



Say Something: A Study of Irish University Students' Attitudes Toward Foreign Languages

2026

Mengdi Wang, Chelsea Whittaker, Vicky Bouché, Ann Devitt.

School of Education

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin



DOI: [DOI in the process of being generated](#)

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To cite this report: Wang, M., Whittaker, C. Bouché, V. and Devitt, A. (2026). Say something: A Study of Irish University Students' Attitudes Toward Foreign Languages. Retrieved from Dublin: [DOI in the process of being generated](#)

Say Something: A Study of Irish University Students' Attitudes Toward Foreign Languages

The Authors

Mengdi Wang

Mengdi Wang is a Research Fellow in language education at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. She is a committee member of the Irish Association of Applied Linguistics.

Chelsea Whittaker

Chelsea Whittaker is an Assistant Professor in Further Education and Training and Inclusion within the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. She holds a deep commitment to social justice and community well-being and has a keen interest in research which examines issues of language, identity, multilingualism, language policy and practice, diversity and inclusion.

Vicky Bouché

Vicky is a PhD candidate in the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin, where her research centres on how Generative AI-supported feedback can enhance student-teacher relationships in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. She is also a qualified secondary school French and Spanish teacher in Ireland.

Ann Devitt

Ann Devitt is associate professor in language and literacy education and Head of School at the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin. She is Academic Director for Learnovate, the Enterprise Ireland funded research and innovation centre focused on educational technology which is hosted in TCD.

Acknowledgements

The research team at the School of Education wish to acknowledge the support of Post-Primary Languages Ireland in funding this project as well as all our participants who took the time to complete the survey. We also acknowledge the invaluable support of the many professionals, educational organisations, and institutional partners who assisted in circulating the survey and encouraging participation across the Irish higher education sector.

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Executive Summary

This study provides a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the attitudes, motivations, and decision-making processes that shape third-level students' engagement with foreign language study in Ireland. It adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining an audit of undergraduate language provision across Irish higher education institutions with a national student survey (n = 374) and follow-up focus group interviews with undergraduate students (n = 24), language lecturers (n = 7), and guidance counsellors (n = 4). Key findings are set out below.

Key Findings

The audit of language provisions highlighted:

- Modern language provision in higher education is more accessible to students with existing language backgrounds, reflecting a continuation model from secondary to tertiary language education rather than an *ab initio* approach in the Irish context. It may inadvertently limit participation among beginners or students with less language learning experience in secondary school.
- Additionally, modern language learning in Irish higher education is largely delivered through elective modules, which may provide flexibility for students but may also limit sustained engagement with language learning throughout their studies.
- Moreover, the distribution of language provision across institutions and geographical regions appears uneven, which may result in unequal access to language learning opportunities depending on students' institutional affiliation and location.

Specifically, a small number of traditional universities provide a much broader range of languages, whereas many institutions offer only a limited selection. Despite institutional differences, both traditional universities and technological universities share a common core language offering centred on French, German, Irish, and Spanish, reflecting the enduring prominence of these languages within the Irish higher education sector. This may be partly explained by Ireland's historical, political, and economic ties with Europe, particularly through its membership in the European Union.

Survey findings indicate that:

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- Language learning in Irish higher education is shaped by a combination of prior educational experiences, institutional opportunities, and broader multilingual and intercultural influences.
- Participants were predominantly young undergraduate students from English-speaking backgrounds, although considerable linguistic diversity and multilingualism were evident in both home language use and educational experiences. Most participants had studied more than one language during secondary school, with Irish, French, Spanish, and German emerging as the most commonly learned languages.
- Moreover, the motivational findings suggest that participants generally hold positive attitudes towards language learning.
- While students demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation to learn languages, participation was primarily constrained by structural factors, including limited language provision, curriculum design, timetable constraints, and institutional policies, rather than by a lack of interest.
- Compared with secondary education, multilingual language study was less common at university, reflecting the more specialised nature of higher education language provision.

The focus group findings echoed with survey data, highlighting that:

- The importance of expanding flexible language provision and creating more accessible pathways for students from all disciplinary backgrounds to engage with language learning in higher education.
- Barriers to language learning arise primarily from institutional structures and education policy rather than a lack of student motivation.
- Lecturers and guidance counsellors further identified reduced university language entry requirements, limited funding, and inconsistent policy implementation as contributing factors to declining participation.
- It is also suggested that more communicative and immersive approaches to language teaching are needed at the third level.

Key Recommendations

The findings suggest that increasing engagement with modern languages requires coordinated action across schools, higher education institutions, and policymakers.

Expanding flexible language pathways, improving the visibility of language opportunities, strengthening collaboration between education sectors, and investing in sustainable language provision will be essential to supporting multilingualism and achieving the ambitions of the *Languages Connect* strategy.

1. Strengthen language learning pathways from secondary to higher education by ensuring that students who study languages at school can continue their language learning at university regardless of programme specialisation. This should include reviewing the impact of removing foreign language matriculation requirements and investigating how elective-only language provision influences students' course selection and long-term language participation.
2. Diversify language provision across the higher education sector by expanding the range of languages offered across different institution types and geographical regions. Particular attention should be given to increasing access to less commonly taught and heritage languages, supporting the multilingualism and diversification objectives of *Languages Connect*.
3. Reduce structural barriers to participation by increasing timetable flexibility, expanding elective language opportunities, and developing cross-institutional collaboration through blended and online language programmes. Such collaboration would enable institutions with limited staffing or resources to provide students with access to a broader range of language options.
4. Improve the visibility and accessibility of language opportunities for students, particularly those enrolled in non-language disciplines, through targeted promotion, academic advising, and clearer information about available language pathways within and across institutions.
5. Strengthen the perceived value of language learning by continuing and expanding the promotion of careers requiring language skills and highlighting the employability, international, and intercultural benefits of multilingualism. Increasing students' awareness of the utility of languages may strengthen their future-oriented motivation (i.e., ought-to L2 self) and encourage sustained engagement with language learning.
6. Enhance international and intercultural learning opportunities, including study abroad, exchange programmes, virtual exchange, and other internationally oriented

experiences, which students identified as valuable components of their language-learning journey and also support the goals of *Languages Connect*.

