THE IMPACT AND EXPERIENCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE CONTEXT OF ERASMUS+ IN ALL EDUCATION SECTORS IN IRELAND

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Definitions

Bilingualism: The coexistence of two different languages at the social or individual level. The question of how to define bilingualism (or multilingualism) has engaged researchers for a very long time. Some researchers have favoured a narrow definition of bilingualism and argued that only those individuals who are very close to two monolinguals in one should be considered bilingual (or multilingual). More recently, however, researchers who study bilingual (and multilingual) communities around the world have argued for a broad definition that views bilingualism (and multilingualism) as a common human condition that makes it possible for an individual to function, at some level, in more than one language. In the context of the present study, this term is primarily used in reference to Ireland's constitutional bilingualism and refers to Irish and English.

Multilingualism: The coexistence of different languages, i.e. two or more, at the social or individual level. Cf. Bilingualism.

Plurilingualism: The dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual language user, which allows them to (a) switch from one language to another; (b) express themselves in one language and understand a person speaking another; (c) call upon the knowledge of a number of languages to make sense of a text; (d) recognise words from a common international store in a new guise; (e) mediate between individuals with no common language, even with only a slight knowledge themselves; (f) bring the whole of their linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression; and (g) exploit paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.).

Code-switching: An alternation between two or more languages in the context of a specific communicative episode, e.g. a conversation. A related term is code-mixing, which some linguists use interchangeably, while others assign distinctive meanings to each. Since the present study does not analyse the finer, linguistic points of language acquisition and performance, but rather, provides a broader picture of the experience and impact of foreign languages on participants of the Erasmus+ programme, it exclusively uses the term code-switching, which highlights the performativity of the linguistic act within the episode.

Language transfer: The application of linguistic features, such as grammatical structures or vocabulary, from one language (L1) to another (L2). The transfer can be either positive or negative, resulting in correct language production (positive transfer) or erroneous language production (negative transfer). Generally speaking, the more similar the two languages are, and the

more the learner is aware of the relation between them, the more positive will be the transfer.

Translanguaging: A process of meaning- and sense-making, in which the language user draws upon different linguistic, cognitive and semiotic resources, often simultaneously. Translanguaging is often closely related to language transfer.

Further Education and Training (FET) – Vocational Education and Training (VET) – Adult Education (AE)

In Ireland, further education and training (FET) comprises post-secondary non-tertiary education as well as second-chance education/training. The FET sector is characterised by a high degree of diversity in terms of the type, level and learner: (a) FET programmes can be general, vocational or mixed; (b) they lead to awards across several levels on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ levels 1-6); and (c) target groups include young people who have recently completed upper secondary education, adult learners, early school leavers, employed people, unemployed people, asylum seekers, and learners with special needs. Due to this high degree of diversity, the present study usually differentiates between vocational education and training (VET) and adult education (AE). While the sectors overlap, in that the latter can also include vocational training (and college-based training courses for apprentices as well as full-time and part-time third-level courses for mature students), both constitute distinctive educational sectors and are treated as such in Erasmus+.

While the study generally follows the differentiation made by the Erasmus+ programme, it has proven necessary to occasionally refer the FET sector as a whole. The relevant sections are framed accordingly.

Executive Summary

Despite a changing linguistic landscape and an increasing multi- and plurilingualism, Ireland's relationship with foreign languages and foreign language education remains complicated, marred by old and new myths, a lack of resources, and inconsistent signals from public and private stakeholders. The present study has been conducted in the broader context of the Government's *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* and the subsequent strategy for foreign languages in education, *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026*, whose objective is to address the current deficiencies/limitations in Ireland's education system. The latter focuses exclusively on the question of how to increase language proficiency, diversity, and awareness. Acknowledging the important role of language competences in Ireland's cultural, social and economic welfare, the highly ambitious objective of these strategies is to make Ireland's education system "the best in Europe within the next decade"[1] and to enable Irish graduates to become not only competitive in the job market at home and abroad, but also active citizens. The vision set out is clear: Ireland is to act as the economic and cultural "gateway to Europe". The EU's Language Policy, and most notably the *Key Competences for Life Long Learning* (2007), and the European Council's Barcelona objective of "mother tongue plus two" or "MT+2" (2002), i.e. that every European schoolchild is to be given the opportunity to acquire their mother tongue plus two more languages, provide further context for these strategies and the political discourse surrounding today's foreign language teaching and learning in Ireland. The same is true of Ireland's constitutional bilingualism and its business sector, which finds itself catering for an increasingly globalised economy.

As the focal point of the government's efforts regarding foreign language education, *Languages Connect* calls for a systemic and attitudinal change among all stakeholders in Ireland. Mobility programmes in general, and Erasmus+ in particular, are to play an important role in achieving this goal. With Erasmus+ playing such a key role within *Languages Connect*, it is important to assess not only the experience and impact of foreign languages on participants of Erasmus+ but also the general attitude *towards* and awareness *of* foreign languages in Ireland, especially with regard to the way their personal and professional benefits are perceived. The broader aim of this study is to widen our understanding of the Erasmus+ programme as a whole and to contribute to the debate about foreign language learning in all education contexts in Ireland. A corollary objective is to explore the extent to which Erasmus+ increases participants' foreign language competence, and how the overall impact of the programme can be maximised in the context of the government's *Languages Connect* strategy.

Building on existing scholarship in applied linguistics and international education, the study's key contributions lie firstly in its mixed-method design, i.e. the combination of quantitative and qualitative data; and secondly in the inclusion of data on Erasmus+ participants from all Irish education sectors, i.e. AE, higher education (HE), school education, VET, and youth. Existing studies on language learning in the context of Erasmus and Erasmus+ have almost exclusively

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[1] DES (2016a), p. 1.

focused on HE, while studies on other sectors are still relatively lacking. Empirically, the present study creates a panoramic view of the role of foreign languages in Erasmus+ mobilities, while simultaneously allowing us to gain a deeper insight into personal lived experiences. It is, however, important to note that the study focuses primarily on outward mobilities to non-English-speaking countries between 2014 and 2020, i.e. the main subjects are either participants from all education sectors who take up mobilities abroad under Erasmus+ in countries other than the United Kingdom (Wales being an exception due to the strong presence of Welsh in the country's linguistic landscape), or project leaders and administrators who facilitate these mobilities.

To explore Ireland's complicated relationship with the learning of foreign languages and the impact that mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ have on participants, the present study first provides some background and discusses foreign language education in the context of the country's bilingualism and European multi- and plurilingualism, highlighting key issues and mapping the language options available to Irish learners in different education sectors. It then discusses the Erasmus+ programme, specifically in relation to Ireland, and the way it relates to language learning. These discussions provide the context for the two components of the study:

1) The quantitative component, whereby new data derived from an online survey among participants of Erasmus+ (2014-2020) are used to create a descriptive profile of Erasmus+ participants and their experience with (foreign) language learning.
2) The qualitative component, whereby new data derived from interviews of 14 Erasmus+ participants and five project leaders/administrators are used provide a deeper insight into the impact and lived experiences of individuals.

The main findings of the present study highlight the importance of (a) encouragement and positive role models; (b) the agency of the learner; (c) consistent provision and quality of language education; (d) speaking opportunities; and (e) the perceived accessibility of the language. They are as follows:

1) General findings relating to the language practice and language learning in Ireland among study participants:

   - Contrary to the prevailing myth, an overwhelming majority of participants enjoy learning a foreign language both in school and outside school. It is noticeable that the main reason provided for disliking learning languages tends to be affectual rather than rational.

   - There is a great linguistic curiosity that ranges from minority and more exotic languages to languages with a greater "linguistic capital", such as English, German, Spanish and French. However, many study participants expressed concerns regarding the achievability of learning the language, with time constraints and the fact that language learning differs from other learning

experiences (in that it takes continuous effort and dedication over a longer period of time) being identified as the biggest issue.

- Despite linguistic curiosity and positive learning experiences, there is a lack of interest in formal and higher-level qualifications. However, the majority of study participants indicated that they would generally be interested in improving their existing competences.

- Despite the demand for foreign language speakers by employer organisations, only a few foreign language encounters take place in the workplace, or in relation to work. The majority of encounters take place in the private sphere and are almost evenly spread between face-to-face communication and media consumption. Accordingly, the majority of study participants see the benefit of learning a foreign language in the personal sphere rather than the professional sphere, with almost one in in every three survey respondents perceiving foreign language skills as not particularly beneficial for their professional development.

- The main reason provided for not utilising existing languages competences is a perceived lack of proficiency.

- There is a significant attitudinal difference between the learning experience and language practice among participants with a migratory background and those without one, as well as those with multilingual parents and/or friends and those without them.

    o Participants with a migratory background tend to (a) perceive themselves as part of a continuously evolving language community; (b) show greater linguistic flexibility and openness to new languages (including Irish); and (c) employ their whole linguistic repertoire in both formal and informal learning settings, regardless of proficiency.

    o The language learning of learners without migratory background is primarily framed through their language education in school, which often lacks agency and sufficient time, as well as the opportunity to practise it outside the classroom. As a result, these learners tend to not perceive themselves as part of a wider language community.

- The attitude towards language learning in general, as well as specific languages, is related to the personal connection a learner has with a language. The personal connection moves the prospect from an abstract idea to a concrete situation and a means of bonding. The personal connection may be based on personal relationships with speakers of that language (family, friends, acquaintances, teachers, etc.) or a broader interest in that culture or aspects of it.

- The language provision in Irish schools and post-secondary education often lacks agency, in that many students, particularly in smaller schools, do not get to choose from a selection of languages. Accordingly, the personal connections of learners are neglected.

- There is a certain lack of confidence among learners with regard to their language competence and successes which are often framed through an intrinsic motivation and natural aptitude, rather than outer factors such as linguistic environment (e.g. speaking opportunities) and systemic flaws in the language provision.

- Study participants from a gaelscoil background express a lesser feeling of intimidation when it comes to speaking the language in front of peers.

- The learning success is highly dependent on encouragement and positive role models, as well as the quality and enthusiasm of the teacher and the language teaching provided.

- The learners' confidence in the language competence and intercultural knowledge of the teacher play an important role in this context. Although some participants highlight the quality of their teachers, there currently seems to be a danger of creating and perpetuating the myth that only native speakers can teach languages effectively and to a high standard.

- Several study participants highlight the fact that foreign languages are introduced relatively late into the Irish curriculum; and there currently seems to be a danger of creating and perpetuating the myth that only those who start early can achieve proficiency.

- The FET sector, i.e. both the AE and VET sectors, struggle in particular with language provision due to the specific needs of the learners, tight programme schedules, and a lack of resources.

2) Findings relating specifically to the practice of languages and language learning in the context of the Erasmus+ programme:

- While the global dominance of English and its status as *lingua franca* (i.e. a language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different) enables people from all walks of life to participate in a European and global knowledge exchange, the participation in mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ brings the geographical, geopolitical, generational, socio-economic, educational and cultural limitations of English to the fore, as well as the situational and personal limitations on the side of non-native English speaking peers, including feelings of tiredness and being overwhelmed, an unwillingness to make the effort, a lack of speaking practice and/or low confidence in their English competence.

- Erasmus+ mobilities and the first-hand experience of a different linguistic environment increase the participants' communicative empathy by raising awareness of what it means to put the onus of bridging the communicative gap entirely on the other.

- Erasmus+ mobilities allow inexperienced travellers and those who have not had the opportunity to visit a non-English speaking country to gain awareness of possible language barriers and confidence in how to handle them.

- Erasmus+ creates a unique multi- and plurilingual space in which participants get to explore their whole linguistic repertoire, as well as new languages. While this multi- and plurilinguistic set-up may be detrimental to a full linguistic immersion, it provides participants with ample opportunities for a language transfer as well as for code-switching and translanguaging. It also introduces new languages and cultures to participants.

- Erasmus+ mobilities often allow participants to improve their language competence in more than one language, with one in three survey respondents indicating that they improved their skills in a second and/or third language.

- Erasmus+ mobilities have a positive effect on participants' competence in English. Study participants report deeper reflections on grammatical structure. as well as adjustments to the repertoire, register, pronunciation and pace to accommodate their peers and conversational counterparts.

- Erasmus+ mobilities can also provide a space to engage more actively with Irish, i.e. in a cultural and a linguistic way. In particular, encounters with peers from countries with colonial histories and/or sizable minority languages can stir discussions and lead to a re-evaluation of one's relationship with Ireland's national language.

- Erasmus+ mobilities allow for and facilitate language learning and an engagement with other languages in more informal, unregulated settings, shifting the focus from an exam-based learning culture to a communicative one that allows learners to participate without the fear to fail, and to gain confidence. The combination of multi- and plurilingualism and an informal learning culture during Erasmus+ mobilities echoes the language practice of migrant communities in Ireland, who perceive themselves as part of a continuously evolving language community and exert great control over the way they engage with languages.

- Formal language learning is available to those who seek it, although the provision of more conventional "face-to-face" classes (which were favoured by the participants of the present study) has significantly decreased with the introduction of the Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support (OLS).

- Only a minority of Erasmus+ participants seek formal linguistic support before and during their mobility. Of these, most favour traditional "face-to-face" instruction, with the OLS proving particularly unpopular.

- Erasmus+ participants enjoy not only numerous opportunities to engage with other languages, but also a significant amount of agency in their learning experience.

- Erasmus+ reduces language anxiety and increases the learners' (linguistic) confidence, including a willingness to make mistakes.

- The main reason provided for a certain degree of apprehensiveness before the Erasmus+ mobility is a lack of speaking practice followed – albeit by a large margin – by the feeling of a too limited vocabulary.

- Erasmus+ mobilities have the greatest linguistic impact on participants who are on the threshold to becoming either independent or proficient language users, highlighting the pivotal role of the programme in acquiring the necessary language proficiency to benefit both individual participants and Irish society.

- Erasmus+ increases the level of agency, responsibility, and self-management.

- Erasmus+ mobilities play a much more dominant role in occupational areas that tend to necessitate a higher level of intercultural skills and cooperation.

- Erasmus+ mobilities significantly increase the likelihood of participants to work in an international context, with two in three survey respondents affirming that it is now more likely that they will work in their (former) host country.

- The HE sector reports that it occasionally struggles to persuade Irish students to participate in Erasmus+ due to negative perceptions of the "usefulness" of going to a European partner country instead of an English-speaking country; the language requirements of a mobility to these countries; the lack of confidence in their language competence, in cases where students already have some language skills; and – more generally – the financial impact.

- In the HE sector, existing language competences and the familiarity with certain languages and cultures are largely reflected in the outward mobilities of undergraduate students, favouring Spain, France, Germany, and Italy. Eastern and Central-Eastern European countries receive proportionally more Erasmus+ participants from AE, school education, VET, and youth than from HE.

- Due to the framing of staff members in the modern language departments in HE as language instructors, rather than as academic scholars, there seems to be a perception among some HE administrators that there are fewer opportunities for the former to participate in the Erasmus+ programme. This is in marked contrast to the other education sectors, particularly the school sector.

- A lack of foreign language competences, particularly in the FET sector, and the overreliance on English, not only affect personal interactions and potentially result in missed opportunities on a personal and institutional level, but can also have broader consequences for the Irish knowledge society by preventing Irish

learners from participating in specialised programmes that are unavailable in Ireland.

- In the school sector, the interviewed project leaders note that an early encounter with foreign languages lays the groundwork for a continuous engagement with other languages, as well as the transferability of linguistic knowledge and cognitive skills.

3) Broader impact of Erasmus+ mobilities:

- While Erasmus+ mobilities provide participants with the opportunity to engage with other languages and to gain insights into other cultures, their impact can be much broader, in that the participants are asked to overcome what is referred to as the Irish "island mentality" and engage more consciously with the world around them. They also increase the likelihood of them working in an international context or seeking opportunities abroad.

- Erasmus+ mobilities have a lasting impact not only on those going on a mobility themselves, but also those staying behind. While the broader communal impact is more apparent with regard to technical skills and best practices that Erasmus+ participants bring back to Ireland and pass on to their colleagues, the impact is much broader and extends not only to soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, responsibility, and flexibility but also to attitudes towards other countries and language learning.

- Project administrators reported that Erasmus+ mobilities can have a fundamental impact with regard to the social and cultural integration of minority groups, including the Traveller community. Group exchanges, in particular, allow the members of minority groups (as well as the other non-minority members) to reframe their identity as multi-layered, which includes Irishness and Europeanness.

Based on these general findings, and the frequency with which the experiences relate to a "perceived" lack of something, it seems to be particularly important to pay attention not only to the objectifiable deficiencies of language education in Ireland, but also to the emotional dimension of language learning. Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight links between different languages and other skills. Generally speaking, a more holistic approach to language learning that links foreign languages to Ireland's two native languages and makes use of shared, underlying proficiencies, would be beneficial not only in terms of the acquisition of a foreign language, but also in improving competences in English and Irish, as well as in skills such as literacy. Additionally, the linguistic curiosity and personal connections of learners to individual languages should be utilised to their full extent by creating additional options and/or allowing more flexibility within existing structures. Learners should be encouraged to use their whole linguistic repertoire.

A carefully managed increase in the language proficiency and intercultural knowledge (i.e. of the so-called "high" and "everyday life" culture) of teachers and other instructors is also essential not only to guarantee a high-quality learning environment, but also to instil more confidence in the learners, regarding both their own skills and those of their teachers/instructors.

As the knock-on effect of foreign language anxiety can be quite significant, sensitivity training and in-service training regarding the phenomenon might be an important first step towards reassuring anxious learners and creating a more inclusive classroom. Raising awareness and fostering realistic expectations among the learners by clearly communicating the nature of the learning process, particularly as compared to other subjects, can also help to ease the frustration on the side of the learner and help to further mitigate language anxiety.

Furthermore, despite great efforts to the contrary, and the proven benefit to individual learners and institutions/organisations, many education sectors continue to struggle with integrating Erasmus+ mobilities into their programmes, due to limited time and resources. So far, the success often relies on the efforts of highly dedicated individuals, who create cooperative networks that stand and fall with these individuals. Additional support would, therefore, be beneficial. In the school sector, there seems to be additional uncertainty among teachers and principals about compliancy with Irish health and safety regulations for students staying with host families during exchanges.

Finally, the lack of awareness among the Irish public concerning the possible professional benefits of foreign language competences needs to be addressed – not only in relation to potential job markets at home and abroad, but also in relation to personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship.

Introduction

With the second decade of the 21ˢᵗ century having drawn to a close, Ireland is facing new challenges: the increasing global importance of non-English speaking countries, the departure of the United Kingdom from the EU; and the effects of Ireland's sociocultural transformation during the Celtic Tiger and its recovery from the post-2008 economic downturn, resulting in a turn of the migration tide from net emigration to net immigration, and a shift in the ethnocultural make-up of migrants coming into Ireland.[2] Today, Ireland is home to nationals of more than 200 different countries and a total of 72 migrant languages have been reported to be spoken by more than 500 people each.[3] Moreover, now that the United Kingdom has left the EU, Ireland is one of only two native English-speaking countries in the Union, with an increasingly diverse, multi- and plurilingual demographic, and will be poised to strengthen its role as economic and cultural "gateway to Europe".[4] As a result, the Government has committed to ensuring that the country is prepared for the changed national, European, and global dynamic. Education, training, and lifelong learning are to play an important role in this context. They are, as the Government's *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* states, "the pivot around which personal fulfilment, a fair society and a successful nation should revolve"[5] – both in economic and sociocultural terms.

Echoing the EU's *European Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (2007), the *Action Plan* identifies the ability to communicate effectively in one's mother tongue or first language (L1), as well as in foreign languages, as one of the key competences needed for personal development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. The benefits of multi- and plurilingualism are widely acknowledged in scientific research and include an amplification of cognitive functions and creativity, as well as an enhancement of social interaction, cultural engagement, and intercultural understanding. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that multi- and plurilingualism are considered as one of the cornerstones of the European project and a powerful symbol of the EU's aspiration to be – as proclaimed by the Union's motto – "united in diversity". In addition, learning foreign languages helps the learner to develop a better mental resilience and personal wellbeing, and improves their competence in their first language.[6]

Notwithstanding the considerable investment by the Government and other public and private stakeholders in more recent times, the foreign language competence of the Irish population remains low in comparison with the European average, despite the country's rich,

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[2] The 2016 Census reported 535,475 non-Irish nationals living in Ireland, i.e. 11.6% of the population. The top six countries of origin are Poland (122,515), UK (103,113), Lithuania (36,552), Romania (29,186), Latvia (19,933), and Brazil (13,640). As the census data from 1996 and 2002 reveal, this marks a significant shift in ethnocultural terms, as the highest proportion of migrants came from the United Kingdom and the United States, which are not only English-speaking countries, but part of the Anglosphere, with many immigrants indicating an "Irish" ethnic background. Indeed, the numbers of UK and US citizens living in Ireland have decreased over the past two decades. Cf. CSO (1997/2003/2017).
[3] CSO (2017). Cf. also O'Connor/Ciribuco (2017).
[4] Harney (2000).
[5] DES (2016a), p. 1.
[6] Cf., e.g. Barac/Bialystok (2012); The Nuffield Foundation (2000); Skutnabb-Kangas (2002); Shelley (2010).

multilinguistic history. In a specially issued 2012 Eurobarometer survey on language competency and usage, 60% of Irish respondents stated that they were unable to speak any foreign language, with only Hungary (65%), Italy (62%), and the UK and Portugal (61% each) displaying less inclination towards foreign languages.[7] While this constitutes a marked improvement in comparison to a survey conducted in 2005, only 27% of Irish respondents believe that improving career prospects at home is a key benefit of learning a new language, placing the perceived benefits either firmly in the job market abroad or in the social and private sphere[8] – a sentiment that is indeed shared among the participants of the present study.

However, reality could not be further from the truth: the demand *for* and untapped potential *of* foreign language skills in the Irish job market has long been noted by various interest groups, such as the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC) or the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN).[9] This is a sentiment that was also expressed in a *2014 Employer Survey*, according to which 32% of foreign employer organisations and 22% of Irish employer organisations indicated that they are more likely to have need for foreign language skills and require a higher level of proficiency in a specific European language, with an average of 62% of foreign employers and only 39% of Irish employers requiring "at least full professional proficiency" in French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese and/or Russian.[10] Indeed, much of the need for foreign language speakers is currently met through the recruitment of native speakers abroad, particularly in terms of multinationals and other foreign employer organisations.

Furthermore, Irish businesses are lagging behind their European and multinational counterparts not only regarding the language and intercultural competences of their employees, but also concerning a coherent language management strategy, including an accurate identification of the language skills needed for the company as a whole. Small and medium businesses, in particular, tend, as IBEC has repeatedly argued, "to not even consider markets where they perceive language and cultural differences [as] an entry barrier" and miss out on the opportunity to maximise their business.[11] In a 2012 statement, the EGFSN highlighted the fact that companies have stopped advertising in the Irish media altogether, preferring to make use of the EU's freedom of movement and recruit abroad to find employees with the necessary linguistic skill set. As a result, the demand for business-oriented language classes, or classes geared towards the legal system, often remains unstable at best, which, in turn, makes it more difficult for cultural organisations such as the Goethe Institut, Alliance Française, Istituto Italiano di Cultura or the UCD Confucius Institute to create and maintain of a pool of suitably qualified language instructors and teachers. In a recent study by Tobias Schroedler,

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[7] EC (2012), p. 15.
[8] EC (2012), p. 64.
[9] Cf., e.g., Schroedler (2018).
[10] HEA/SOLAS/QQI (2014).
[11] Cf. DES (2017), p. 36; Cf. also Donohue (2012). The relevance and benefit of foreign languages have also been highlighted by the British Council, which explains, in a detailed 2017 report entitled *Languages for the Future,* that in order for the government slogan of "Open for Business" and "Global Britain" to become reality, the UK must be open to the languages and cultures of their business partners. The relationship between languages and business has been further underlined by an economic study conducted by the University of Cardiff, which concluded that every year a lack of language and intercultural skills is costing the UK economy around 3.5% of its GDP. Cf. Foreman-Peck/Wang (2014).

representatives of both the Goethe Institut and the Alliance Française lament the fact that companies – just like individuals – tend to spend money on language learning for their employees as mere perks in economically comfortable times, instead of viewing foreign languages as a strategic, long-term benefit for the individual employee, as well as the company, both in economic and social terms.[12] This speaks to the fact that while shortages are noted by employers and interest groups, ultimately the importance placed on language competences still remains comparatively low in European terms. Therefore, one important objective of the Government's *Action Plan* is to raise awareness of the general benefits of foreign languages among both individuals and the different sectors, and to develop greater diversity and provision of language learning opportunities within Ireland.[13]

In response to this ambition, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) developed *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026*, which was officially launched in December 2017 by the then-Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton T.D, and which is not only referenced in the *Action Plan,* but is also identified by the *International Education Strategy 2016-2020* as part of a whole-governmental approach to realising its vision of being "Irish educated, globally connected".[14] In the accompanying preface to *Languages Connect*, the minister challenges Ireland to "change [its] mindset around language learning" and calls on education providers, employers, and – in light of future generations perhaps most importantly – parents "to act as advocates and motivate" all members of society, young and old, to learn a foreign language.[15] *Languages Connect* calls for a systemic and attitudinal change among all stakeholders in Ireland. More concretely, it sets out a highly ambitious road map to put Ireland in the top 10 countries in Europe for the teaching and learning of foreign languages, through a number of actions targeted at improving proficiency, diversity, and engagement among both the individual language learners and instructors, as well as the various public and private stakeholders. Mobility programmes in general, and Erasmus+ in particular, are to play an important role in achieving this goal. Apart from implementing significant structural changes within the Irish education sector, consolidating community/heritage languages, especially those of the country's largest migrant communities as a national resource; and improving the population's attitude towards foreign language learning, to foster the uptake in languages at Leaving Certificate level and in HE, *Languages Connect* seeks to increase the number of participants in Erasmus+ by at least 50% and to double the number of teachers participating in teacher mobility programmes within the next decade.[16] It also seeks ways to encourage learners in FET and undergraduate and postgraduate students in HE to avail of Erasmus+ opportunities in general and to make the most out of their experience abroad, with regard to foreign language learning, by breaking the so-called "Erasmus bubble" of international students and engaging more with the local community.[17] With Erasmus+ playing such a key role within the *Languages Connect* strategy, it is important to establish a baseline. In this vein, the present study examines the learning experience *of* and

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[12] Schroedler (2018), p. 191.
[13] DES (2016a), p. 25, Objective 1.6.
[14] DES (2016b).
[15] DES (2017), p. 5.
[16] DES (2017), p. 11.
[17] DES (2017), p. 24.

the impact of foreign languages *on* participants in all sectors of Erasmus+ in Ireland, i.e. AE, HE, school education, VET, and youth. It also assesses the awareness *of* and attitudes *towards* foreign languages among those involved in these sectors.

Background and Context

Foreign Language Education in the Context of Ireland's Bilingualism and European Multi- and Plurilingualism

Ireland views itself as a bilingual country, in that Article 8 of the 1937 Constitution establishes Irish as the country's national and first official language and recognises English as a second official language.[18] Nevertheless, English is the mother tongue of the vast majority of Ireland's population, relegating Irish – despite its prominent constitutional status and the fact that many English speakers habitually refer to Irish as their "native language", regardless of their competence in it[19] – to the *de facto* status of a minority language. In fact, the centuries-long language decline in the social status of the Irish language, the dramatic decrease in Irish speakers in the 19th century, and the significant shift in the Government's language policy away from revivalist attempts to a more fragmented approach in the 1960s, has left Irish, as per the most recent edition of the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, an endangered language, serving primarily in the Gaeltacht and Irish-Language Network areas as a community language, in which it all faces a crisis.[20] Indeed, a large percentage of Irish is spoken within an exclusively educational context. According to the 2016 Census, only 1.7% of today's population uses Irish as a community and household language, with a staggering 69.7% of respondents stating that they either cannot or do not speak Irish.[21] However, given the rich history of Irish, its role within Irish national identity formation, and the advantages that come with being a bilingual society (including the potential facilitation of further language learning through a positive language transfer), the Government has – in light of a plethora of academic activities – begun to reaffirm its commitment to safeguard Ireland's linguistic heritage and to foster this resource through a comprehensive strategy, the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*. In June 2018, the first cross-governmental *Action Plan for the 20-Year Strategy* was launched, operating between 2018 and 2022.[22]

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[18] This constitutes a marked shift from the 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State, which did not hierarchically differentiate between the two languages. Since late 2017, and with the Recognition of Irish Sign Language for the Deaf Community Bill being signed into law, ISL is a third official language in Ireland.

[19] Ó hIfearnáin (2006), p. 13; cf. also Moriarty (2010).

[20] Cf. Ó Riagáin (1997); Ó Giollagáin/MacDonnacha/Ní Chualáin/Ní Shéaghdha/O'Brien (2007); Ó Giollagáin/Charlton (2015); Brady (2018). However, the most recent edition of Paul Lewis' *Ethnologue* (2016) does not classify Irish as an endangered language and instead assigns EGIDS to level 3, due to its institutionalised wider usage in media, e.g. TG4 and RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta. Cf. Lewis (2016).

[21] Cf. CSO (2017), p. 67. For an overview of the history of the Irish language cf., for instance, Ó Huallacháin/Ó Huallacháin/Conlan (1994); Ó hÁinle (1994); Nic Pháidín/Ó Cearnaigh (2008); Walsh (2010).

[22] Cf. GoI (2010); DCHG (2018).

Despite many advantages, Ireland's bilingualism constitutes a double-edged sword when it comes to translating the EU's multi- and plurilinguistic aspiration into policy, i.e. that all citizens of Europe should achieve proficiency in their mother tongue and at least two other languages (MT+2).[23] The significant gap between the official languages policy framework at constitutional level and the linguistic reality of language practice has complicated the matter and drawn much attention away from a more integrated and holistic approach to language learning that links Irish with other modern languages. This includes the learners' first language, English, of which a comprehensive understanding helps to demystify other languages. Indeed, an increasing amount of research has been dedicated to the way in which an acquired competence in the first and second language can itself influence the acquisition of a third language.[24] The potential positive effects have been noted in case studies in Europe and beyond, where the constitutional language policy and linguistic reality are not quite as far removed from each other, e.g. in the case of minority language speakers (Catalan, Basque, Breton, Frisian, Sàmi, Sorbian) or Dutch speakers in Belgium and German speakers in France, Italy and Belgium, not to mention the extremely heterogenic language context of Luxembourg.[25] This ripple effect is well explained by Jim Cummins's theory on the "interdependence or iceberg hypothesis", according to which proficiencies developed in one language are transferable to another, provided there is sufficient exposure *to* and motivation *behind* learning both languages.[26] Cummins's *Common Underlying Proficiency Model* signifies that proficiencies involving more complex tasks (i.e. literacy, content learning, abstract thinking and problem-solving) are common across languages. As illustrated by his iceberg analogy in Fig. 1, learning different languages reinforces the learning process of each language through the shared, underlying proficiencies.
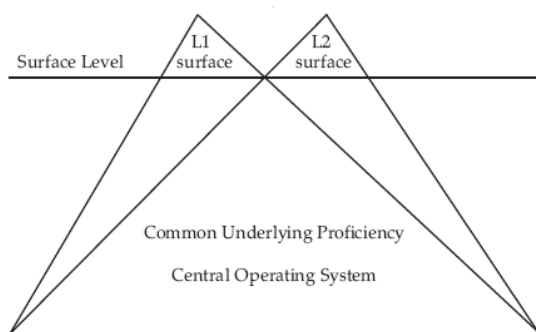
Figure 1: Iceberg analogy for language learning, adapted from Cummins (1981)

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[23] cf. EUCO's Barcelona objective (2002), with European leaders recommitting to the objective at the 2017 Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden.
[24] Cf., e.g., Cenoz/Jessner (2000); Hammarberg (2001); Tremblay (2006); Bardel/Falk (2007); Bono (2011); O'Duibhir/Cummins (2012); Harris/O'Leary (2012); Rothman/González Alonso/Puig-Mayenco (2019).
[25] Cf., e.g., Cenoz/Jessner (2000); Horner/Weber (2008); Péporté/Kmec/Majerus/Margue (2010).
Indeed a 2019 background paper for the current primary curriculum review and development takes a closer look at the (primary) education sectors of several plurilingual countries (i.e. Finland, Canada, Wales, Belgium, New Zealand), compares it to the current Irish practice, and explores potential ways forward. Cf. Keogh-Bryan (2019).
[26] Cummins (1981).

The different languages taught in school and/or the home relate to each other and strengthen the overall language competence of the learner, forming, as illustrated above, a pinnacle iceberg with – in this case – two spires. The visible spires breaking through the surface level find their expression in the different language competences of the learner. Beyond the interdependence of languages in the language learning process, scholars are also increasingly challenging descriptive frameworks of foreign language awareness and acquisition that are solely grounded in modern, nation-state sensibilities. Instead, their attention is turning more and more toward the question of "what people actually do with language in the social world," including code-switching, language transfer, and translanguaging.[27]

In Ireland, however, instead of channelling the historic ease with which the Irish shifted and/or code-switched between Irish, English, French and other languages such as German and Ulster Scots, all of which were present in Ireland's linguistic landscape;[28] and, benefitting from previous language learning experiences, including the cross-linguistic interaction *of* and the lexical transfer *between* different languages, as well as the metalinguistic and metadiscursive awareness and conceptual fluency, Irish and other modern languages seem to be more frequently pitted against one another when it comes to the limited financial and educational resources such as allocated curriculum time and suitably qualified teachers.[29] The discontinuance of the widely successful Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative, MLPSI (1998-2012), due to budgetary issues is one example,[30] despite the fact that 95.1% of principals and 88.7% of teachers took a favourable view on its extension.[31] Perhaps even more symbolic for this "either-or", rather than "as-well-as" mindset, is the Linguistics Institute of Ireland's (ITÉ) inclusion of the question, in its last two national surveys on languages, before the institute was closed in 2004 by the Houses of the Oireachtas, as to whether it is more important that a child learns Irish than a foreign language at school. In addition, as Jennifer Bruen has noted, language learning has also been increasingly pitted against the promotion of literacy and numeracy by policymakers following the 2007/2008 financial crisis – despite the amount of research demonstrating the value of an additional language in terms of overall metacognitive awareness, literacy and communication skills.[32] This being said, in light of the Government's recent recommitment to languages and language education, a new wealth of activities has shaped the discourse among policymakers and educators. One example is the three-year CLIL-pilot project that supports a content and language integrated learning approach.[33] Launched in April 2019 by Minister for Education and Skills Joe McHugh T.D., the project aims to implement partial immersion in Irish in schools and early years' settings.

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[27] Coffey/Wingate (2018), p. 1.
[28] Cronin/Ó Cuilleanáin (2003).
[29] The only other country which does not have compulsory foreign language teaching at any stage in its education system is Scotland. Cf. EACEA (n.d.); RIA (2011), p. 2. For a recent overview on multilingual language learning cf. Safont Jordà/Porotlés Falomir (2015).
[30] For the final evaluation cf. MLPSI (2012).
[31] Harris/O'Leary (2009), p. 14. Cf. also MLPSI (2012).
[32] Bruen (2013), p. 109.
[33] Cf. DES (2019).

