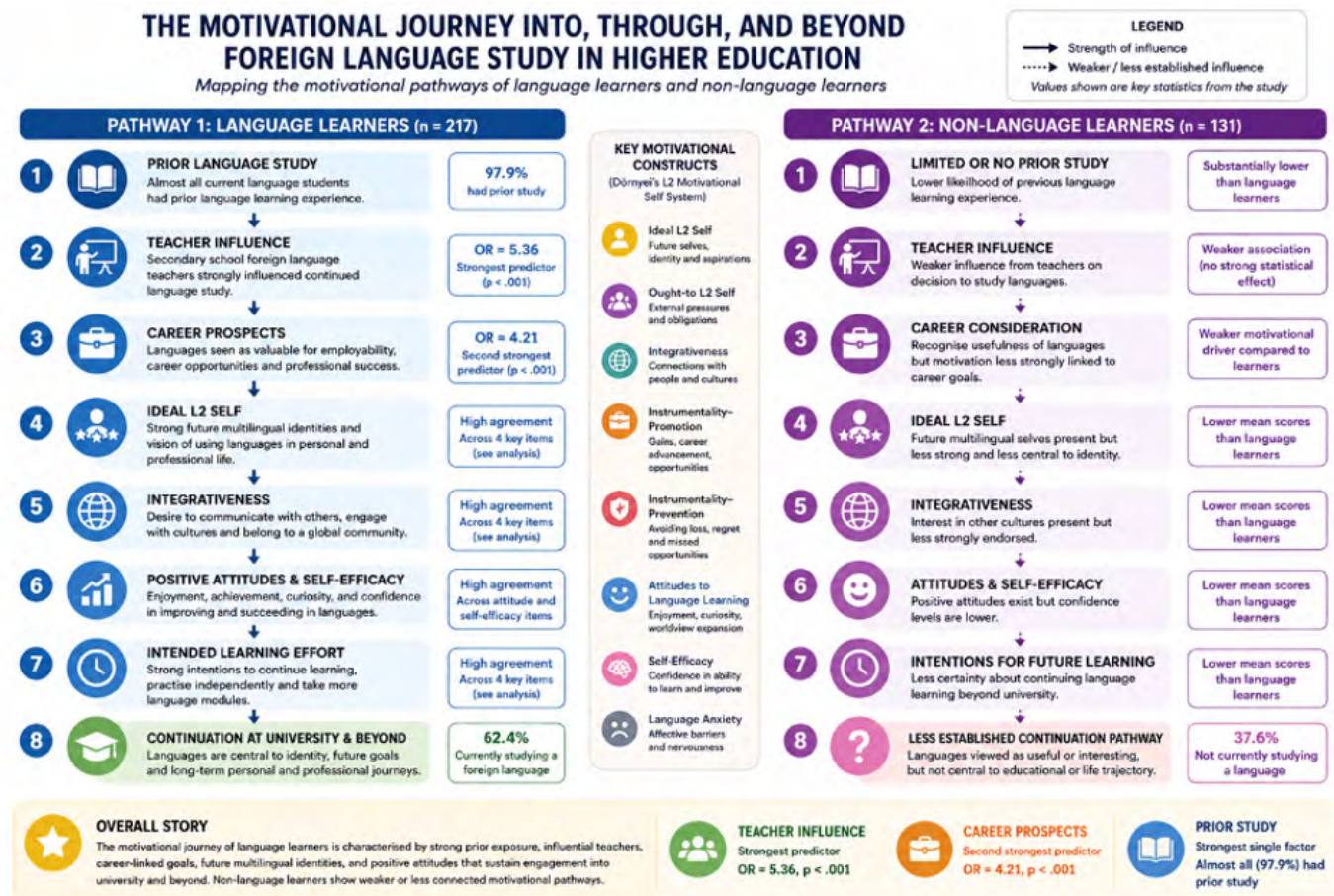
Students broadly rejected monolingual English-oriented views. Responses to the statement “Because I speak English I don’t need other languages” were consistently low across participant groups. Language students disagreed most strongly, but even non-language students generally rejected the idea that English alone is sufficient.