7. Establish systematic monitoring of language participation across the education continuum, extending beyond secondary education to include higher education. Regular monitoring of language provision, enrolment, progression, and completion would provide evidence to evaluate the long-term impact of *Languages Connect* and inform future language policy and resource allocation.

1 Introduction and Context

According to the Central Statistics Office (2024), Ireland has experienced increasing migration in recent years, resulting in growing linguistic and cultural diversity. Despite this increasingly multilingual society, participation in foreign language learning at post-primary level in Ireland has been declining (Department of Education and Youth, 2024).

While European policy has long advocated that all pupils should learn at least two foreign languages from an early age, only 10.4% of Irish upper-secondary students study two or more foreign languages, compared with an EU average exceeding 60% (Eurostat, 2024). This places Ireland among the lowest-performing EU countries in terms of multilingual language learning participation.

In response to these challenges, Ireland launched *Languages Connect* in 2017. This is a national strategy and policy document for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026. As highlighted in the *Languages Connect* policy (2017), there was opportunity to raise awareness of the possibilities that foreign languages provide for careers and mobility, as well as to increase the uptake of foreign languages in further and higher education in Ireland. However, a significant difference exists between the numbers studying a foreign language in HE (approximately 4%) compared with the numbers studying a foreign language at the end of secondary school (76%) in Ireland (Bruen, 2023). This sharp decline highlights a substantial participation gap between secondary and higher education. This issue extends beyond institutional language uptake and reflects a broader lack of continuity in language learning between post-primary and higher education, which may undermine the long-term ambitions of *Languages Connect*. It also raises important questions regarding the factors shaping students' language-learning trajectories as they transition to further and higher education and the implications for achieving the long-term objectives of *Languages Connect*.

To address these issues, this study aimed to generate a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of the attitudes, motivations, and factors that shape third-level students' engagement with foreign language study in Ireland as well as the provision of language options available to these students in higher education institutions across Ireland.

2 Literature Review

L2 motivation is a complex and dynamic construct that has evolved considerably over the past several decades. However, opportunities to learn additional languages are influenced not only by learners' motivation but also by wider educational and policy contexts. In Ireland, foreign language provision remains concentrated in a relatively small number of traditional European languages despite ongoing national efforts to promote multilingualism. This section reviews the literature on second language (L2) motivation and foreign language education in Ireland to establish the theoretical and policy context for the present study.

2.1 L2 Motivation

Motivation has long been recognised as one of the most important factors influencing success in second language (L2) learning. Over the past several decades, the historical development of L2 motivation research can be viewed into three phases (Dörnyei, 2005; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2021):

- The social psychological period (1959–1990)
- The cognitive-situated period (during the 1990s)
- The process-oriented period (2000s and onwards)

Research has consistently demonstrated that motivated learners are more likely to invest effort, persist in the face of challenges, and achieve higher levels of language proficiency than less motivated learners (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Gardner, 1985, 2010; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2021). Therefore, understanding motivation is particularly important in the context of language uptake and continuation, as motivational factors influence not only language achievement but also decisions to initiate, maintain, or discontinue language study.

2.1.1 Motivation and Orientation

Despite extensive research on L2 learning motivation, scholars have yet to reach a consensus regarding its definition. According to Gardner (1985), motivation refers to “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning a language” (p.10). In contrast, orientation is defined as “long-range goals which, along with attitudes, sustain students’ motivation to learn a second language”

(Belmechri & Hummel, 1998, p. 220). Although the terms motivation and orientation are often used interchangeably, motivation can be understood as the driving force that enables learners to pursue the goals associated with their orientation (Belmechri & Hummel, 1998). However, orientation reflects the reasons for learning a language, learners may not always be sufficiently motivated to pursue the goals underlying that orientation (Gardner & Tremblay, 1994). Consequently, learners may possess strong instrumental or integrative orientations without necessarily demonstrating high levels of motivation if they are unwilling to invest sustained effort in language learning.

In addition, Gardner and Lambert (1959) proposed two types of orientations: Integrative orientation and Instrumental orientation in their pioneering study. Integrative orientation reflects the individual's "willingness to be like valued members of the language community" (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, p. 271), whereas instrumental orientation refers to learning a second language for practical purposes, including enhanced employment opportunities, career advancement, and financial benefits (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2021). These two motivational orientations provide an important conceptual framework for understanding why students choose to engage in foreign language learning, which is particularly relevant to the present study investigating the factors influencing Irish university students' decisions regarding foreign language learning engagement in higher education.

2.1.2 Motivation and Demotivation

Motivation encompasses a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes and is therefore widely regarded as a dynamic and multifaceted rather than a static construct (Dörnyei, 1998, 2005; Schunk et al., 2014). Although positive experiences may enhance learners' motivation and sustain their engagement, negative influences can also reduce motivational intensity. Additionally, Bush and Peters (2020) argued that demotivation should be understood as a distinct process rather than the opposite of motivation.