While foreign languages are not compulsory at any stage of the Irish education system (a marked contrast with continental European countries),[34] Irish has been a core subject throughout the entire school curriculum and compulsory in the Leaving Certificate since 1934, with opt-outs only available to (a) non-Irish students; (b) students who have been abroad for a period of time; and (c) students with a specific learning disability.[35] However, despite having sufficient financial and educational resources at their disposal, the students' communicative ability in the Irish language remains relatively low, as aptly illustrated by the Census. The perceived lack of progress, combined with the compulsory nature of Irish language education, marks many students' first formal experience with language learning and has – at times – had the detrimental effect of increasing not only a disinterest in the subject at hand, but also other languages, laying the foundation for the perceived difficulty of learning languages in general.[36] In terms of the potential influence of the acquisition process of a second language onto a third one, this arguably constitutes the worst-case scenario. Research conducted by Emer Smyth *et al.* in post-primary schools has shown that when asked to name the two subjects they least liked, one out of three second-year students mentioned Irish, followed by French and German. Interestingly, while more than half the students found Irish difficult and about half found French difficult, only about 40% of the students perceived German to be hard. On average, the subjects the students perceived as less difficult than Irish were French, Science, Maths, and Business Studies.[37]

Additionally, the global dominance of English and its status as *lingua franca* (i.e. a language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different), particularly as a language of business, science and technology, have further cemented this gap between linguistic aspiration and reality by conveying the impression that learning other languages, including Irish, is unnecessary, as "English has become the second language of everybody", and that in "almost in any part of the world to be educated means to know English."[38] In its essence, this sentiment updates and broadens the 19th-century language discourse, which framed Irish as "backward" and "superfluous" and English as the "language of the future", to the globalisation context of the 21st century.[39] In both cases, English is being presented and perceived as a resource that not only secures survival, but economic wellbeing and sociocultural standing.

The precarious situation of Ireland's national language highlights that appropriate curricula and teaching conditions alone do not guarantee good results. On the contrary, the use of a language does not refer just to a general ability to speak it, but it involves a combination of ability,

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[34] Cf. RIA (2011), p. 2.

[35] According to recent reporting, the DES has confirmed that it is finalising a review of the "policy and practice in relation to exemptions from Irish". Cf. *The Irish Times* (1 October 2018).

[36] Cf. DESc/CoE (2007), p. 11; DES (2017), p. 7; Walsh (2010), p. 43. For a historical view regarding compulsory Irish education, cf. Kelly (2002).

[37] Smyth/Dunne/McCoy/Darmody (2006). Among first-year students, Smyth *et al.* arrived at similar results: Smyth/McCoy/Darmody (2004). This finding is echoed in a 2016 study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), which found that Irish is considered to be among the hardest and least interesting of subjects in post-primary education. Cf. Darmody/Smyth (2016).

[38] Mydans (2007).

[39] Cf. e.g. Tymoczko/Ireland (2003); Hindley (1990).

opportunity, and positive attitude.[40] The success of the gaelscoileanna movement and the eTwinning initiative are a case in point in a national and European context respectively. Since its initiation in the 1970s, the number of gaelscoileanna, i.e. Irish immersion schools, has grown exponentially, with urban English-speaking parents in particular seeking out the perceived cognitive, communicative and academic benefits of bilingual education.[41] Through their more holistic approach and immersive environment, gaelscoileanna are meant to not only teach their students linguistic competencies, but to create an opportunity to actively engage with the Irish language both inside and outside its traditional academic context.[42] Unsurprisingly, gaelscoileanna foster a more positive attitude towards Irish by channelling the language awareness of the students' parents and their active involvement within the school and language community. Indeed, what differentiates gaelscoileanna from other efforts, such as the earlier all-Irish schools, is that it is a parent-led grassroots movement, which led to the establishment of the individual schools and is also reflected – as Brian Mac Gilla Phádraig and Ciarán Mac Murchaidh have shown – in parents' continued involvement in matters of school organisation and management.[43] However, this parental involvement is also one of the root causes for the most frequent criticism of the gaelscoileanna, i.e. an underhanded elitism that puts children with a migratory or precarious socio-economic background at a disadvantage.[44]

eTwinning, on the other hand, is a digital community of teachers that is part of Erasmus+. This digital community allows teachers and students in participating schools to find partners and then interact and collaborate in projects with one another. Since its inception in 2005, more than 70,000 projects have been run, involving more than 2 million primary and secondary students across the continent. The students learn about their respective cultural heritage and their shared values, as well as each other's everyday lives. Utilising social media and telecommunication applications such as Skype, the platform also creates immersion opportunities for language learners by putting them into direct contact with their peers in countries such as France, Germany, and Spain. Unfortunately, language learners at non-primary or secondary institutions are excluded from participating in eTwinning, due to vetting concerns and the maintenance of a safe environment for the remaining underaged participants.[45] They are, however, eligible to participate in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, which allows learners from both sides of the Mediterranean to engage in intercultural dialogue and to improve their skills through online learning tools. It expands the reach and scope of Erasmus+ and complements the traditional physical mobility. Additionally, professionals involved in adult learning can have an exchange of thoughts with their peers in other European countries via EPALE, a multilingual open membership community.

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[40] Cf. GoI (2010), p. 7; Dörnyei (1998); Moriarty (2010).
[41] Cf. Coady/Ó Laoire (2002), p. 145f. For current statistics and information cf. Gaelscoileanna (n.d.).
[42] Cf. O'Rourke (2011), pp. 136-137.
[43] Ó Riagáin (1997); Carthy (2016), p. 13; Mac Giolla Phádraig (2003); Mac Murchaidh (2008). Cf. also the contributions by Jim Higgins, Robin Bury, and Anton Carroll in Mulholland (2006), pp. 153-167.
[44] Cf., e.g., McWilliams (2005); Holden (2007); Holmquist (2008); Carey (2008).
[45] Interestingly, while vocational schools (at secondary level) in other participating countries can participate in eTwinning, all vocational organisations in Ireland are barred from this.

Within this complex linguistic and educational context, in which (a) bilingual aspiration and reality fall well short of one another; (b) English is commonly perceived as sufficient to interact with the global community; and (c) financial and human resources are limited and an "either-or" discourse prevails, foreign languages have struggled, despite appearances. The currently high uptake of foreign languages at post-primary level, with 90% of students in junior cycle and 70% in senior cycle studying a foreign language,[46] is less the result of a comprehensive and consistent language strategy in the education sector as a whole than the result of individual efforts of schools and teachers and language-related requirements of certain institutions when transitioning into third-level education.[47] The impact of the latter seems to be of particular importance, considering that the uptake of foreign languages in HE remains low, although roughly two in three Leaving Certificate students opt to pursue a third-level degree.[48] This idiosyncrasy echoes David Little's poignant observation that "foreign languages [essentially] survive in post-primary schools because the National University of Ireland requires a foreign language for matriculation", i.e. in most degree programmes.[49] Ireland's other three universities (Trinity College Dublin, Dublin City University and the University of Limerick) either have no second language requirement (DCU) or do not differentiate between Irish and other modern languages (TCD and UL) in their matriculation requirements when it comes to a second language. However, since Irish is compulsory in the Leaving Certificate, the requirement is very much in line with DCU's policy. The Institutes of Technology (IoTs) only have language requirements for courses with a prominent language component, such as Business/Law with Languages or Languages and International Tourism. This also remains the case after the amalgamation of Dublin's three existing IoTs (DIT, ITB and ITT) on 1 January 2019, resulting in the formation of Ireland's first Technical University. Given the rather precarious status of foreign languages education, hinging to largely on the National University's language requirement, a 2011 warning by the RIA of its "gradual erosion" seems particularly alarming. According to the Academy, "The removal would have serious consequences for the sustainability of languages at all levels."[50] The consequences of dropping such safeguards and incentives can be observed to the north, where the discontinuation of the Northern-Irish Primary Modern Languages Programme, in combination with a lack of an university entrance requirement, has led to a significant drop in both the provision and uptake of foreign languages, further increasing the pressure of modern language departments in third-level education.[51]

While the curricular availability of individual languages is at the discretion of the respective primary and secondary schools in Ireland, the Leaving Certificate options regarding modern languages entail French, German, Hebrew, Arabic, Italian, Japanese, Spanish and Russian. The latter were added as a result of the Post-Primary Languages Initiative (PPLI), which was set up in September 2000, by the Department of Education and Science (DESc), with the aim to diversify, enhance and expand modern foreign language education at secondary level.

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[46] DES (2017), p. 16, 29.

[47] However, if candidates hold an exemption from Irish from the DES, they may apply to the institutions for an exemption from language-related entry requirements.

[48] Cf. DES (2017), p. 31f.; OECD (2016).

[49] Quoted in King/Byrne/Djouadj (2011); cf. also Section 47 of the Universities Act, 1997.

[50] RIA (2011), p. 7

[51] Cf., e.g., British Academy (2018); British Council Northern Ireland (2019); Carruthers/Ó Mainnín (2018).

However, French has traditionally been the most dominant modern foreign language in Ireland's secondary schools. To this day, the majority of students choose to sit French in their Leaving Certificate, followed by a disproportionate amount choosing German and Spanish.[52] Following the commitment made by EU Member States under Article 149 of the Treaty of Nice (2001), the State Examinations Commission (SEC) also provides examinations in the following non-curricular EU languages: Latvian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Slovenian, Modern Greek, Finnish, Polish, Estonian, Slovakian, Swedish, Czech, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Portuguese, Danish, Dutch, Croatian, Maltese. Additionally, and based on the commitment to foster the heritage languages of EU citizens, the SEC also accedes to requests to other national languages of EU Member States. Despite these successes in diversification and the formal acknowledgement of European heritage languages, the PPLI has highlighted significant challenges associated with the introduction of new languages to the education system, including the creation of a pool of suitably qualified teachers, the attraction of students and graduates with foreign language skills into teacher training, and the generation of sufficient levels of demand from schools that will sustain the viable employment of language teachers in the context of the overall pupil-teacher ratio, and competition from other subjects. Indeed, in 2019, Carl O'Brien of *The Irish Times* reported that secondary schools are increasingly compelled to reduce access to foreign languages, due to difficulties in recruiting qualified teachers, with one school principal noting: "Finding teachers who have fluency in languages is a major challenge for us and has reached crisis point [...] We have concerns that if this trend continues we may have to consider making the language optional."[53] Referring, among other things, to the PPLI's 2017 *Audit on Foreign Languages Provision in Post-Primary Schools,*[54] O'Brien also highlighted the increasing disparity in language provision between fee-paying and non-fee-paying secondary schools. According to O'Brien, students of the former have better access to tuition, as well as more learner agency in general, in that they are much more likely to have a choice of which language to study. Size and geographical location are further factors when it comes to the provision of languages, so that the North West of Ireland offers its students significantly less choice. What O'Brien omitted from his article, but which was shown in the audit, was that Italian and Japanese as senior-cycle options are mostly concentrated in Dublin schools (with Galway and Limerick as notable exceptions), and that there is low-level or no provision of Spanish in many counties.[55] Both, the increasing class gap and geographical gap in language provision should be addressed sooner rather than later, as schools and individual teachers are at the forefront of setting the tone for any future engagement with foreign languages – a fact that is once more underlined by the present study.

Although third-level institutions are facing similar pressures regarding the sustainability of viable faculty employment and competition from other subjects, with some institutions opting to reduce the languages on offer and/or not replacing retiring language lecturers and instructors (particularly in the IoTs), students have access to a relatively wide range of foreign language courses that can be taken as core subjects or in combination with other disciplines across the

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[52] According to the records of the SEC 15,485 students sat the 2018 Leaving Certificate examination in French, 6,194 in German, and 4,967 in Spanish. SEC (2018).
[53] O'Brien (2019)
[54] PPLI (2017).
[55] Cf. PPLI (2017), p. 30.

humanities, business, and the sciences. However, there are significant geographical and institutional limitations regarding the availability of languages other than French, German and Spanish, so that a combination of specific programmes may not be available. Indeed, the status of many modern language departments is precarious and any further reductions and/or side-lining of foreign languages will endanger the objectives set out by the Government. For the moment, almost all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) institutions offer modern languages, with exceptions being the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT) and the National College of Art and Design (NCAD). The privately funded non-profit Royal College of Surgeons (RCSI) offers no language modules, though it should be noted that most of the students are international students and that the college provides them – if necessary – with special assistance to adjust to cultural/linguistic differences, on their return to their home countries. However, compared to their European counterparts, the language selection in Ireland's third-level institutions remains somewhat limited, continuing the focus of secondary language education on French, German, Italian and – more recently – Spanish; and lacking, at times, *ab initio* options for these languages. In addition to these more "traditional" language options, all universities offer Mandarin Chinese and/or Japanese, with the former also being offered by two IoTs, i.e. Dundalk (DKIT) and Tralee (IT Tralee). Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Cork (UCC) have by far the most extensive offering of modern foreign languages: TCD offers courses in Portuguese,* Bulgarian,* Croatian,* Czech,* Russian, Polish, Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, and Korean;[56] and UCC offers Portuguese, Catalan, Galician, and Korean. In the private/independent/non-profit sector, only ICD Business School offers a foreign modern language, i.e. Mandarin Chinese. Of the remaining institutions, i.e. the College of Computing Technology, Dublin Business School, Galway Business School, Griffith College, Independent College Dublin, and the National College of Ireland, only some provide (specialised) courses in English for non-native speakers.[57] In comparison, there is quite a robust network of African Studies, Arab Studies, Jewish Studies, Slavic Studies, Scandinavian Studies, and Finnougristics at continental European third-level institutions, with students more frequently opting to cross (linguistic) borders within the EU to pursue their degree of choice than their Irish counterparts.[58]

In the context of other non-primary or secondary education, adult learners have the opportunity to improve existing language skills or start learning a new language through short-term and night classes at various Community Colleges and Institutes of Further Education (CFEs) throughout Ireland – although languages are rarely integrated into degree programmes.[59] In

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[56] Languages marked with an asterisk are offered only as elective modules and/or as part of TCD's lifelong learning related evening and short courses programme.

[57] This information was provided by the relevant offices of the institutions.

[58] Some countries facilitate the choice by providing special funding for those opting to follow a programme abroad. While many third-level students choose to study a country with a common and/or related language and cultural ties, proximity also plays a major factor, particularly considering the increasing internationalisation of institutions and a growing number of English language programmes. In 2016, 15 EU Member States reported that more than half of their international students hailed from Europe (no data from Germany and Slovenia), with numbers among international students exceeding 80% in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Denmark, Austria, Croatia, Poland and Luxembourg. Cf. EC/Eurostat (n.d.).

[59] While the integration of languages in these types of programmes is – as we will see later on – often the result of systemic issues, the lack of language competences poses certain challenges and can put both individual learners as well as the Irish knowledge society at a disadvantage internationally.

AE, the focus in terms of language provision remains to a large extent on Literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The Further Education and Training Hub[60] currently lists eight FET content courses and/or programmes that contain a language component: while the Limerick College of Further Education offers a European Studies programme with French, Dublin's Plunkett College and the MSLETB Further Education Centre in Castlebar offer a similar programme with French and Spanish; the VTOS Centre in Sligo Town offers a Social Studies course, as well as a course in Tourism and Cultural Studies, that include a choice of French and Spanish; the Greenhills College in Dublin offers German as part of its pre-university course in Arts with Languages and Psychology and the Ballsbridge College of Further Education, in collaboration with the UCD Confucius Institute, offers a Business Studies with Mandarin Chinese course; and, finally, the Cork College of Commerce offers optional German and Chinese with its Business programme. Individual languages classes, including Irish, are usually available as part of the CFEs evening programme. Additionally, third-level institutions such as TCD, UCC and NUI Galway offer foreign language courses as part of their Adult Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning programmes, although individual courses differ significantly both in their scope and their academic and financial commitment. All in all, the languages on offer mirror the options in secondary and third-level education, with several courses available in Russian and Polish throughout the country and a limited number of courses in Arabic in the urban centres (Dublin, Cork, Limerick). The private sector, which is not regulated by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), offers additional languages options, as do non-profit cultural organisations such as the Goethe Institut, Alliance Française, Istituto Italiano di Cultura and the UCD Confucius Institute.[61]

Foreign Language Learning in the Context of Erasmus+

Erasmus+ is the EU's flagship education and training programme. It plays an important role in the European integration process and fosters internationalisation of individuals, institutions and organisations, through mobility and strategic partnerships. In addition to boosting skills among individual participants, and allowing for knowledge exchange between participating institutions to make them more competitive in an increasingly globalised and complex world, the programme's goal is to promote common European values such as solidarity and inclusion, as well as to enhance active citizenship, civic engagement, and intercultural understanding.[62] The current iteration of the programme runs from 2014 to 2020 and has a budget of almost EUR 16.5 billion, of which Ireland receives on average EUR 20 million a year, with the instalments having been increased incrementally.[63] In May 2018, the European Commission

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[60] The Further Education and Training Hub has been developed by SOLAS, the Further Education & Training Authority, in partnership with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and other FET providers.
[61] Indeed, one of the interviewees acquired Russian through the private sector, which she then utilised professionally to support the students with a Russian-speaking background in her school.
[62] Cf. EC (2019), p. 5.
[63] Cf. HEA/Léargas (2017).

(EC) proposed a doubling of the Erasmus+ funding in its next multiannual financial framework (2021-2027), quoting the programme's track record of creating "opportunities for the education and mobility of young people".[64]

Erasmus+ is the result of an amalgamation of a number of mobility programmes, i.e. the Lifelong Learning Programme (Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Comenius, Grundtvig), Youth in Action, and international cooperation programmes such as Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink, as well as the programme for cooperation with industrialised countries, under the label of the internationally renowned Erasmus programme, which was inaugurated in 1987 to facilitate mobility among third-level students and – from 1997 onwards – staff members. Fundamentally, in HE, Erasmus/Erasmus+ is linked to a fee waiver for undergraduate and graduate students at the guest institution, as well as a fair recognition and validation of skills, qualifications and periods of study and prior learning, including non-formal learning. Between 1987 and 2013, over 3 million students and 350,000 staff members from more than 4,600 HEIs participated in the programme, making it the world's most successful mobility programme.[65] Specific to Ireland, over 60,000 HE students and staff members have travelled for periods of study and/or work under Erasmus/Erasmus+ since the programme's inauguration and numbers have increased exponentially since 2007/08, with 4,654 students and staff members going abroad in 2018.[66] However, inbound Erasmus+ students continue to outnumber outbound ones at a ratio of two-to-one,[67] not least due to the language question and continental students looking to Ireland and the UK to boost their competences in the global *lingua franca*, English. To this end, southern and eastern European countries tend to send out more students than they receive, while central European and Scandinavian countries are usually more balanced.[68] Regarding the other education sectors, i.e. AE, school education, VET, and youth, more than 8,500 learners and staff members have travelled abroad as part of Erasmus+ since 2014.[69]

Considering its success and immense popularity among individual participants, participating institutions and other stakeholders, Erasmus/Erasmus+ has been widely celebrated as an important motor for European integration and the development of a pan-European identity. The underlying idea is simple: Erasmus+ participants not only enhance, according to David Cairns, "their educational profile but become also some kind of uber-European, with a de facto ambassadorial role of providing a symbol of integration to the European institutions and acting as a role model, with the ultimate aim of establishing a new generation of less nationally oriented Europeans."[70] The foundation of the multilingual participatory magazine *Cafébabel*, in 2001, by Erasmus students and the introduction of the moniker *Erasmus Generation*, in 2005, seem to be a case in point and underscore the powerful impact of their time abroad on

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[64] Cf. EC (2018).

[65] EC (2014a), pp. 4f.

[66] Numbers accessed through the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool.

[67] In 2017, for instance, 9,046 students and staff in the HE sector travelled to Ireland under of the Erasmus+ scheme, while only 4,009 students and staff from Irish HEI went to other programme countries (KA103). Numbers accessed through the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool.

[68] Cf. Statistics for All (n.d.). Cf. also, e.g., Brooks (2018); Kenway/Fahey (2007); Shields (2017).

[69] Numbers accessed through the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool.

[70] Cairns (2017).

participants and the public imagination.[71] However, two recent impact studies conducted by Charis Hughes and Magdalena Staniek, on behalf of Léargas and the HEA respectively, have drawn attention to the fact that, contrary to popular belief, participating in Erasmus+ may have the opposite effect. Staniek, for instance, notes, in light of a word frequency analysis, that participants "in both Erasmus and non-Erasmus cohorts feel more Irish than European and, surprisingly, the difference is more pronounced among the Erasmus participants who are more than three times as likely to feel mostly Irish than mostly European whereas that difference is only marginal for the non-Erasmus group".[72]

Moreover, the programmes' educational and promotional achievements aside, Erasmus/Erasmus+ have not been the overall success that the EU make them out to be and scholars – not least Cairns – have critiqued the normative expectations of the programmes regarding the economic, social and cultural resources of their participants. Erasmus+ is, as Friedrich Heger sums it up, far from being "a programme for everyone".[73] Although structural and bureaucratic obstacles have been significantly reduced in the past two decades, not least with the foundation of the European Higher Education Area and the amalgamation of the pre-existing mobility programmes Erasmus, Youth in Action, Leonardo da Vinci, Comenius, and Grundtvig, accessibility and participation remain a challenge for some sectors and population groups. On the one hand, the integration of various mobility programmes under Erasmus+, the simplification of the application process, and increased funding have opened Erasmus+ to staff and learners from all walks of life – with both sending and receiving institutions and organisations often mitigating potential conflicts and problems regarding the everyday practicalities. On the other hand, HE continues to consume the largest individual share among the Irish education sectors (EUR 11.8 million vs a combined EUR 15.43 million for the remaining sectors in 2018),[74] with many institutions and individual stakeholders outside third-level education also lacking the awareness, experience, and general resources such as allocated time that the International Offices of the HEIs possess. With regard to HE, mature students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular tend to struggle with the flexibility and/or economic resources necessary for an extended stay abroad which, typically lasts between 3 and 12 months in the sector. Other factors that may limit the access and participation in Erasmus+ are limited placements, academic achievement during (early) school education, educational background *within* and support *of* the family, foreign language competences, and special needs.[75] However, Ireland-specific research into the drivers *of* and barriers *to* international mobility remains scarce. Staniek's study of the drivers *of* and barriers *to* Erasmus+

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[71] However, a recent study by Llurda *et al.*, with Catalan participants of Erasmus+, highlights the underlying complexity of this issue, particularly in the context of minority language speakers and the positioning of strong regional identities. Cf. Llurda/Gallego-Balsà/Barahona/Martin-Rubió (2016).
[72] Staniek (2020); Hughes (2018).
[73] Heger (2013).
[74] The numbers are retrieved from the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool and based on the budgets awarded in 2018. The exact numbers are EUR 11,799,472.32 (HE) and EUR 15,433,170.40 (school, AE, VET, youth, and volunteering).
[75] Cf., e.g., EC (2014b); Di Pietro/Page (2008); Souto Otero (2008); Souto Otero/McCoshan (2006); EC (2000); Teichler (2004).

participation therefore marks an important first step in exploring the motivational factors behind Irish participants in Erasmus+.[76]

To make Erasmus+ as accessible as possible for the participants, and to make sure that it works well across the participating countries, the EC works with national agencies to manage the programme locally. In Ireland, the DES has appointed Léargas and the HEA to jointly manage Erasmus+, with the latter overseeing the HE sector and the former overseeing all other education sectors. There are currently 33 countries that fully take part in Erasmus+, i.e. all EU Member States, including overseas territories, as well as the Republic of North Macedonia, Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, and Turkey. Other partner countries throughout the European Higher Education Area and the world can take part in certain parts of Erasmus+, which are subject to specific criteria and conditions. In general, the structure of the Erasmus+ programme consists of three key actions: mobility of individuals (KA1), strategic partnerships (KA2), and – in relation to the youth sector – policy reform (KA3). However, the mobility of individuals for educational purposes remains at the centre of Erasmus+, with 68.92% of the 2018 funding in Ireland allocated to it, of which 59.63% is, in turn, being allocated to HE.[77]

Since multi- and plurilingualism is one of the cornerstones of the European project, language learning features prominently in Erasmus+. Indeed, the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity is one of the objectives of the programme and ranks among the main reasons among participants for going on Erasmus+.[78] This being said, the reasons for going abroad with Erasmus+ differ vastly and are based on individual needs, abilities, interests and expectations, which in turn affects the linguistic engagement and cultural immersion of participants. For example, an arts student majoring in a modern language will likely engage on a different level with the language and culture of the receiving country from an engineering student or a professional on a short-term placement, or indeed a young person participating in a youth exchange for a week.

Following the internationalisation of education in Europe and beyond, an increasing number of studies have explored the nexus between learner mobility and foreign language acquisition.[79] While empirical studies largely confirm the notion that a foreign sojourn increases a learner's language competence, the results differ greatly among individuals. As a result, psycholinguists, cross-cultural psychologists, international educators and scholars from other disciplines are paying increasingly attention to underlying situational and behavioural factors in language acquisition. In addition to the development of general linguistic competences in phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, which remain the focus of many studies, these scholars explore how aspects such as the length of stay, attitudes, and motivation affect this development.[80] Anxiety, language fatigue and previous language learning experience, which

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[76] Staniek (2020).

[77] Percentages are calculated based on the numbers/budgets retrieved from the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool in 2018.

[78] Cf. EC (2019), p. 9.

[79] Cf., e.g., Taguchi (2008); Willis Allen/Herron (2003); Segalowaitz/Freed (2004); Collontine (2004); Dewey (2008); Isabelli/Nishida (2005); Freed/So/Lazar (2003); Sasaki (2009).

[80] Cf., e.g., Llanes/Muñoz (2012); Yashima/Zenuk-Nishide/Shimizu (2004); Wanner (2009); Isabelli-García (2006); MacIntyre/Clément/Dörnyei/Noels (1998); Willis Allen/Herron (2003); Gregersen/MacIntyre (2014); Geeraert/Demoulin/Demes (2014); Willis Allen (2013); Adams (2006).

are particularly relevant in the context of Ireland's constitutional bilingualism, can also play a significant role in language acquisition. Indeed, the factors at play seem almost endless and are highly individualistic. Celeste Kinginger, for instance, exposes in a longitudinal study that social class, gender, nationality and identity can significantly impact the motivation and the degree of investment of study abroad students when it comes to language learning. Dörnyei *et al*., on the other hand, highlight the importance of external forces such as the teacher and classroom management, the group dynamic and/or the educational culture and general socio-political environment.[81]

However, perhaps one of the most interesting aspects revealed by recent studies on learner mobility and language learning, particularly in the context of Erasmus+, is Jennifer Jenkins' observation that the programme helps participants to develop an appreciation towards the idea of being a non-native speaker in a multicultural/multilingual environment and to defer to the normativity of native speakers "as a fiction".[82] To the non-English speaking interviewees of Jenkins's study, linguistic "mistakes" are not necessarily a bad thing, but an expression of creativity and an imagined (language) community. The notion of English as a global *lingua franca* seems to lend agency and ownership to non-native speakers. While the latter finding may at first glance seem somewhat less relevant in the context of the present study, as English does indeed have a different status globally with non-native speakers, outnumbering native speakers in substantial numbers,[83] the notion that an Erasmus+ mobility helps Irish participants to feel more comfortable living and working in a non-English speaking environment is certainly relevant. Indeed, this corresponds broadly with the findings of the study at hand, which highlights not only the increased linguistic agency of the learners, but also a growth in their confidence and willingness to allow themselves to make mistakes. A deeper appreciation and level of (linguistic) comfort among Irish citizens is more than desirable, in order to further shift the focus to the continent and the opportunities that the EU's freedom of movement entails.

Following the rise of e-learning and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in the early 2010s, the EC has gradually introduced the Erasmus+ OLS since 2014. As any e-learning activity, the OLS can be used at any time from a computer, tablet or smartphone with an internet connection. OLS courses are available in all European official languages for qualifying participants under KA1, i.e. the mobility of individuals. Participants with a level of at least B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in the main language of instruction or work may choose to follow an OLS course in the language of the receiving country, if available. Support in languages or levels not yet covered by the OLS can be provided through other means, such as organisational support for HEIs or individual grants for other fields. Under KA2, strategic partnerships in the area of language teaching and learning are particularly encouraged and funding for linguistic support is being provided where long-term training and teaching activities are concerned. The OLS includes a mandatory assessment of language competence *before* and *after* the mobility, except native speakers, and consists of optional self-study modules and thematic MOOCs, live coaching and tutoring sessions, and a discussion

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[81] Kinginger (2004); Dörnyei/MacIntyre/Alastair (2015).
[82] Jenkins (2009), p. 206. Jenkins bases her observations among other things on data collected by Peckham/Kalocsai/Kovács/Sherman (2008).
[83] Cf., e.g., Crystal (2003).

forum and news section. Self-study modules for business language are available for advanced learners. The OLS has also replaced the provision of specialised courses in the lesser used and taught languages funded under the Erasmus Intensive Language Course scheme of the previous iteration of the programme, which enabled students to attend language courses in the host countries, to prepare them for their studies or internship abroad. Third-level students can, however, still avail of on-site language courses through the language departments and centres of their host institution, if they qualify under the receiving institution's guidelines.

The advantages and disadvantages of e-learning and MOOCs have been widely debated in scholarly literature, as well as the media. While proponents highlight their accessibility and flexibility through the removal of geographical limitations, as well as the reduction of financial and temporal restraints, opponents draw attention to the attrition and high dropout rates among e-learners, due to various internal and external motivational factors.[84] Generally speaking, e-learning demands a higher ability to self-regulate one's learning and learning experience through time management, self-teaching methods, and metacognitive evaluation, particularly regard to cMOOCs, i.e. in situations which learners construct their own course. A high level of self-efficacy and self-confidence to achieve the (perceived) goal of the course is also a significant factor, as is the belief that the course is beneficial career-wise.[85] Additionally, research into participants' backgrounds has shown that e-learning and MOOCs may favour those who are educationally privileged[86] and possess a higher digital literacy.[87] An increasing amount of research is also being conducted on the social engagement of e-learners with both their instructors and peers, and how this may influence the learning outcome.[88]

Regarding Erasmus+, the shift from on-site language courses to OLS courses too has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the launch of the OLS not only allows for better quality control on the part of the EC, but also affords participants better accessibility, eliminating, particularly in rural areas, the need to travel – at times great distances – to participate in conventional languages courses. Outside the context of third-level education, it allows participants on placements and traineeships to better integrate the language learning sessions into their work/training schedule. On the other hand, the higher demand of self-regulation, self-efficacy, and self-confidence of the e-learning environment, as well as the suggestion that it favours those with educational privilege and digital literacy, echoes the concerns regarding Erasmus+ in general, i.e. that the OLS, like the programme in general, is not "for everyone".[89] This is furthered by the fact that Erasmus+ participants can – the mandatory assessment *before* and *after* the mobility aside – engage as much or as little as they want with the platform. However, the Erasmus+ OLS is trying to mitigate these issues by several measures, which aim to create a positive attitude, as well as opportunities to interact with other language speakers and learners. One of these measures is an intuitively designed interface, which takes the user step by step through the learning process and offers the option

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[84] Cf., e.g., Halawa/Greene/Mitchell (2014); Jordan (2014). For a brief discussion of the general advantages and disadvantages, cf. also Heller (2013); Peterson (2017).
[85] Wang/Baker (2015); Kizilcec/Schneider (2015); Barak/Watted/Haick (2016).
[86] Koller/Ng (2013).
[87] Yuan/Powell (2013).
[88] Cf., e.g., Sinah (2014); Li/Verma/Skevi/Zufferey/Blom/Dillenbourg (2014); Ferguson/Clow (2015).
[89] Cf. footnote 73.

to personalise the learning path according to their needs and interests, with algorithms suggesting suitable exercises. The live coaching and tutoring sessions aim to compensate for the intimacy of face-to-face communication in conventional courses, although the amount of time a participant can seek out tutelage is limited and in proportion to the duration of the mobility. In the broader context of live coaching, non-thematic live MOOCs provide opportunities to actively engage with the language both in its traditional academic context, as well as contexts such as everyday conversation and general topics of interest. In other words, just as the previously mentioned gaelscoileanna movement, the intention of OLSs is not only to increase the general ability, but to create opportunity *for* and a positive attitude *towards* communicating in a foreign language.

Nevertheless, no comprehensive empirical study has been conducted regarding the overall effectiveness of the OLS. One of the few exceptions is María Boquera Matarredona's study, which provides an initial discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of the OLS's assessment test. However, while the findings remain relatively superficial and often lack a reference to clear empirical data,[90] the study at least provides a starting point. To ascertain the effectiveness of the OLS, and to assess its advantages and disadvantages, particularly in comparison to conventional language courses and other public MOOCs, a more comprehensive study that also includes longitudinal data would be highly desirable. While the present study addresses some aspects of the OLS, its focus remains on the overall language learning experience and awareness in the context of Erasmus+, of which the OLS is but one part.

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[90] Boquera Matarredona (2016).

Research Objective, Design and Methodology

The central objective of this study is to empirically examine the learning experience and impact of foreign languages on participants in all sectors of Erasmus+ in Ireland. Furthermore, it intends to shed light on the awareness and attitudes towards foreign languages among those involved in the sectors. The corollary objective is to explore the extent to which Erasmus+ increases participants' foreign language competence, and how the overall impact of the programme can be maximised in the context of the government's *Languages Connect* strategy. In this vein, the study focuses primarily on outward mobilities to non-English speaking countries, i.e., the main subjects are either participants from all education sectors who take up mobilities abroad under Erasmus+ in countries other than the UK (Wales being an exception due to the strong presence of Welsh in the country's linguistic landscape), project leaders, and administrators facilitating these mobilities.[91] One of the key contributions of this study lies in its mixed-method design, i.e. combining quantitative and qualitative methodology, and including data on Erasmus+ participants from all education sectors. Existing studies on language learning in the context of Erasmus/Erasmus+ have almost exclusively focused on HE, while other sectors are still relatively lacking.[92] The broader aim of this study is, therefore, to widen our understanding of the Erasmus+ programme as a whole and to contribute to the debate about foreign language learning in all education contexts in Ireland.