Students also rejected the idea that AI translation removes the need for language learning. Agreement with the statement “AI can translate for me, so I don’t need languages” was low, and students were more likely to see language learning as continuing to matter in an AI-mediated world. Students who believed that AI could replace language learning were more likely to endorse English-only views. Among language students, the belief that language learning remains important in an AI world was significantly associated with rejecting both AI-replacement and English-only perspectives. This suggests that sustained language learning may strengthen a broader multilingual orientation.

Overall, the statistical data allows us to track language and non-language students’ motivational journeys into, through and beyond foreign language study in higher education, which we summarise in Figure 5.

THE MOTIVATIONAL JOURNEY INTO, THROUGH, AND BEYOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Mapping the motivational pathways of language learners and non-language learners



Note: OR = Odds Ratio from logistic regression (Full Model). All percentages based on respondents to relevant items. See full report for detailed statistics and scale means.

Figure 5. Motivational journeys into, through and beyond foreign language study

4. Qualitative Findings

This section integrates findings from the open-ended survey responses and focus groups. Together, these data show that students' decisions to continue, discontinue or avoid foreign language study are shaped by the interaction of school experience, identity, third-level language study opportunities, confidence, social perceptions and perceived future value. For language students, university-level study was often the continuation of an already established pathway. For non-language students, non-participation often reflected structural barriers such as the lack of a suitable language option on their chosen degree, low confidence or academic risk rather than a simple lack of interest.

4.1 Language teachers, school experience and path-dependent continuation

A dominant theme across language students' open-ended responses was the influence of secondary school experience. Many chose to continue because they had enjoyed the subject at school, had achieved success in it, or had been inspired by a specific teacher. Some described having "loved" the language at school, while others felt that strong Leaving Certificate performance made it natural to continue. For these students, university study was not a new departure but the next step in an established pathway.

Teachers were especially significant. Students frequently credited teachers with shaping their interest and confidence. One student described their teacher as the "cornerstone" of their love for the language. Focus group participants similarly referred to teachers who restored confidence, offered extra support, shared personal experiences of living or working abroad, or helped the language feel connected to real life.

"I loved both my teachers, [...] if a teacher has a passion for language, it makes you want to have a passion for language as well, and it makes you want to learn more about language as well."

The reverse also appeared. Students who had discontinued language learning often described teachers or classroom approaches that weakened motivation. They referred to rote learning, repetitive grammar exercises, boredom, high-stakes examinations and limited communicative practice. Some felt language classes did not recognise their maturity or help them imagine themselves as real users of the language.

“We wouldn’t learn from songs or watching shows or anything. It was, like, grammar after grammar. It wasn’t very personal, we didn’t get much oral practice. People felt like they weren’t getting anywhere.”

Teacher influence therefore operates in two directions: it can open a pathway towards further study, but it can also contribute to students exiting that pathway. This finding is important because it shows that students’ later decisions about language learning are often rooted in earlier experiences of confidence, enjoyment, relevance and classroom practice.

4.2 Identity, mobility and career value

Language students frequently linked language study to career mobility, employability and international opportunities. Teaching, translation, international relations, diplomacy and global business were commonly mentioned. More broadly, students saw languages as opening possibilities for working abroad, accessing Erasmus, improving their CVs and differentiating themselves in a competitive graduate labour market.

“I think it [knowledge of a language] definitely is going to stand out, and shows you’ve other attributes to contribute to the company.”

Erasmus and travel were particularly important as motivators. For many students, the possibility of studying or living abroad made language learning feel tangible and worthwhile. Travel and mobility transformed languages from school subjects into lived resources that could support independence, intercultural experience and personal growth.