Ushioda and Dörnyei (2021) defined 'demotivation' as "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action" (p. 141). Examples include negative learning experiences, unsupportive teaching practices, excessive

workload, limited opportunities for language use, and perceived lack of progress (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2021).

In the context of further and higher education, factors such as competing academic demands, timetable constraints, and limited awareness of language learning opportunities may contribute to demotivation and influence students' decisions regarding language course enrolment. Therefore, understanding both motivational and demotivational factors is important for explaining language learning participation and continuation.

2.1.3 Self-Determination Theory and Intrinsic Orientation

Intrinsic orientation refers to engaging in language learning because it is inherently enjoyable, interesting, or personally satisfying (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2021). It is closely aligned with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasises the importance of autonomous motivation and internal satisfaction. Learners with strong intrinsic orientation derive pleasure from the process of language learning itself rather than from external rewards.

2.1.4 L2 Motivational Self System: Ideal L2 Self Ought-to L2 Self

The concept of the Ideal L2 Self originates from Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2005). It refers to "the L2-specific facet of one's ideal self: If the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the Ideal L2 Self is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 105).

On the contrary, Ought-to L2 Self refers to "the attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e., various duties, obligations, or responsibilities) in order to avoid possible negative outcomes" (Dörnyei, 2005, pp. 105–106). Unlike the Ideal L2 Self, which is internally driven, the Ought-to L2 Self is primarily associated with external pressures and obligations. These expectations may originate from parents, teachers, peers, employers, or wider social norms.

Although the Ought-to L2 Self can motivate language learning behaviour, research suggests that the Ideal L2 Self is a strong predictor of language learning motivation, persistence, and intended learning effort across diverse educational contexts (Csizér et al., 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2009). In contemporary contexts, the Ideal L2 Self may reflect aspirations related to international communication, mobility, and participation in global

communities rather than integration into a specific target language community (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Yashima, 2009).

2.1.5 Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation

Attitudes towards other cultures and Integrative Motivation refer to learners' interest in and openness towards people, cultures, and ways of life beyond their own cultural backgrounds. This dimension reflects the belief that language learning facilitates intercultural understanding and broadens learners' perspectives (Kimura et al., 2001).

Positive attitudes towards other cultures have been consistently associated with greater willingness to learn foreign languages and engage in intercultural communication (Dörnyei, 2003). In increasingly multicultural societies such as Ireland, this dimension is particularly relevant, as language learning may contribute to social inclusion, intercultural competence, and appreciation of cultural diversity. Such attitudes may also support broader educational and policy goals aimed at fostering multilingualism and global citizenship.

2.2 Foreign Language in the Irish Education System

Ireland has become an increasingly multilingual society as a result of migration, internationalisation and growing linguistic diversity. This also creates new opportunities and demands for foreign language education. In response, *Languages Connect* (2017) positions the diversification of foreign language learning and the promotion of multilingualism as central objectives of Ireland's national language strategy, recognising the economic, cultural and societal value of linguistic diversity. Nevertheless, research consistently shows that language provision in Ireland remains concentrated in a relatively small number of traditional European languages, particularly French, German and Spanish (Bruen, 2021, 2023; Bruen & López, 2024; Department of Education and Youth, 2024; Post-Primary Languages Ireland, 2017). Although the availability of community and heritage languages within formal education remains limited (Department of Education and Youth, 2024), *Languages Connect* explicitly recognises the linguistic diversity of contemporary Irish society and promotes the inclusion and valuing of home and heritage languages as a key objective of the national strategy (Department of Education and Skills, 2017; Department of Education and Youth, 2024; McKelvey et al., 2026).

Drawing on these theoretical and policy perspectives, the present study examines what motivates third-level students in Ireland to engage in or opt out of foreign language study in Irish higher education.

3 Methodology

The previous literature review section highlighted the importance of motivational orientations, self-related beliefs, and demotivating influences in shaping language learning behaviour. Building on these theoretical perspectives, the present study aims to address the following research question:

What motivates third-level students in Ireland to engage in or opt out of foreign language study, and how do influencing factors, perceived barriers, and beliefs about the utility of languages shape their participation and decision-making?

To address the research question, this research adopted a mixed-methods design. It firstly conducted a desk-based audit of language provision using Careers Portal data examined the range of languages offered, programme structures, entry pathways, and availability of elective options. This was followed by a large-scale survey of undergraduate students ($n = 374$), which explored students' motivations, attitudes, and experiences of Modern Foreign Language (MFL) learning. Finally, follow-up focus group interviews with undergraduate students ($n = 24$), language lecturers ($n = 7$), and guidance counsellors ($n = 4$) provided deeper insights into the factors influencing students' decisions regarding engagement with foreign language study in Irish higher education.

By integrating these data sources, this study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes, motivations, and decision-making processes that shape third-level students' engagement with foreign language study in Ireland.

3.1 Language Provision Analysis

To examine the availability and structure of language provision in Irish higher education, undergraduate courses listed through the Central Applications Office (CAO) were identified. Courses containing language components, including language majors, minors, and elective

language options, were filtered and exported from CareersPortal.ie. The dataset was imported into Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further analysis.

Information relating to language offerings, programme structures, entry pathways, and opportunities for elective language study was reviewed and analysed in Section 4.1.

3.2 Survey design

The survey consisted of four sections as displayed in Table 1, which was designed to collect information on participants' demographic backgrounds, language learning experiences, current university study profiles, and language learning motivation.