The mixed methodology allows this study to create a panoramic view of the role of foreign languages in outward Erasmus+ mobilities, while simultaneously gaining a deeper insight into personal lived experiences when it comes to language learning and its impact. Thus, the analysis begins with a descriptive profile of Erasmus+ participants and their relationship to languages and language learning. The profile is based on an anonymous online survey conducted from November 2018 to February 2019. The participant profile is then followed by a thematic analysis based on 14 participant interviews and five interviews with project leaders and administrators, which were conducted between April and October 2019. The main justification for incorporating a qualitative element into the study is that qualitative research allows flexibility and offers an effective way to probe, develop and refine the previously developed profile of Erasmus+ participants, by zooming in on the personal lived experiences of a small, select group of participants. Individual interviews are particularly suitable for this purpose, as the study is less concerned with the general structure of a phenomenon, i.e. language learning in the context of Erasmus+, and more concerned with a detailed examination of personal experiences regarding this phenomenon and the sense interviewees make of their experience. Underlying attitudes and language awareness can also be studied more closely. The interviews and their subsequent thematic analysis are an explicitly interpretive endeavour, both in terms of the researcher and the subjects, who reflect the experience in the interview process

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[91] As with the case of Malta and Cyprus, where English maintains a strong presence due to the countries' colonial past, Erasmus+ participants experience a significant exposure to the countries' native language (i.e. Welsh, Maltese/Italian and Greek/Turkish), due to their official status and the (relatively) high presence in everyday life.
[92] The desideratum can be partly explained by the fact that the programme's previous iterations were not open to participants outside HE. An additional factor may be the relatively short time period in which participants from other education sector spend abroad, compared to undergraduate students in third-level institutions.

and its interpretation. This is particularly the case when we move from what Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke have described as "semantic" themes to "latent" themes, with the former focusing on the explicitly stated "surface data" and the latter aiming to "identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies".[93]

Descriptive Profile of Erasmus+ Participants and Their Experience with (Foreign) Language Learning

Before beginning our foray into the experience and the impact of foreign language learning in the context of Erasmus+, we must first consider the demographics behind the participating cohort in the Irish context and their language competences. To this end, past, present and future participants of the 2014–2020 iteration of the Erasmus+ programme were contacted and asked to take part in an anonymous online survey. Accordingly, the hypothetical number of possible responses is approximately 30,000. While the International Offices of the HEIs facilitated the circulation of the survey, Erasmus+ participants from other education sectors were contacted directly via the email address provided in their Participant Report to the EC. However, only participants who consented to follow-up questions were contacted. Access to the EC's Erasmus+ Mobility Tool was provided by the HEA and Léargas, although several contact details (i.e. institutional email addresses) of former participants had expired in the meantime. Additionally, the online survey was publicised via the homepages of both national agencies and social media, in order to attract the attention of those who might otherwise have fallen through the net or who did not consent to be contacted again in their Participant Report but nevertheless wanted to take part. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and no incentives were offered. The respondents were able to skip questions and/or stop at any time.

The survey was open from the beginning of November 2018 until the end of February 2019. In total, 609 Erasmus+ participants and prospective participants responded to the survey, with questions receiving 474 responses on average. A certain degree of survey fatigue among the respondents is noticeable, with the number of respondents who skip answers gradually increasing over the course of the survey. The survey consisted of 49 questions, the majority of which were closed, single-answer questions. Where necessary the option "other (please specify)" was included. This rather restrictive format was chosen with deliberation, in lieu of the study's mixed methodology and a sweep of several Participant Reports submitted to the EC by Erasmus+ participants. Here, questions regarding experiences with foreign languages are often watered down, by allowing respondents multiple answers, with some choosing most, if not all answers available. A rating scale is introduced only later in the Participant Reports and focuses on a different set of questions. As a result, in the present study, the respondents were asked for the "main" reason behind their attitude and/or experience, allowing for one answer

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[93] Braun/Clarke (2006), p. 84. Cf. also Braun/Clarke (2013).

only. This survey's respondents, therefore, had to prioritise their respective answers. The following variables are examined:

- Age.
- Gender.
- Educational background.
- Mother tongue and other language competences.
- Linguistic background and competences of parents.
- Linguistic background of social circle.
- Previous experience with foreign language learning.
- Duration and type of Erasmus+ mobility.
- Language(s) of communication during mobility.
- Linguistic support before and during mobility.
- Attitude towards the local language and being/becoming part of the linguistic community.
- Increase of language competence through self-assessment (CEFR).
- Awareness of professional and personal benefits of foreign language skills.
- Likelihood of working in the country of Erasmus+ mobility and/or in an international context.

Who Participates in Erasmus+?

When we look at the demographic make-up and the general experience of Erasmus+ participants as per the data provided by the online survey, it is important to highlight the shortcomings of the data. Both the voluntary nature of the survey and the necessity of a basic digital literacy are, to a certain extent, reflected in the data – as is the dependency on intermediaries such as international officers and project leaders to facilitate its dissemination in certain sectors. This is particularly visible with regard to certain subgroups among the Erasmus+ participants and touches upon the question of what prompts a potential survey respondent to either respond or not respond. Survey response and non-response studies have shown that trends do indeed exist, with results from online surveys by and large echoing those of the administration methods of more traditional surveys. In general, the more educated and more affluent people are, the more likely they are to participate in a survey.[94] Women and younger people, i.e. in this case young adults and young professionals, are also more likely to participate in surveys.[95] Relevance *of* and interest *in* the survey topic has also been shown to influence response rates, as have the wording and length of the questionnaire and dissemination methods.

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[94] Curtin/Presser/Singer (2000); Goyder/Warriner/Miller (2002); Singer/van Hoewyk/Maher (2000).
[95] Curtin/Presser/Singer (2000); Singer/van Hoewyk/Maher (2000); Moore/Tarnai (2002); Goyder (1986).

In the study at hand, the explicit mention of the foreign language context in the survey title might have been a deterrent to prospective respondents, as they may have felt that their experience was of little relevance to the research conducted, either because they did not speak another language or because foreign languages did not play a significant role in their mobility. A case in point is one of the interviewees, who first expressed doubts about her ability to contribute to the study in a meaningful way, as her Erasmus+ mobility has led her to the UK, i.e. Wales, rather than continental Europe. A first look at the data further underlines that the study follows the general trends of survey participation. For instance, underage participants (<18 years) who have participated in Erasmus+ mobilities via the school and youth sectors are markedly underrepresented, with only one survey respondent indicating that they were 16 years or younger and a large number of respondents choosing not to indicate their age group at all (Fig. 2).
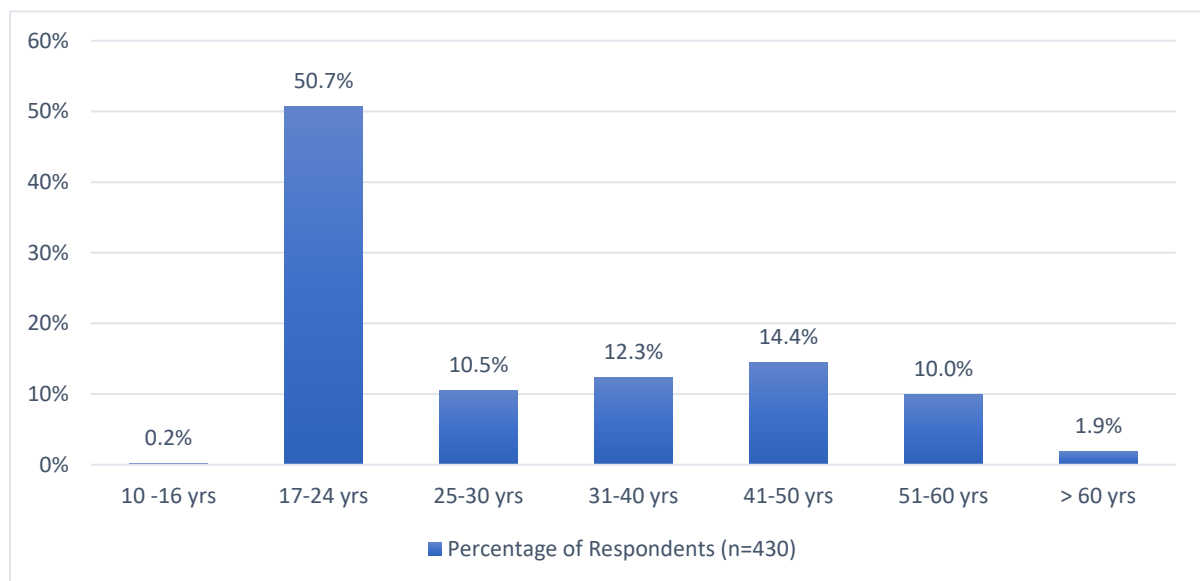

Figure 2: Age bracket

This is not only due to the survey's dependency on intermediaries in these sectors, i.e. teachers and project leaders, but is further accelerated by the fact that a large number of these Erasmus+ participants have left the relevant schools and projects since their mobility took place. The combination of a perception of the survey as "something for adults" and insufficient digital skills/access has most likely also hampered the response rate among underage Erasmus+ participants. Given that the survey was designed to address vastly different demographics across five education sectors, the wording of the questions, together with the length and logic of the questionnaire, has most likely heightened this perception among pre-teens and teens. With the exception of the wording issue, these factors also likely contributed to the low response rate of older Erasmus+ participants, with only eight respondents (1.9%) indicating that they were 60 years or older. Additionally, the wording and survey logic, which increased in its difficulty over the course of the questionnaire, might have contributed to an increasing survey fatigue, with more and more respondents skipping questions.

Only 27.3% of the respondents identified as male, whereas 72.3% identified as female (Fig. 3). While females are not only more likely to respond to surveys, but are also generally overrepresented in the Erasmus+ programme,[96] the female to male gender ratio among the survey respondents seems particularly high. However, as with the question regarding age, a relatively high number of survey participants (180 respondents) chose not to answer the question regarding gender, presumably due to a certain degree of survey fatigue, as these questions were posed towards the end of the survey (Q45 and Q46).
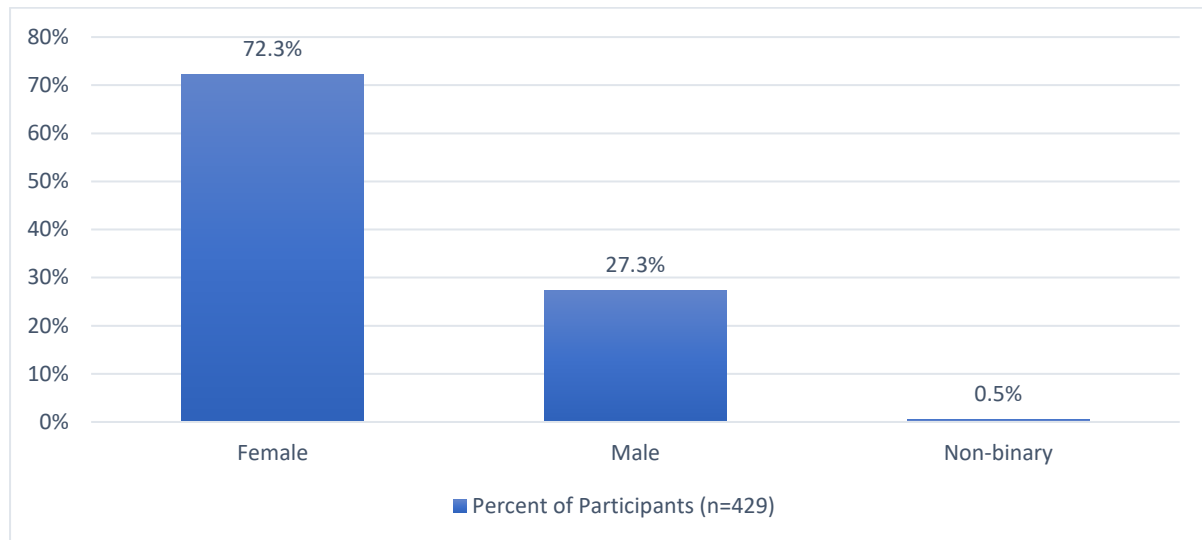

Figure 3: Gender identity

Despite these shortcomings of the data, figures 2 and 3 still concur with the general trend regarding Erasmus+ mobilities in Ireland. The majority of mobilities are taken up by undergraduate students in the HE sector (Fig. 4). While VET learners represent a considerable group in terms of outward mobilities, with 1,740 mobilities between 2014 and 2017,[97] only 5% of survey respondents identified as part of the VET sector – and this includes possible staff mobilities. Professionals who are more or less settled in their careers (i.e. 30+ years) and who participate in Erasmus+ to exchange good practice in their occupational area, or to establish/further a cooperation with a non-Irish partner, comprise a second considerable group within the Erasmus+ programme.

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[96] Cf. Böttcher/Araújo/Nagler/Mendes/Helbing/Herrmann (2016); Staniek (2020); Hughes (2018), p. 9.
[97] Number is based on the Participant Reports of the corresponding years in the Mobility Tool.
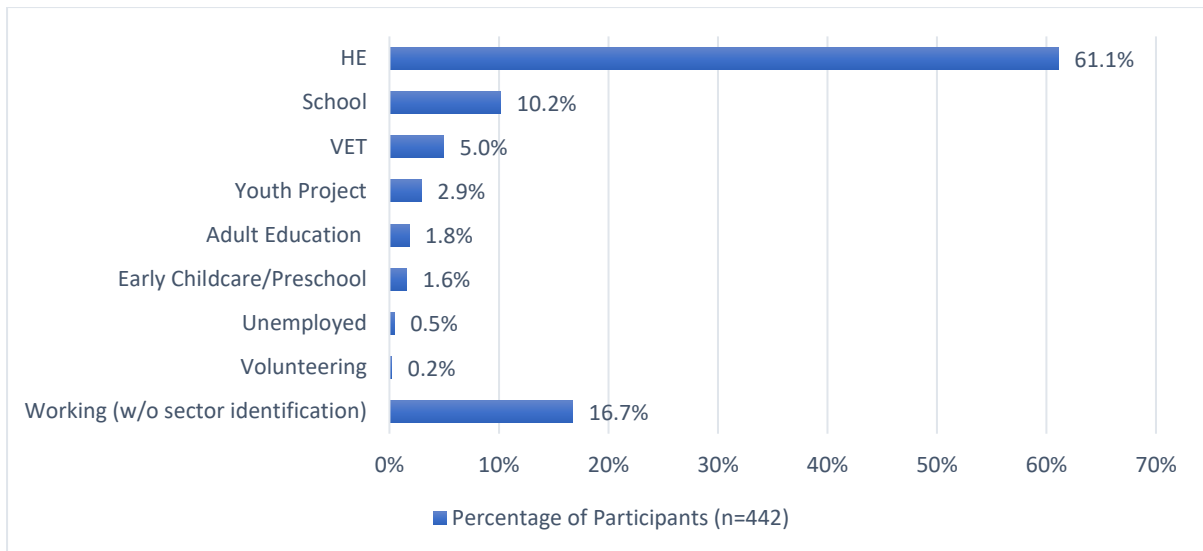
Figure 4: Sending institution/education sector

In this context, it is noticeable that education, including early childcare and HE in general, is by far the most common occupational area of the survey respondents (Fig. 5), although – due to ambiguous wording in the questionnaire – it is not clear whether undergraduate students in HE and other learners chose to identify as someone from the education sector instead of their targeted occupational area.

Figure 5: General occupational area

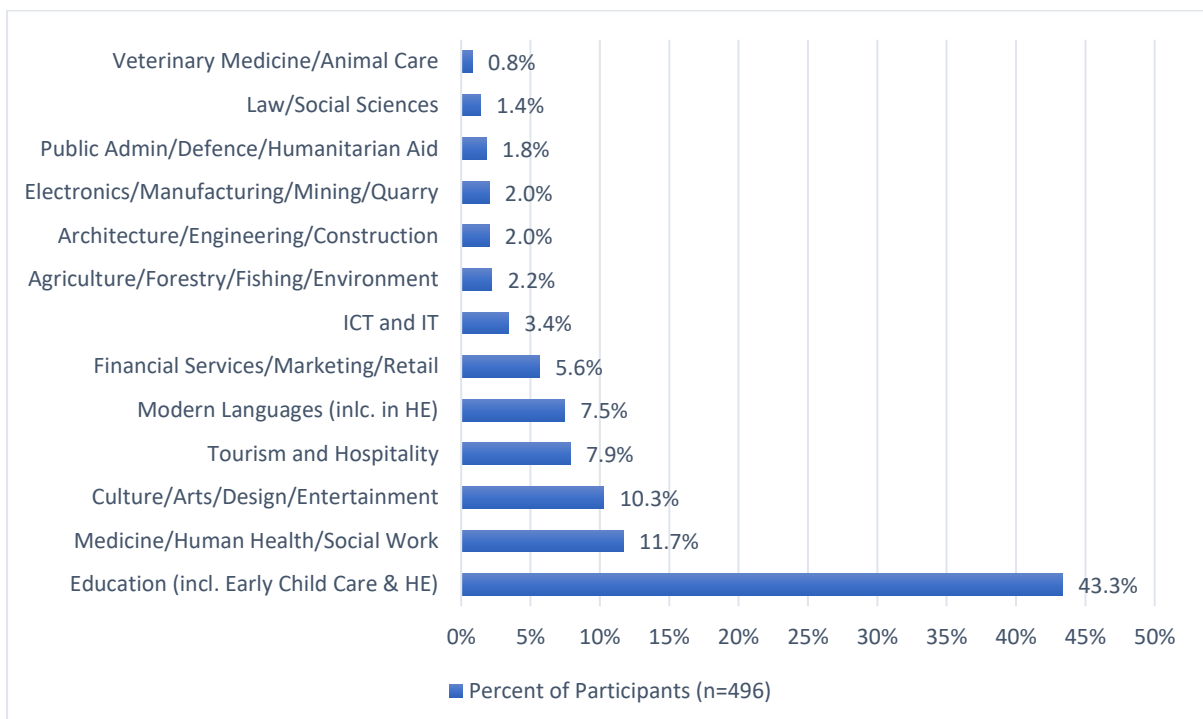All ambiguity aside, with more than two out of five of the respondents (43.3%) indicating an occupational background in education, 11.7% in medicine, human health and – perhaps most importantly in this category – social work, 10.3% in culture and entertainment, 7.9% in tourism and hospitality, and 7.5% in languages (including HE), the survey highlights that Erasmus+ plays a much more dominant role in occupational areas that tend to necessitate a higher level of intercultural skills and cooperation. In contrast, only 3.4% of respondents indicated a background in ICT and IT, with even fewer (1.4%) indicating a background in law or the social sciences. These are areas in which English is the dominant language internationally (i.e. sciences, finance, IT, international law, etc.) or that are particularly concerned with a domestic market (i.e. law). Perhaps most interesting in this context is the fact that only 1.8% of survey respondents are in public administration, defence or humanitarian aid. In the context of the dismantling of international borders and European integration, these areas might benefit the most from the knowledge exchange and the increase in intercultural understanding and language competences that are associated with Erasmus+.

In terms of foreign language experience, the majority of survey respondents had some sort of foreign language education in primary or secondary school (Fig. 6), although 162 respondents (31.8%) explicitly stated that they had no foreign language education whatsoever. However, a sizable number had received or were receiving language instruction in more than one foreign language, i.e. 123 out of 347 respondents (35.45%).
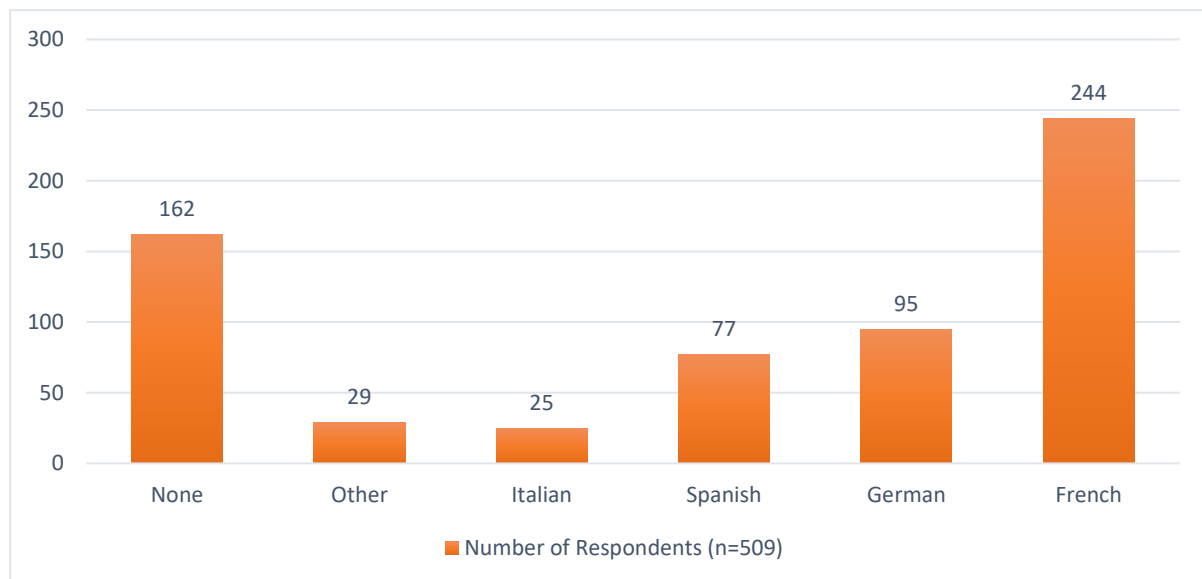
Figure 6: Foreign language education in school

Predictably, French is the most common foreign language among those who had taken one at school. Among the respondents, French (244 out of 509 respondents) outnumbers all other conventional "school languages"' combined, i.e. 95 survey respondents indicated a background in German, 77 in Spanish, and 25 Italian. The most common languages within the category "Other", which received 29 responses, are Japanese and Russian.
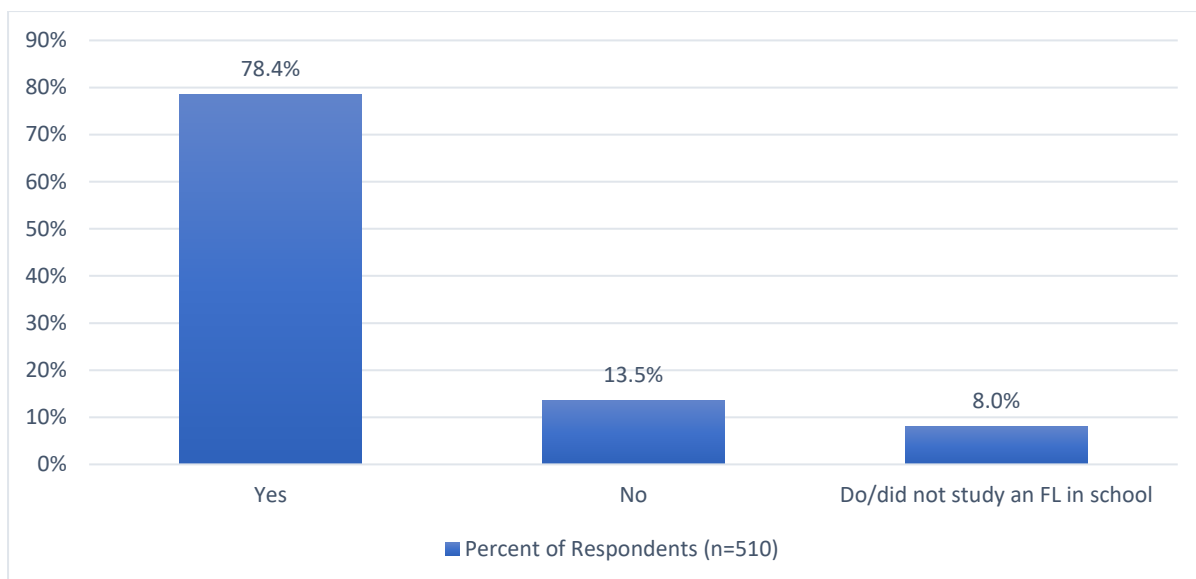
Figure 7: Enjoyment of learning a foreign language

Interestingly, and contrary to a prevailing myth, an overwhelming majority of respondents (i.e. 78.4%) declared that they generally did/do enjoy learning a foreign language (Fig. 7), with only 13.5% of respondents explicitly stating they did/do not enjoy their foreign language education at all. When looking at the main reason given for this enjoyment, more than half the respondents (54.3%) enjoyed learning how to communicate with people from other countries and one in five respondents (20.7%) felt that it opened up a new world for them (Fig.8). As we will see, this is expressed quite clearly by the interviewees in this study, most of whom identify the "opening up of new worlds" as one of the main benefits of learning as foreign language. This benefit is further emphasised by the interviewees' experiences during their Erasmus+ mobilities, which they observed in professional and cultural terms, but also more directly in their interpersonal interactions.

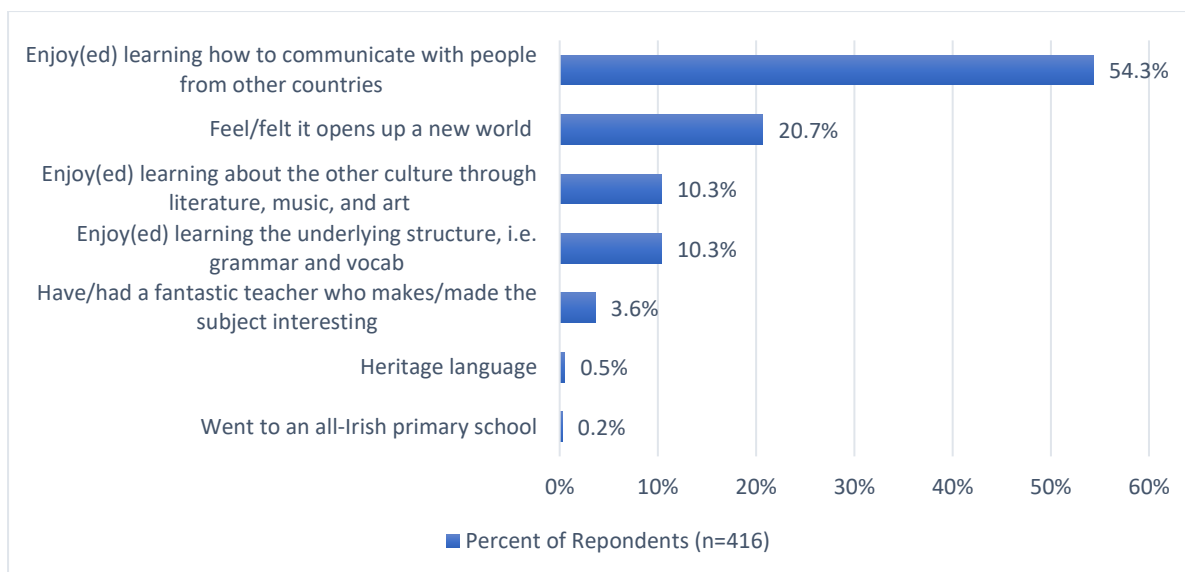*Figure 8: Main reason for enjoyment*

In contrast, only 0.2% of respondents identified their background at an all-Irish primary school as the main reason they enjoyed learning another language. This is not to say that the previous experience of an immersive language education does not affect the attitudes regarding the acquisition of a second language positively, it is just not the main reason provided by the respondents. One possible explanation might be that the respondents may be more future- and goal-oriented when reasoning their behaviour, instead of looking back. In a similar vein, the fact that the language learned was/is a heritage language does not play a significant role either, with only 0.5% of respondents identifying it as the main reason for their enjoyment.

When looking at the main reason why the respondents did/do not enjoy learning a foreign language (Fig. 9), two in five respondents (42.7%) indicated that the grammar appears too challenging for them. This is followed, albeit by a notable gap, by feelings of anxiety in speaking the language in front of peers (17.9%) and by a dislike for the teacher and the way the language is taught (16.3%). Another important reason is a feeling of frustration regarding the slow progress (13.5%).
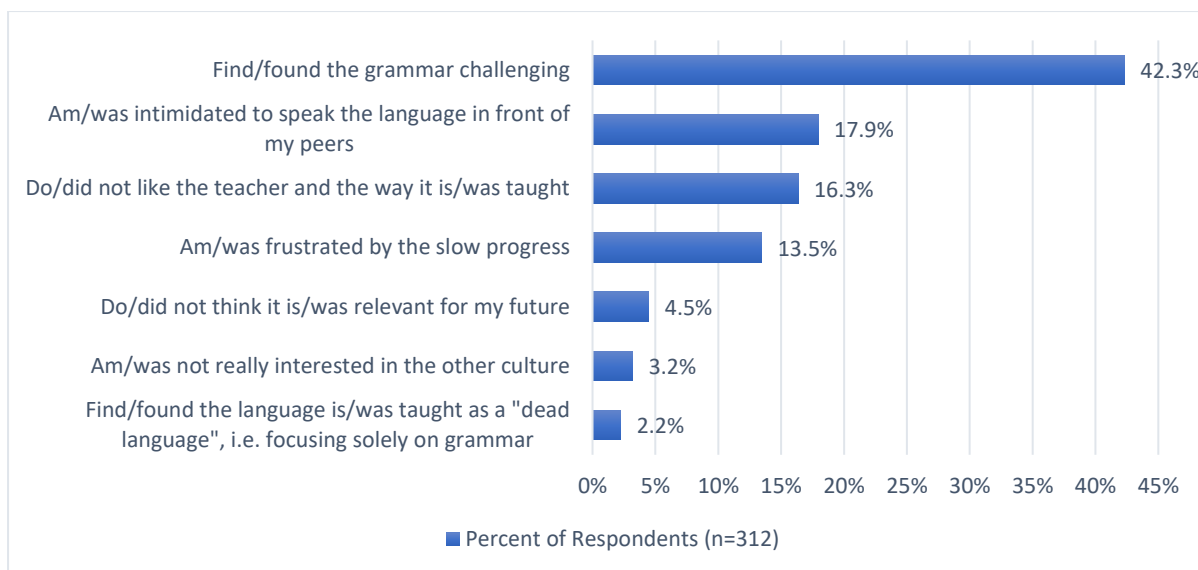
Figure 9: Main reason for non-enjoyment

Looking at the reasons provided, it is noticeable that the main reasons are affectual rather than rational and centre around words like "challenge", "intimidation", "dislike", and "frustration". Closer attention should therefore be paid to the emotional dimension of the foreign language classroom to address and alleviate these issues. While recent adjustments in the curricula and teaching methods are changing the way that languages are taught in Irish schools, with the recent changes to the Junior Cycle being perhaps the most significant institutional expression of an ongoing shift towards learning methods and assessments that are more aligned with the language learning process,[98] languages maintain their status as a "difficult" subject among many students, not least – as expressed in the survey – due to linguistic concepts and practices that are quite foreign to native English speakers. Notable examples are the gendering of inanimate objects or ensuring an agreement of the grammatical number, gender, and case between individual words – both of which are features not only of Irish, but also French, German, Spanish and many other modern (European) languages. Highlighting the links between different languages and encouraging a positive language transfer (i.e. applying and expanding more openly and systematically on one of the learning outcomes formulated in the revised Junior Cycle)[99] might ease the feeling of being overwhelmed, as linguistic concepts would seem much more familiar when contextualised. This also includes the possible phonological transfer between languages, as for example between Irish and German, or indeed

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[98] Not only does language learning feature prominently in the new Junior Cycle framework's "Statements of Learning" (Statement 2 out of 24 statements formulates the goal that students are able to communicate in an appropriate level in a second and third language), but the framework also employs a dual approach to assessment, allowing for an additional, ongoing formative assessment that supports the students' learning over the course of the three years. The introduction of a short course in Chinese Language and Culture, which is broadly aligned with level 3 in the NFQ, is also a positive development regarding the diversification of modern languages. Cf. DES (2012); DES (2015).

[99] Learning Statement 2: "[…] I know that the skills that help me to learn one language are useful in learning another." DES (2012), p. 30; DES (2015), p. 51.

between Irish-English and German.[100] Ample research has been conducted regarding the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety, which accounted for the second most common reason (17.9%) for not enjoying language learning. The negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and achievement is well-established, showing that students suffering from foreign language anxiety are less willing to participate in learning activities and perform more poorly than their peers.[101] Considering the important role that emotions play in the language learning process, the knock-on effect of foreign language anxiety can be quite significant. To this end, sensitivity training and in-service training courses for teachers of foreign languages regarding the phenomenon will be a first important step towards easing anxious students and creating a more inclusive classroom.[102] A phenomenon that also ties into foreign language anxiety is the frustration regarding a lack of progress, which was identified by 13.5% of survey respondents as the main reason why they did/do not enjoy learning a language. The causes for frustration can be manifold and include the generally slower learning process (both compared to other subjects and the current culture of instant gratification), unrealistic expectations by the students, and/or a lack of speaking practice. Fostering realistic expectations among the students by communicating clearly the nature of learning process, particularly compared to other subjects, may help to ease the frustration.

To further explore the question of enjoyment, particularly in terms of attitudinal influences from the social environment, it is worth contrasting the answers of those respondents whose parents are either non-native English/Irish speakers or possess foreign languages competences (n=137) with those whose parents have no foreign language skills (n=370). As Fig. 10 illustrates, respondents who grew up with parents that do speak a foreign language are 20.4% more likely to enjoy learning a foreign language, with the number of those not who do not enjoy it dropping to a mere 1.5%. In contrast, the number of respondents whose parents have no foreign language skills and who do not enjoy learning a language remains relatively high, at 18.1%. Additionally, respondents whose parents have no foreign language competences are more likely not to have foreign language instruction in school, with age playing no apparent role in this context.

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[100] For the latter, cf. the PhD project of Markus Böttner (NUI Maynooth).
[101] Cf., e.g. Horwitz (2001); Aida (1994); MacIntyre/Gardner (1991).
[102] Cf., e.g. Tsiplakides/Keramida (2009); von Wörde (2003); Gregersen (2003); Young (1991).
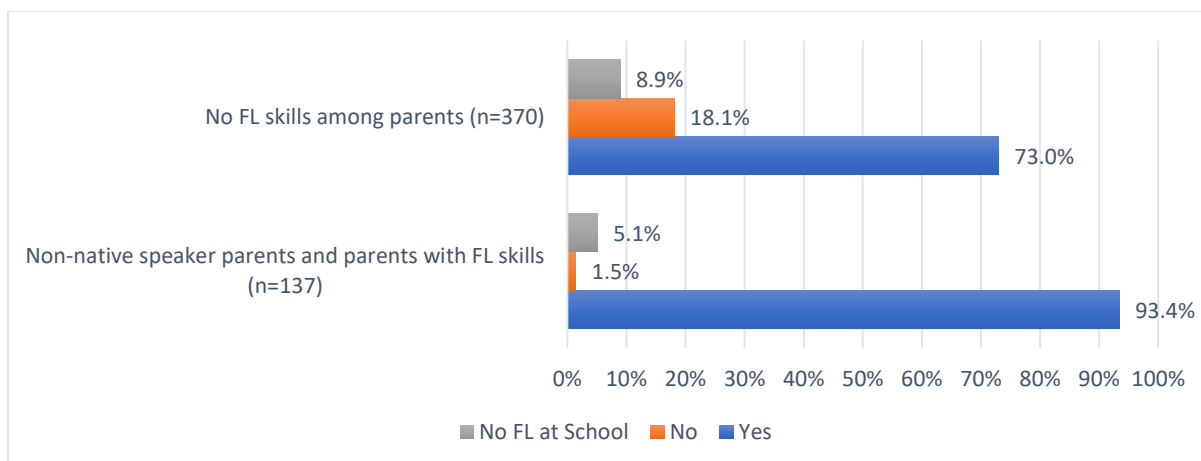
Figure 10: Impact of parental foreign language competences on learner enjoyment

Figure description: Comparison of respondents with non-native English-speaking parents/parents with foreign language skills and enjoyment (n=137) vs those without foreign language skills who enjoy(ed) learning a foreign language (n=370)

When looking at the main reason why respondents whose parents have no foreign language skills do not enjoy learning foreign languages (Fig. 11), and comparing the results to the adjusted overall numbers from Fig. 9, we can observe that the struggles with grammar are markedly less relevant to this particular group, with the number dropping from 42.3% to 33.3%. Slightly more relevant are feelings towards the teacher and the way the language is taught (19.0% vs 16.3%) and – perhaps more importantly – a disinterest in the other culture (6.3% vs 3.2%). In other words, the personal connection to the target language, be it in form of the culture itself or the teacher as the in-classroom representative of that culture, becomes increasingly important. If we consider both as a first point of contact and thereby a first point of possible struggle with the language, other reasons such as challenging grammar become of secondary importance.