Motivation was not only instrumental. Many language students described a deeper personal and integrative motivation: discovering other cultures, connecting with people, broadening their worldview, or avoiding feeling limited to one country or language. Some connected language study to heritage, family background or bilingual identity. Focus group participants described speaking another language as accessing “another version” of themselves, communicating differently, or connecting with a different cultural identity.

“I’d say it’s mostly a part of your soul when you learn a language.”

These findings show that language study is often meaningful because it connects practical, personal and cultural futures. For language students, foreign languages were not only useful subjects; they were linked to imagined futures, mobility, identity and belonging.

4.3 Non-language students: interest without language study opportunities

Many non-language students valued languages, even though they were not studying them at university. They recognised languages as useful, interesting and valuable, and acknowledged their relevance for travel, employability, intercultural communication and personal development. This suggests that non-language students should not be understood as a group who need to be convinced that languages matter. Many are already partly convinced.

However, positive attitudes did not necessarily translate into participation. For non-language students, the most prevalent theme in the open-ended responses was structural exclusion. Many stated that their course did not offer a language option, that there was no relevant module, or that language study clashed with core or “crucial” modules. Others had to prioritise their main degree requirements and could not justify adding a language if it might interfere with academic progression. The focus group data reinforced this finding. Non-language students often said they would consider studying a language if it were credit-bearing, beginner-friendly and timetabled around their main degree. Instead, they encountered rigid degree pathways, credit limits, timetable clashes, evening classes, non-credit provision and a lack of clear entry routes.

“I have 6 modules in total, so to add another one just for the fun of it, it’d be difficult. It would have to be part of my degree for me to be able to take it up.”

For commuting students, language opportunities outside the normal teaching day could be particularly inaccessible.

“The only issue about those classes is they’re at 6pm. Every week from 6 to 8pm, which is quite hard for students, especially ones that commute.”

This complicates any simple distinction between “language students” and “non-language students”. Some non-language students are not disengaged; they are blocked. They may have interest, but the structure of their degree makes language study difficult or impossible. Universities may therefore be suppressing latent demand when language pathways are not visible, flexible, credit-bearing or compatible with students’ wider academic commitments.

4.4 Anxiety, confidence and academic risk

A separate but related barrier was the perceived risk of formal language study. Several non-language students expressed interest in learning a language outside university or as a hobby, but avoided formal modules because they did not want high-stakes assessment, grades or oral performance pressure. For these students, the problem was not necessarily the language itself, but the assessment in a formal academic setting.

A recurring theme was evaluative anxiety. Some students said they had enjoyed languages but were not good at exams. Others felt they were “really bad with languages” or likely to be “instantly behind” if they attempted university language study. Dyslexia and other learning-related challenges were also mentioned. These responses suggest that low confidence can turn language learning from an opportunity into a perceived academic threat.

“I was intimidated to go in and see if people had that basis built already...the stress of going into it and starting and being scared that I won’t be on the same level as everyone else.”

Academic risk was particularly important for students whose main degree was already demanding or tightly structured. Some feared that taking a language module could negatively impact their degree classification overall, increase workload, or distract from core subjects. Others preferred informal, conversational or pass/fail opportunities because these felt less intimidating than assessed modules.

This risk was also visible in students’ discussions of Erasmus and study abroad. While mobility was often seen as attractive and motivating, some students also described it as financially, administratively or academically difficult. For students with work, family, financial or degree-related constraints, Erasmus could therefore operate as both an opportunity and a potential deterrent.

“Sometimes students don’t choose it [a language degree], because they know they have to go to Erasmus, and they don’t want to go.”

This finding helps explain why positive attitudes do not always lead to participation. Students may value languages and still avoid them if the cost of participation feels too high. Reducing anxiety, lowering entry barriers and offering low-risk routes into language learning are therefore important if institutions want to reach students beyond existing language programmes.

4.5 Social perceptions and the perceived place of languages

The qualitative data show that students’ decisions are shaped by how languages are positioned socially and professionally. Both language and non-language students recognised the career value of languages, but they differed in how directly they connected that value to their own pathways. Language students often saw languages as a clear professional advantage. Non-language students were more likely to recognise the general usefulness of languages while still seeing them as secondary to their main degree or difficult to integrate into their future career.