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Table 1. Structure and content of the student questionnaire

Questionnaire Section	Key Variables / Measures
Part 1. Demographic Profile and Language Use	• Gender, • Age, • Language use in the home environment
Part 2. Secondary School Language Learning Experience	• School characteristics, • School language provision, • Leaving Certificate language subjects, • Participation in language promotion activities
Part 3. University Study Profile and Language Participation	• Higher education institution, • Programme of study, • Participation in university language courses, • Reasons for non-participation among students not enrolled in language courses
Part 4. Language Learning Motivation	26 five-point Likert-scale items adapted from Oakes (2013) (20 items) and Kimura et al. (2001) (6 items) across six dimensions (1 = Very much to 5 = Not at all): • Ideal L2 Self (4), • Intrinsic Orientation (4), • Instrumental Orientation (6), • Integrative Orientation (4), • Ought-to L2 Self (4), • Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation (4)

3.3 Focus Group Interviews

To complement the survey findings, follow-up focus group interviews were conducted with three key stakeholder groups: undergraduate students (n = 24), university language lecturers (n = 7), and secondary school guidance counsellors (n = 4). The focus groups aimed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and perspectives on the factors influencing engagement with modern language learning in Irish higher education.

The undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to five focus groups to ensure a mix of disciplinary backgrounds and to encourage discussion among students from both language-specialised and non-language-specialised programmes. Separate focus groups were conducted for language lecturers and guidance counsellors to facilitate open discussion from each stakeholder perspective.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the survey findings and the research questions. The discussion explored participants' motivations for language learning, experiences of university language provision, factors influencing participation, perceived barriers, and recommendations for improving access to and engagement with modern language learning. Each focus group lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted online via Microsoft Teams. With participants' informed consent, all discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised prior to analysis.

3.4 Sampling and Participation Recruitment

Participants were recruited through convenience and voluntary sampling. To maximise participation across the Irish higher education sector, the research team primarily contacted colleagues in Schools of Languages/Linguistics and university language centres which offer undergraduate language options. These institutional contacts were asked to circulate the online questionnaire to eligible students through local communication channels (e.g., email lists, virtual learning environments, and social media).

The recruitment strategy aimed to reach as broad and diverse a sample as possible across institutions. Students from both language-specialised programmes (e.g., language degrees and language majors) and non-language-specialised programmes (e.g., students taking languages as elective, minor modules as well as those not studying any language modules) were invited to participate in order to reduce potential sampling bias and capture a wide range of experiences with language learning in higher education.

Despite these efforts, participation was uneven across institutions and programme types. The final sample was disproportionately composed of students enrolled in language-specialised programmes and students from Trinity College Dublin. Consequently, the findings should be

interpreted as being more representative of students with stronger engagement in university language learning rather than of the entire undergraduate population in Ireland.

3.5 Ethics considerations and approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin. All participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Survey and interview focus group data were anonymised, securely stored, and handled in compliance with GDPR.

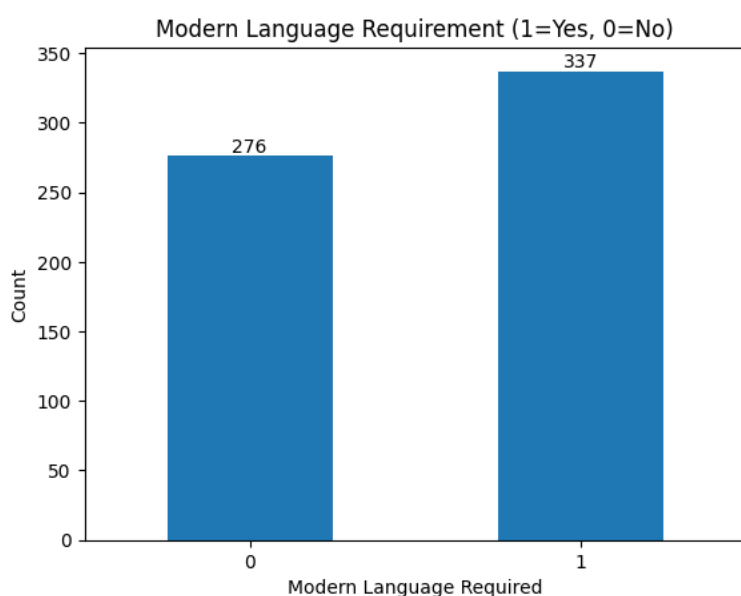
4 Findings

This section presents the findings of the study. It begins with an overview of language provision in Irish higher education, followed by a detailed analysis of the questionnaire data and a preliminary analysis of the focus group interviews.

4.1 Language Provision in Irish Higher Education

Overall, at the time of analysis there were 613 programmes offering language course choices across institutions in Ireland. Figure 1 shows that over half of programmes required prior modern language knowledge before taking the modern language courses, specifically in language-specialised degrees, which reflects that students enter with an established level of linguistic competence. However, the substantial number of language courses without entry requirements also reflects the declining influence of matriculation requirements as a driver of language uptake (Department of Education and Youth, 2024).

Figure 1. Modern Language Requirements



According to Figure 2, language frequency is highly concentrated among a small number of dominant languages. The top three Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs) are French, Spanish, and German, which aligns with the high level of MFL uptake in the Leaving Certificate examinations. Although Irish as a Leaving Certificate subject has dropped in uptake since 2021 (NCCA, 2025), Irish as a language option shows high frequency (551 occurrences) across

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programmes, indicating its strong structural presence in the curriculum at the third-level institutions. Additionally, approximately 80% of total occurrences are contributed by the top 11 languages while the remaining languages remain relatively small individual contributions.