Figure 11: Impact of parental foreign language competences on reasons for non-enjoyment

Figure description: Comparison of main reasons for non-enjoyment among respondents who do/did not enjoy learning a foreign language and whose parents have no language foreign language skills (n=63) vs overall numbers (n=312)

Another interesting factor to consider, regarding the social environment, is the impact of a gaelscoil education (Fig. 12). Remarkably, survey respondents who attend(ed) a gaelscoil (n=68) were/are less likely to enjoy learning a foreign language. Although still an overwhelming majority, only 73.5% of respondents with a gaelscoil background indicated an overall enjoyment of learning a foreign language. By contrast, 79.1% of their peers from English language schools (n=444) indicated an overall enjoyment. The attitudinal difference is even more pronounced when we take a closer look at those who stated that they do/did not enjoy learning a foreign language, i.e. 22.1% (gaelscoil) and 12.4% (English language school). This signifies a gap of 9.7% or one out of every 10 respondents.

Figure 12: Impact of gaelscoil background on learner enjoyment

Figure description: Comparison of respondents with a gaelscoil background and enjoyment (n=68) vs those with English language school background who enjoy(ed) learning a foreign language (n=444)

Strikingly, 8.6% of respondents with an English language school background declared that they generally enjoyed learning a foreign language, despite having had no experience of it in school. Among the corresponding group with a gaelscoil background, only 4.4% indicated the same. To provide some further context through some additional survey data, whereas 32.4% of survey respondents with an English language school background have/had no foreign language instruction in school, the number rises to 40% among those who attend(ed) a gaelscoil, with age playing no apparent role in this context. In other words, the students in this survey from English language schools were more likely to (have) study/ied a foreign language in school, and those who do/did not are also more likely to generally enjoy it than their gaelscoil counterparts. However, the sample size is small and further study would be needed to explore if these attitudes are reflective of the wider school populations.
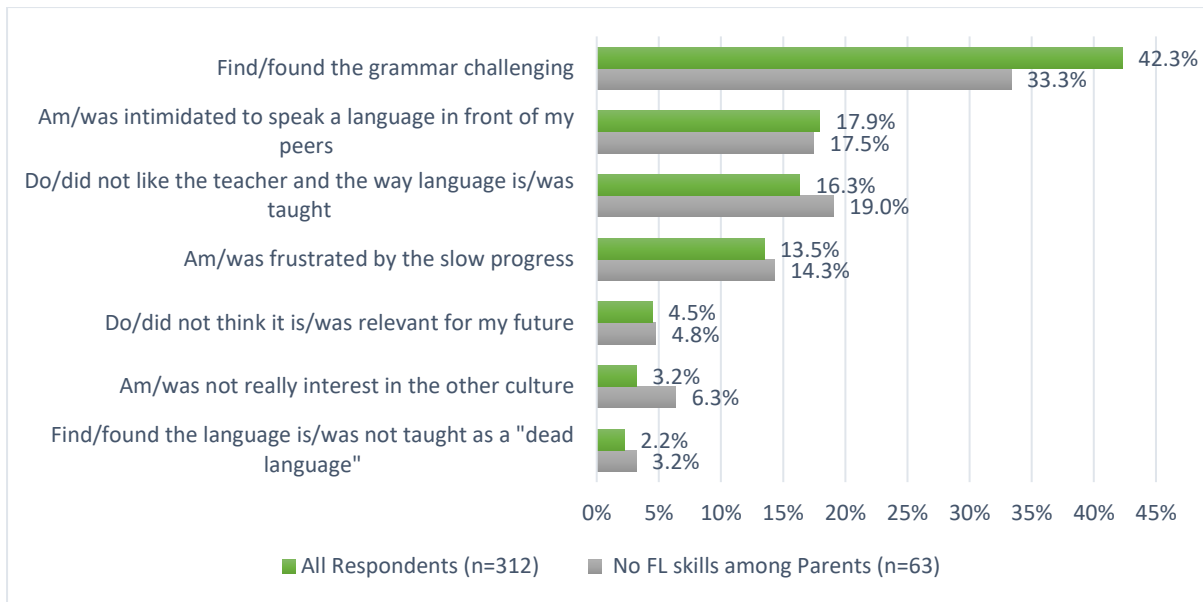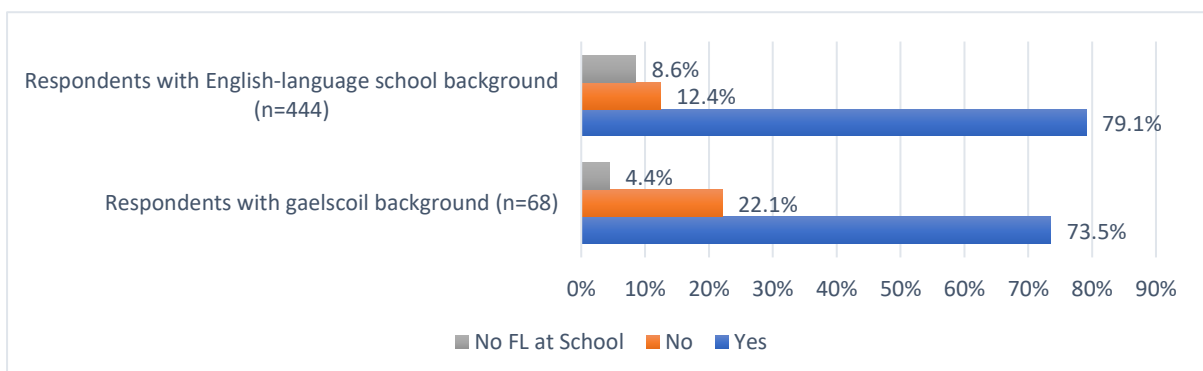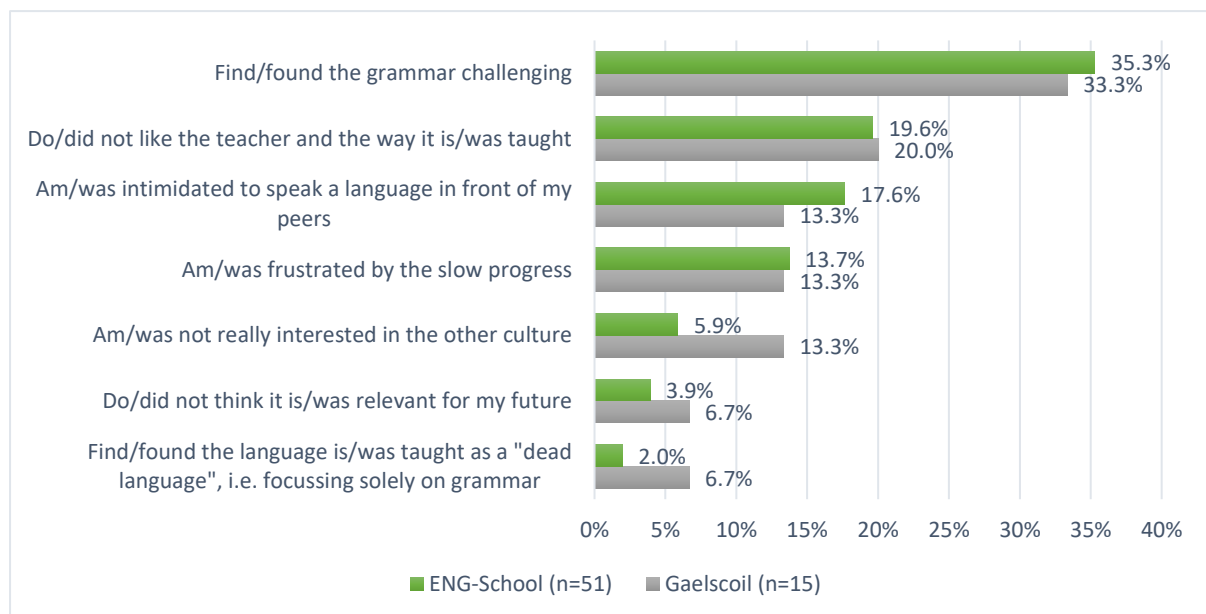

Figure 13: Impact of gaelscoil background on reasons for non-enjoyment

Figure description: Comparison of main reasons for non-enjoyment among respondents who have a gaelscoil background and do/did not enjoy learning a foreign language (n=15) and those who have an English language school background and do/did not enjoy learning a foreign language (n=51)

When it comes to the main reason for disliking language learning, there are some notable differences in the answers provided by the two subgroups (Fig. 13). On the one hand, feeling intimidated about speaking the language in front of peers seems to be a lesser issue among respondents with a gaelscoil background, suggesting a greater lack of confidence among students from English language schools. Only 13.3% of gaelscoil students (n=15) gave this as the main reason, compared to 17.6% of their peers from English language school (n=51). While the survey data do not provide further insights into the matter, it can be assumed that this is – most certainly – engendered by the respondents' experience with living and learning in a linguistic environment different from the language they speak at home. Somewhat connected is the fact that a considerably larger proportion of respondents with a gaelscoil background (i.e.

6.7% compared to 2.0% of respondents with an English language school background) named the lack of a communicative approach and the overemphasis of grammar as the main reason for their non-enjoyment.

Figure 14: Usage of foreign language skills outside the foreign language classroom

As mentioned earlier, the use of a language does not refer just to a general ability to speak it, but involves a combination of ability, opportunity, and po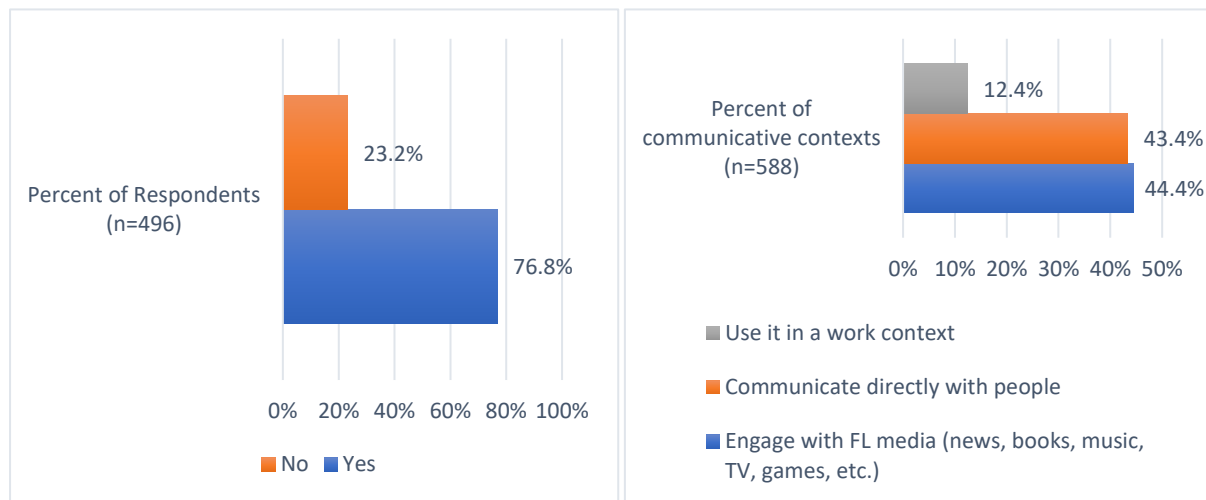sitive attitude.[103] To this end, it is a positive sign that 76.8% of survey respondents have used their foreign language competences outside the foreign language classroom, with some using it in a very particular context/way and others in multiple communicative contexts (Fig. 14). However, given the demand for foreign language speakers by employer organisations and interest groups such as IBEC or the EGFSN, it is surprising that only 12.4% of foreign language encounters take place in the workplace or in relation to work. Indeed, the majority of foreign language encounters take place in the private sphere and are almost evenly spread between face-to-face communication (43.4%) and a somewhat more passive media consumption (44.4%). The latter is certainly aided by the dramatic increase in availability with the rise of the World Wide Web since the late 1990s and the investment of major streaming services such as Netflix in non-English speaking markets in the last couple of years. Of those respondents who had not used their foreign language skills outside the classroom, a majority indicated that they would not have felt proficient enough to do so even, if they had had the chance to use them, suggesting a lack of confidence in their own skills and/or an unwillingness to allow mistakes. As we shall see, this lack of confidence was also observed by a number of the interviewed Erasmus+ participants, many of whom were at first reluctant to use their pre-existing language skills, only to then flourish within the more informal learning setting of the mobility. In decidedly professional settings, the interviewees noted that they had risen to the challenge and subsequently felt a certain degree of accomplishment in achieving their goals.

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[103] Cf. GoI (2010), p. 7; Dörnyei (1998); Moriarty (2010).

The generally positive attitude towards foreign language learning is once again expressed in the fact that 80.6% of respondents indicated that they would like to improve their existing foreign language skills and/or would like to start learning a new language (Fig. 15). This corresponds largely with the number of respondents who enjoyed learning a foreign language in school (Fig. 7).
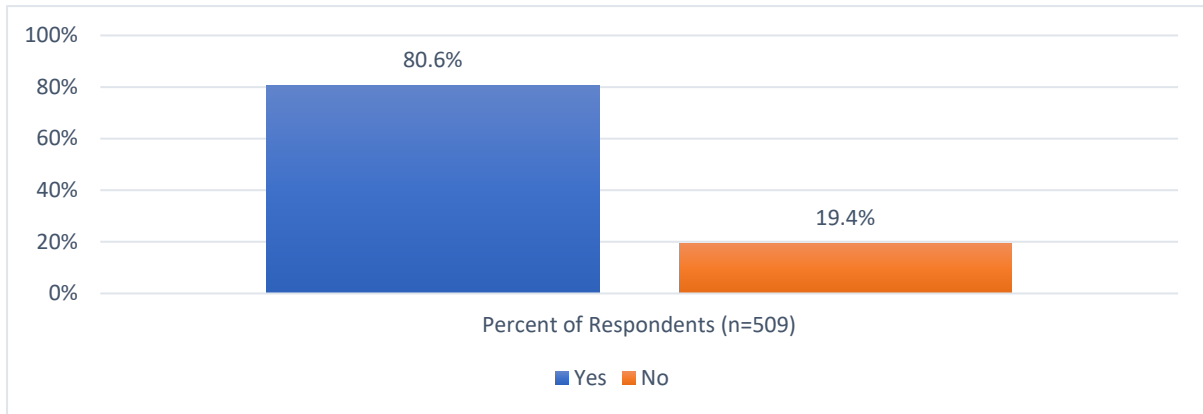
Figure 15: Interest in continuing to learn a foreign language

However, this overwhelmingly positive attitude does not necessarily translate into a desire to gain a formal qualification (Fig. 16), particularly a qualification that exceeds level 6 (>Higher Certificate) on the NFQ. Fewer than half of the respondents (49.2%) are interested in pursuing a formal and higher-level qualification in a foreign language beyond the Leaving Certificate. This mirrors the general perception that foreign language competences are more relevant in the social and private sphere than the professional sphere. If they are needed professionally, the perception is that a bachelor's degree is enough and/or they can be acquired by other means.
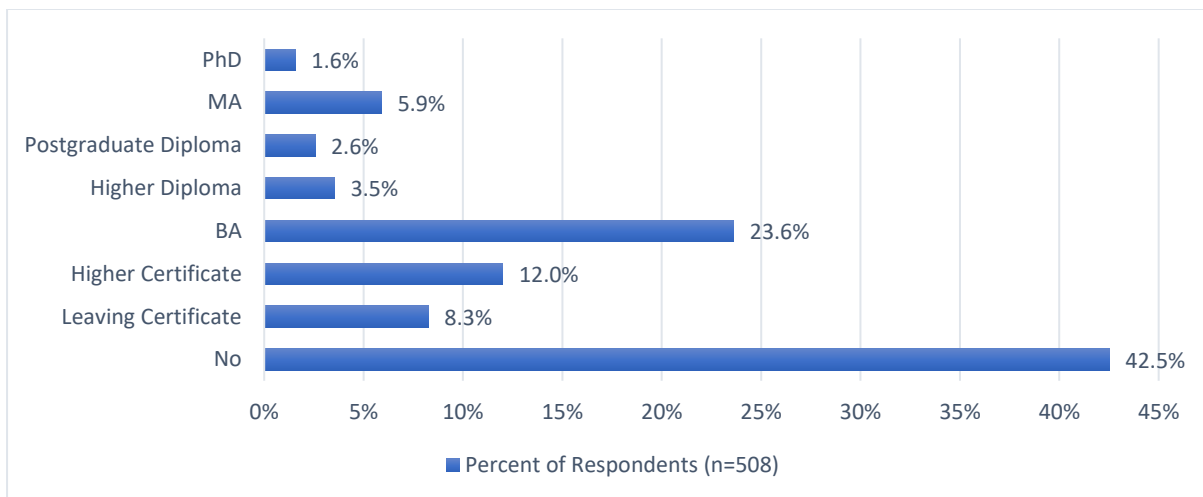
Figure 16: Interest in formal certification/academic degree

The lack of interest in formal and higher-level qualifications raises the question of general linguistic ambition and the level of proficiency that learners can realistically achieve in basic language courses. In order to reach the minimum level of B2/B2.2 on the CEFR (which is desirable in a professional context), a language learner needs to have studied between *c.* 500 and 600 hours, with added specialised courses in highly specialised fields.[104] This constitutes a considerable commitment of resources, in terms of time, money, and emotional wellbeing.

Following this first foray into the demographic and linguistic background of the survey respondents, we can now turn our attention towards the way they experienced the Erasmus+ mobility itself. Where do/did Irish Erasmus+ participants go to? How long are/were they staying in their host country, and which languages do/did they use during their mobility? To what extent do/did they improve their language competences? And, how did they feel about being in a different linguistic environment?

As we can see from Fig. 17, existing language competences and a familiarity with certain languages and cultures are largely reflected in the outward mobilities of Irish Erasmus+ participants. Specifically, countries whose language is most commonly taught at school level and in HEIs rank among the most popular Erasmus+ destinations. They constitute a combined total 58.6% of all outward mobilities conducted by the survey respondents (n=529), with Spain/Portugal accounting for 17.4% of the mobilities, France accounting for 16.1%, Germany/Austria/Switzerland accounting for 13.4%, and Italy accounting for 11.7%. The Nordics (13.4%) and Benelux (7.4%), both Northern/Western European regions with high living standards, internationally commended education systems and a high standard of English, also feature prominently among the respondents' Erasmus+ destinations.

Figure 17: Destination of outward Erasmus+ mobilities

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[104] Cf. CoE (2019).

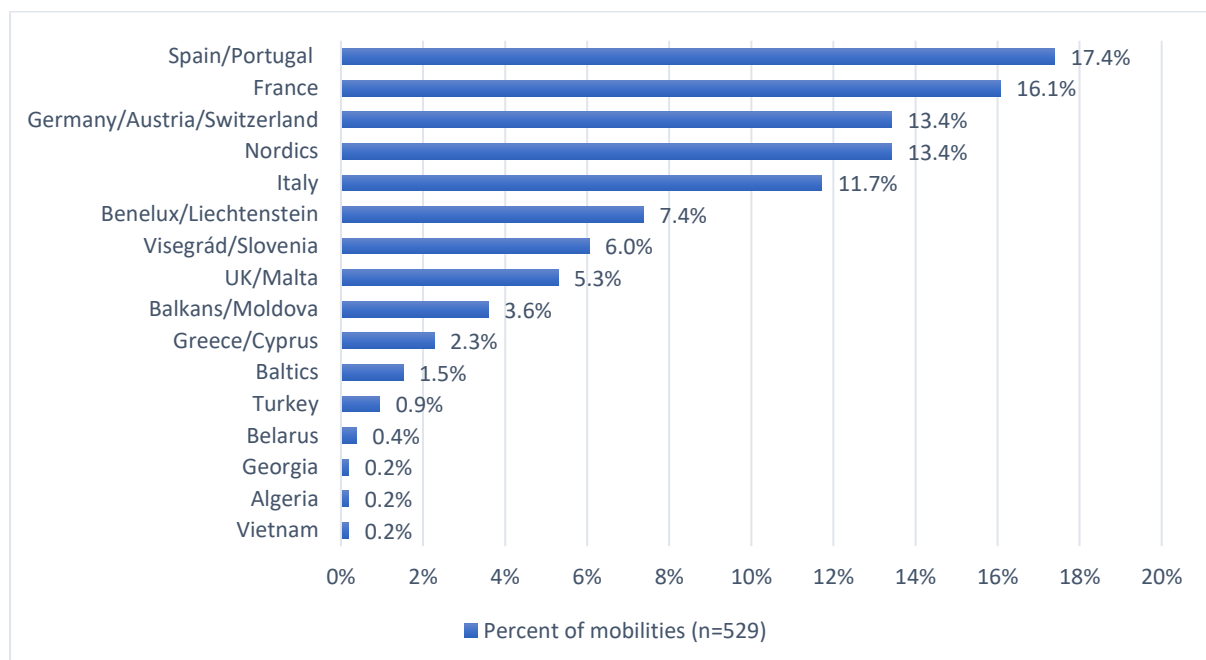On the other hand, the Visegrád Group (plus Slovenia), the Balkans (plus Moldova), and the Baltics are decidedly less popular destinations for an Erasmus+ mobility. When cross-referencing the institutional background of the respondents with their Erasmus+ host country, it becomes apparent that Eastern and Central-Eastern European countries receive proportionally more Erasmus+ participants from AE, school education, VET, and the youth sector than from HE. Only 6% of the respondents who participated in Erasmus+ via an HEI (n=265) went to an Eastern or Central European country other than Germany or Austria, compared to 16.7% from the other sectors of Erasmus+ in Ireland.[105] If we include the Nordics, the difference between HE and the other sectors becomes even more pronounced, with 15.6% of HE-respondents and 36.2% of other respondents taking up mobilities in these countries.[106] As one of the aims of *Languages Connect* is to develop greater diversity and provision of language learning opportunities within Ireland, and to utilise the Erasmus+ programme to not only increase proficiency, but to spark an interest in certain languages among beginners, it would be worthwhile paying more attention to these underrepresented regions, particularly countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Romania and Latvia, with which Ireland has strong ties via the migrant communities. Specifically, the HE sector is lagging behind and has much to gain in this area.

This brings us to the question of how the respondents (have) experience(d) foreign language environments during their mobility. Naturally, there are vast differences not only between individual education sectors, but also between individual subgroups within these sectors. The choice of host country plays a significant role in shaping the linguistic experience of Erasmus+ participants, as does the reason for going abroad. For instance, a mobility to Wales or Malta is quite different from a mobility to France or Spain, let alone Armenia or Georgia, in terms of experiencing and having to live within a foreign language environment. An HE student studying a foreign language to degree level, staying in that country for a whole academic year, experiences Erasmus+ differently from someone going abroad for week of job shadowing or a few days to further a strategic partnership.

As Fig. 18 illustrates, the majority of mobilities are either short term (less than three weeks) or long term (more than 7 months), with the main language being English (56.7%). Other languages that have been raised by the survey respondents as a main language during their mobility include Finish, Turkish, Maltese, Danish, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Slovene, Arabic, Bulgarian, Estonian, Macedonian, and Norwegian (all <1%).

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[105] Countries cross-referenced are Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, FYR Macedonia/Republic of North Macedonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Turkey.
[106] Countries cross-referenced include Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.
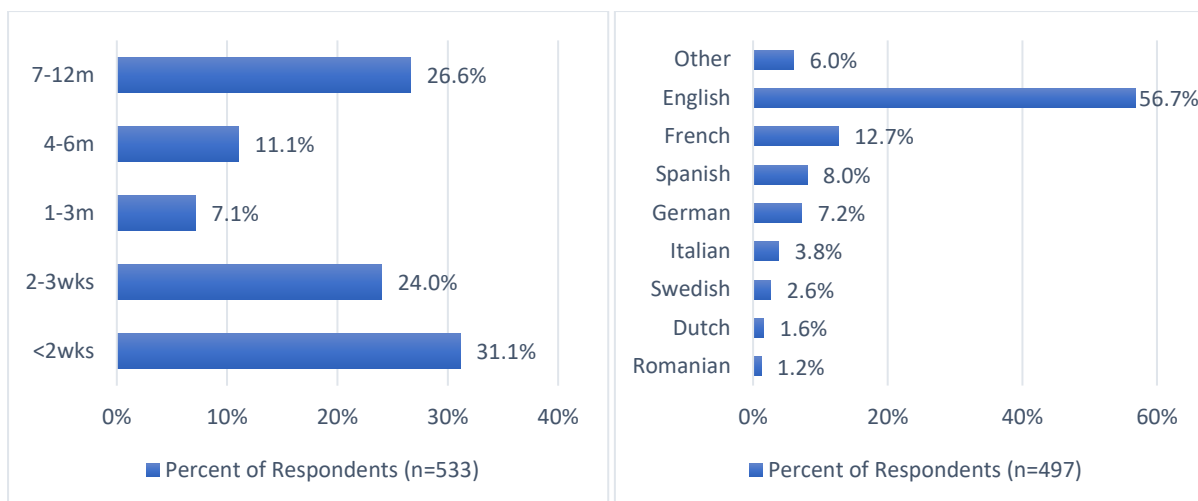
Figure 18: Duration of mobility and main language

Generally speaking, the majority of those who were somewhat familiar with the language of the host country and/or for whom the mobility was part of a degree programme in a modern language (n=259) were comfortable with staying abroad for a certain period of time (Fig. 19). Almost four out of five respondents (77.6%) were positive that they would be able to interact with the local population within and outside the workplace/university. Almost half the respondents indicated that the main reason for a certain degree of apprehensiveness was a lack of speaking practice (47.8%) followed – albeit by a large margin – by the feeling of a too limited vocabulary (28%). Some respondents also felt that their grammar was too limited (11.8%), while others were afraid that they are/were too unfamiliar with the cultural conventions and etiquette of their host country (12.4%).
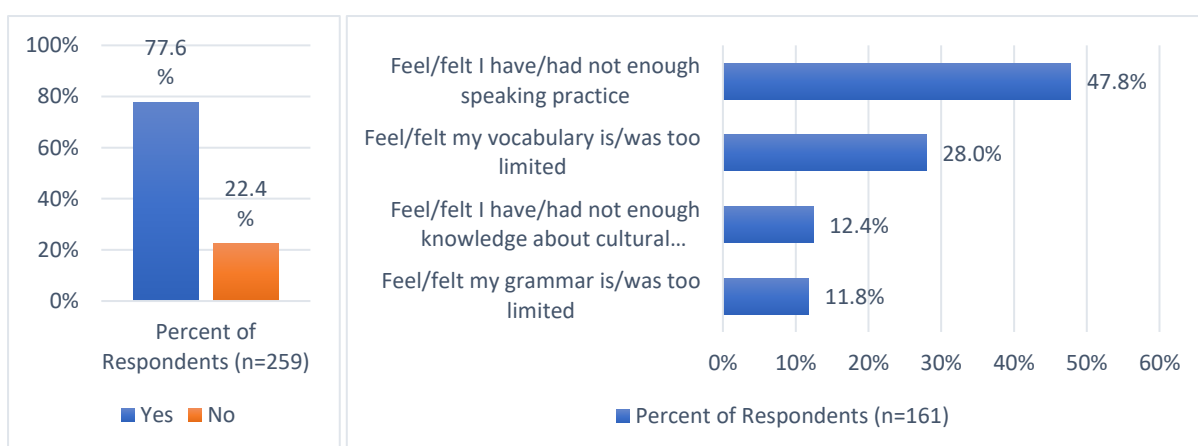
Figure 19: Feelings of preparedness and reasons for apprehensiveness

Figure description: Feeling of preparedness for mobility of those familiar with the local language (n=259) and the main reasons for apprehensiveness (n=161)

Interestingly, there is a certain disconnect, language-wise, between the respondents' experience in school and their Erasmus+ mobility (Fig. 9). After all, the most frequently quoted reason for not enjoying learning a foreign language in school was that the respondents felt that the grammar was too challenging, followed by feeling intimidated about speaking the language in front of peers. Only 2.2% of respondents felt that there was not enough focus on conversational skills in school, the lack of which is quoted as the main reason for feeling apprehensive when going on an Erasmus+ mobility (47.8%). Limitations in grammar and grammatical structures, on the other hand, do not seem to be a major concern in this context. Only 11.8% of respondents felt that their grammar was too limited, compared to 42.3% finding the grammar too challenging when studying a language in school. A possible reason for this disconnect is that the focus and expectation are fundamentally different. While in the school context, grammatical correctness largely determines the level of success in exams, conversational skills, including a good command of the vocabulary, are much more important when living in a foreign language environment, in order to interact with people in everyday life. Grammatical errors are more easily forgiven by native speakers than by formal examiners. Other reasons mentioned are worries about homesickness, the lack of language support, the amount of time passed since learning the language, and it being the first trip to the country.

This being said, 83% of respondents who were somewhat familiar with the language of the host country (n=229) felt that their mobility had changed this and would be more at ease with spending an extended period of time in a foreign language environment. Of those who did not know the language beforehand (n=131), 84.7% indicated that they felt less apprehensive about spending some time abroad after their Erasmus+ mobility; and 58.9% of respondents without previous knowledge of the local language (n=285) found that their previous experience with another, unrelated foreign language had helped them during their mobility (Fig. 20).
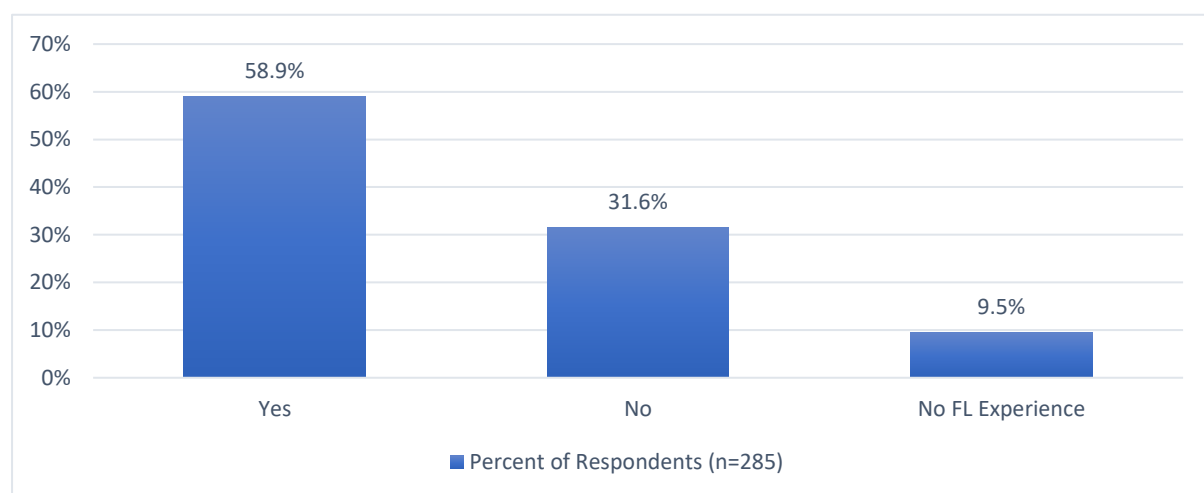

Figure 20: Usefulness of another foreign language in navigating the linguistic environment of host country

Whatever the main reason for the mobility, be it an exchange of best practice, a strategic partnership or study related, more than four out of five respondents (82%) observed an improvement in their knowledge of the local language when that was the main language used

during the mobility, including gaining a basic understanding, where it was lacking (Fig. 21). Remarkably, even when the main language of the mobility was English, a substantial number of respondents (40.8%) indicated that they improved their language competences, including English. One survey respondent (31-40 years) from the HE sector, who went to Malta for job shadowing, stated: "I was more cautious of other people whose first language was not English and adjusted my pace and pronunciation accordingly." As we will see, in the interviews, the adjustments made by Irish Erasmus+ participants do not end with speech tempo and pronunciation, but include an increased awareness of vocabulary and grammatical structures that are typical for Irish English-speakers but unfamiliar to non-native-English speakers. Confronted with non-native-English speakers, the participants became more aware of Irish particularities and shifted more towards standard English. In addition to improving the language skills in the local and main language of the mobility, 35.9% of respondents indicated that they also improved their competences in a second and/or third language. Four respondents remarked that they improved their Irish while abroad.
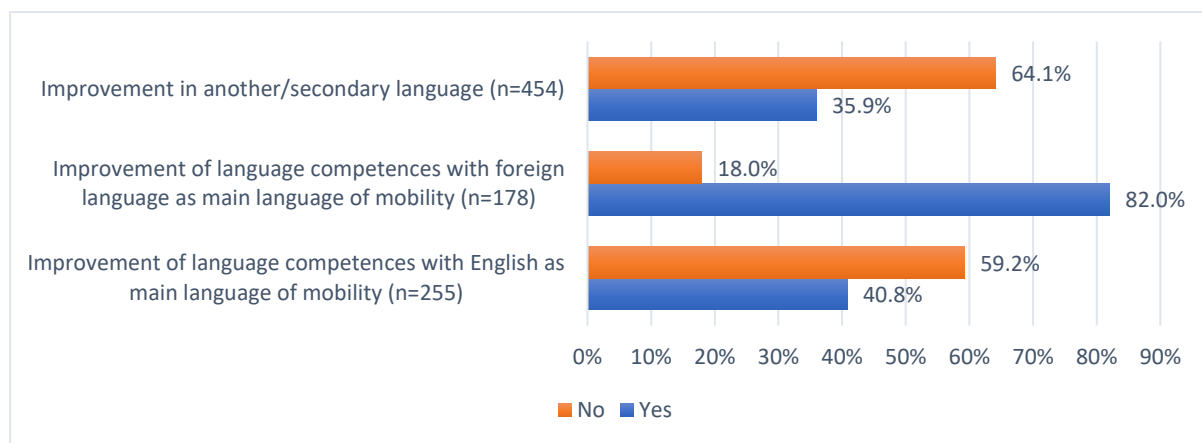
Figure 21: Improvement of language competences during Erasmus+ mobility

A self-assessment of the respondents, comparing their language competence *before* and *after* the mobility, helps to chart the extent of the improvement (Fig. 22). The respondents self-assessed their skills with the help of the Common Reference Levels (CRLs) in the CEFR. The provided self-assessment grid consisted of descriptive "can-do" statements describing the language learners' performance at six CRLs (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2, the highest level).[107] In order to generate the figure below, the CRLs of individual respondents from *before* the mobility were cross-referenced with the corresponding CRLs from *after* the mobility. For instance, of the 140 respondents who indicated that they had no language skills whatsoever before their mobility, 102 stated that they still had no languages skills; 27 stated that they achieved an A1 level during their mobility; three achieved an A2 level; four achieved a B1 level; one achieved a C1 level; and three achieved the level of C2. All in all, 395 valid responses were given. Of the 395 valid responses, 23 respondents indicated that their language competence decreased during their Erasmus+ mobility. While a deterioration of language

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[107] CoE (n.d.).