This suggests that career messaging remains too general. Students frequently associated language careers with teaching, translation, interpreting, business or diplomacy, but had fewer examples of how languages might matter in healthcare, science, engineering, media, law or other fields. Students in non-language disciplines may not reject languages; they may simply lack a clear model of how languages fit their professional identity.

Focus groups also highlighted cultural and gendered stereotypes. Languages were sometimes described as feminised subjects or as less practical than STEM.

“I do know people who their families would have told them not to study languages in college, because they’d say you can have it as a hobby, but it’s not going to get you a good job. They’d say it’s safer to do a STEM subject, or you need to earn more money doing that.”

Students also challenged the assumption that language modules are lighter or easier than other subjects. Some felt that languages are sometimes treated as supplementary while requiring substantial time, preparation and emotional effort, particularly because progress depends on active participation, oral performance and sustained practice.

“I kind of get a bit of the feeling where they [STEM peers] think we’re just doing a really easy course, and it’s not as important, and things like that.”

Particular languages also carried social associations; for example, German was sometimes perceived as harsh or masculine, while Romance languages could be associated with aesthetic or cultural stereotypes. Such perceptions can influence subject choice long before students reach university.

“There would be the boys in my class saying, oh, but that’s [French] a girl’s subject”

These perceptions matter because they shape whether students see languages as relevant, prestigious or compatible with their identity. If languages are framed as supplementary, feminine, soft, or less practical than other subjects, some students may be less likely to imagine themselves as language learners, even where they recognise the value of multilingualism.

4.6 AI and the continuing value of human language learning

AI emerged as an important contemporary theme, particularly in the focus groups. Students did not generally see AI as replacing the need for language learning. Instead, they described it as a useful support tool for grammar explanations, vocabulary, proofreading, translation checks and clarification of difficult points.

At the same time, students were clear about AI's limitations. They argued that AI cannot fully capture humour, tone, cultural nuance, dialect, trust, identity or the experience of communicating with another person. Some participants also noted that AI is less reliable for minority languages, regional varieties and culturally embedded texts.

"I don't think they [LLMs] can kind of help you understand the niche, like, the small cultural aspects of a certain language [...] And there's these types of things that you can only get from, I guess learning it the traditional way, or speaking to people. And I actually think with the rise of AI, people will want to learn languages without it more, and in a more authentic to feel the connection, rather than using AI."

This demonstrates that students do not necessarily see digital translation tools as making language learning irrelevant. Rather, they distinguish between functional translation and the broader human, cultural and relational dimensions of communication. This creates an opportunity to frame languages not as skills made obsolete by AI, but as human capabilities that complement digital technologies.

4.7 Student recommendations for future provision

When asked what schools and universities could do to encourage more students to learn foreign languages, both language and non-language students called for pedagogical change. They wanted less emphasis on rote learning, exam pressure and textbook grammar, and more emphasis on speaking, real-life communication, cultural engagement and meaningful use. This desire for more practical and communicative learning was one of the strongest points of agreement across the qualitative data. Language students often focused on improving the quality and consistency of provision. They wanted more dynamic teaching, better coordination, earlier exposure and stronger continuity between school and university. Their responses suggest that students already studying languages want the learning experience to become richer, more communicative and more clearly connected to real-world use.

Non-language students focused more strongly on lowering barriers to entry to university language study. They called for beginner-level modules, language options across all courses, credit-bearing electives, pass/fail or low-risk modules, informal conversation opportunities and more flexible timetabling. Their recommendations reflect the barriers identified elsewhere in the data: lack of access, lack of confidence, academic risk and difficulty fitting languages into a non-languages degree.