Figure 2. Language Frequency Across All Courses (Pareto Analysis)

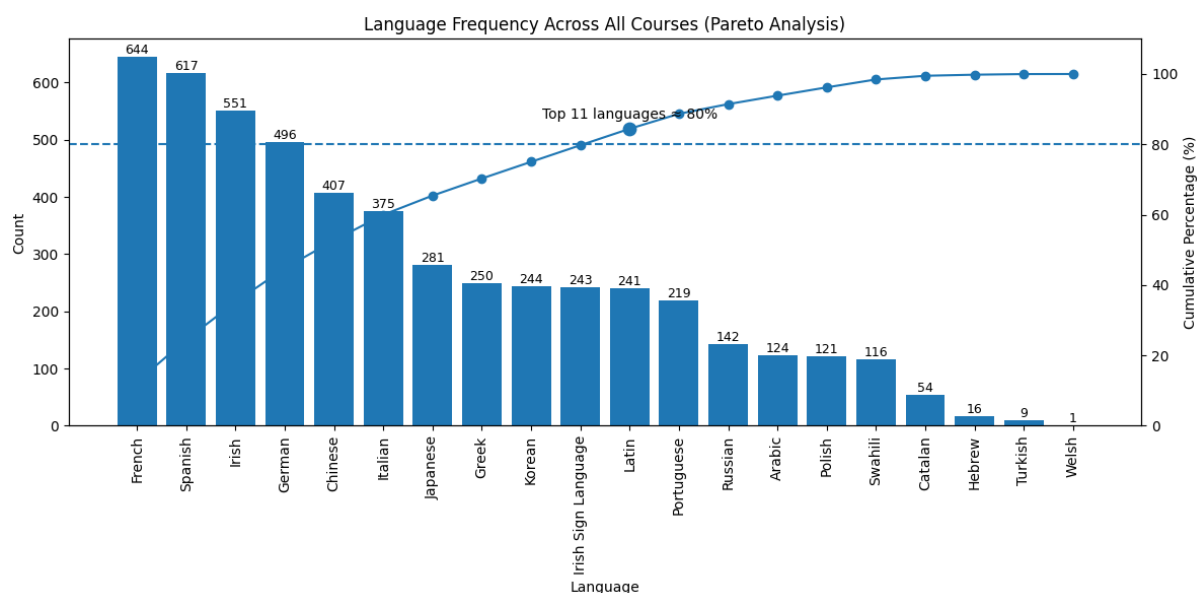
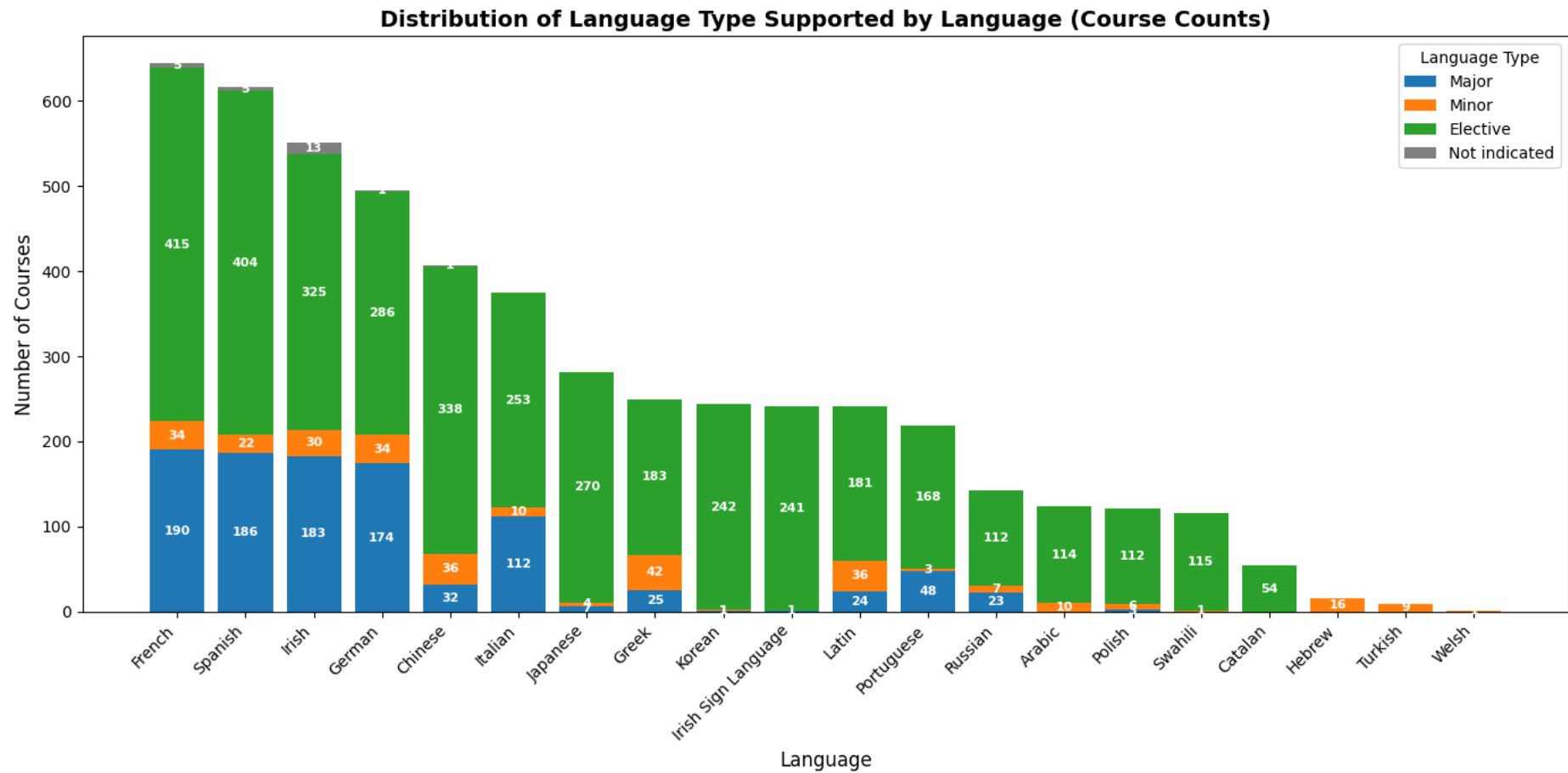