competence is generally possible, e.g. in cases where the participants choose to not fully engage with the local language community – despite having some knowledge of the language – and rely heavily on English, one must cast doubt on the validity of the self-assessment in cases where respondents indicated a certain fluency in the language *before* and a beginner's level *after* the mobility, with one respondent noting that they had dropped from a C2 level to the level of an absolute beginner, indicating that they possessed no skills whatsoever.
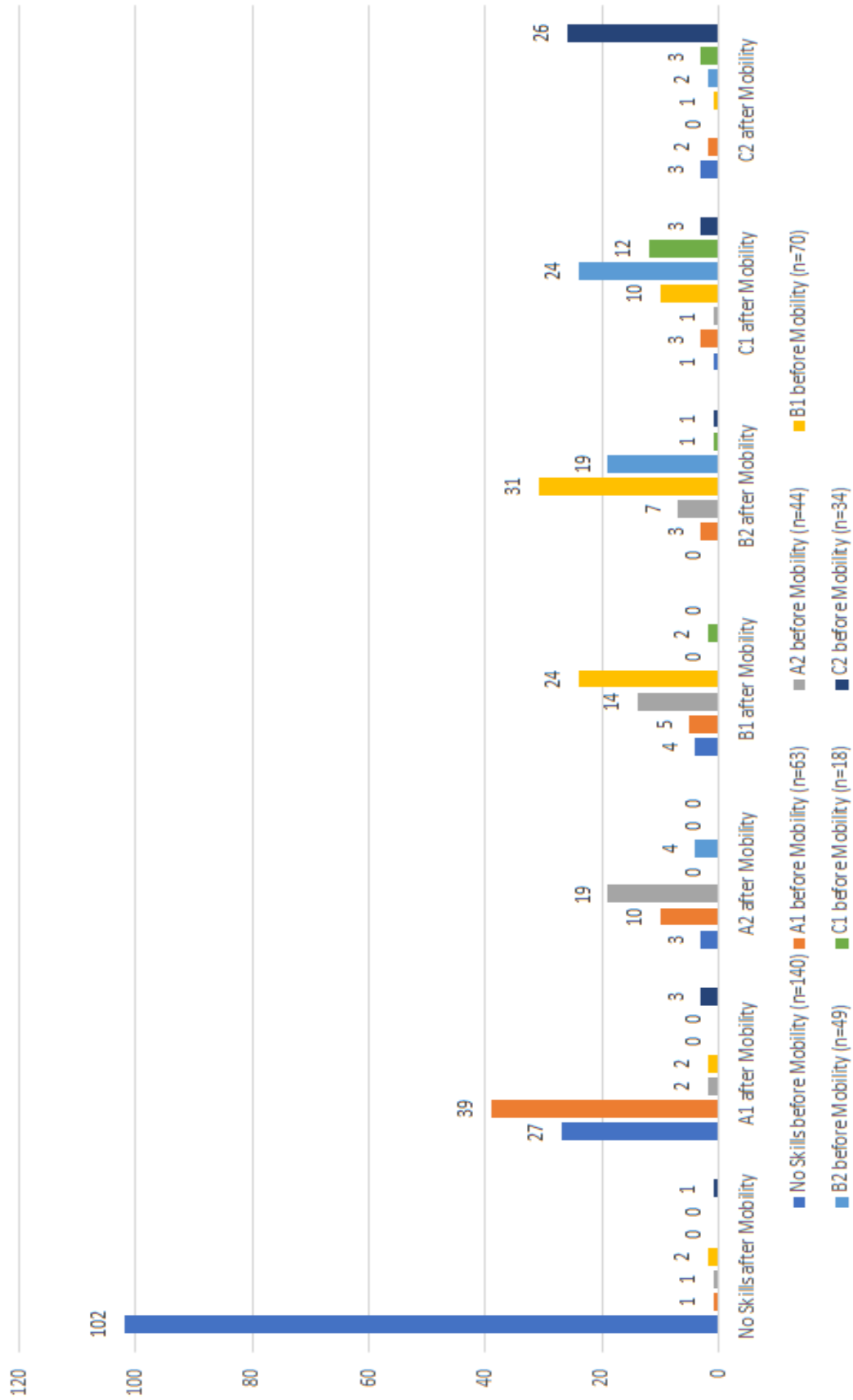
Figure 22: Self-assessment on the Common European Framework of Reference

While some respondents failed to observe any discernible improvement in their language competence, more than a third of respondents indicated that their skills had improved overall, i.e. 154 out of 418 or 36.84%. As can be expected, most of these respondents have gone from one CRL to the next CRL, e.g. from A1 to A2, from A2 to B1, etc., with some respondents recording an improvement by several CRLs. Ten respondents stated that they have gone from the level of a basic language user (absolute beginner, A1, A2) to the level of a proficient language user (C1, C2). Depending on the language, length of mobility, motivation, individual experience with language learning and other factors, such a marked improvement is certainly within the realms of possibility. However, the self-assessment of language skills is "inherently error-prone", with the respondents whose language skills have – according to the self-assessment – substantially deteriorated perhaps being the most obvious example. On the one hand, some participants might not have entirely understood the descriptors of the CRLs. On the other hand, they might not have been able to assess their skills correctly. After all, it has frequently been observed that low-level learners, elevated by their progress, tend to overestimate themselves, while high-level learners, focusing on the finer points of the target language, tend to underestimate themselves.[108] This tendency is further fuelled by the fact that the individual levels are not equal in scale and that transitioning from one to another takes increasingly more effort (cf. scale provided by the CoE, Fig. 23).
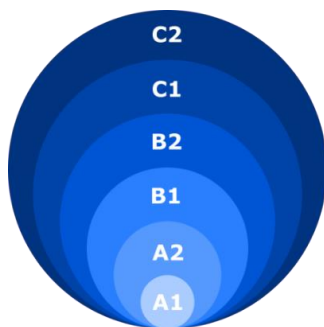
Figure 23: Scale of the Common European Framework of Reference by the Council of Europe

In other words, beginners usually progress at a much faster rate than those who are already more advanced in their language learning. However, in the present case, this is only true for the absolute numbers, according to which only three respondents indicated that they had moved from an effective operational proficiency (C1) to a proficiency (C2). The percentages behind the numbers reveal a very different picture with regard to the learners' progress, with the previously mentioned three respondents equalling 20% of those who went on their mobility already effectively operationally proficient. Percentagewise, the Erasmus+ mobility had the greatest impact on those who were on the threshold of becoming either independent or proficient language users. A total of 60% of B1 respondents progressed to B2 or higher, while 53.06% of B2 respondents progressed to C1 or higher. In comparison, only 27.14% of respondents with no language skills progressed to A1 or higher and 36.51% of A1 respondents

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[108] North/Jones (2009), p. 13.

progressed to a higher CRL. Given the high impact on the more advanced language learners, the Erasmus+ mobility plays a pivotal role in enabling them to acquire the necessary language proficiency to benefit both as individuals and as part of Irish society. After all, an upper intermediate language user (B2) is capable of interacting spontaneously with native speakers and understanding the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialisation compared to mere day-to-day issues. In other words, employers and interest groups such as IBEC or the EGFSN are thinking about these type of language users when they note a certain demand *for* and untapped potential *of* foreign language skills in the Irish job market. The linguistic and cultural immersion during an Erasmus+ mobility helps the learner to make the much more difficult transition into these proficiency levels.

The respondents' learning progress is linked to their experience of the foreign language environment and the way in which they were able to engage with the language learning process (Fig. 24). According to recent scholarship in the area, we tend to learn most effectively when we find something interesting, exciting and/or important; we are in a challenging, yet supportive environment; we feel as part of a community; we have sufficient time; we believe that we are in control of our own learning; and we are able to collaborate with other learners who are struggling with the same problems.[109] To assess the learning experience, the survey posed a number of questions relating to these issues, most of which were answered in a decisively positive way, with time and opportunity proving to be the biggest challenge for the respondents. A total of 82.8% of respondents (n=429) reiterated the importance of engaging with the local language during their mobility, with just over half of the respondents, i.e. 55.1% (n=396), stating that they had enough time and opportunity to do so. However, 65.6% of respondents (n=340) felt that they were a part of the language community and 79% (n=328) felt in control of their own language learning. A total of 61.1% (n=342) stated that they had the opportunity to collaborate with other language learners.
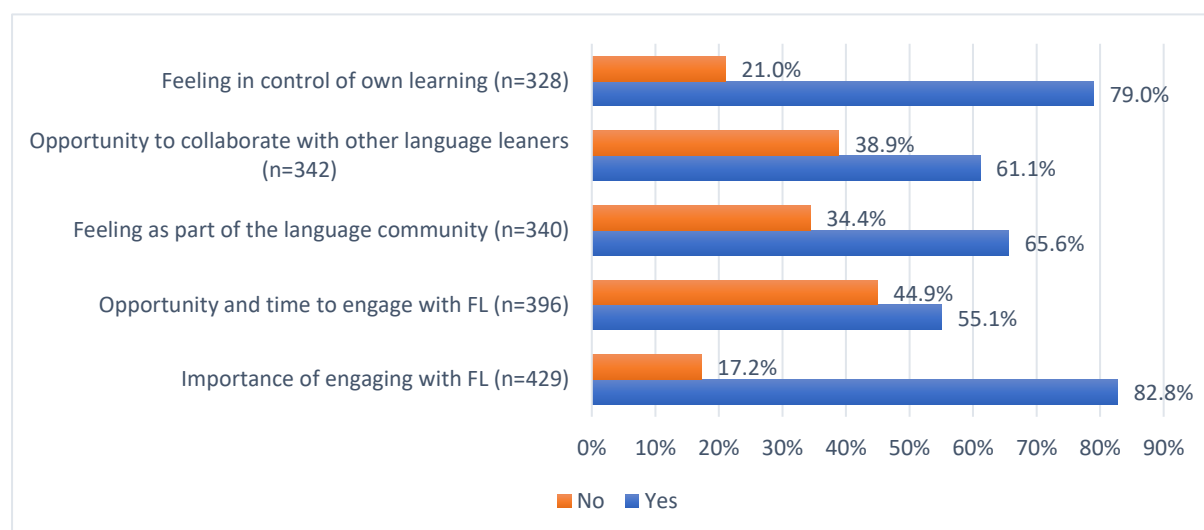
Figure 24: Experience of foreign language environment and the language learning process

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[109] Cf., e.g., Borglund/Carlsson/Colarieti Tosti/Havtun/Hjelm/Naimi-Akbar (2016).

Considering the progress observed by the respondents, together with the overall positive learning experience, it comes as a surprise that only 24% stated that they sought linguistic support before their mobility, with 76% stating that they did not seek such support (Fig. 25). The changed linguistic environment during the mobility affects these numbers only marginally, with only 28.7% of respondents expressly stating that they sought linguistic support and 71.3% indicating that they did not.
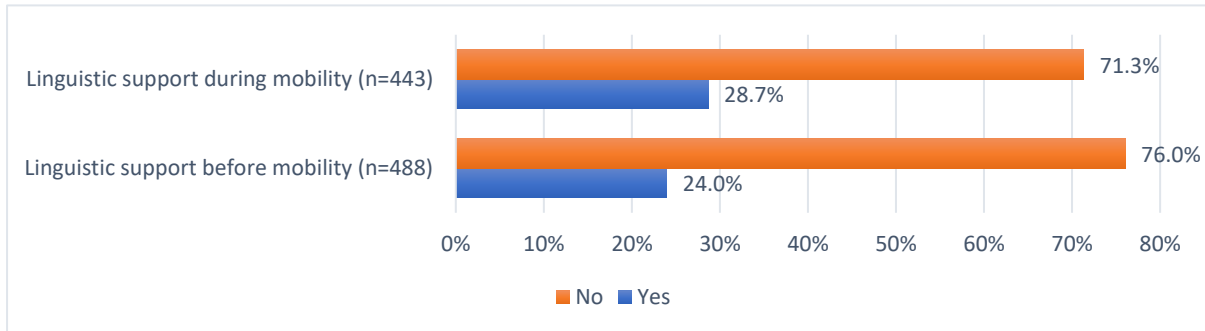
Figure 25: Linguistic support before and during mobility

Of the support available, the majority of respondents favoured the traditional face-to-face language course (Fig. 26). A total of 55.1% of respondents attended such a course before their Erasmus+ mobility (n=98) and 74.6% did so during their mobility (n=114). The second most popular support option in preparation for the mobility was mobile and web applications, i.e. 18.4%, while respondents during the mobility continued to favour face-to-face instruction in the form of intensive courses and/or pre-semester courses, in addition to the regular language courses. Strikingly, only 5.1% of respondents stated that they used the Erasmus+ OLS before the mobility, with 2.6% making use of the OLS during the mobility.
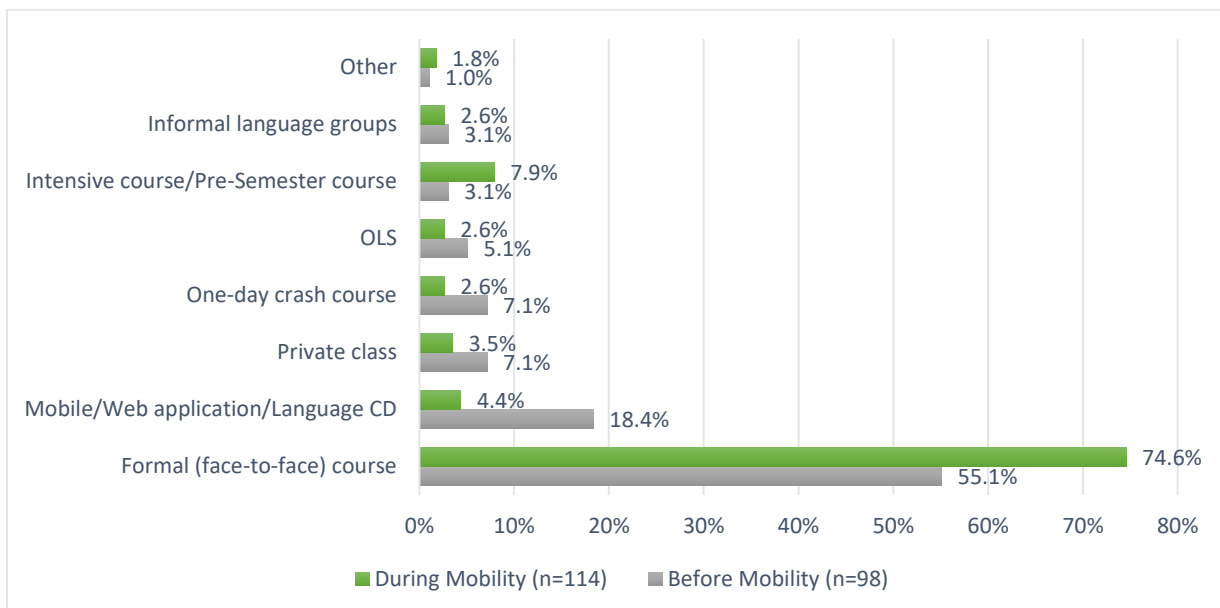
Figure 26: Type of linguistic support before and during mobility

While the overall number of respondents who sought linguistic support is low (Fig. 25), the lack of engagement with the OLS, which has replaced the provision of specialised courses in less widely used and taught languages funded under the EILC, and the general favouring of the traditional face-to-face courses, should be addressed, especially if one considers why the respondents have not sought linguistic support (Fig. 27). Of those who provided a reason why they did not do so, 39.6% stated that the institution/organisation did not offer any type of linguistic support, with an additional 24.7% indicating a lack of time. In contrast, only 11.1% said that they had no interest in learning the language and 7.6% felt there was no need to do so, as everyone was able to speak English.
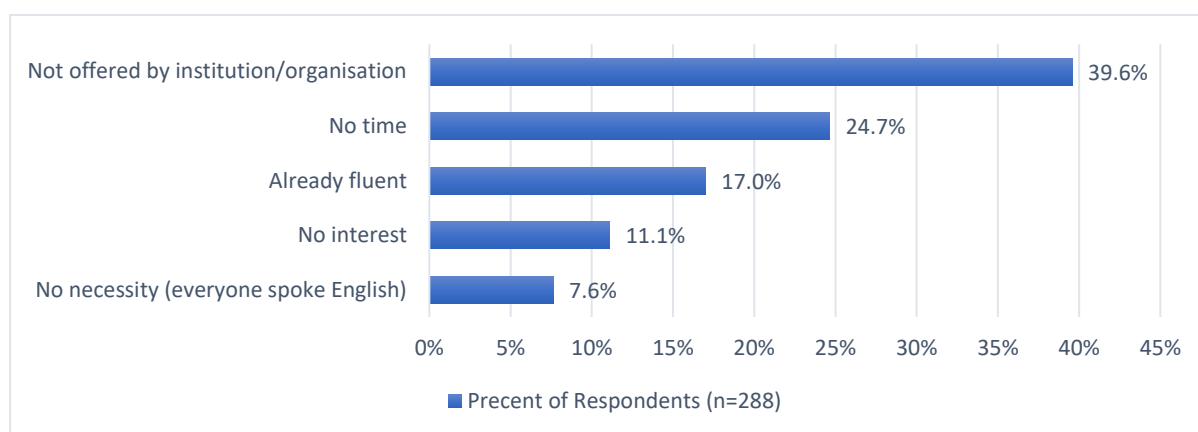
Figure 27: Reasons for not seeking linguistic support

Given the reports by interest groups such as IBEC or the EGFSN, it is quite surprising that almost one in every three respondents (i.e. 30.54%) perceived foreign language skills as professionally unbeneficial (Fig. 28). In comparison, only one in every five respondents (i.e. 19.21%) indicated that they think knowing a foreign language has no personal benefit. Despite these relatively high numbers, the majority of respondents acknowledge the personal and professional benefits related to language learning and foreign language competences, with the greatest awareness relating to the former. As we will see, the greater awareness concerning possible benefits in the personal sphere is echoed by the interviewees. To address the lack of awareness among participants with regard to possible professional benefits, a targeted campaign might be fruitful that highlights the professional benefits of foreign language competences not only in relation to potential job markets abroad, but also to the Irish job market.
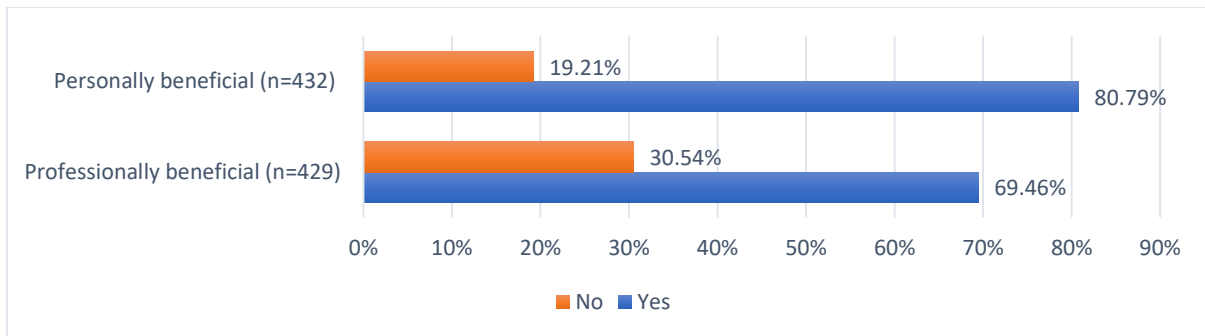
Figure 28: Awareness of professional and personal benefits of foreign language skills

Finally, various studies and indeed the Participant Reports in the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool have highlighted the positive impact of Erasmus+ in terms of future mobility. This is also reflected in the online survey (Fig. 29), with 86.7% of respondents stating that – based on their Erasmus+ mobility – it has become more likely for them to work in an international context. Only 13.3% of respondents expressed a deterring effect. When asked specifically about the prospect of working in the (former) host country, 73.3% confirmed that this has become more likely, while 26.7% indicated that it has become less so.
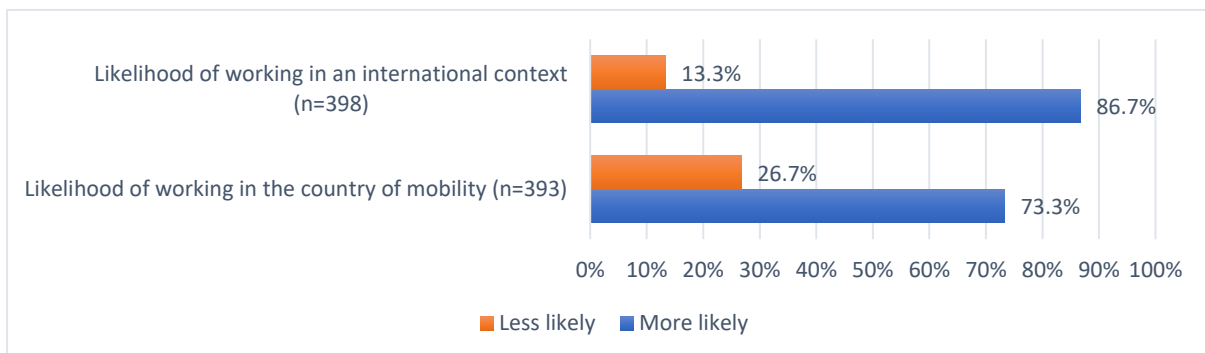
Figure 29: Likelihood of working in the country of mobility and of working in an international context

The Lived Experience of Erasmus+ Participants and Project Leaders/Administrators

Following our considerations of the demographics behind the participating cohort in the Irish context and their language competences, we can now move towards the investigation of the lived experience. As previously mentioned, the incorporation of a qualitative element into the study allows more flexibility and offers an effective way to probe, develop and refine the quantitative data of the online survey. At the core of the thematic analysis is the detailed examination of personal perceptions and experiences regarding language learning and the sense participants make of their own experience as language learners, particularly in the context of Erasmus+.[110] The emphasis on experience also allows a closer examination of underlying attitudes and language awareness. The small sample size and the format of the interviews allow for an explicitly interpretive endeavour, both in terms of the researcher and the subjects, who reflect their experience in the interview process.

Who Was Interviewed?

The two subject groups that were interviewed were Erasmus+ participants under KA1 and – to a lesser extent – KA2, as well as project leaders and administrators from selected institutions and organisations. Each education sector is represented by two institutions and/or organisations. Within each sector, one participant was interviewed in the first institution/organisation, while one participant as well as an administrator was interviewed in the second institution/organisation. However, due to the high number of mobilities in HE and the vastly different experiences between students and staff members (both in mobility length and linguistic experience), the subject group was expanded for this sector and a subgroup created. As a result, a student and a staff member were interviewed for each HEI, with one institution also providing an interview with an international officer. An additional interview was conducted with a participant who has moved on from one of the schools participating in this study to a local HEI. Finally, to provide a different angle, a non-Irish EVS volunteer (European Voluntary Service) was interviewed in relation to their experience both with Erasmus+ in general and with the Irish youth project they have been volunteering with over the past year in particular. The interviews were conducted in person or over the phone in a semi-structured way. The average duration of the interviews was approximately 40 minutes.

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[110] Cf. Braun/Clarke (2006); Braun/Clarke (2013).

Sources of Interview Data

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with the explicit permission of all participants. All interview data were anonymised and coded, according to standard interviewing procedures. Care was taken to ensure that the institutions/organisations selected represent core regional clusters and that they vary in terms of size, resources, and institutional profile.

Figure 30: Outward mobilities conducted by interviewees

All but one of the interviewees were older than 18 years, with an average age of 35.8 years – or 31.6 years of those who went on an Erasmus+ mobility. The impact of Erasmus+ on foreign language learning among children and young people is, therefore, primarily framed either through participants who have come of age since their Erasmus+ mobility took place or through project leaders and/or participating staff members in the school and youth sectors. Of the 14 participant interviewees, five were female while eight were male. One participant identified as non-binary. All but two of the interviewees went through the public education system in Ireland, with the EVS volunteer undergoing education in her home country and one Irish interviewee being home-schooled. Some interviewees with migratory backgrounds received some primary/secondary education before moving to Ireland.

The interviewees had a varying degree of experience with Erasmus+, ranging from only one mobility to up to ten mobilities within four different countries over a time period of eight years. The group of interviewees administrating Erasmus+ projects was entirely comprised of women, although two individuals who were interviewed regarding their own experiences as Erasmus+ participants do – to a certain extent – also act as project leaders. Like the participant group, this group too entailed varying degrees of experience, with some having moved from being a participant to a project leader/administrator. Two of the project leaders/administrators accompanied their respective group to Romania and Portugal.

Finally, as Table 1 illustrates, the 19 interviewees have had vastly different experiences in language learning and possess a wide range of language competences. This being said, all interviewees indicated that they were advanced language users in at least one language other than their mother tongue. In contrast with the online survey, however, the self-assessment was not based on the CRLs of the CEFR. It is also important to note that only two interviewees undertook their Erasmus+ mobility with the primary objective to improve their fluency in a specific target language, i.e. German and Russian. For the other interviewees, improving their fluency was either a corollary objective or not a (conscious) objective.

Education Sector	Participant	Gender and Age	Language Competences	Erasmus + Mobility
HE	AC	Male, 23	Polish, English, German; some Irish and Spanish	Germany, 1 academic year
	SR	Female, 22	English; some Irish and French; a few words of German, Spanish, and Lithuanian	Wales, 1 academic year
	GD	Male, 47	English, Italian; some Irish, French and Portuguese	Armenia, 1 week
	PS	Male, 23	Polish, English, Spanish; some German	Spain, ½ academic year
	GM	Male, 41	English, Irish, German, Afrikaans; some Spanish	France, Austria, Netherlands, Czech Republic, Germany, 3-4 days each + Admin
	TM	Female, 55	English, Irish, German; some French and Spanish; a few words of Italian	Admin
AE	PC	Male, 26	English, Irish; some French and German	Spain, Germany, France, 4 days each
FET/AE	PK	Female, 59	English, French	Belgium, Portugal, 3-4 days each + Admin
FET/AE	TR	Female, 46	English; some Irish and French; a few words of Spanish	Admin
School	EMM	Female, 12	English, Irish	Croatia, Portugal, 1 week each
	HE	Female, 57	English, Irish, French, German, Russian, Hebrew	Germany, 3 weeks + Admin
	ELM	Female, 51	English, Irish, German; some Spanish and Italian	Admin
VET	JB	Male, 19	English, Irish, some Spanish	Romania, 4 weeks
	SO	Male, 42	Nigerian tribal language (not identified), English; some Irish and French	Finland, 3 weeks
	MD	Female, 60	English, Irish; some French and Spanish; a few words of Swedish	ADMIN
Youth	YT	Male, 21	Russian, English, Irish, French; some Portuguese and Turkish	Georgia, 2 weeks
	SF	Non-binary, 18	English; some Japanese and Ancient Greek	Romania, 1 week
	SC	Female, 32	Italian, English	Ireland, 1 year
	RR	Female, 26	English; some Irish; a few words of French	Admin+ Slovenia (as HE student)

Table 1: Interview Key

The design and analysis of the interviews are based on existing scholarship on collecting and interpreting qualitative data in general, together with a thematic analysis suggested, in particular, by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.[111] While there are several approaches to thematic data analysis, Braun and Clarke favour a reflexive approach that allows for an organic and flexible coding process in which codes can evolve and boundaries can be redrawn throughout the coding process, with themes developing around a clustering of similar codes and shared meaning. The present study utilises key ideas of phenomenology and hermeneutics in order to conduct a detailed examination of lived experiences, which will be discussed thematically under the following subheadings:

- First Impressions.
- English as *Lingua Franca*.
- Linguistic Curiosity.
- Language Practice and Language Learning in Ireland.
- Experience of Foreign Languages in the Context of Erasmus+.
- Impact of Erasmus+ Mobility on Language Competences and Practice.
- Broader Impact of Erasmus+ Mobility.

The analysis is phenomenological in its nature, in that it focuses on participants' subjective experiences and sense-making, rather than attempting to produce an objective statement about an event and/or phenomenon. In other words, it aims to understand how the experience is meaningful in the context of the interviewees' life.

As with any other research, a vital first step was the formulation of the overall purpose of the investigation and the identification of central topics to be explored before the interview process started. Since the interviews were meant to offer a way to probe, develop and refine the general profile of Erasmus+ participants, by zooming in on the personal lived experience of a small, select group, the interview guides for both subgroups were based on the previously conducted online survey. However, in contrast with the survey, the interviews were not confined to a set of rigid predetermined prompts and closed, single-answer questions. Instead, the survey questions were used as a starting point and translated into a series of open-ended questions, which allowed the interviewees to reflect on their experience. Indeed, some of the interviewees only realised the impact of foreign languages on their experience during the interview process itself, noting beforehand that their mobility had nothing or little to do with foreign languages. In order to enable a greater spectrum of responses and insights into the experiences of the interviewees, the status difference between interviewee and interviewer was minimised through the establishment of a more conversational atmosphere and human-to-human relationship, in which the interviewee acted as an experiential expert and the interviewer as an enabler, i.e. the interviewer was open to new and unexpected topics introduced by the interviewee and did not shy away from occasionally offering their own opinion in a sensitive

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[111] Cf., e.g., Kvale (1996); Fontana/Frey (2008); Braun/Clarke (2006); Braun/Clarke (2013).

and empathetic manner, to gleam more information and to help the participant to explore their lived experience.

The researcher, in line with the hermeneutic dimension, was encouraged to work with the data in a dynamic, iterative and non-linear manner. An in-depth analysis of each participant's account was followed by a search for commonalities and patternings through the identification of codes and shared themes. To this end, the researcher read and reread the interview transcripts very closely, moving from general notes to more abstract theme titles to thematic clusters. While bearing in mind that the emphasis was on conveying the shared experiences across all education sectors, the researcher considered it paramount that the lived experiences of the individual participants and administrators should emerge from the data.

First Impressions

Considering the inherent nature of a programme that allows individuals to spend time in a foreign and/or multilingual language environment, it is not surprising that the majority of interviewees reported an improvement in terms of their own language skills or – in the case of the project leaders/administrators – the participants' language skills. Indeed, the experiences of the interviewees highlight the limitations of English as a means of communication and an increased awareness of what it means to put the onus of bridging the linguistic gap entirely on the other. Many interviewees acknowledged the benefits that some language competence afforded them in their daily interactions with non-native English speakers, with some recalling situations where it had tangible effects in their professional lives.

Echoing the online survey, the improvement of the interviewees' language competence is not limited to the local language but can also extend to second and third foreign languages, as well as English and Irish. Twenty-two-year-old media student SR, for instance, first expressed severe doubts about her ability to contribute to the study in a meaningful way, as her Erasmus+ mobility has led her to the UK rather than continental Europe. Only as the interview unfolded did SR become more and more aware of the many ways in which languages and language learning affected her daily life in Cardiff, be it through the omnipresence of Welsh or the multilingual environment of the Erasmus+ students. Not only did SR use the French she had learned in secondary school, but she also helped her international friends in their pursuit of the English language. Most notably, however, being confronted with Welsh and the way it is practised, particularly in comparison to Irish, has led her and her friend to more actively engage with Irish. Furthermore, as became more and more clear throughout the interview, she has begun to revalute the position of the Irish language within Irish culture and as part of Irish identity:

> Obviously, Wales has [its] own language. It's kind of like us, with Irish. We have Irish, but we mainly speak English. They're the same. […] There were places where people spoke Welsh, and we wanted to experience some of them because we wanted to experience the culture. All my friends, when they came here, they were speaking Welsh and we were speaking Irish. (SR, Higher Education)

However, most of the language learning and engagement with other languages takes place in informal, unregulated settings or is the by-product of choosing to complete at least parts of the mobility in a language other than English. Few of the interviewees had the opportunity to avail of a formal language course that focused primarily on the acquisition of a foreign language. The interviewees who did were either university students or a language teacher whom the Erasmus+ programme enabled to build on her existing language competences and attend a three-week, intensive course of Russian, which will subsequently be offered as an after-school programme at her home institution, to support the growing number of students with Russian heritage and to allow others to discover a new culture.