"Integrating languages with more courses. like, STEM-related, since it's only more, like, really Humanities and Business-related"

Taken together, student recommendations point to the need for language provision that reduces fear, increases relevance and gives students a practical route into participation. For those already studying languages, this means richer and more communicative learning. For those outside language programmes, it means flexible, visible and low-risk language learning opportunities.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative data from this study is represented in Figure 6, which shows how post-primary language learning experiences, transition influences, and higher education structures can either support continued language study or lead to interruption and non-participation.

LANGUAGE LEARNING PATHWAYS FROM SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY

How school experiences shape confidence, continuation and participation in foreign language study at university

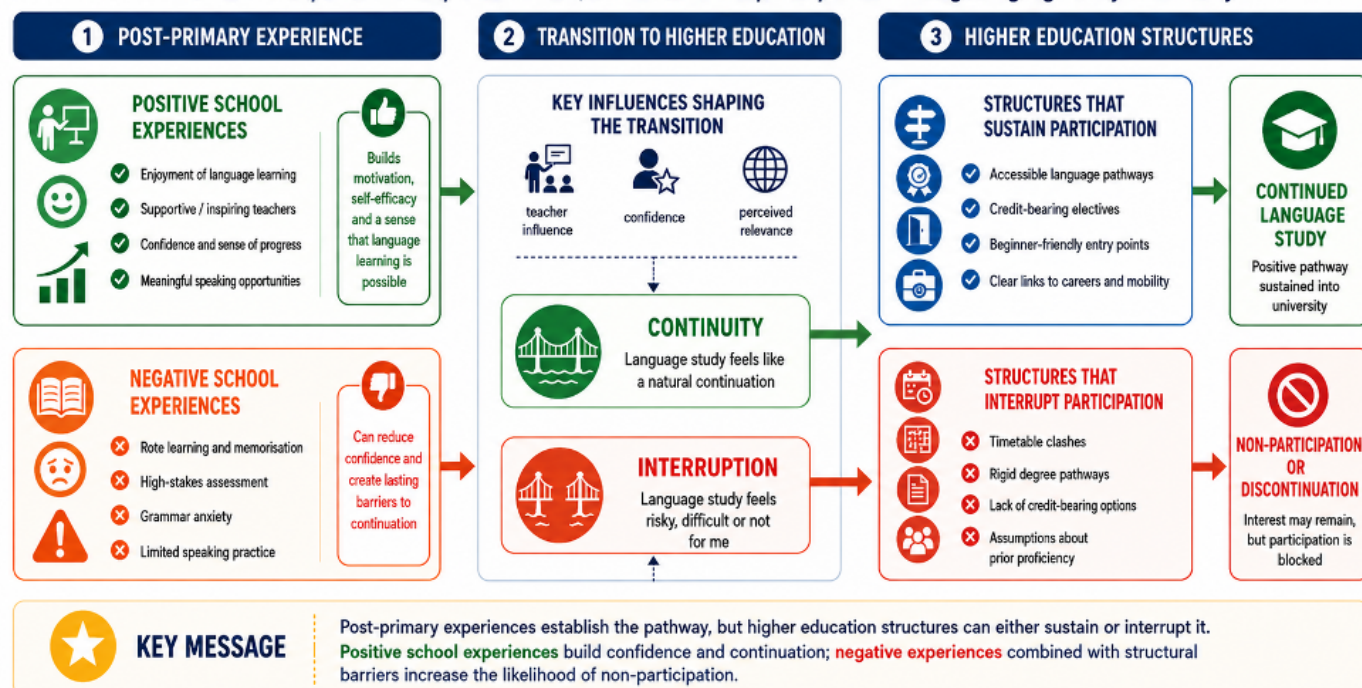


Figure 6. Language learning pathways from school to university

5. Synthesis: The Student Engagement Triad

Across the quantitative findings, open-ended survey responses and focus groups, student engagement with foreign languages at university can be understood through the interaction of three factors: interest, access and risk. This triad (Figure 7) explains why positive attitudes towards languages do not always translate into participation.