Figure 3 indicates that modern language courses are largely delivered through elective modules across institutions. This indicates that language education is more often treated as an optional enhancement rather than a central component of degree programmes in Irish higher education context. Additionally, elective modules present the greatest diversity and volume which suggests that institutions rely on elective structures to expand linguistic offerings beyond core degree pathways. While languages are mostly positioned as electives, students may face greater timetable pressure and may be less likely to continue language learning across their degree.

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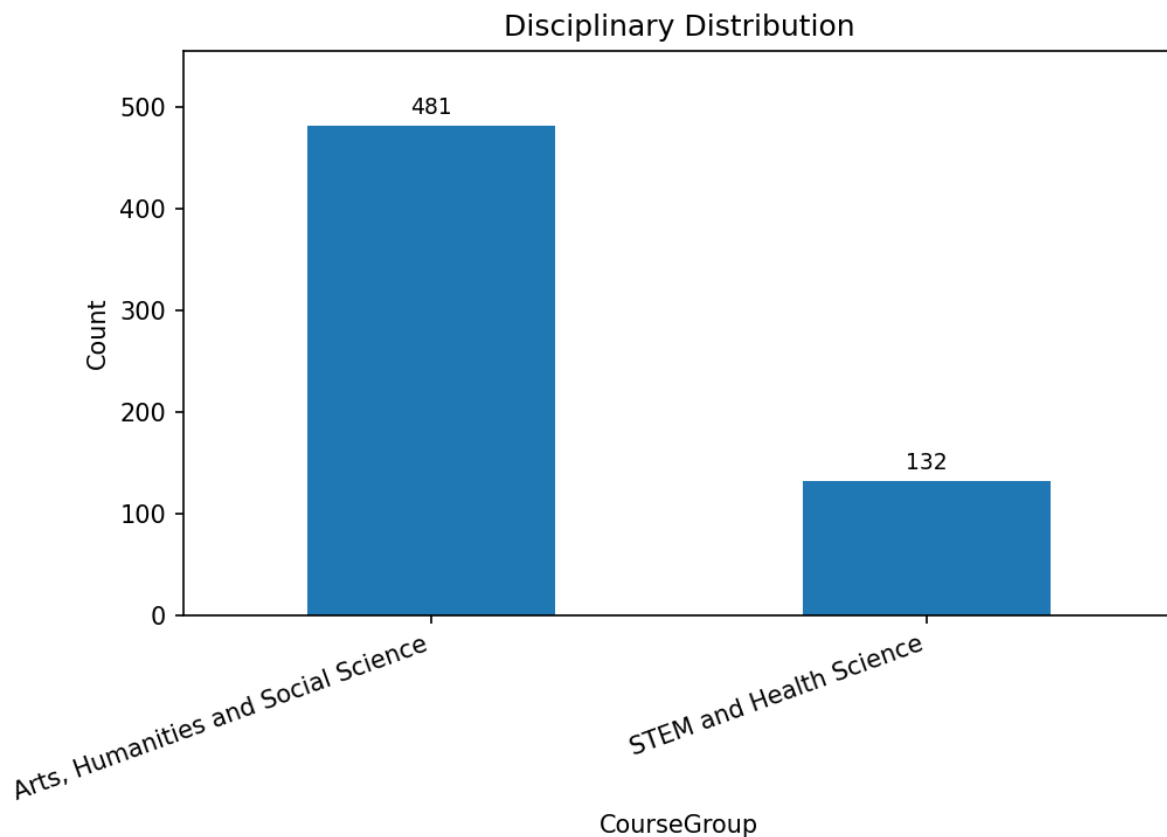
Figure 3. Distribution of Language Type Supported by Language



Moreover, only a small group of languages take the predominant role in major pathways; those languages are mainly European languages such as French, Spanish, German, Italian as well as Irish. Beyond these core languages, participation drops sharply, indicating limited diversification within major pathways. Additionally, minor pathways remain comparatively rare, especially Hebrew, Turkish and Welsh, which are only available in minor pathways. Compared with major offerings, minor pathways display a more diversified distribution, providing opportunities for less dominant languages, such as Greek, Latin, and Chinese, to achieve greater representation within higher education programmes.

As shown in Figure 4, undergraduate programmes offering modern language options were predominantly concentrated within Arts, Humanities and Social Science disciplines ($n = 481$), compared with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and Health Science programmes ($n = 132$). This pattern is consistent with the findings of Language Trends Ireland (2026), which indicates that language learning opportunities in Irish higher education remain largely embedded within arts, humanities and social science programmes. In contrast, language provision within STEM and health-related disciplines is comparatively limited, suggesting that students in these fields have fewer opportunities to engage with language learning as part of their undergraduate studies. This disparity was also reflected in both the survey (Section 4.2.3) and follow-up focus group interviews (Section 4.3), where students from STEM and health-related programmes frequently reported limited access to language modules, citing restricted elective opportunities, timetable clashes, and intensive programme workloads as barriers to continued language learning.