As with much of the scholarship on the Erasmus+ programme and previous iterations of the sectors' mobility programmes, most of the interviewees assessed their mobility in positive (if not exceedingly positive) terms, in relation both to language learning and their more general personal/professional development. Even in cases in which individual participants struggled with certain aspects of the experience – be they academic, intercultural, or personal – the participants prevailed, with many turning their struggle into a much-valued learning experience and opportunity to grow. For instance, PS, a 23-year-old computing student who has spent six months in Spain, initially struggled with the experience of failing an exam for the first time in his life. PS admits that he was not only overwhelmed with balancing this academic work and the lifestyle of an Erasmus+ student, particularly in the popular Erasmus+ destination that Valencia affords, but also with the language of the modules he took at the host institution. In contrast with many other Irish Erasmus+ students, especially from non-language degrees, PS opted to follow modules in both English and – if certain modules were not available in English – in Spanish. Having had only beginner's level Spanish (A2) at the start of his mobility, PS reassessed his priorities, buckled down and was rewarded twofold at the end of his sojourn:

> In May I took a break from everything, sat down and studied. I just stopped going out so much, stopped being on trips and I went to the library every day. Just studied all the time. Then the exams. I passed. [It made me feel] better, more confident. At first, I just felt my confidence was affected, so it got fixed and then I thought, if I wanted to do it, I could do it. (PS, Higher Education)

The experience not only boosted PS's overall confidence in what he was able to achieve, but also his language competence to the level of an advanced language user (B1). In fact, PS now even envisions utilising his Erasmus+ experience and his improved language competence to move more actively within the European Single Market in general, and particularly within the company infrastructure of his current employer:

> I work for a company based in Dublin now and they have an office in Spain, so hopefully the fact that I know a bit of Spanish might bring me closer to working for the same company but over there. I would like that because it's a good company and I would like to move to Spain at some point in the future. (PS, Higher Education)

In the same way that PS, as a non-language student, struggled in terms of his language competences during his Erasmus+ mobility, AC, a 23-year-old student pursuing a bachelor's degree in German Studies, found living in a different language environment at times frustrating, as he had to come to terms with his own limitations and self-expectations. On the one hand, AC struggled with the dialect(s) of his German classmates and professors in Frankfurt an der Oder, as well as the German university culture, which is more student driven and relies heavily on conversations and debates. As he explained, "You have different people talking at different paces, in different dialects about different things. It was overwhelming… even after a few months." (AC, Higher Education) On the other hand, AC also had to realise that his language education to date in Ireland has not yielded the same results as a comparative education in continental Europe. He found himself "very annoyed" that the German of his Erasmus+ peers seemed "superior" to his own, despite the fact that he was one of the stronger students in his degree programme back home. In the end, AC also overcame his personal struggles and frustrations, by immersing himself in the German language as much as possible, thereby increasing both his language competences and his confidence in his own German language skills. Indeed, AC felt rather strongly about his language competence and – just like PS – the opportunities it will now afford him: "I will not accept a job unless it is with German. Even use German to translate some gruesome, terrible stuff, I'll do it. I'd rather use my German. […] I'm thinking, [if I'm not] … too happy in Ireland anymore, I could just go back to Germany." (AC, Higher Education)

The participants of an Erasmus+ mobility project in the youth sector had a similar experience during their eight-day trip to Romania, albeit a much more emotionally charged one, due to the age difference and level of emotional maturity and confidence, as well as their complete lack of experience in different language environments. Whereas PS and AC (who both migrated to Ireland in their early teens and were familiar with navigating an unfamiliar language environment) not only spent a considerably longer period of time abroad, but also had at least basic language competences in the local language of their Erasmus+ mobility, the participating young people had only a few words of Romanian and little or no experience with the non-English speaking world. Yet, under the guidance of the youth workers, they too managed to turn their initial struggles into a valuable lesson in dealing with different expectations, language barriers, and intercultural differences. RR, who initiated the exchange and who accompanied the group observed:

> The Irish young people struggled sometimes with the language barrier […]. If they went on a holiday it was to England or there were three people who had been to Spain. Everyone else had been to English-speaking countries only. […] [Communication] was, I would say, a huge barrier for the first couple of days. They couldn't understand why the Romanian young people… we knew by body language that they were asking for clarification, but our young people just shut down. They said, "They're talking about us, we don't know what they're saying." We had to add in another session into the youth exchange to explain this is what we're asking […]. [In the end they overcame it,] it just took a bit of, "We need to give them space, this is their second language." […] [When the Romanians came to Ireland,] they knew what to expect and they knew what level of English. […] They knew, take it slowly, explain everything, especially the […] slang that we might use by accident, or teach them some too. (RR, Youth)

While the described emotional "shut down" of the Irish participants underscores the emotional severity of the experience, the young people overall grew in confidence, when faced with

unfamiliar and/or difficult situations, and learned to empathise with the struggle faced by non-native speakers when trying to communicate in another language and culture. This being said, the Irish participants were still not entirely at ease with the idea of encountering possible language barriers, particularly in interactions with strangers. RR, for example, recalled how they "would be [still] hesitant to go [to the local shopping centre] without a Romanian young person", in case "they had a question or […] the shopkeeper said the total cost of their shopping in Romanian". SF, an 18-year-old participant with little or no experience with non-native speakers prior to their Erasmus+ mobility, summarised the impact the week in Romania had in no uncertain terms, both in relation to their future career choice and their personal development:

> I want to be a [youth worker] in the future, and [I went] to get more experience. To learn a different culture, to speak about a different language, in a different society. So, I don't only have this small box. I know that I can expand it and learn about other things, not everything is Ireland and America. There [are] people in between. (SF, Youth)

English as Lingua Franca

The experience of the youth group in Romania highlights perhaps one of the most frequently mentioned learning experiences and lessons learned of the interviewed Erasmus+ participants, i.e. the limitations of English as a universal language. Despite highlighting the eagerness of many non-native speakers to practise their English, and the a feeling of awe – for example, "it feels a bit of humbling when you go to a place like [Armenia] and everybody speaks it in such an amazing way" (GD, Higher Education) or, in the words of 12-year-old primary school student EMM, "it's crazy" (EMM, School) – when faced with the quality of English abroad, several participants also came to realise the limitations of English and to question the status of English as *lingua franca*, with four interviewees across the educational sectors also pondering the possible geopolitical and linguistic shifts that Brexit might bring. The causes of these limitations are manifold and encompass geographical, geopolitical, generational, socio-economical, educational and cultural aspects, as well as highly personal and situational ones, such as feelings of tiredness and being overwhelmed on the side of the non-native English speaker, or an unwillingness to make the effort, a lack of speaking practice and/or a low confidence in one's own English competences. The following excerpts are but a few examples of the experiences the interviewees had with regard to the limitations of English, and they address these aspects in varying degrees:

> The interesting thing is that older people I spoke to [in Armenia] had more Russian than they did English, because it was part of the 15 republics. (GD, Higher Education)

> [O]ur learners who work in nursing homes in say, Northern Sweden with the elderly people, they find it sometimes a little bit difficult because they wouldn't have any English. (MD, VET)

> Where we went in Romania was a really small community and it was six hours from Bucharest. It was a really small, rural community. We had to travel to cities; definitely when we got into the cities, the people … working in the shops, the level of English increased. (RR, Youth)

> [We were speaking English throughout the meeting], until you would go and facilitate an outside visit, or you were going to see what the local projects were doing. (PC, Adult Education)

> To be fair, [we] needed [the translator] at the prison to understand the classes and stuff like that. (JB, VET)

> My best friend [from my year abroad] doesn't speak English, only German, and her native language is Bulgarian. So, we have to speak through the medium language, German. (AC, Higher Education)

> You have to speak another language as well, understand what another person who doesn't speak your same language wants to say also, because with youngsters it's not this easy because the youngsters don't all speak English. Youngsters from Italy mostly don't. (SC, Youth/EVS)

As unexpected as the last two quotes may be to many less-travelled native-speakers of English, in that despite rising education levels, not all young people can speak English or – as SC's observation already hints – feel confident enough to hold a conversation (let alone in a way that adequately reflects their personality), it is important to note that some limitations can be rather surprising. GM, a 41-year-old university lecturer who has participated numerous times in the Erasmus+ programme, for both teaching purposes and for strategic meetings, recalls his surprise about the level of English among some senior executives of the University of Graz, Austria:

> In Austria, I was surprised because as a German speaking country, and Graz being the second city, I assumed there would be a good level of English. The first time I went, I was speaking a little bit of German with the director, and the finance manager of the college, and very senior people came in to talk about potential connections, who [as] explained, by the Dean, had very basic English. […] I could see them struggling and someone had to translate, so I volunteered to speak in German. I had a full meeting in German, where I did have to ask a few times to clarify but my German was stronger than two of the people around the table's English. […] The fact that they could hear and maybe I went the extra mile by showing that I [was] very interested in this link and I [was] speaking [their] language, figuratively and actually. I [was] talking student fees in German, in Austria to help [them] understand, and I [was] answering [their] questions. It helped the director to sign off on the agreement, I think. (GM, Higher Education)

As this experience illustrates, GM's ability to switch to German set the tone of the meeting from the onset. Not only did he underscore his interest in the partnership by facilitating the communication, he ensured that his prospective partners felt comfortable and appreciated (individually and culturally), and that they were not put on the spot. YT, a 21 year-old International Relations student who went to Tbilisi, Georgia, as part of a multinational youth exchange, echoed the importance of an eye-to-eye communication that does not put the onus solely on the other person, and highlights the shared responsibility as an powerful bonding experience between the groups from Ireland, Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, and Turkey, of which only the Turkish participants spoke no Russian at all:

> It was easier to bond with people who spoke the same language as you, especially if it was more than two, like the Russian speakers. You could switch languages quite easily sometimes; if you needed to clarify something in English, you could just switch to Russian and vice versa. I guess there [are] some things, like a joke in Russian, that isn't funny in English. It's more of an opportunity to bond with someone. (YT, Youth)

However, a lack of foreign language competences and an overreliance on English not only affect personal interactions and result in missed opportunities on a personal and institutional level, but they can also have broader consequences for our knowledge society, as the following example from the FET sector illustrates:

> [W]e had to find French speaking learners to travel on the learner mobilities. […] There was nobody […] When the learners went, we sent four learners to a training programme in France. It was a big gardening, horticultural college. They're massive in France compared to Ireland. We sent learners and we sent Congolese and French-speaking African learners to get around [the language issue], which is kind of a cop-out. (PK, FET/Adult Education)

PK, who works for an ETB that is involved in, and coordinates, the learning of 20,000 learners in FET, highlights the educational disadvantages faced by Irish learners due to their inability to avail of certain opportunities afforded by the Erasmus+ programme, particularly in the AE sector, which currently only facilitates staff mobilities under KA1. Adult learners may, however, travel as part of an activity that forms part of a KA2 project. Beyond the restriction of accessibility in AE, the FET sector is also hindered by the fact that courses in vocational training colleges and other FET institutions abroad are rarely taught in a language other than the local one. Although PK considered sending the Congolese and French-speaking African learners "kind of a cop-out", she at least managed to find some learners to benefit from the partnership and bring the desired knowledge back to Ireland. Considering the lack of language competences among many learners, and the tight programme schedule that does not easily lend itself to a mobility, it comes as no surprise that the ETB has so far "use[d] Erasmus predominantly […] around supporting staff", both in AE and VET, as summarised by the board's strategic planner, TR. Painting a broader picture, she adds: "We have 20,000 learners but probably [fewer] than 20 learners in Erasmus" (TR, FET/Adult Education).

SC, a 32-year-old EVS volunteer in Galway, also drew attention to what Jennifer Jenkins has described as an acknowledgment that to many non-native speakers of English, the normativity of native speakers has become mere fiction. Highlighting the dynamic character of language, and the fact that non-native speakers may practise English differently from native speakers across linguistic boundaries (i.e. building on a common understanding of second or third languages), SC noted:

> I also see this from other participants of my training abroad, because it's much different learning or trying to understand English as mother tongue. There was a particular participant in one of my groups, and I think it's the same for the youngster going abroad from here, saying [they] didn't recognise how difficult it could be being mother tongue English in a group, even if the group language is English. The English we speak is European English, so a lot of words are not [exactly like they are if English is your] mother tongue… they have to make an effort of understanding […]. So, for them it is also a different language, somehow." (SC, Youth/EVS)

In other words, the status of English as a *lingua franca* among continental Europeans, many of whom are living in a multi- and plurilingual space, has largely turned English into a common good between speakers of different languages. Here, native speakers are just one type of language user and they do not necessarily hold greater authority. Indeed, as SC points out, to many native speakers this new "European English" may seem like a "different language" with which they need to learn to engage.

These limitations aside, the global dominance of English and its status as *lingua franca* does enable people from all walks of life to participate in a European-wide knowledge exchange, to gain insights into best and/or new practices or to train in a particular area. Just as Ireland's

bilingualism constitutes a double-edged sword when it comes to translating the EU's multi- and plurilinguistic aspiration into policy, so does the status of English as a global language, particularly in the areas of business, science and technology. One the one hand, native and non-native English speakers are at the centre of many multinational collaborations and aspirations. This knowledge gives native speakers of English often the confidence to be able to navigate unfamiliar territories with relative ease, as, illustrated, for example, in SF's feelings prior to the mobility to Romania: "I knew the young people we'd be with would speak both Romanian and English, so I wasn't too worried" (SF, Youth). Of course, the aforementioned emotional "shut down" during the mobility, due to communicative problems between the Romanians and the Irish, did disabuse them somewhat of that notion. On the other hand, the status of English as a global language puts Irish language learners at a disadvantage from the onset. While not all non-native speakers value English in the same way, and they may or may not be willing to put effort into learning English (and speaking it when faced with an English-speaker), those looking beyond the borders of their own countries are well aware of the opportunities English affords and the value of both talking to a native-speaker and going abroad with Erasmus+, limiting the opportunities to use and practise one's own language skills. GM, for instance, recalls an early warning, when he first started learning German and became a pen pal, at 12 years old, to "be careful" as "they will hijack the conversation in English" (GM, Higher Education). Since then, the situation has even more intensified, with (relatively) fluent English speakers pushing their agenda to speak English out of both self-interest and convenience.

The imbalance in terms of uptake of Erasmus+ mobilities is tangible, particularly in HE, where incoming students are looking for both subject-specific knowledge and a marked improvement of their English. GM summarises the situation poignantly, as follows: "There's more of an interest for our continental European partners to come to Ireland as an English-speaking country to study, than there are for our students to go to our partners in Europe" (GM, Higher Education). TM, who is the university's international officer overseeing the institution's many partnerships, elaborates further, highlighting the opportunities passed up by Irish students and the complex reasons underlying their decision:

> In terms of numbers, just within Europe, we have maybe between 35 and 50 students going out each year. We have about three times that who come in. That's to an extent a product of having a lot of agreements that are dormant, or we don't have the students to go to these places every year, but they always have the students to send to us. […]
>
> I think the biggest factor is that there is far more interest in learning English by those who don't speak it natively, than there [is] by English native speakers to learn any other language, and that's a global phenomenon and it's not something we can change.
>
> There's an education background to look at, and if you look at the Finnish, the Swedish – they are learning English since they were four and the Irish education system doesn't get [its students] to learn another language until they are nearly 14. That's another factor. There's the financial aspect of going abroad […] and there are the more youthful ties [where] people won't go, because they're in a relationship, or people won't go because they don't see a bigger picture, because they don't plan beyond two years from now. I would add to that, for some of my particular students, they don't have the parental influence […]. (TM, Higher Education)

TM struggles, at times, to persuade the Irish students to go abroad with Erasmus+, due to preconceptions regarding the usefulness of going to an Erasmus+ partner country instead of

somewhere in the Anglosphere; the language requirements of a mobility for one these partner countries; the lack of confidence in one's own language competence, in cases where students have some language skills; and, more generally, the financial impact[112] and time commitment associated with studying abroad. While she faces very different issues with the staff, whose short-term mobilities are mostly conducted in English (unless the person in question is proficient enough to conduct the mobility in the local language), only few staff members are able to do so, with most teaching in the language departments. Paradoxically, due to the framing of the mobilities and the staff members concerned, there are fewer opportunities for language-teaching staff members than for other members of staff:

> The thing is, if we have a link with a more traditional university in Europe, and it's with the languages department here, the reason we have that link is to exchange our students of languages. If you think about the process, the obvious place for us to have our link is with the English department in, say, the Sorbonne in France. It follows then that our French lecturer, let's say we have a native French speaker here, which we do, that person could go to France, but she's not going to teach French in France. Or the staff in the Sorbonne in Paris, from the English Department, is an excellent speaker of English, but they're not going to come here and teach English, because we already speak it. In fact, there are [fewer] opportunities for staff exchanges for language staff, than for other disciplines, simply because your area of expertise isn't important. I don't go to Germany and teach German, but that's what I was doing here. So that's a little nuance. That's an aspect of it. (TM, Higher Education)

As other countries participating in Erasmus+ illustrate, this subconscious framing of staff members of the language departments, in terms of their language teaching rather than as experts in their respective research areas, limits their value not only for their HEIs but for Irish academia in general. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to start to reframe the expertise of these staff members in the Irish HE sector, i.e. highlighting the value of their research on complex cultural and linguistic issues within the study of modern languages and cultures. This, in turn, would open up new opportunities for these members to participate in the Erasmus+ programme and actively participate in the knowledge exchange between the partner institutions. After all, although the partner institutes "were looking for an English-speaking guest lecturer" and "were very happy" to have him, they invited GM based not on his linguistic background alone, but on his expertise.

By contrast, the other education sectors do not seem to have a similar issue with the framing of their respective language teachers and instructors. The reason for this lies in the different roles of staff members of language departments in HE and the language teachers and instructors in the other sectors. There is a different expectation regarding the language competence of both: while HE staff are usually required to be proficient language users (i.e. to have native or near-native competences), teachers and instructors in other sectors are frequently well below that level and use Erasmus+ staff mobilities to improve or refresh both their language skills and their knowledge regarding the target country. Additionally, the primary duty of the latter remains with teaching the broader aspects of a language and culture to language learners, while their HE peers have the additional – and in the current framing, neglected – responsibility to provide and contribute new insights to a (at times) highly specialised (academic) discourse.

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[112] TM points out that due to the socio-economic background of many students the financial impact of a mobility does not only refer to the added costs but also to the lost income as students may supplement the family income through a part-time job.

Finally, the other sectors also allow for group exchanges, which are particularly relevant in the school context and lend themselves to enriching the language curriculum.

Linguistic Curiosity

With regard to language learning in general, and echoing the online survey's findings, the majority of the interviewees enjoy learning or engaging with another language. Contrary to the prevailing myths that "learning a language is hard" and "the Irish are simply not good at languages and do not really need them", many interviewees expressed or, in the case of project leaders and administrators, observed a general degree of excitement about the prospect of learning another language, with the languages of choice ranging from the more traditional school languages (French, German and Spanish) and increasingly popular Asian languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Korean and Japanese to smaller, more "exotic" languages and/or minority languages such as Yiddish, Romani, Maltese, Kalaallisut and, in the case of 12-year-old EMM, Croatian.

While there is certainly a general curiosity, particularly among children and young people, regarding foreign languages and other cultures, the most important reason for the initial curiosity is each individual's personal connection to them. The personal connection moves the prospect from an abstract idea to a concrete situation and a means of bonding. EMM, for instance, would like to take German in secondary school, "[b]ecause [her] mam is basically fluent in German and it would be cool to communicate with her in another language" (EMM, School). However, if she could learn any language apart from the traditional languages taught at school, she would like to learn Croatian – a choice that is heavily influenced by her first Erasmus+ mobility to the Croatian sea town of Solin and her lasting friendships with some of the local children. Similarly, PS recalls choosing Spanish over French in secondary school because he and his mother had previously bonded over a Spanish course she had been following. While they did not study Spanish together, she did "show [him] things" (PS, Higher Education).

To SF, on the other hand, this connection based more on culture. They are highly interested in the Japanese language, due to their long-lasting fascination with the country's rich pop culture in general and its *anime* and *manga* culture, in particular. "I'd love to watch [*anime*] without subtitles", SF says, highlighting the inherent experiential difference between the original and the translated version and the resulting semiotic shifts and possible lack of depth. "To be able to listen and hear it. I don't like [it] dubbed, because if it's dubbed it loses a lot of meaning, but [with] the subtitles you have to look down and read it and miss the imagery. I'd love to just watch it like I'd watch any other TV show in English" (SF, Youth). Understanding the language, SF feels, would allow them a deeper understanding of the artwork in question and the culture it relates to. It is this lasting fascination that has prompted SF to try to learn Japanese with the help of a free online application, with the hope of being able to join an evening course

eventually, as the face-to-face instruction "would really help" (SF, Youth). That pop culture and culture more broadly can indeed serve as potent way to spark linguistic curiosity among children and young people is something that has also been observed by schoolteacher HE, with regard to the student body:

> Interestingly, Korean was offered this year in Transition Year, as a module, a taster module. He [the teacher] [is] not a language teacher as such but spent a couple of years in Korea and decided to offer it as a module, and it's surprising how many young students are fascinated by Korean culture, pop culture. […] [K-pop and things like that are] definitely feeding this interest, or certainly sparking the curiosity with wanting to learn more. The module is language and culture; there's a lot of culture in it. That, I think can sometimes be very powerful in drawing students deeper into what needs to be done. […] that's one thing I would say that the longer I teach languages, the more important it is to work very hard on integrating culture and content, because they love it; then the love for the language follows. (HE, School)

As an internationally experienced EVS volunteer, SC then describes, within the context of her current youth project in Galway and the international community into which it links, that the linguistic curiosity is also born out of necessity. To that end, SC links the experience of Irish young people to her own experience when she first volunteered with the EVS programme five years ago. In the same way as her, the Irish young people going on an Erasmus+ mobility have to interact one way or another with the locals in the Czech Republic: they "have to be curious about how to say 'hand' [in order to] explain [to the Czech children that] the hands are on the head", during this particular exercise (SC, Youth/EVS). In SC's experience, the informal learning at the project allows the children and volunteers to discover each other's language together to overcome possible barriers and to achieve their set goal. This in itself constitutes an important bonding experience, as the following observation illustrates: "There are these words that you pronounce the same and they [mean] totally different things and it becomes very funny and then you start searching for funny things in another language" (SC, Youth/EVS).

As we have seen with EMM and her desire to learn Croatian, and to an extent in SC's description of experiences of the young people in the Galway youth project, an Erasmus+ mobility can have a lasting impact. This is, however, not only the case for those going on a mobility themselves, but also for those staying behind. While the broader communal impact is more apparent with regard to technical skills and best practices that Erasmus+ participants bring back to Ireland, and pass on to their colleagues, the impact is much broader and extends not only to soft skills such as interpersonal skills, responsibility, and flexibility, but also to attitudes towards other countries and language learning. Reflecting on the language preparation the school did prior to EMM's mobility to Croatia, and the way the children talk about their experience afterwards, ELM, a veteran schoolteacher and the project leader of a number Erasmus+ exchanges at EMM's school, notes that the Erasmus+ mobilities "make them want to learn. They're very much keen to go and learn languages. Not only the kids who travel though, but the kids who are here and hearing what the other kids are saying." However, it is not only the classmates whose horizons shift thanks to those who have returned from their travels. Behind every child stands a parent or guardian, and behind them are standing possible siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, family friends, and so on. As ELM recalls: "We had families who had never travelled and didn't even consider travelling anywhere." She further notes:

> Now they are realising that they're part of not just our community and our school, but part of a much wider community, they're allowing the kids to travel; they're travelling with them in some cases. [With] one of our families, the father had never ever travelled anywhere, but because the children had gone abroad, they're going every summer to visit one of the families from the school that we were with, [which] the kids got to know when they were over there. It has introduced the concept of Europe as a possibility to other people. (ELM, School)

Indeed, the introduction of the "concept of Europe", particularly in relation to one's own identity, constitutes an important learning outcome for many Erasmus+ participants and was raised several times by the interviewees.

Despite the general curiosity about other languages, several participants question their ability to follow through with it. Time constraints and the fact that language learning differs from other learning experiences, in that it takes continuous effort and dedication over a longer period of time, are identified by the interviewees as the biggest issues. Both SR and MD, a 60-year-old education professional who manages several successful Erasmus+ projects, wish there was an easier, more instantaneous way:

> If you could cast a spell, I'd love to speak fluent Chinese in the morning. I think it's interesting, there [are] so many letters in the alphabet. (SR, Higher Education)

> I wish I had a magic wand at times, but I manage. (MD, VET)

As indicated by the choice of words, the question of language learning is more hypothetical for SR than for MD, who regularly travels in a professional capacity to the Erasmus+ partner organisations and institutions in Austria, Finland, France, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. As a result, MD not only employs her French and Spanish skills on a regular basis, but has also picked up few words of Swedish to facilitate her interactions with both her Swedish counterparts and the general population.

For JB, on the other hand, a 19-year-old student at a rural CFE, language learning is a much more complex issue that involves – despite experiences to the contrary – the persisting idea of English as a universal language; the question of his (cultural) identity, personal priorities and achievability of the learning process; and a certain degree of apathy towards language learning: "I would like to learn a language, but it would probably take too long for me. I don't have so much time to be putting in so much effort into something like that when there's other stuff going on" (JB, VET). For JB, the benefits of learning another language are not tangible enough to justify the time and effort involved. This apathy is further fuelled by the fact JB – as we have seen in the section discussing English as a *lingua franca* – is one in a few who has maintained his position that "there is really no need for us to learn too [many] languages". However, he acknowledges some limitations of English and the fact that it is "kind of nice being able to speak [a bit of Spanish] and [the Spaniards] can respect it". Indeed, the only language JB enjoys learning and likes to engage with is Irish – "[t]he language of the island". He has a deeply felt personal connection to Irish, owing largely to his parents' encouragement (and the fact that he received his early childhood education through this medium), which has not necessarily extended to other modern languages.

SF then faces a different, yet related problem. In addition to work taking precedence at the moment, they are highly aware of their tendency to "jump interests" and to maintain prolonged interests if something else catches their eye: "It could be anything" (SF, Youth).

Considering the generally positive attitude towards language learning and the curiosity regarding a variety of modern languages, one might wonder why the foreign language competence of the Irish population remains low in European terms, despite the considerable investment by the Government and other public and private stakeholders. Several of the interviewees referred to the geographical isolation that comes with being an island nation, and of the social change that the Celtic Tiger years have brought, transforming Ireland's hitherto homogenous population into a pluralistic and multilingual one. However, the social dynamics, and the way both Irish society and migrant communities react to this situation, are only gradually changing. Read together, the experiences of GM, AC and HE illustrate how heritage languages, language transfer, code-switching and translanguaging have slowly but steadily found their way into Irish everyday life – although there is still progress to be made. Fundamentally though, as TM points out, policymakers, language learners and those promoting language learning must understand one thing moving forward: "[L]earning a language is not an instantaneous event. A lot what we do nowadays, we want to be instantaneous. We want instant gratification, […] that whole swipe left, swipe right thing doesn't sit well with learning a language" (TM, Higher Education).

As stated earlier, the use of a language refers not just to a general ability to speak it, but involves a combination of ability, opportunity, and positive attitude. Therefore, the question is not only whether the curiosity translates into a broader positive attitude towards languages and language learning, but also whether the learners obtain the necessary linguistic skills and opportunities to employ them to increase their confidence and willingness to engage more frequently in another language.

Thinking back to his youth and his experience with foreign language learning, 47-year-old university lecturer and executive GD observes: "When you're growing up as a child, you see them as just one more thing that's compulsory rather than something you have an affinity with. I found it was very difficult to learn the language [taught in school], without having anywhere to practise it." He further adds that even Irish as the national language did not provide him with real opportunities to engage in, since, "the Irish that was spoken on TV or on radio was just so far ahead of the Irish we were doing in school" (GD, Higher Education). In fact, despite growing up in a suburban area, with "a lot of people […] from a lot of different countries", GD struggles to recall any encouragement "to learn another language or anything like that" (GD, Higher Education). Much more proficient in Irish and French today than when he graduated from secondary school, GD attributes his improvement to the four years he spent in Italy as a teacher of English as a Foreign/Second Language. In Italy, he not only became a fluent speaker of Italian, but also acquired a solid understanding of grammatical structures in general, as well as the connection of Indo-European languages, including English:

> I also had to learn the grammar of English, because before I went, I had [such a limited] idea of how language is constructed. People in Italy were talking about subject, verb, object and I was thinking to myself, "What on earth are they talking about?" Because, I guess we didn't have a grounding when it came

to the construction of language, and how language is conceptualised. That might be a problem, as well, with regard to Irish and the learning of Irish. (GD, Higher Education)

This knowledge, combined with a more positive attitude towards language learning, enabled him to expand on his French and Irish, also allowing him better access to Portuguese, when he subsequently moved to Brazil for seven months.

GD's experiences touch on several key aspects that are emblematic of the way the interviewees in this study have framed the language practice and their language learning in Ireland, with some of them focussing on their positive experiences and others describing their experiences in decidedly negative terms. These aspects are the importance of:

- Encouragement and positive role models.
- Agency of the learner.
- Consistent provision and quality of language education.
- Speaking opportunities.

All these aspects are closely linked to the question of ability, opportunity and positive attitude and can have a severe impact in future efforts to learn another language. They are also linked to the aforementioned fact that we tend to learn most effectively when we find something interesting, exciting and/or important; we are in a challenging, yet supportive environment; we feel as part of a language community; we have sufficient time; we believe that we are in control of our own learning; and we are able to collaborate with other learners who are struggling with the same problems.

Encouragement and positive role models can originate in the home, the school and the broader community, with parents and teachers being the first and most natural point of contact to many young people. This being said, individual interviewees also referenced, at times, the impact of friends, co-workers, and social media, with SR, in particular, noting the growing impact of the internet and social media influencers, etc., noting the availability of foreign language programmes through streaming services such as Netflix and Spotify. While the impact of parents and teachers is being referenced in both positive and negative terms, the few interviewees who referenced additional sources of encouragement did so in exclusively positive terms. A good example of the positive impact the parental attitude can have with regard to a child's interest in languages is JB, whose parents enrolled him in an Irish-language pre-school, as they "wanted [him] to have good Irish". However, they did not particularly encourage any additional language learning subsequently. As a result, JB feels quite differently about foreign languages from the way he does about Irish, which constitutes an important part of his cultural identity:

> Spanish, I didn't really enjoy it. I just did it because I had to do it. Irish, I kind of liked. I like speaking Irish and stuff like that. […] [The difference is that] I care about one. The language of the island. The other one I did because other people told me I had to do it. (JB, VET)

To a certain extent, JB's strong attachment to Irish as an expression of his cultural identity echoes the findings of the online survey, in which gaelscoil students expressed slightly less enjoyment of learning foreign languages than their peers at English language schools (cf. Fig.

12), with a lack of relevance for the future marking the biggest percentile differences between both groups regarding the main reason for the non-enjoyment (cf. Fig. 13). However, since JB is the only interviewee both with a gaelscoil background and to express such a strong attachment to Irish, while disregarding other modern languages, we should be cautious about presenting rushed conclusions. JB is but one individual out of a large population and the connection to the survey findings might be purely coincidental. The fact that JB's Erasmus+ mobility brought him not to one of the geopolitical and economic powerhouses of the globalised world but to Romania may also have negatively affected his attitude towards the local language. A more in-depth study on the topic, which compares the attitudes among gaelscoil students and those attending English-medium schools, would be desirable. As language learning is a complex process, it is also important to note that a slightly less positive attitude among gaelscoil students does not necessarily translate into a lower linguistic achievement.

JB's differentiation between Irish and other modern languages aside, the interviewees note an overall lack of encouragement from their parents and the wider community, with GM and HE attributing their interest in language learning, and their respective success, to some intrinsic motivation or natural aptitude. PK, on the other hand, theorises that her parents' limited educational background as early school leavers, and their socio-economic status, played a significant role in this context, as "it didn't enter their minds, the concept of languages as an academic subject" (PK, FET/Adult Education). Other interviewees such as SR, who does not feel particularly linguistically inclined, and lacks a strong intrinsic motivation, struggled with learning French in school, especially since she did not feel particularly encouraged by her parents or teachers, so that she "just kind of gave up" (SR, Higher Education). This sentiment is echoed in JB's overall apathy towards Spanish.

Interestingly, even among the interviewees with migratory backgrounds, modern languages did not necessarily feature as an academic subject. While AC's parents, who are early school leavers like PK's parents, encouraged their son to learn languages beyond the necessary English, they did not see the benefits of an Erasmus+ mobility as part of his undergraduate degree in German. To their mind, "you just learn a language by learning it, or you just move to Germany after college" (AC, Higher Education). To them, language learning is primarily about (economic) survival. If you fail to learn it by studying the grammar or vocabulary (which is underscored by them as "forc[ing] [AC] to stay at home and read the dictionary"), you will automatically learn it when you need it, i.e. once you live in the country and have to function in it. This framing of languages in participatory and professional terms is also prevalent in AC's conceptualisation of languages and their usefulness. Although being interested in minority languages such as Yiddish, Romani and Kalaallisut for their cultural value, AC clearly prioritises (from a European point of view) the traditional world languages English, German, Spanish and French, of which one should "know at least two […] to live comfortably". Particularly in AC's case, language learning seems more transactional than sentimental, with professional opportunities and Brexit being ever-present in his mind. With reference to French

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, AC attributes a larger "linguistic capital"[113] to English, German, Spanish and French than to other languages, especially when it comes to the languages, he is interested in.

Forty-one-year-old GM, on the other hand, whose father was born in India, and who "would have spoken multiple languages" (i.e. Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and English), characterises his childhood home as exclusively English speaking, with neither his Indian father nor his Irish mother actively promoting pluri- and multilingualism, or encouraging him with regard to the language education provided through the school. Finding great pleasure in learning first Irish and then German, GM even recalls a growing conflict with his parents that he had not been brought up bilingually, be it in Irish or indeed in one of the native languages of his father's home country, to which he had no access without his father's support. Looking back, GM concedes that he "was angry as a teenager" and that he "felt a bit hard done by" – even though neither of his parents spoke Irish and his father was at the time one of the few people "of colour" in a homogenously white, Catholic community, so that the family's priority at the time was presumably more on integration than on preserving the linguistic heritage of GM's immigrant father (GM, Higher Education).

Given the dramatic societal change Ireland has undergone in the past three decades, it comes as no surprise that GM's experience differs significantly from the experiences of the other, younger interviewees with a migratory background, not least AC, who frames his language competences so strongly in terms of survival and a "linguistic capital". Not only have they all migrated themselves, but they also arrived in the increasingly pluralistic society of the Celtic Tiger and the years thereafter.[114] Code-switching and translanguaging have become a regular occurrence among those of migratory background in Ireland, depending on the social space they occupy at any given moment. As PS attests: "[Polish] is spoken at home. I have lots of Polish friends, so we speak Polish a lot of the time. [But] because I [am] in a mixed environment, I throw in the English" (PS, Higher Education). However, the code-switching is not the only reason why the language practice of those with a migratory background may differ from the language in the country of descent. YT describes in this context a certain outdatedness of his and his community's Russian that often originates from the early 2000s and is only occasionally updated through opportunities such as the Erasmus+ mobility (YT, Youth). This development is also reflected in GM's language practice. Code-switching and translanguaging have become part and parcel of GM's adult life, both between entirely different languages and different English accents and registers, and both in professional and private settings.

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[113] Bourdieu (1991) In 2017, Kai L. Chan conceptualised a so-called Power Language Index (PLI), which compares the efficiency of more than 100 languages over five domains, i.e. the ability to travel widely; learn a livelihood; communicate with others; acquire knowledge and consume media; and engage in diplomacy. Cf. Chan (2017).

[114] In their 2017 report *Language and Migration in Ireland* for the Immigrant Council of Ireland, Anne O'Connor and Andrea Ciribuco explore the language experiences of migrants in more depth through a mixed methodology approach that combines the data derived from an online survey (n=158) and two focus groups (9 and 10 participants). Cf. O'Connor/Ciribuco (2017).

The code-switching and translanguaging of migrants are, however, indicative of a larger pattern in the context of the question of "what people actually do with languages"[115] in their everyday life. Compared to the other interviewees, those with a migratory background tend to display greater linguistic flexibility and confidence, as well as a certain openness to learn new languages, including Irish. They tend to perceive themselves as part of a continuously evolving language community and exert great control over the way they in which engage with languages. PS, for instance, recalls himself learning Russian when he first arrived in Ireland, as a large part of the local migrant community consisted of Russian-speaking Eastern Europeans, while YT picked up "a good bit of Portuguese" to facilitate communication with his Brazilian co-workers in his part-time job (YT, Youth). Native Polish speaker AC also mentions that he facilitates the communication with his co-workers by "try[ing to] use Russian" (AC, Higher Education). It is important to note that none of them received any formal education in these languages. Instead they confidently employ the little they have, often transferred from a related language such as Polish or French, to engage with their peers. PS also notes that he read different editions of a school journal, one in English/Polish and one in Russian, in order to make sense of the latter. However, if a language proves genuinely intriguing and exceeds its situational usefulness, YT, in particular, is – with the financial support of his mother – more than willing to attend a formal class. For instance, YT is currently attending a Turkish course after becoming friendly with the Turkish delegation of his Erasmus+ youth exchange, and finding the language not only interesting but also achievable to learn. Indeed, a sense of achievability could also be added to the key aspects, albeit a less explicitly stated one, that are emblematic of the way in which the interviewees have framed their language practice and learning in Ireland. Whereas YT finds Mandarin Chinese nearly impossible to master to, he notices similarities to his existing language repertoire and feels quite confident in being able to achieve some proficiency in Turkish. YT's reflections also exemplify why it can be quite harmful to (sub)consciously frame languages like German or Russian as "hard" or "particularly difficult". Such a framing can act as a deterrent to those who would otherwise have been open *to* and interested *in* them.

While the interviewees with migratory background are often self-motived in language learning and require less regulation, they also largely excel in formal language learning settings. For instance, all but PS consider themselves proficient (enough) in Irish, with GM and YT stating that they are fluent in it. Indeed, 42-year-old SO, who moved from Nigeria to Ireland in 2003 and sat his Leaving Certificate in Irish and French as an adult learner, proudly recalls that a local newspaper reported on his success with regard to the Irish language. In fact, it is noteworthy that the interviewees with a migratory background are much more positive about learning Irish than those of Irish descent, who are much more on the fence. Even those who have a close relationship with the language due to its linguistic, cultural and/or political layers describe it in ambiguous terms, alluding to the legacy of a succession of bodged language policies and poor teaching practices.