- **Interest** is present across students who study a language in third-level and who don't. Language students describe strong personal, cultural and career-related reasons for continuing, while many non-language students also recognise the value of languages for employability, travel, intercultural communication and personal development. However, interest is shaped by earlier experiences: supportive teachers and positive school experiences can strengthen confidence, while rote learning, exam pressure and fear of mistakes can make languages feel inaccessible.
- **Access to language study opportunities** determines whether interest can become participation. Many non-language students reported that language modules were unavailable within their degree, clashed with core modules, were not credit-bearing, were scheduled at inconvenient times, or assumed prior proficiency.
- **Risk** then acts as a further filter. Students may value languages but avoid formal modules if they fear lower grades, oral performance, additional workload, financial costs or disruption to their main degree.

The challenge is therefore to make language learning more meaningful, more accessible and less daunting. Awareness-raising may strengthen interest, but it will not be enough if students cannot access language learning or if participation feels too risky.

THE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT TRIAD

How interest, access and risk shape participation in foreign language study at university

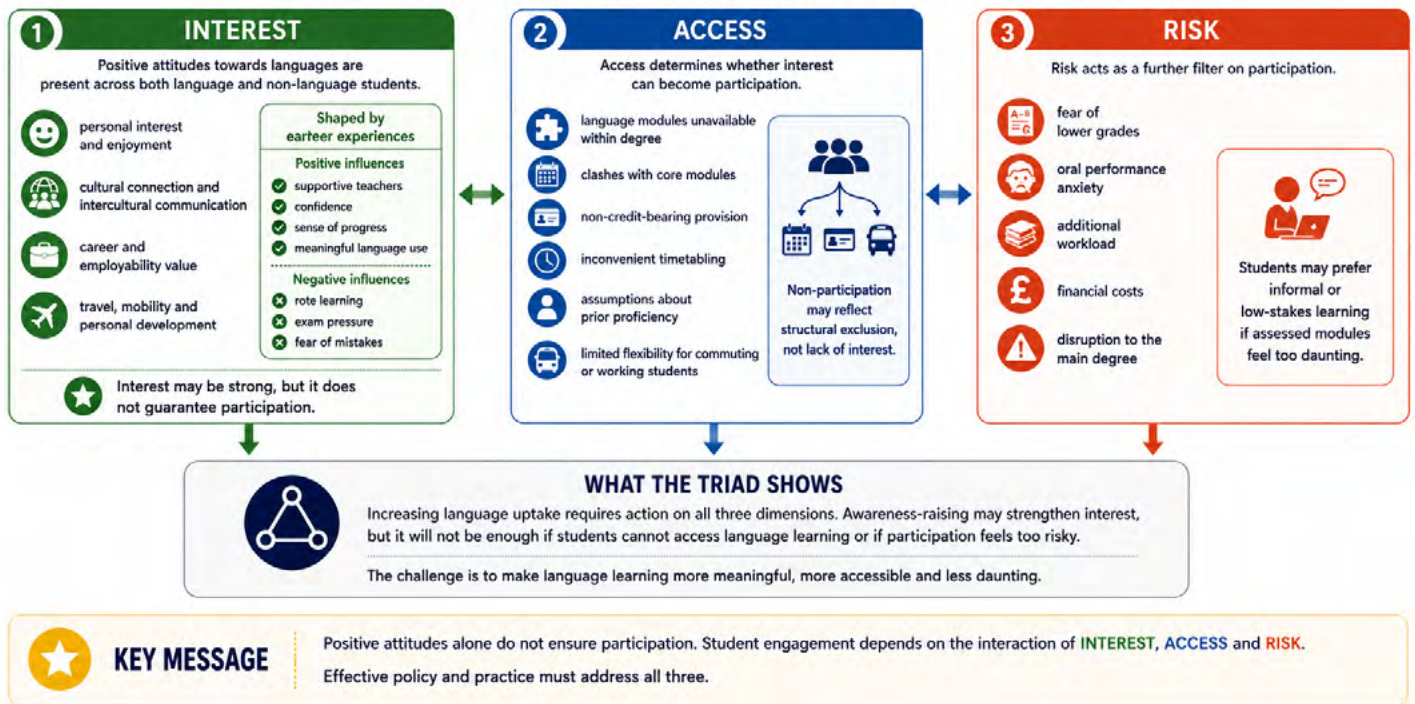


Figure 7. The student engagement triad

6. Strategic Insights for Policy and Practice in Modern Foreign Languages Education

The findings provide key strategic insights for languages in education in Ireland. These insights are not additional findings; instead they interpret what the evidence means for future planning, particularly in relation to *Languages Connect*, the post-primary–higher education continuum, and the role of languages in a multilingual and AI-mediated society.

Firstly, the challenge is not a lack of interest.

Across the quantitative and qualitative data, students generally recognised the value of multilingualism. Many non-language students saw languages as useful for travel, employability, intercultural communication and personal development. The challenge is how to convert existing interest and appreciation into participation in language learning.

Secondly, language learning trajectories are cumulative and path-dependent.

Students who continue languages at university usually arrive with an established history of language learning shaped by positive school experiences and confidence developed at post-primary level. The transition from post-primary education to higher education is a critical pressure point: it can sustain the learner's pathway or mark the point at which language learning stops.

Thirdly, teachers are a strategic lever in language uptake.

Post-primary teachers shape not only linguistic competence but also confidence, enjoyment, future imagination and willingness to continue. Professional learning should therefore focus not only on curriculum delivery, but also on motivation, identity formation, communicative confidence and learner agency.