Figure 4. Disciplinary Distribution



Furthermore, Table 2 indicates that the distribution of language offerings across institutions is highly uneven in Ireland. Overall, UCD offers the most language options to students across the country. A small number of traditional universities, particularly UCD, TCD and UCC, provide a wider range of language choices, while most institutions offer a limited number of language courses. This uneven distribution indicates that language diversity is concentrated within a small number of institutions, resulting in unequal access to language learning opportunities across the Irish higher education sector. Consequently, students' opportunities to study a wider range of languages are often determined by the institution they attend, raising concerns about equity of access and the geographical distribution of language provision.

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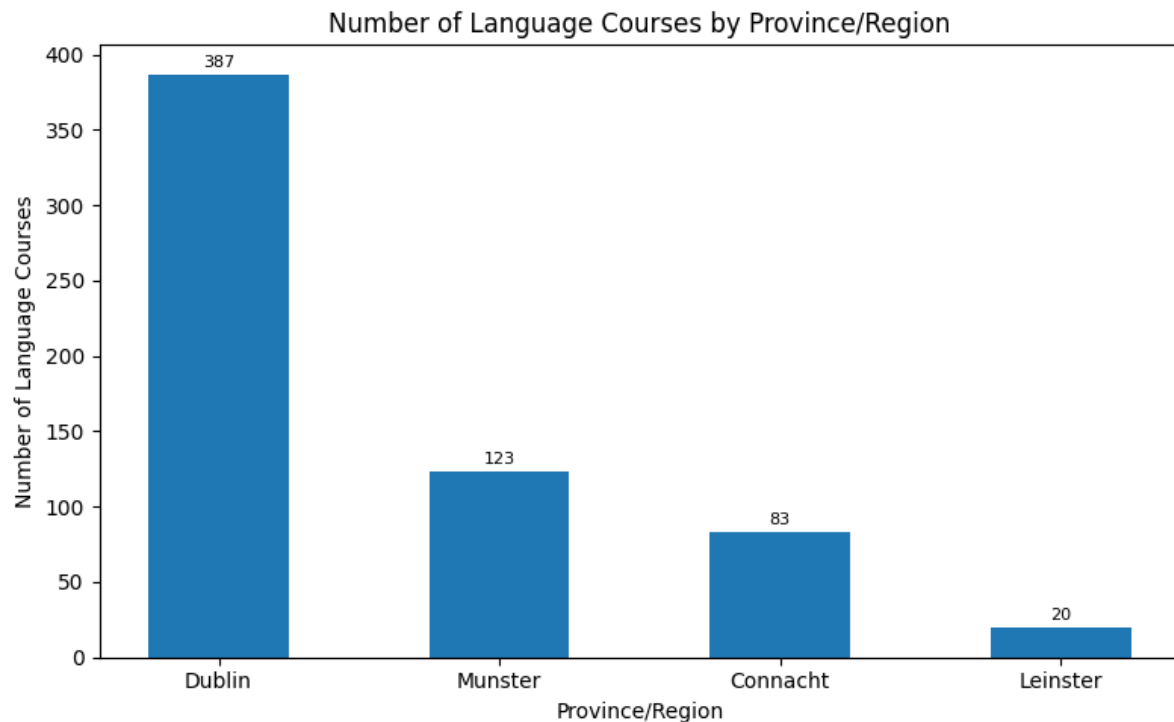
Table 2. Number of Languages Offered by Irish Higher Education Institutions

Institution	Number of Languages
University College Dublin (UCD)	17
Trinity College Dublin (TCD)	16
University College Cork (UCC)	11
Maynooth University (MU)	9
Technological University Dublin (TUD)	7
Dublin City University (DCU)	6
South East Technological University (SETU)	6
University of Galway (UoG)	6
University of Limerick (UL)	5
Atlantic Technological University (ATU)	4
Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)	4
Munster Technological University (MTU)	4
Technological University of the Shannon (TUS)	4
Mary Immaculate College (MIC)	3
St. Patrick's Pontifical University	3
Marino Institute of Education (MIE)	1

As illustrated in Figure 5, institutions located in Dublin offer 387 programmes that include language courses, accounting for the largest proportion of provision nationally. This indicates a highly uneven distribution of language offers among provinces and regions.