And again, all but PS consider themselves more or less fluent in at least one language other than their mother tongue, English or Irish – even though some interviewees confess that they

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[115] Coffey/Wingate (2018), p. 1.

have become less fluent since leaving secondary school. However, although PS does not consider himself fluent in Spanish, he did successfully take most of his university modules during his Erasmus+ mobility in Spanish, indicating that his language skills exceed that of a basic language user. The relative success of the New Irish, with regard to languages, is by no means confined to singular occurrences, but is part of a wider reality. TR observes this with regard to the thousands of learners the ETB oversees:

> We can't keep up with the demand for language. They're incredibly motivated. […] We have had experiences of New Irish people learning Irish, so the New Irish learning the Irish language, and they have none of the hang-ups about the Irish that Irish people would have. So, they actually excel in learning Gaeilge, which is really interesting. (TR, FET/Adult Education)

Arguably, the "hang-ups" TR describes with regard to Irish learners learning Irish also extend to other modern languages, with the experience of learning Irish often setting the tone for future experiences.

As this foray into the general language practice of the interviewees with a migratory background illustrates, this particular group claims a certain degree of agency in their language learning, supplementing the language education provided through additional languages that are either situationally useful or quite simply intriguing to them. In either case, the personal connection is once again key, playing into the notion that we tend to learn most effectively when we find something interesting, exciting and/or important, and are in control of our own learning. The fact that they often picked up specific languages out of situational necessity places them directly in a language community of the target language, not only giving them ample opportunity to use the language, but also allowing for frequent code-switching and translanguaging.

The Irish interviewees without a migratory background, on the other hand, practise languages quite differently, with their primary experience being framed through formal language education in school and – in the case of HE, PK and TM – third-level education. Only a few of these interviewees use their language skills on a regular base. Within this group, only GD and HE acquired proficiency in languages other than those being taught in school, with GD's experience being framed by his own migrant experience in Italy and HE's experience framed by a deep-seated passion for languages in general, which resulted in her acquiring Russian and Hebrew as additional languages to supplement her language competence in Irish, French and German, all of which she studied in university until the programme made her drop one of them in the second year. MD, SR and SF, who indicated that they picked up some words and/or phrases in languages other than those taught in school, did so due to family connections or professional circumstances or – in SF's case – due to a long-lasting fascination with Japan's pop culture.

Overall, it must be noted that the language learning of the interviewees whose experience is primarily framed through the language education in school often lacks agency and sufficient time, as well as the opportunity to practise it outside the classroom. As language learners, they do not perceive themselves as part of a wider language community. SF, who was home-schooled, lacks any form of formal language education and would rate their language competence in Irish "at like minus 1 percent" (SF, Youth). To them, other languages are a

somewhat abstract idea, as they know very few people who would be bilingual or non-native English speakers – with the Gaeltacht and the Irish-Language Network areas being equally foreign entities. For instance, SF vividly recalls having to ask their father about the language people spoke during a family holiday in a Gaeltacht area, when they were younger: "Because growing up I never heard it and then I remember asking my dad what language they were speaking and he said Irish and I was so shocked. It was the first time I ever heard anyone speaking Irish, conversation-wise" (SF, Youth).

However, the interviewees who attended school and were the recipients of a formal language education, indicate that the success of learning a language is highly dependent on the quality and enthusiasm of the teacher and the language teaching provided, with the student's confidence in the language competence and intercultural knowledge of the teacher also playing an important role. The following excerpts are but five examples that highlight the importance of the teacher:

> I did Spanish in secondary school for five years and I really enjoyed it. It was one of my favourite subjects and I also visited Spain before a few times. I liked the culture and I wanted to see more and learn more. (PS, Higher Education)

> [I did not enjoy learning languages in school, because] the quality of the teaching was poor. And in terms of Irish, I didn't really enjoy it up until [the] Leaving Cert[ificate], when we had the most incredible teacher […]. She was from the Gaeltacht herself and she … [brought] Peig [Sayers] to life in a most incredible way. I think it's an incredible piece of literature and document of time, so I have the opposite experience to other people around that. (TR, FET/Adult Education)

> We were blessed though. We had a very good French teacher towards the end, and she was a French woman. I think that helped, that she was enthusiastic. In first year, you do a trip to Paris and then in Transition Year or 5th year you can do a French exchange and she arranges it with her hometown, and her home school. (SR, Higher Education)

> A lot of students complained about our teachers, not just to each other but also to the school because some teachers didn't come into school for long periods of time because of personal reasons. So, students started lacking in their French. So, it's really important to have the teacher emphasise the learning of the language because some of them would encourage learning the language, like reading in French outside of school hours. Others would encourage just to learn exactly what was on the piece of paper, so that's why I don't remember anyone saying, "My next class is French, I can't wait! (YT, Youth)

> I tried to do Japanese for [the] Leaving Cert[ificate], but because of the teacher I just didn't do it. Sometimes a teacher can throw you off. (AC, Higher Education)

It is notable that both TR and SR state explicitly that their teachers were native speakers of Irish and French, signalling not only their overall confidence in their teachers' language competence, but also recalling how they brought the language to life – with the memoirs of Peig Sayers being a particularly difficult and often detested topic among past generations of Irish learners. ELM, too, recalls fondly the positive impact a French Comenius Assistant had on the primary-school students over the course of a year. As a result of being exposed to French, and listening to the assistant's stories from home, the students were more than excited about the prospect of learning another language once they enter secondary school – with many favouring French, due to their personal connection to the teacher. However, there is another reason why the status of these teachers as native speakers is emphasised. For TR, SR and ELM, these teachers form not only an important link of the language community, they embody it.

TR specifically differentiates her teacher from other language teachers in her school who had, in her view, a poor teaching practice. YT also highlights this point and then further underscores it, when he explains that he "stopped studying French […] [as he] felt like [they] were just forced to regurgitate a lot of information that was given to [them] nine months prior [to an exam] and [they] had to learn it off" (YT, Youth). Considering that YT is quite adept at language learning for communicative purposes and identifies quite strongly as part of a language community, it comes as no surprise that he sees little point in learning a language just to tick a box. This is something he feels was fundamentally different in his Irish class: "I felt like in Irish it was an exam to see how well you could speak the language, whereas in French it was how well you could recite the language." According to YT, this was particularly the case regarding the Leaving Certificate examination, which he and his friends felt was structured in a way that favoured "pre-learned information to be put on paper", with the oral exam being "completely predictable." Indeed, GD points out that, when he was growing, languages often felt like "just one more thing that's compulsory, rather than something you have an affinity with" up, since there is nowhere "to practise it" (GD, Higher Education). Highlighting the importance of a goal beyond passing a school exam, by becoming an independent language user, YT adds: "I thought it would have been great if the school encouraged us to think four ourselves in the language. I always felt […] comfortable with a language when I start[ed] thinking in it" (YT, Youth). YT's experience is echoed by the young people in RR's youth project, who describe their foreign language learning exclusively as a "learning of phrases", whenever the group discusses their competencies in relation to the European recognition tool, Youthpass. In a conversation around the level of languages in Irish secondary schools, and the possibility of studying a language in college, the Irish participants signalled very little interest to do so to their Romanian peers – much to the surprise of the latter. RR sums up the general feeling of the Irish participants as follows: "They don't really have confidence in the second language that they're already learning in school" (RR, Youth).

This lack of confidence is a recurring thread in the interviews and relates to both an individual's own language competence, after dedicating so much time to learning a language, as well as their confidence in the teachers and the system as such. At one point during the interview, AC even questions the general ability of the state examiners to stay objective after reading "the exact same essay" 30 times (AC, Higher Education). Indeed, only a minority of the interviewees frame their experience with the language education provided in school differently, either being exceedingly self-motivated or taught by an exceptional teacher. With both TR and SR attaching importance to the fact that their teachers were native speakers, it has to be noted that there is currently a danger of creating and perpetuating the myth that only native speakers can teach languages effectively and to a high standard. However, as a look beyond Ireland's borders tells, where the majority of teachers are non-native speakers, it is a very different story. Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that efforts have recently been made to do away with such notions in Ireland, too. The key is a high level of language competence, as well as an in-depth (inter-)cultural knowledge, both of which are by no means dependent on the ethnic and linguistic background of the teachers. Veteran schoolteacher HE is a testament to this. An experienced teacher of German, she is not only comfortable in the language but also possesses

in-depth knowledge of the German-speaking countries, due to frequent visits, during which she visits exhibitions, cultural events and her German friends.

The lack of more practical "everyday" knowledge is also an important point that came to the fore in the online survey (Fig. 19), with 12.4% of respondents who were somewhat familiar with the language indicating a certain apprehensiveness due to an unfamiliarity with the cultural conventions and etiquette. Currently, the Irish Teaching Council requires their languages teachers to have a B2.2 level of their teachers, i.e. below the threshold of becoming proficient language users themselves, and 15 ECTS in German literature and media. While this requirement is the result of too few language teachers, a carefully managed increase in the language proficiency and cultural knowledge (i.e. of the so-called high culture, as well as "everyday life") of the teachers is desirable and necessary to guarantee a high-quality learning environment and to instil more confidence in the students, regarding their own skills and those of the teachers. To this end, it is imperative to raise the overall language competence throughout the teacher education and language programmes. Additional degree programmes that attract individuals with high language competences and equip them with the skills necessary to teach in primary and secondary school, could mitigate the pressure and increase the overall supply of modern language teachers throughout the country. First strides are being made in this direction, most notably in the form of a new Postgraduate Diploma at NUI Maynooth, to equip teachers with the 60 ECTS necessary to register as a German language teacher with the Teaching Council. However, the programme and the Teaching Council's requirements still exclude a large pool of potential candidates. A look to the continent might be worth the effort, as the Netherlands have for example recently initiated an Educational Master Programme in German, entitled *Toch leraar duits*, aimed at university graduates who are proficient in German and wish to move into secondary education.[116]

Another important thread in the interviews relates to the language provision in Irish schools in general, which often lacks agency, in that many students, particularly from smaller schools, do not get to choose from a selection of languages. Instead, in the experience of the interviewees, schools have either only one language on offer, or rotate the languages, thereby inevitably disregarding possible personal connections and affinities that students might have for a particular language or language group:

> It was chosen for me, the year I entered school: that entire year was German, and the previous year was German, then the next two years were French. It was just the way they organised it in school. […] I had no choice in which language to pick. Everybody did German that year. It wasn't offered. (GM, Higher Education)

> I would have actually liked to have done German, because I had neighbours … one [of whom] was German and one [of whom] was Irish and their children were bilingual and I used to babysit them, and they brought me to Germany to see [their] hometown. German was down as an option for school, but there weren't enough people who wanted to do it, so it didn't happen. (SR, Higher Education)

> In my school we had four French teachers and one German teacher. I wanted to do German for my Junior and my Leaving Cert[ificate], but I couldn't because the capacity was for 30 students, for 120 students incoming. I applied for French instead. (YT, Youth)

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[116] Cf. Leiden University (2019/2020).

In GM's case, the lack of agency extended well into his third-level education, where he started to study Japanese, but had to move to Spanish after a leave of absence, as Japanese was discontinued due to low student numbers. HE, who teaches German at a secondary school, and who is an avid language learner, considers herself lucky in terms of her language education. Not only did she – in her mind – receive a high-quality language education, which was from the first moment onwards coined by language immersion and the passion of her Irish teacher; she also had the opportunity to learn two languages in school, i.e. German and French. Today, the latter is an exception. Indeed, as a teacher, HE is determined not only to provide her students with an immersive language experience by teaching entirely through the medium of German, but also to provide them with more language options. Her recent Erasmus+ mobility project links directly into this diversification. Having taken private classes in Russian for several years, HE saw a way to utilise her own interest in the language to provide support for the increasing number of students who have a Russian-speaking family background. As these students only speak the language informally at home, or speak it but cannot write and read it, or do not speak it at all, HE created an after-school club in which interested students can learn Russian, and which she hopes to add to the curriculum before long. To this end, and to further increase her proficiency, HE attended a three-week intensive language course at the *Russische Haus der Wissenschaft und Kultur* in Berlin. Indeed, HE and her school are at the forefront of rethinking language education and are actively creating a language-friendly and language-aware school environment that cherishes and supports their students' curiosity in various languages, be they heritage languages or others. Language transfer, code-switching and translanguaging are a frequent occurrence and the usage of the whole linguistic repertoire is encouraged within and outside the school – a marked difference from the previous experience of 23-year-old AC, who attended the school to receive his secondary education. Having arrived in Ireland in 5th class, without any English, AC recalls being reprimanded in his primary school for speaking Polish with his classmate, with the teacher pointing out to AC that he did not "need to speak" his mother tongue anymore – at least within the school and the teachers' classroom (AC, Higher Education).

Another issue highlighted by several interviewees is that foreign languages are introduced relatively late into the curriculum, with the discontinuance of the MLPSI in 2012 reversing the steps successfully taken towards an earlier introduction. Comparing herself with her continental European peers, SR notes that the Irish, Welsh and Scottish "don't learn languages until [they're] 12 years old", and thinks that "it'd be better" if they "integrated [language learning] earlier" into the school curriculum, as with "the French or the Spanish" (SR, Higher Education). TM, who as both a linguist and an international officer, underscores this observation and shares SR's misgivings, particularly when she looks to the Nordic countries, which introduce foreign languages to the curriculum 10 years earlier. AC elaborates further, linking the delayed introduction of foreign languages to the issues surrounding Irish language education and the geographical disadvantage of Ireland as an island nation:

> In my own personal opinion, I think you cannot have a very high level of teaching in German in Ireland if local people struggle with learning Irish. And introduc[ing] German so late, in the first year of secondary school, when people are about 11/12/13 years of age. It is the age range etc. You cannot really start learning a language that late. Especially German. In Ireland, you're not really exposed to it. Even in Eastern Europe, you would be more exposed to German due to the historical context. Even in Italy. (AC, Higher Education)

As a language teacher, HE too stresses the impact of geographical distance and the way it shapes perceptions and learning attitudes: "[I]if you've lived in a land-locked European country, you're surrounded by neighbours who speak four other languages; there's a great motivation there to learn the language of your neighbouring country because there is so much interchange" (HE, School). The mere proximity and the ability to cross several borders within a short period of time, let alone the experience of innumerable wars, which has resulted in a constant renegotiation of national borders (frequently disregarding linguistic and cultural factors), underscores the importance of knowing other languages and provides a powerful motivation. Language learning and its benefits are less abstract to continental Europeans. As a result, a large part of HE's language advocacy takes place outside her classroom. From the already mentioned afterschool club, to setting up links with European partner institutions, to student exchanges to the European Parliament Ambassador School Programme, all encourage to the students to engage more with "mainland Europe because there are so many opportunities there." As a result, the school's students are, according to HE, "well aware of the Erasmus opportunities and they're all excited about going there and doing that year abroad [in university]".

While schools like HE's make great strides in language education, due to their size, structure, teaching methodology, and the commitment of individuals like HE, other schools and education sectors struggle. Although the small, rural primary school of ELM does its best to foster linguistic curiosity among its students through Erasmus+ mobilities, either with students going on a mobility or a teacher from abroad coming to the school for period of time, it is dependent on these external sources, as the current primary school curriculum does not provide for foreign languages, as already indicated by TM, SR and AC. At times, ELM feels powerless and finds it hard to explain to her students why other children get to learn languages while they do not:

> They're wondering why we're not learning [languages]. They particularly struggle when we went to Italy, the kids in the schools […] were only three years old. They were brought into the classroom to see what we were doing. Every one of them came up to me after that lesson and asked me why we weren't learning other languages in primary [school]. "Why are we only starting to learn languages in secondary [school]?" I had no answer for them. I said that we tried, and we used to have foreign languages, but they took it away. I told them I agreed with them that languages should be taught in primary school. They're actually a bit jealous about it. They wonder why they don't get the chance. (ELM, School)

However, as illustrated by MLPSI and the fact that the school once offered a foreign language, the reintroduction of foreign languages into the primary school curriculum is theoretically possible and depends primarily on the allocation of contact hours and the development of a sufficient pool of qualified teachers. Other education sectors struggle to a much greater extent, due to the specific needs of the learners, tight programme schedules, and the lack of resources. Feeling somewhat powerless, as well and facing the challenge to get her – oftentimes academically disadvantaged – learners to where they need to be, TR acknowledges that the majority of language competence within the FET sector, and particularly the AE sector, is brought in by the learners from the outside, rather than instilled and fostered within the system. With virtually no language provision, language competences and the opportunities attached to them remain – as we have seen in the context the Erasmus+ mobility with the horticultural college in France – the privilege of those with a migratory background. As TR reflects, "It's

probably shocking if you looked at language provision. Of 20,000 learners, the [number] of awards we get… [if] we do a bit of sporadic French. We saw a little of Arabic and Polish Leaving Certificate subjects taking place. I would imagine they are second generation or native speakers. Again, this is something we grapple with" (TR, FET/Adult Education). This is a reality that is echoed by PK, who also points out that while the ETB does not provide it "students do go for Leaving Certificate exams in Arabic, Polish and Russian, Spanish and French" (PK, FET/Adult Education). While both would welcome efforts to include foreign languages into the programmes, language learning has, in TR and PK's experience, so far only concerned English as a second or foreign language. However, the experience has introduced them to the complexities involved in the language learning process, from the quality of the teaching to the importance of a strategic plan for the sector at the national level. Without the latter as an incentive, language provision will remain fragmented and "sporadic" at best, as the ETB would to need to reallocate resources and reassess existing programmes:

> SOLAS set our policies and overall strategic direction and I think they need to look at the European dimension and I'm hoping they will in their next strategy. I think, it's kind of critical that they do, that it comes from there down. I think definitely, if you can put resources in place, like European development officers in the ETBs that would be able to support the centres to identify opportunities to send learners away that would be great. Technically, I would imagine it's something we would be able to support within our own resources there, in terms of providing maybe more language support. It's one that has huge potential to grow. (TR, FET/Adult Education)

Regardless of the sector, thinking about the most important aspect of language learning, TM highlights the fact that the process is vastly different for other learning processes and does not lend itself to tight programme schedules and an exam-based learning culture. To succeed, she contends there needs to be a shift in the way we think about language learning and the way we communicate the successes of the process – both to the learner and the decision-makers:

> It's not instant gratification and the decision-makers need convincing about how to really implement… I mean even when the good will is there, some people make decisions that are not the right ones to plan the delivery of language long term. (TM, Higher Education)

> You have to, as a teacher, you have to make sure your learners understand two things: 1) that you never stop learning and 2) the way you learn is by making mistakes, so go out there and make mistakes because that's how we learn. Even if that's a big red line on your essay, that's the one you're going to learn. If you accidentally get it right, you might get it wrong next week, because you accidentally got it right. (TM, Higher Education)

Experience of Foreign Languages in the Context of Erasmus+

Most interviewees, particularly those without a migratory background, experienced languages and language learning quite differently during their Erasmus+ mobility from the way in which they experienced them in Ireland. While the foreign languages at home are largely framed through the formal language education in school, the interviewees experienced languages and language learning more often in informal than formal settings during their Erasmus+ mobility, echoing the experience of the interviewed members of the migrant communities in Ireland. The shift towards informal settings is no surprise, as only two interviewees (i.e. HE and AC)

undertook their mobility with the primary objective to improve their language competence and attended formal language courses. PS, on the other hand, also decided to follow a language course offered at his host university. However, his primary concern was the content modules for his computing degree, so that, while important, the language acquisition remained a corollary objective.

Despite the shift to the informal, the majority of the interviewees engaged quite actively with the local language or – if they had no previous knowledge – attempted to engage with it. Naturally, inhabiting the different linguistic environment provided them with ample opportunities to do so. From reading street signs and public transportation information to visiting local shops, restaurants and museums, to dealing with handymen and everyday matters, the interviewees encountered a multitude of contexts and situations to engage with the local language. Some of this engagement was voluntarily, and some of it involuntarily, due to remaining language barriers. The combination of the linguistic environment and the fact that a majority of Europeans speak at least rudimentary or basic English lent the interviewees a certain degree of agency with regard to the question how much or how little they engaged with the language. PS alludes to this, when he recounts that he deliberately chose not to "always go for it", even though he "would have had plenty of opportunity" (PS, Higher Education).

Those interviewees who possess some proficiency in the local language of their Erasmus+ mobility (i.e. PS, AC, GM, and PK) indicated that they experienced a boost to their confidence and felt more and more comfortable as time passed by. They also felt a certain degree of accomplishment by achieving their goals, as situational as they might be, through their foreign language skills:

> Erasmus did work on my confidence. I mean, I had to speak the language. I could have been in the English-speaking bubble or the Polish-speaking bubble, but I had to get out. (AC, Higher Education)

> You can see yourself being understood and that's lovely. Then when people tell you, and then if I was a day or two immersed into it, they'd say my accent was very good. (PK, FET/Adult Education)

> [My colleague's] insistence that only French would be spoken even socially, even when I was with him […]. It had improved so much. (PK, FET/Adult Education)

> By day one, I would have been a bit nervous to speak German, or Dutch. Particularly Dutch, because I wouldn't be confident in it. By day three of an Erasmus trip, I would have wanted to just speak German. (GM, Higher Education)

> They were very impressed [when I explained it in German]. And I felt myself a little bit on a high that I could do that. (GM, Higher Education)

PK, in particular, uses highly emotional descriptors when she remembers how she had to give a presentation in French to her French and Belgian project partners:

> I was terrified giving the PowerPoint presentation [in French] though, I have to say, because I had to focus on being intelligent. I had to focus on my PowerPoint as you would in English anyway, then the accent. So, as I went into it and I became more focused on trying to be understood and trying to be intelligent, and the content was meaningful, my accent became poorer and poorer because it's all English on this side of the world. […] I was so proud of myself [when it was over], and that I could have left [my colleague] who speaks three languages and he is so brilliant at French […]. I could have left him [to] represent me, so I was really pleased that I didn't refuse and that I continued to engage. (PK, FET/Adult Education)

Having studied French in her undergraduate degree at NUI Galway, and given a French-language presentation before, PK still felt intimidated (i.e. "terrified") by the professional setting and the content of her presentation, which included highly specialised terminology and English language concepts that do not have a French equivalent or have different connotations. Once again PK came to realise the difference between speaking a language in a purely social context and a professional context in which she must focus on the content as well as the language. While she could have given the rein to her Irish colleague from a collaborating HEI, who is a near-native speaker of French, PK chose to step up to the challenge and as a result, felt tremendously rewarded for her efforts. Yet, she also sympathises with people who do not step up, because of a supposed scrutiny and judgement by both native speakers and those non-native speakers who seem more competent, linguistically. Her personal lesson learned, and her advice for others, boils down to one simple observation: "[E]verybody trie[s] and it's really important."

Naturally, the experience differs significantly for those who have minimal language competence in the local language prior to their mobility. Yet, as the example of RR's youth exchange with Romania illustrates, particularly inexperienced travellers, and those who have not had the opportunity to visit a non-English speaking country, gain awareness of possible language barriers and confidence in how to handle them. In the case of RR's youth group, they even became mitigators and passed their newly gained intercultural knowledge and competence on to other members of their community. As many of the participants struggle with foreign languages in school, RR and her colleague decided – in line with the informal learning setting of the youth project as a whole – to give the participants as much agency as possible, in terms of engaging with Romanian. Instead of bringing in a Romanian speaker to teach the young people important phrases, the group opted to explore the language together, with the help of Google Translate. The participants took well to this explorative, playful approach, with several members of the group subsequently downloading language learning apps like Duolingo. This self-directed, informal learning also proved to reduce language anxiety among the group members, once the they arrived in Romania and was a great way to bond with their peers:

> The people who did engage in those [informal, explorative] sessions were straight out and saying it wrong and saying it different […] and they didn't care because they were learning then. And the Romanians could correct them. I think the Irish group were a lot more comfortable to allow themselves to make mistakes. […] The were saying things backwards and upside down and they were saying all sorts [of things] that they didn't mean to say. I think they were getting some fun out of that. Had it been with a teacher, I don't think it would have been the same way, because they would have been under pressure to get it right. It was a nice way to learn. (RR, Youth)

More experienced travellers also enjoyed the more casual contact with the local language. Having previously experienced the limitations of English and the benefits of trying to engage with his surrounding in the local language, GD prepared himself for his week in Yerevan by "learn[ing] some phrases before going", trusting that the language would become more accessible once he had immersed himself in it. However, once in Yerevan, GD soon realised that Armenian was quite different from his experiences with other Indo-European languages during his time in Italy and Brazil. In particular, the distinctive script made the language less accessible at first glance, with GD noting that it "was just impossible to read Armenian because

of the fact that it just looked so different" (GD, Higher Education). Describing it as "more difficult to decipher" than Cyrillic, he concedes that he was able to play it somewhat by ear and imitate the sounds, stressing that it is much harder when "you're trying to learn just by listening to how there're expressed". When his hosts "wr[o]te things out phonetically", GD was not only grateful that he could use the terms in his interactions with the locals, but found it a useful bonding experience between himself and his Armenian hosts – although the Latin script was also fairly present in the urban landscape of Armenia's capital. In addition to the experience itself, GD valued learning more about the rich cultural heritage attached to the language and its writing system, which dates, as he enthusiastically recalls during the interview, back to early mediaeval linguist Mesrop Mashtots (ca. 405 AD) and is a source of national pride to Armenians. Indeed, during the preparation for the mobility and his stay in Yerevan, GD noticed many surprising similarities between the small, land-locked country in the South Caucasus region and Ireland, including colonialism, uprisings, and a powerful diaspora, most notably in the United States.

Many of the other interviewees echo GD's experience, although they did not necessarily investigate the historical, cultural and political background of their host country to the same extent. In contrast with GD, however, the others, who had minimal prior language skills, were confronted with languages that were much more accessible. And yet their reactions and level of engagement varied dramatically. While PC found the communicative limitations of English a powerful motivator to engage more with the local language, JB was not particularly inclined to do so, picking up only the necessary vocabulary to navigate the immediate surroundings and relying largely on daily routines:

> Once you're there and you have to use it, and you have to start to learn it a bit… you wouldn't otherwise… I certainly wouldn't have, I really wouldn't… certainly I'd be going to Spain on holidays and that but when I went to Germany, it was nice to learn a new language and be able to connect with the local people there. (PC, Adult Education)

> It helped for a while I suppose, knowing the words for bits and bobs. Things we might see around the hotel. […] By a week we knew where everything was, what to do, how to do it, we knew how the buses worked. Things like that. (JB, VET)

JB's experience with the OLS might have further fuelled his reluctance to engage more with the local language. Noting that he is "more of a classroom person", JB found the OLS "extremely hard" for a beginner, as it "was kind of going into the grammar stuff" (JB, VET). Looking back, JB ascertains: "I hadn't much clue really about what was going on." JB's negative experience is echoed by MD, who, as the project leader of various Erasmus+ projects, attests to the unpopularity of the system among her learners. While her own negative experiences centre primarily around administrative issues and accessibility, MD has observed that her learners by and large seem to prefer free online apps like Duolingo, now that the CFE is not allowed to "employ a language speaker to do some language preparation with the learners" (MD, VET). Finding the language inaccessible, JB relied largely on the translator provided through the programme to conduct his placement in a local Romanian prison, which did not give any special consideration to JB in terms language accommodation. SO, on the other hand, whose Erasmus+ mobility led him to a youth project in Virrat, Finland, made a

very different experience and remembers fondly how the whole group accommodated him linguistically:

> [I had the] advantage that Finnish people […] study English from first grade, from the age of maybe 9/10 they can understand. They might feel a little bit shy when talking, the young ones, but the youth workers… they are all perfect… their English is. […] [T]hey are always so comfortable with Finnish but because we are around and most of the time they were saying "speak in English" and I was like, "no you are so used to speaking one language." It is so easy to say 2 or 3 words they are switching back, they were amazing. (SO, VET)

Although the main language of the JB's placement was Romanian, both he and SO were surprised by the high quality of the English they encountered in their interactions with locals, with JB even remarking that English of these non-native speakers is "better than ours in some cases" (JB, VET).

However, as we have already seen in the responses to the online survey, where more than one in four participants indicated that they improved their language competence in more than one language, Erasmus+ mobilities do not only offer opportunities to engage with the local language and/or the main language of the mobility. Instead, by bringing people together from the EU Member States and partner countries, Erasmus+ creates a unique, multi- and plurilingual space in which participants get to explore their whole linguistic repertoire, as well as new languages. Whereas the main language of YT's mobility to Tbilisi was English, he also got to "brush up" and extend his Russian, due to the many Russian speakers within the group. Furthermore, the Turkish delegates, many of whom YT befriended, also introduced him to Turkish. Unsurprisingly, the local language, i.e. Georgian, is not raised by YT in the interview. After all, unlike English, Russian is widely spoken in Georgia and was the primary language of interaction with the locals, with him even acting as an interpreter for his Turkish friends: "Everyone in Georgia of middle age and older speaks Russian, so I took the role of interpreter when we were out, because the Turkish group spoke only English and Turkish and many people didn't speak English" (YT, Youth). Yet, although YT does not explicitly mention Georgian, he and his peers did inhabit a distinctive cultural space, which – similar to GD's experience in Yerevan – finds its visual expression through the Georgian scripts in the linguistic landscape, particularly in form of the standard script of Mkhedruli. However, as the Latin script is also fairly present, and he could communicate effortlessly with the locals in Russian, not to mention that he feels culturally connected to Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans, it did not affect him in the same way as Armenia affected GD: "Georgia is a lot like Eastern Europe, so it was a bit like going home for me. I was told lots of stories by my parents about how good it is there, because they'd been there" YT, Youth).

A rather unique opportunity presented itself to AC, who pursued a degree in German Studies when he attended Viadrina European University in Frankfurt an der Oder, Germany. Located at the German-Polish border, the university is not only the home institution to many Polish students, but cooperates closely with the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, jointly operating the Collegium Polonicum in the Polish town of Slubice, just across the river Oder, which marks the border between the two countries. As a result, AC not only attended German lectures in Frankfurt, but also a Polish lecture on European politics, "which not only gave me

a chance to study through two languages but at the same time to improve my Polish academic skills" (AC, Higher Education).

As third-level students like AC spend a significantly longer period of time abroad, as well as in a highly internationalised space, they tend to experience this multi- and plurilingualism more acutely. Often derogatively referred to as the "Erasmus bubble", in which many students choose to stay among their international peers, instead of engaging more actively with the local population, this space lends the participants a great deal of agency and offers many opportunities to engage with a variety of languages other than the local one. While this choice may be detrimental to the type of linguistic immersion described by GD, with regard to his time in Italy in the early 1990s, or by PK, in relation to her time in Paris in the 1980s, it provides today's Erasmus+ students amble opportunity for code-switching and translanguaging, as well as introducing new languages and cultures to the participants. PS, for instance, recalls of his time in Valencia:

> [Other than Spanish,] I used English and then Polish, my native language because there was a lot of Polish people [during my Erasmus]. Also, there were a lot of Eastern European students and we kind of speak a group of languages…. There are Latin languages and we have Slavic languages, so I practised some other languages too, or understood them. […] I picked up some very basic French. [I haven't had French in school], but I had some French friends too… and Italian friends too. (PS, Higher Education)

SR, on the other hand, describes it as an important part of the whole experience that she and her friend sought out deliberately:

> We made it our aim to live with international students when we got our accommodation. We knew we were in an English-speaking country, but because it was Erasmus, we wanted that. I lived with a girl from Denmark and a guy from Spain. Then someone from Wales as well. […] It was really interesting because my Spanish friend was learning English, so I would help her with her English on projects. Then with the French friends, I had studied French in secondary school, so I got to use a little bit of that. The Spanish were trying to get us to learn Spanish, and I am going to see my friend in Spain, and I wish I had a little bit more Spanish, because I am going to see her. She sends me messages with some Spanish [words]. (SR, Higher Education)

During her Erasmus+ mobility to Cardiff, SR actively engaged with five languages. This includes not only the foreign language she learned at secondary school, French, but also her mother tongue, English, and Ireland's first and national language Irish, which she explored more with her Welsh friends. Through her friends, she learned some words and phrases in Spanish and Welsh, although she confesses that she cannot remember much Welsh nowadays, "because some of them are so long". While SR did not become fluent in any of the languages she engaged with, she deeply admires her Spanish friend, who arrived with "little to no English" in Wales and left "with another language… completely" after one year. As a result – and addressing what she perceives to be a lack in her own language education – SF feels "like people learning English are better than us [English-speakers], because we don't know the tenses and stuff". Yet, helping her friend with her English made SR also reflect on her mother tongue and her own linguistic repertoire in English: "So, when I am helping them with English, as their second language, I know I have to be careful because I know I can't use slang. And I have to explain why I am saying a sentence that way."

In fact, the effect of the mobility on one's own English skills is a common thread among the interviewees and cuts across all educational sectors, with the duration of the mobility, age and educational background playing seemingly no particular role. Similar to SR's experience in Cardiff, most interviewees highlight the positive effect of the encounters with non-native speakers:

> Some of the other participants benefited from teaching English to the other group members [of the exchange]. We were the only country where English was primarily spoken. The Georgian and Armenian groups had poor English because they only spoke it as a result of learning it in their own time. The other students actually learned it in school, so their English was better, so I guess they felt it was helpful for them to be able to teach someone English. (YT, Youth)

> I had a group of friends like that who only spoke Turkish and very, very basic English. I was correcting their essays. In fact, I had to correct a German-English translation of an official document in writing […]. So, I really had to work on my English, because I had to think about what I was saying. Not only perfectly in terms of grammar and syntax, but also in terms who receives it. Is it professors, is it just a normal person on the street or someone whose English is very bad? I had to work, not on the language itself, but how I used the language in these situations. (AC, Higher Education)

> They have so much more writing and presentations to do all the time with these [Erasmus projects]. They're presenting for non-English speakers, so often they think, "Can I make it simpler?" They're simplifying their language as well, by taking a look at it and how they're saying [it]. We often [ask] them, "If you were reading something in a foreign language, would you want a long bit or just a short bit?" So, they take a big text and they learn to summarise it a bit to make it easier to the people, they're presenting it to understand it. (ELM, School)

> I think I learned a little bit, because we had to really think about things when they asked, "What does this word mean? And I had to think about grammar, so then I was thinking, "I actually know more about English than I thought." You kind of realise things like that. (SF, Youth)

> I certainly [correct my Irish-English]. I might be a little bit biased as a linguist. I studied marketing and languages, my major being German. When I'm speaking in a different country, I tend to amend my accent. […] I do change how I speak in front of the class versus how I speak with my friends and family. I don't think of it in anyway [negatively]. It's just an operation style when I'm in a meeting versus social setting. And certainly, when I am speaking to people around the world in English, when they're used to English from Netflix, YouTube and the BBC and they're not used to Irish-English, or an Irish accent in English. I speak a little slower, I speak a bit clearer and I would try to think of any words or phrases that could be misunderstood from Irish idiosyncrasies and Irish syntax that's just not understood necessarily in the broader English sense. (GM, Higher Education)

As these excerpts illustrate, the effect can be manifold and impact the language competence of Erasmus+ participants on many different levels and range from reflections on grammar to changes to the repertoire, register, pronunciation and pace to accommodate their peers and conversational counterparts. As GM points out, the encounters with non-native speakers also highlight the particularities of Irish-English. In the case of ELM's primary school students, the linguistic benefits of the mobility are striking, in that the children not only gain more confidence and experience through an increased amount of oral and written presentations that are attached to the Erasmus+ projects, but they are also learning to reflect on the communication process and the needs of their peers from a young age onwards. Further notable in this context is also SF's surprise regarding their already existing knowledge, which may indicate an increase in confidence in their own abilities and competences as a result. SF also points out that engaging with other languages, be it Romanian during their Erasmus+ mobility or Japanese, has made them reflect on the particular way English-native speakers use language in relation to their emotional state, and how it may conceptually relate to other cultures and intercultural interactions:

> I think language builds culture, and with the "I love you" thing, in English we kind of throw that word around. Like someone buys you a cupcake or something and you're like, "Oh wow I love you." They'll overreact to it and then other times you'll say I love you in a more personal way. I'd say, in Romanian and Japanese, they really care about how they say things. So, I guess there is one difference. In English, in Ireland and in England, we kind of don't have that same kind of respect for… not language, but I think there is a different culture… we just throw that word around and it doesn't make sense. (SF, Youth)

Moreover, many Irish participants of Erasmus+ come to understand what SC describes with regard to the English of continental Europeans, who have learned the language in school and through the contact with other Europeans:

> It's very hard to communicate with people speaking another language, and I recognise that even if we learn English, for example, it's not like the native English. When you learn English abroad, if you are [speaking] European English you speak [different] […] because the accent is different. Some words you learn are not the real words. (SC, Youth/EVS)

However, for others, the interaction with non-native speakers and the need to accommodate can also feel restrictive and limiting. While most interviewees, and indeed one in three survey respondents (cf. Fig. 21), register an improvement in their English skills, PS observes a negative impact on his English skills, particularly with regard to his vocabulary: "It got worse because most people I hung around with were not from English speaking countries, so everything for me was 'very good' and 'very nice'. There were no other adjectives" (PS, Higher Education). Instead of broadening his vocabulary by looking for alternative ways to express himself, in a way that his counterparts might be more familiar with, PS chose the easiest way to bridge the communicative gap and resorted to the lowest common denominator.