Fourth, higher education structures can suppress latent demand. Many non-language students did not reject languages; rather, language learning was unavailable, unaccredited, inconveniently timetabled, perceived as too risky, or assumed prior proficiency. If languages remain structurally challenging to access, positive attitudes will not translate into participation. Institutional design is therefore as important as student motivation.

Fifth, career messaging needs to become more specific.

Students understand that languages are useful, but many struggle to connect them to their own discipline or professional future. They need concrete examples of how languages enhance practice in healthcare, engineering, law, technology, media, education, public service, business and international organisations.

This is especially important because career value is already recognised by students. The barrier is not lack of awareness in general, but lack of translation into concrete pathways. Students need to see not only that languages are useful, but how they can be useful in their own degree, placement, postgraduate pathway or future workplace.

Finally, AI should be treated as an opportunity to reframe the value of language learning.

Students view AI as a useful support tool with clear limitations. They recognise that it cannot replicate cultural understanding, humour, trust, identity, embodied communication or intercultural nuance. This creates a strong basis for positioning languages as human capabilities that complement digital technologies.

Overall, future language policy should move beyond raising awareness alone. Strengthening language learning requires a holistic approach that connects motivation, pedagogy, institutional structures, career relevance and learner identity across the full educational pathway.

7. Recommendations for Future Policy Development

The findings point to nine areas for action. These recommendations are grouped around three priorities: strengthening continuity across sectors, removing barriers to participation, and reframing the relevance of languages for students' academic, professional and civic futures.

7.1 Strengthening continuity across sectors

7.1.1 Further develop *Languages Connect* transition supports linking post-primary and higher education.

Building on existing *Languages Connect* initiatives, policy should continue to strengthen structured collaboration between schools and HEIs to support progression and reduce attrition at key transition points. This could include more targeted transition resources, clearer school-facing information on HEI language pathways, university language taster sessions, guidance on entry requirements, and more visible communication about beginner, elective, credit-bearing and degree-level language options across different disciplines.

7.1.2. Prioritise teacher professional development focused on language learner motivation, identity formation and communicative competence.

Given the decisive role of teachers in shaping language learning trajectories, professional learning should support approaches that build confidence, reduce anxiety, normalise mistakes and foster positive multilingual identities. This should include communicative, culturally relevant and plurilingual pedagogies that connect Irish, home languages and foreign languages, while also preparing students for the more active use of language expected in higher education.