As previously mentioned, Erasmus+ mobilities can also provide a space to engage more actively with Irish, i.e. in a cultural if not linguistic way. In particular, encounters with peers from countries with colonial histories and/or sizable minority languages can stir discussions and lead to a re-evaluation of one's relationship with Ireland's national language. Witnessing the fluency of others not only in their national language but often in a second and third language, JB "felt a bit useless" as "[w]e can barely speak our own language here in Ireland" (JB, VET). Indeed, SR's experience with Welsh, and a language practice that integrates it more into everyday life, has led her to a reflection of Ireland's treatment of Irish and a subtle re-engagement with it. RR's youth group, on the other hand, experienced quite a dramatic confrontation with Ireland's language policies, as well as their own attitude towards the language and their failure to engage more actively. With the status of language being closely linked to questions of national identity, the Irish participants failed to effectively communicate to their Romanian counterparts the complex relationship of the Irish to their national language:

> So, then the subject of Irish came up. The Romanian group were asking why they don't speak Irish, that's you're second language. But we were saying that's not the case for most people. […] They were horrified. They were saying it's your national language. That was a big thing as part of the second leg [of the mobility], as part of the cultural comparison and how we value our own language and traditions. I would say the Irish group got quite emotional, but at the same time, kind of let down because they couldn't say, "Yeah, we do know this language," or even the national anthem. It's in Irish. The Romanians sang their national anthem, and we played it off YouTube, because we didn't know. […] They felt quite embarrassed in terms of culture, so they said next time they're learning the national anthem. So, that's something that is really small and funny, but it had a huge effect on them. It's a comparison of how you value culture and traditions, and the language of your country. We really couldn't give them an answer. We didn't know the answer. (RR, Youth)

According to RR, the Romanians particularly struggled to understand why the Irish could not speak their own language better, after spending 13 to 14 years learning it in school. The Romanians' lack of understanding is shared by many of the New Irish, especially those whose home countries have had similar experiences to Ireland with regard to language oppression. Although the loss of the Irish language was arguably much more progressed at the time of Irish Independence, YT draws attention to the different ways in which Eastern European countries dealt with the language question after the fall of the Soviet Union:

> I personally, when I sit in public transport, which is in English and Irish, I always look at the Irish to understand it. But I feel people are talking about getting rid of that, and a lot of visitors don't understand that. People come from countries where they speak their national language. Imagine France just got rid of French? Especially Latvian people or Lithuanians, a lot of Eastern Europeans don't understand that because of the Soviet Union. There was Russian first and then you had the option to speak your national language, but it was discouraged. Now these countries are doing it the opposite way around. They don't allow you to speak Russian, just your language. They are reclaiming it. I don't think it's going to happen in Ireland, but it would be great if there was a bigger emphasis on it. (YT, Youth)

Impact of the Erasmus+ Mobility on Language Competences and Practice

Although most interviewees describe a tangible impact of the Erasmus+ mobility on their language competences, this impact has not been measured in concrete terms through a formal self-assessment exercise like the one conducted by in the online survey. There are several reasons for this choice, the first and foremost being that the interviews are meant to focus on the personal lived experience of the participants. Instead of imposing the descriptive statements of the CRLs, the interviewees were left to describe the impact (or lack thereof) in their own words, i.e. if they felt there was something to talk about at all. In fact, of the 14 interviewees who participated in Erasmus+ only PS framed the impact through the CEFR, most likely in reference to the mandatory assessment *before* and *after* the mobility he undertook via the OLS. According to the assessment, PS improved from an A2 to a B1.

Generally speaking, however, the experience and impact of Erasmus+ in terms of language learning can be framed along the two baselines that TM identifies with regard to her own students:

> My input to would be that if they go to a place where they don't speak the language, [they're] setting [themselves] up for a different experience. Your experience will be largely one of non-integration, of remaining with your group of native language speakers. So, you're cutting off, your burning bridges before you cross them, you're setting yourself up for a more limited experience. So, we kind of have two groups of students. Students for whom language is not the primary reason to go abroad, and students for whom it is. So, where it is the primary reason and they've already got a bit of language and they're liking it and enjoying it, they're coming along and saying, "Oh my God, I can't believe how much I've learned in the few months I've gone away." […] So those people become better and the people for whom language isn't the priority, they stay in this static place, and they get a better awareness certainly of the food they need to order, things like that. So, they will obviously increase their awareness of the language, but it's not a conscious and determined way. It's passive knowledge. (TM, Higher Education)

Although based on her experience as an international officer in an HEI, these baselines extend far beyond TM's sector and the experience of undergraduate students in HE. Yet, it has to be added that some of the second group ultimately embrace a closer relationship with the local language or indeed another language. An additional factor that can affect the impact of the linguistic experience is the perceived accessibility of the language, with languages that are more closely related to English and/or maintaining a greater presence in the popular imagination often seeming more memorable to the interviewees.

PC, for instance, notes with regard to his time in Germany: "I would have had the bones of hello and goodbye, but I just kind of found that I did learn a bit throughout the (four day) meeting" (PC, Adult Education). Having participated in several mobilities, i.e. in Spain, Germany and France, PC has come to enjoy operating in an international context and engaging with another language so much that he wants to take it further, professionally. Thinking about the next steps in his career, PC is now looking at a postgraduate degree in the field of International Relations or Business Studies: "Something like that with an international flavour and for me to do that, I think German could be [beneficial]." In the end, PC comes to the following conclusion:

> I learned Irish in school, I learned English, I learned a bit of French that was the chosen one in secondary school. But outside of that, [Erasmus+] is unlocking new opportunities to gain new languages and increase your learning. That again couldn't be achieved through your normal local working on a European platform, this [engagement] is providing the opportunity to learn. (PC, Adult Education)

To a certain degree, PC's experience echoes that of YT, whose Erasmus+ mobility to Georgia introduced to him the idea to of learning another, sixth language, albeit not the local language of Georgian:

> Before going on Erasmus, I always felt that knowing languages was important for personal [reasons] and career-wise. But I guess going on Erasmus emphasised that further. I don't think I would have started learning Turkish, or even another language in general, before going on Erasmus. I thought in general, I have five languages but they're all European centred, so I should learn an Eastern language. I couldn't pick up Chinese or Japanese, I'm not that good, but Turkish I realised was a lot like a mixture of Russian and English. So, I thought I'd be well able for it. Now that I'm learning it, I think that maybe I will be able to speak it fluently. I think that's a really good opportunity for me to learn it. (YT, Youth)

JB, on the other hand, acknowledges that he could not "remember much", when he tried to remember "a couple of things" in Romanian earlier (JB, VET). Similarly, SF, who also spent a week in Romania and engaged much more with Romanian than JB, admits: "I learned a bit of Romanian, but I cannot remember [much]. I remember 'thank you,' but that's all I can remember. I remember when I came back, I was speaking it for a good while, but I'm mostly learning Japanese at the moment, so that took over and I can't remember Romanian now" (SF, Youth). Even GM, who is an experienced language learner and fluent in several languages, concedes about the linguistic impact of his Erasmus+ mobilities:

> In Czech no, I think it was just hello and thank you [and I can't remember it]. It was very difficult. In German it's fine. I have a masters and it comes back to me when I am in a German-speaking country quite easily. And my partner is South African which means I pick up the Dutch quite fast and we speak Afrikaans. (GM, Higher Education)

Then again, AC who has spent a whole academic year in Germany as part of his degree programme, saw a dramatic improvement in his language competence over a short period of

time. Moving outside the classroom, and having more conversational experiences with Germans, proved "implemental in the final year" of his programme (AC, Higher Education). Indeed, AC has gained so much confidence in his language competence during his mobility that he was not only not nervous about his final oral exam in German, but also feels comfortable enough to challenge and critically engage with his lecturer in German. Having spent so many years learning the language, AC sees his proficiency as his "first big success in life".

Ultimately, as SF already alluded to when mentioning that they currently prioritise Japanese over Romanian, the retainment of the linguistic skills is connected to a continued active engagement with the language. This is echoed by HE, PS and AC, though AC is probably the most excessive in his personal conclusions, as his linguistic achievement is closely tied to his emotional state and his general feeling of accomplishment:

> If you want to continue learning and improving, [active engagement] the way to go about it. If you're back here and stop doing it, of course, you'll get rusty and I can see [that] based on my own learning of Russian. For the past two or three years, I haven't really used it and now when I try to say something, I really struggle, and I can't think of what I am supposed to say. (PS, Higher Education)

> [I go to Germany] maybe three times a year. I would watch the news every evening, get a good update on German news and what's happening. […] Teaching German, I'm always connected with media news in German. I would use it in class. (HE, School)

> I will not accept a job unless it is with German. Even use German to translate some gruesome, terrible stuff, I'll do it. I'd rather use my German. I don't want to lose my German. Even if I do my MA, I'd be afraid that I would lose a bit of my German if I don't use it. I'm thinking, [if] I [am not] too happy in Ireland anymore, I could just go back to Germany. (AC, Higher Education)

That the continuous engagement does not necessarily need to be "gruesome" and "terrible" is underlined by others, who point towards the many opportunities afforded by modern media and communication. From streaming services and online platforms (YouTube, Netflix, Spotify) and social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat) to personal friendships that are being maintained via communication apps (FaceTime, WhatsApp, Viber, Skype), the interviewees see a multitude of opportunities to continue their engagement with the language. When watching documentaries and listening to Spanish music, PS in particular notices that "grammar is there already", and that it is mainly the vocabulary that is still lacking. The hardest part, according PS, is to get used to "the [number] of different accents" there are in Spanish, so that he sees the documentaries and songs as a way to prepare himself "for the different accents" (PS, Higher Education). However, thinking about the kind of films she is willing to engage with, due to the higher cognitive effort she has to put into the consumption, SR emphasises the importance of recommendations and personal connections to the films, as well as the standard of their production.

Other than the more concrete impact on their language competences and language practice, ELM observes perhaps a less noticeable, yet highly important, impact of her primary school's Erasmus+ projects and the early encounter with foreign languages. Laying the groundwork, the engagement with other languages has a sort of ripple effect among many students, who experience a certain transferability of linguistic knowledge and cognitive skills. In the present study, this transferability has earlier been described in the context of Jim Cummins's theory on

the interdependence or iceberg hypothesis.[117] This transferability is also noted by SR and GD, although the former has seemingly not made the experience herself:

> They say that when you have a few languages, you pick them up really fast. (SR, Higher Education)

> It also gives you a kind of linguistic flexibility where, once you have acquired a language and a fluency in another language; you're not as daunted by learning another one. You don't feel as intimidated about learning another language after that. (GD, Higher Education)

ELM, on the other hand, has witnessed as a parent and as a teacher, the impact an early engagement with languages can have beyond the learning of one specific language:

> [My daughter's class] did their taster in German then, and she was able to relate some of the stuff that she'd learned from the Croatian language and the Romanian language [during her Erasmus trips]. Masculine, feminine, all the things that don't exist in English and she was able to relate to it. (ELM, School)

> My daughter, when she started French, they had learned a few phrases in French from the exchange teacher we had. She went to secondary school and [was] straightaway able to say things in French]. (ELM, School)

> The parents very much want [their children] to learn their phrases before we go, to learn the few phrases from the countries we're going to. Even the students who aren't travelling learn them. Sometimes parents try. They are very much aware that the kids are going to have to learn French and German from scratch at 13 and 14 years old. So, as far as they're concerned, any little bit of something that will make it easier when they get to secondary school, the parents are all for it. (ELM, School)

Indeed, one of ELM's daughters, the 12-yerar-old EMM, recounts how she and her friends frequently talk about the upcoming transition to secondary school and the prospect of choosing a foreign language, with most of her friends wanting to do French, because "they think it is easier" (EMM, School). As previously mentioned, and in contrast to her friends, EMM would prefer to learn German, as she has a personal connection to it through her mother, who is "basically fluent in German."

Finally, the contact with the language can also "give you great confidence to learn more about the culture" (GD, Higher Education). As most interviewees have come to experience in their Erasmus+ mobilities, not only can a willingness to engage with the local language serve as a gateway to more personal interactions with the people but also to their culture. The following excerpts are a few examples that illustrate how the interviewees experienced foreign languages, and their new gained awareness regarding the local language as a gateway to a better intercultural understanding and the culture itself:

> I think it just gives you an understanding of the mentality of the people. I think it also gives a greater degree of open mindedness to other cultures […]. I think it gives you a doorway, a real insight into the culture. I never would have understood so much about Italian culture or the mindset of people if I didn't know the language. I think if I just spoke English while I was there it would have hindered my understanding of so much. (GD, Higher Education)

> I think it's really important to do so because I think it just gives you a much better understanding of the culture, of the subtleties, the nuances of the culture as well. (GD, Higher Education)

> It's always nice. I found particularly one partner […] on the project, from Turkey, the very first thing they said to me when they landed was, "Céad míle fáilte". Some things like that can be nice. That again, it's not just language, it's culture. If you learn the colloquial language, you learn the culture. (PC, Adult Education)

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[117] Cummins (1981).

Another advantage is that you can really see the world from a different perspective. Even by talking to people from a different culture, it gives you a different perspective and you wouldn't know if you didn't speak the language. (AC, Higher Education)

I suppose it opens doors and it leads to some very interesting encounters with people. I mean I never expected to be out in Russia, meeting all kinds of very interesting people with fascinating stories to tell about life under Soviet rule. And nostalgia for past times, that for them, seemed better. Having these really interesting experiences, and listening to them and also their parents', their grandparents' stories. Some of them had captured memories of war experiences and things like that. You begin to realise that the whole history of Europe is interconnected and it's fascinating to get behind the Iron Curtain and to hear, first-hand, from them. What it was like. I never would have had that experience, if I hadn't learned Russian. (HE, School)

Broader Impact of Erasmus+ Mobilities

While Erasmus+ provides the opportunity to engage with another language and gain insights into other cultures, its impact can be much broader, in that the participants are asked to overcome what some interviewees referred to as the Irish "island mentality" and engage more consciously with the world around them. In JB's case, and the case of RR's youth group, stereotypes about Eastern Europe in general and Romania in particular were challenged and ultimately discarded, with JB noting:

[Romania] was great. I didn't realise how nice the places were. I had a different perception of Romania to be honest. […] I expected it to be kind of dull and bleak, and kind of different with no great culture. But it was the exact opposite. Everyone was really nice and friendly. It was a really nice and bright city, and everything was really nice and cheap. […] I said to my friends that we should go back on a European city trip or something. (JB, VET)

In other instances, learners who are less academically inclined and choose more practical professions gain knowledge in world affairs. TR, who not only oversees the ETB's activities in the adult but also in the VET sector, notes:

A lot of our subjects would be vocational, [like] hairdressing, or in areas that you wouldn't necessarily have a degree in. But the really interesting thing about the project was the awareness of geopolitical stuff that was going on in countries and being aware of it. […] Even a sort trip, there's a lot of richness in it. You get to know people and you get to know what's happening in the country as well, which is really interesting. (TR, FET/Adult Education)

Arguably, the cognitive engagement with the country of the mobility enables the participants to become the type of active citizens *European Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (2007) and the Irish *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* strive for.

In addition to the newly gained awareness of world affairs, both ELM and SC observe how much more confident their learners become through Erasmus+, not only in linguistic and communicative terms, but overall. Thinking about her primary school students, ELM notes:

They learn so much and become so confident. Honestly, it's almost a physical thing. You can see them grow out there. When they came back, they came back stronger and walked taller and were so much more confident. They mix with the other kids from the other countries with no problem whatsoever. (ELM, School)

In ELM's experience, there are many "first times" for her students: the first time travelling without a parent, the first time travelling to a non-English speaking country, the first time in an airplane. Ultimately, ELM feels that Erasmus+ provides her students not only with a better understanding of other cultures but with also invaluable life skills and the opportunity to gain more independence. SC, who mentors slightly older children and young adults, echoes ELM's observation:

> Now they know, and they are confident in [...] going there and meeting other people from other countries. They know how the process works for, more or less, all the international meetings with Erasmus+. They know they have to get in touch with other cultures and languages. They might have to explain what they want to say, because not everybody understands English. I think right now, they are really confident in doing it again. (SC, Youth/EVS)

SC also notes an increased level of responsibility and self-management among those who have participated in the Erasmus+ programme:

> They are very responsible for the school as well; they are for example having exams that they know they can do something or not do something. They are very responsible; they were planning to come to help with the big show that we have but then they were like I'm sorry I have to leave because I have an important exam in school in yep days and I have to go to study. I thought okay, great, just go. They know how to balance those two things. They know, for example, they say to me "hey SC, the school doesn't want to let me if I don't have the paper from [the circus] saying I'm doing an education abroad, not just holidays, I am going abroad for learning something". So, we make the papers together. They give me all the information and they know what to provide to me to make the paper for them. (SC, Youth/EVS)

The impact of Erasmus+ mobilities is, however, not limited to the participants themselves but extends far beyond them. ELM, the project leader of EMM's mobilities to Croatia and Portugal, praises the impact these mobilities had on the families and the community as a whole:

> We had families who had never travelled anywhere and didn't even consider travelling anywhere. Now they are realising that they're part of not just our community and our school, but part of a much wider community. They're allowing the kids to travel; they're travelling with them in some cases. One of our families, the father had never ever travelled anywhere, but because the children had gone abroad, they're going every summer to visit one of the families from the school that we were with, that the kids got to know when they were over there. It has introduced the concept of Europe as a possibility to other people. Then there's the Traveller community. It has massively changed the perspective of our kids there, not just as a minority but equal to everyone here and equal to everybody in Europe and the possibilities that that presents. (ELM, School)

Indeed, the Erasmus+ mobilities at ELM's school have a fundamental impact with regard to the social and cultural integration of Traveller children into the community's everyday life, as well as Irish society. While initially only settled children would participate in the school's Erasmus+ projects and travel abroad, the local Traveller community has, in recent years, become more and more open to letting their children participate in the exchange as well. This marks not only an important integrative experience for the rural community, but also for the children themselves. Participating in the exchange as part of the Irish delegation has allowed the children, for the first time, to see themselves in a different light, i.e. as people whose identity has different layers and who can simultaneously be members of the Traveller community as well as the Irish and European community:

> I've found that – the striking thing is – in Ireland, when you have a Traveller child and they open their mouths, immediately they're different. Immediately it's, "Oh, you're a Traveller". They get discriminated against. They're looked down on or whatever. They're treated differently. But when they are away, they're just part of the Irish group and nobody sees any difference between their accent and our accent. They can't

hear the difference. That for them is a revelation, they're not treated differently, they're just part of the group. They come back ten feet taller. For the first time they begin to see they're not "a Traveller", they're just Irish. (ELM, School)

How vital this experience and the subsequent shift in the children's perception of themselves and their professional opportunities can be, is illustrated in the way the children start to think about their education:

Just that experience, that they're are Irish, [not] just Irish, part of this massive big, European community. So many opportunities out there and now they're talking about going abroad to study. Years ago, they wouldn't even consider secondary school. Now they're talking about third level and talking about possibly going to third-level in cities we've been to, because they have met kids who were talking about the same thing and telling them what was going on. They're looking at possibilities that would have been unheard of ten years ago. (ELM, School)

ELM's school is a prime example for the broad impact the Erasmus+ programme has both on individual participants as well as the wider community and by extension Irish society. PC, who looks at the impact more from a top-down perspective, sees the programme and the personal contacts established by its participants as an important way to rejuvenate the struggling region and to open new professional opportunities to the local communities:

The beauty of the transnational meetings is that you're able to bring a couple of countries to your area and you jam pack a couple of day's schedules for them to be able to get involved in the Council, to get involved in local projects. […] you're really able to give an opportunity to meet people from the region. [Also, to] our local county council here, they wouldn't have gotten the opportunity to meet people from the region. They're really learning new cultures, new languages. They're making connections and they have to start communicating if they want to make long-term relationships to extract some best practices, more innovative techniques and training courses. They will make the connections and they will use the language a bit more, I think. It's kind of an activator in the region when you have the projects. (PC, Adult Education)

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

In light of the recent political, social and economic developments, and noting the lack of foreign language competences among Irish citizens in a European comparison, the Irish government has begun to re-evaluate the position of foreign languages and to address the deficiencies of Ireland's current relationship to foreign languages and foreign language education, noting that the ability to communicate effectively in one's mother tongue as well as in other languages, is one of the key competences needed for personal development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. The 2016 *Action Plan for Education* and the subsequent launch the *Languages Connect* strategy constitute two important cornerstones of this recommitment. One important, if not the most important objective of the strategies is to raise awareness of the general benefits of foreign languages among both individuals and the various sectors, and to develop greater diversity and provision of language learning opportunities within Ireland. As a result, *Languages Connect* calls for a systemic and attitudinal change among all stakeholders in Ireland. Since language learning takes a considerable commitment of resources, i.e. in terms of time, money, and emotional wellbeing, *Languages Connect* has identified mobility programmes in general and Erasmus+ in particular as a valuable tool to achieve its objectives.

To explore Ireland's complicated relationship with the learning of foreign languages, and the impact mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ have on their participants, the present study first provided some background and discussed foreign language education in the context of Ireland's bilingualism and European multi- and plurilingualism, highlighting key issues and mapping the language options available to Irish learners in different education sectors. This was followed by a discussion of the Erasmus+ programme, specifically in relation to Ireland, and the way it relates to language learning. With the help of an online survey, the study then created a descriptive profile of Erasmus+ participants and their experience with (foreign) language learning. This was further refined by zooming in on the personal lived experiences of 14 participants and five project leaders/administrators, who were interviewed in person or over the phone between April and October 2019.

Overall, the main findings of the present study highlight the importance of (a) encouragement and positive role models; (b) the agency of the learner; (c) the consistent provision and quality of language education; (d) speaking opportunities; and (e) the perceived accessibility of the language.

While there is a great linguistic curiosity among them, ranging from minority and more exotic languages to languages with a greater "linguistic capital", such as German, Spanish and French, this does not translate into the linguistic attainment that the government and other stakeholders are looking for – even though the majority of study participants reported a generally positive learning experience of languages. This is underlined by the fact that most of the participants indicated that they would be generally interested in improving their existing competences, but not in obtaining a formal and higher-level qualification, as they continue to see the benefit of learning a foreign language in the personal sphere, rather than the professional sphere. Indeed, most communicative episodes take place in a private setting. Another deterring factor is whether participants perceive the attainment of a language as achievable, i.e. whether they think they will "master" it, with time constraints and the fact that the learning process differs from other learning experiences being identified as the biggest issues. The perception of specific languages with regard to their achievability naturally affects the current diversification efforts, as languages that are less closely related to English are naturally perceived as much more difficult to learn than more closely related languages such as German, French or Spanish, moving from Slavic languages to Semitic languages and then on to Asian languages. In this context, *Languages Connect* has identified Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, and Japanese as key languages in its diversification effort.

One of the main reasons provided for not utilising existing languages competences is a perceived lack of proficiency, which is generally framed through a lack of agency in the learning process and confidence regarding one's own language skills. To this end, success tends to be framed through an intrinsic motivation and natural aptitude, rather than factors such as linguistic environment and language provision. However, the quality and enthusiasm of the teacher and the language teaching provided can have a fundamental impact and compensate for an "ineptitude" and/or an initial lack of interest. Indeed, the learning success is highly dependent on encouragement and positive role models, including language teachers, which are the first point of contact with another language and culture for those who grow up in

monolingual households. At best, they can become an embodiment of the language community; at worst they can have a detrimental effect on the learner, with the latter's confidence in the language competence and intercultural knowledge of the teacher playing an important role. Although some study participants highlight the outstanding quality of their teachers, there currently seems to be a danger of creating and perpetuating the myth that only native speakers can teach languages effectively and to a high standard.

In terms of agency, many participants have had often neglected their personal connections to specific languages. The personal connection moves the prospect from an abstract idea to a concrete situation and a means of bonding. The personal connection may be based on personal relationships with speakers of that language (family, friends, acquaintances, teachers, etc.) or a broader interest in that culture, or aspects of it.

This being said, there is a significant attitudinal difference between the learning experience and language practice between those with a migratory background and those without one, as well as those with multilingual parents and/or friends and those without them. The learning experience of monolingual learners is primarily framed through the language education in school, which often lacks time, agency (i.e. the learners have little choice with regard to the language they have learned) as well as the opportunity to practise it outside the classroom. As a result, these learners tend to not perceive themselves as part of a wider language community. On the other hand, participants with a migratory background, in particular, tend to (a) perceive themselves as part of a continuously evolving language community; (b) show greater linguistic flexibility and openness to new languages (including Irish); and (c) employ their whole linguistic repertoire in both formal and informal learning settings, irrespective of proficiency.

Based on these general findings, and the frequency with which the experiences relate to a perceived "lack", it seems to be particularly important not only pay attention to the objectifiable deficiencies of language education in Ireland, but also to the emotional dimension of language learning.

In this context, the Erasmus+ programme is particularly relevant, as it not only lends the learners a great amount of agency, but it ties into the more emotional dimension of language learning. While Erasmus+ participants can engage with a language as much or as little as they choose (with only a minority of study participants seeking formal linguistic support), the mobilities create a unique multi- and plurilingual space in which participants can explore their whole linguistic repertoire, as well as new languages. While this multi- and plurilinguistic set-up may be detrimental to the kind of full linguistic immersion that we typically used to think about when talking about a sojourn abroad, it does provide participants with ample opportunity for language transfer, code-switching and translanguaging, as well as introducing new languages and cultures to participants. In other words, Erasmus+ allows Irish participants to move languages "out of the classroom". Indeed, Erasmus+ allows for and facilitates language learning and an engagement with other languages in more informal, unregulated settings, shifting the focus from an exam-based learning culture to a communicative one that allows learners to participate without the fear of failing, and to gain confidence. Echoing the language practice of the migrant communities, learners are now more likely to (a) perceive themselves as part of a continuously evolving language community; (b) show greater linguistic flexibility

and openness to new languages; and (c) employ their whole linguistic repertoire in both formal and informal learning settings, irrespective of proficiency. As a result, Erasmus+ participants are likely able to improve the language competence in more than one language, including English and Irish. Indeed, Erasmus+ mobilities have provided some study participants with the space to engage more actively with Irish in a cultural, if not linguistic way. In particular, encounters with peers from countries with colonial histories and/or sizable minority languages have stirred discussions and led to a re-evaluation of the participants' relationship with Ireland's first and national language. In terms of an improvement of language competences, Erasmus+ mobilities seem to have the greatest impact on participants who were on the threshold of becoming either independent or proficient language users. This highlights the pivotal role of the programme of acquiring the necessary language proficiency to benefit both individual participants and Irish society, as it pushes learners to a level where they can utilise it more effectively in a wide range of contexts.

In more general terms, Erasmus+ mobilities highlight the geographical, geopolitical, generational, socio-economical, educational and cultural limitations of English as a *lingua franca*, as well as situational and personal ones, on the part of non-native English-speaking peers. Moreover, inexperienced travellers, and those who have not had the opportunity to visit a non-English speaking country gain awareness of possible language barriers and confidence in how to handle them. More experienced travellers, on the other hand, gain communicative empathy, as they tend to gain better awareness of what it means to put the onus of bridging the communicative gap entirely on their non-native English-speaking peer. Structurally, it is noticeable that Erasmus+ plays a much more dominant role in occupational areas that tend to necessitate a higher level of intercultural skills and cooperation. This neglects the opportunities that mobilities might give to participants from other sectors. The Erasmus+ partner countries have much to offer in sectors such as engineering, business, IT, and governance, where the focus has tended to remain on the Anglosphere. Raising the awareness of what partner countries have to offer, in terms of content, is an important first step in increasing participation from these sectors. Given the impact of Erasmus+ in terms of language learning, this may foster a willingness to engage more with the other languages.

The study participants from the HE sector reported that they have struggled, at times, to persuade Irish students to participate in Erasmus+, due to negative perceptions regarding the "usefulness" of going to a European partner country instead of an English-speaking country; the language requirements of a mobility to these countries; the lack of confidence in their language competence, in cases where students already do have some language skills; and – more generally – the financial impact. Furthermore, the existing language competences and the familiarity with certain languages and cultures are largely reflected in the outward mobilities of undergraduate students in HE, favouring Spain, France, Germany, and Italy. Specifically, Eastern and Central-Eastern European countries are markedly less popular among students. This is not the case in the other education sectors, where exchanges and placements in these countries are much more common. Finally, there seems to be a perception by HE administrators that there are fewer opportunities for staff members from modern language departments to participate in the Erasmus+ programme, as they are increasingly framed as language instructors, rather than experts in specific cultural and literary fields. This is also in marked

contrast to the other education sectors, particularly the school sector, where language teachers frequently participate in Erasmus+ mobilities, both as part of a school project with students and as part of their professional development.

The AE and – to a lesser extent – VET sectors face entirely different struggles. A lack of foreign language competences, particularly in AE, and the overreliance on English, not only affect personal interactions and potentially result in missed opportunities on a personal and institutional level, but they can also have broader consequences for the Irish knowledge society by preventing Irish learners from participating in specialised programmes that are unavailable in Ireland. However, both sectors struggle to include foreign languages in their tight programme schedules. The question of whether foreign languages should and can be incorporated into these sectors should be explored. While the language provision in the school sector also suffers under the tight schedule and a lack of resources, Erasmus+ mobilities can be incorporated quite easily, and are particularly popular in Transition Year. However, there seems to be a certain insecurity among teachers and principals with regard to what is generally possible and what is not possible under the Irish child protection laws. This could easily be addressed through a targeted campaign.

While education is a network, where the different sectors are closely connected, the school sector in particular plays a pivotal role in attaining the attitudinal change needed to achieve the ambitious objects set out by *Languages Connect*, as the early encounter with foreign languages lays the groundwork for a continuous engagement with other languages, as well as a transferability of linguistic knowledge and cognitive skills. Erasmus+ mobilities provide the opportunity for students to engage with another language and to gain insights into other cultures from a young age. At 12 years old, the youngest study participant has yet to start learning a foreign language in school. However, she has been on two Erasmus+ mobilities, and has also been the beneficiary of an Erasmus+ exchange that brought a French teacher to her school. As a result, EMM is more than excited to start learning a language once she goes to secondary school. Indeed, EMM's school illustrates particularly well that Erasmus+ mobilities have a lasting impact – not only on those going on a mobility themselves, but also on those staying behind, affecting not only the attitudes towards foreign languages and language learning, but also the social and cultural integration of minority groups, including the Traveller community.

As language learning and foreign language education remain complex endeavours, particularly in light of Ireland's difficult linguistic history, intertwining the cognitive and emotional, the conscious and subconscious, ripe with myths, preconceptions and prejudices, it is perhaps best to close with an observation by TM, who worked first in a language department and now as an international officer at an HEI. TM describes language learning as a journey that never ends – a journey that some people might not be on themselves, but which nevertheless impacts the journey of others, either by providing them with emotional, financial, institutional resources, or by draining them.

> Like stopping the offering of a language module in this context is just terrible, or other things have happened where people offer a language but only on five programmes, and it's three hours on a Friday afternoon, so you can do languages while everybody else goes down to the pub. That's like offering your violin lessons to a child but it's on a Sunday morning when they want to sleep in. And painting languages

in a bad light; or saying it's hard, like German is so hard and Spanish is so easy. You hear all this stuff and you know it's wrong, but people are so willing to believe it. (TM, Higher Education)

We [in the International Office] keep telling them that [there might be opportunities if they get a bit of language], and we have school groups coming in here, transition year groups coming in here, we say to them, "Don't underestimate the value of having a little bit of language; you'll be a lot better, but it's not about being perfect at the language, it's about having a little bit." It's about having a little bit to get by, and then a little bit more. It's about being on that learning curve. As a linguist myself, I would be very much in that vein, but there are other inputs to the same students of my colleagues, say, and I'm not thinking of anyone in particular but colleagues who themselves didn't engage with any foreign language. They are going to consciously or subconsciously deliver a completely different input to that student about the need or usefulness for a foreign language. (TM, Higher Education)

Abbreviations

AE	-	Adult Education
CoE	-	Council of Europe
CSO	-	Central Statistics Office
CEFR	-	Common European Framework of Reference
CFE	-	College of Further Education
CRL	-	Common Reference Level (in reference to the CEFR)
DCHG	-	Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
DES	-	Department of Education and Skills
DESc	-	Department of Education and Science (1997-2010)
EACEA	-	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency
EC	-	European Commission
EGFSN	-	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs
ESOL	-	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ETB	-	Education and Training Board
EU	-	European Union
EUCO	-	European Council
EVS	-	European Voluntary Service
FET	-	Further Education and Training
GoI	-	Government of Ireland
IBEC	-	Irish Business and Employer Confederation
IoT	-	Institute of Technology
MLPSI	-	Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative
NFQ	-	National Framework of Qualification
PPLI	-	Post-Primary Languages Initiative
RIA	-	Royal Irish Academy
OECD	-	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OLS	-	Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support
QQI	-	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SEC	-	State Examinations Commission
VET	-	Vocational Education and Training

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