7.1.3. Support ongoing research and longitudinal data collection on language learning pathways.

Future policy should be informed by up-to-date national evidence on participation, transitions, motivation and outcomes. Longitudinal research would help identify when and why students discontinue language learning, which interventions support continuation, and how language learning pathways in Ireland compare with those in other multilingual or bilingual education systems.

7.2 Removing barriers to participation

7.2.1 Expand flexible and accessible language pathways in higher education.

HEIs should be encouraged to offer beginner-level modules, credit-bearing electives and embedded language options within disciplinary programmes. This should include reviewing timetables, non-credit-bearing provision, assumptions about prior proficiency and barriers affecting commuting or working students. Improving structural accessibility is essential because positive attitudes alone will not translate into participation if students cannot fit language learning into their degree.

7.2.2 Increase language uptake among diverse learner groups.

Future initiatives should ensure that language learning opportunities are available to students from varied socio-economic, linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds. Particular attention should be given to students without strong prior language-learning histories, students in non-language disciplines, commuting students and those who may lack confidence or linguistic capital.

7.3 Strengthening relevance and future value

7.3.1 Strengthen discipline-specific career messaging.

National and institutional campaigns should move beyond general claims about employability and show how languages enhance professional practice in specific sectors such as healthcare, business, law, engineering, media, technology, education and public service. Clearer career mapping could help students connect language learning to their own futures and translate positive attitudes into sustained engagement.

7.3.2 Promote authentic intercultural communication opportunities at post-primary level.

Mobility programmes, virtual exchanges, community partnerships and multilingual school initiatives can help students experience languages as meaningful social practices rather than only academic subjects. Such opportunities can strengthen confidence, identity and motivation, especially where full-year mobility is not possible for financial, personal or logistical reasons.

7.3.3 Position languages as essential human capabilities in an AI-mediated world.

Policy should emphasise that multilingualism complements rather than competes with AI. Students viewed AI as useful for support tasks, but not as a substitute for cultural understanding, intercultural competence, nuance, trust and human communication. This provides a strong basis for reframing languages as future-ready skills in a multilingual and digital society.

8. Limitations and Conclusion

This study has some limitations. The sample was not fully representative of all higher education students in Ireland, and some institutions (e.g., DCU) and disciplinary areas (e.g., Humanities) were more strongly represented than others. There were relatively small numbers in some language categories, which means that findings relating to specific languages should be interpreted with caution. Additionally, participants were informed that this study focused on languages and the promotion of language learning before completing the survey and participating in focus groups. As a result, responses may have been influenced by participants' awareness of the study's subject matter. In particular, the views expressed by non-language students may have been shaped by the context of a language-focused study and, in the case of focus groups, by discussions involving students who were studying languages and language lecturers. Findings should therefore be interpreted with this context in mind. The focus groups provide depth and explanatory richness, but they are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Nonetheless, the combination of survey data and focus group evidence provides a strong basis for understanding the main patterns shaping third-level language engagement.

The findings show that foreign language uptake in higher education is not solely determined by attitude. Many students value languages, including students who do not currently study them. The central challenge is that interest is often weakened by anxiety, interrupted by negative school experiences, or blocked by institutional structures. Students are more likely to continue with languages when they have positive prior experiences, supportive teachers, strong self-efficacy, clear future identities and accessible pathways. They are less likely to participate when language learning feels risky, peripheral, unavailable or disconnected from their main specialism.

The evidence does not suggest that students have turned away from languages. Rather, many students already recognise their value. The task now is to make language learning feel possible, relevant and worthwhile for a wider range of learners.

This conclusion is therefore cautiously optimistic. The report identifies serious barriers, but it also identifies latent demand. If educational institutions can reduce anxiety and risk, improve language provision and teacher training, as well as connect languages more clearly to students' identities and futures, there is scope to strengthen uptake beyond the students who already arrive at university with strong linguistic capital.

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