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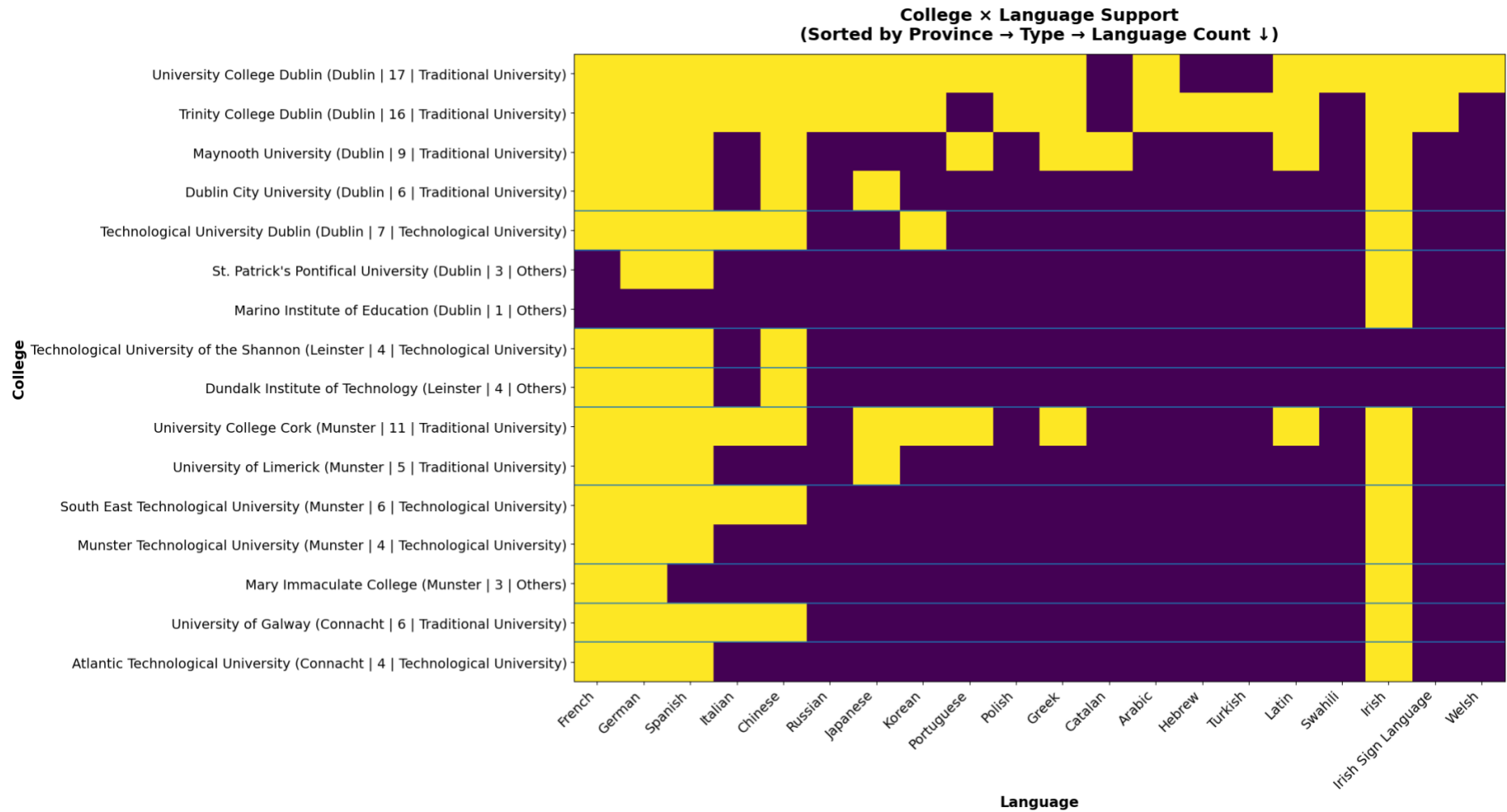
Figure 5. Number of Courses Supporting Language Learning by Province



Overall, Figure 6 shows traditional universities provide the widest range of language options for students across all provinces and in Dublin. This suggests that language education opportunities are not equally distributed geographically, with certain regions and institutions offering significantly greater linguistic diversity than others. However, among technological universities nationwide, Technological University Dublin offers the highest number of language options.

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Figure 6. A Heatmap of Language Support Across Colleges by Province.



Additionally, while both traditional and technological universities share a common core language combination (French, German, Irish, and Spanish), traditional universities exhibit significantly greater diversity in language combinations. They include additional classical and less commonly taught languages such as Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew, indicating more linguistic diversity in modern language study. In contrast, technological universities tend to adopt a more practice-oriented language combination centred around core modern languages (French, German, Spanish, Irish, Chinese and Italian).

Summary

In summary, the analysis suggests that modern language provision in higher education is more accessible to students with existing language backgrounds, reflecting a continuation model from secondary to tertiary language education rather than an *ab initio* approach in the Irish context. It may inadvertently limit participation among beginners or students with less language learning experience in secondary school. Additionally, modern language learning in Irish higher education is largely delivered through elective modules, which may provide flexibility for students but may also limit sustained engagement with language learning throughout their studies. This finding echoes the time management and structural challenges identified by Bruen and Lopez (2024), who argue that the elective nature of language provision often competes with disciplinary requirements and students' workload, reducing opportunities for long-term language study. The distribution of language provision across institutions and geographical regions appears uneven, which may result in unequal access to language learning opportunities depending on students' institutional affiliation and location.

Despite institutional differences, both traditional universities and technological universities share a common core language offering centred on French, German, Irish, and Spanish, reflecting the enduring prominence of these languages within the Irish higher education sector. On the one hand, this may be partly explained by Ireland's historical, political, and economic ties with Europe, particularly through its membership in the European Union. As multilingual competence is widely recognised as supporting educational and labour mobility within Europe (Department of Education and Youth, 2024), French, German, and Spanish are among the most widely spoken and important languages within Europe and have been consistently prioritised in European language education policies and labour markets. On

the other hand, the concentration of language provision in major European languages may also reflect staffing capacity and funding constraints within higher education institutions (Bruen, 2023; McKelvey et al., 2026).

4.2 Large-scale survey results

The following subsections present the findings of the large-scale survey according to the four components of the questionnaire.

4.2.1 Part 1: Demographic Profile and Language Use

Overall, 374 responses were received across Irish higher education institutions. According to Figure 7, the sample predominantly consisted of female participants ($n = 286$), followed by male participants ($n = 74$). A small number of respondents identified as non-binary/third gender ($n = 10$) or preferred not to disclose their gender ($n = 4$). In addition, the sample was predominantly composed of younger participants ($M=21.86$), with a small number of older respondents across some gender categories. The median age is 21, which was broadly similar across groups, with most participants clustered in their early twenties.

Figure 7. Gender Distribution ($n=374$)

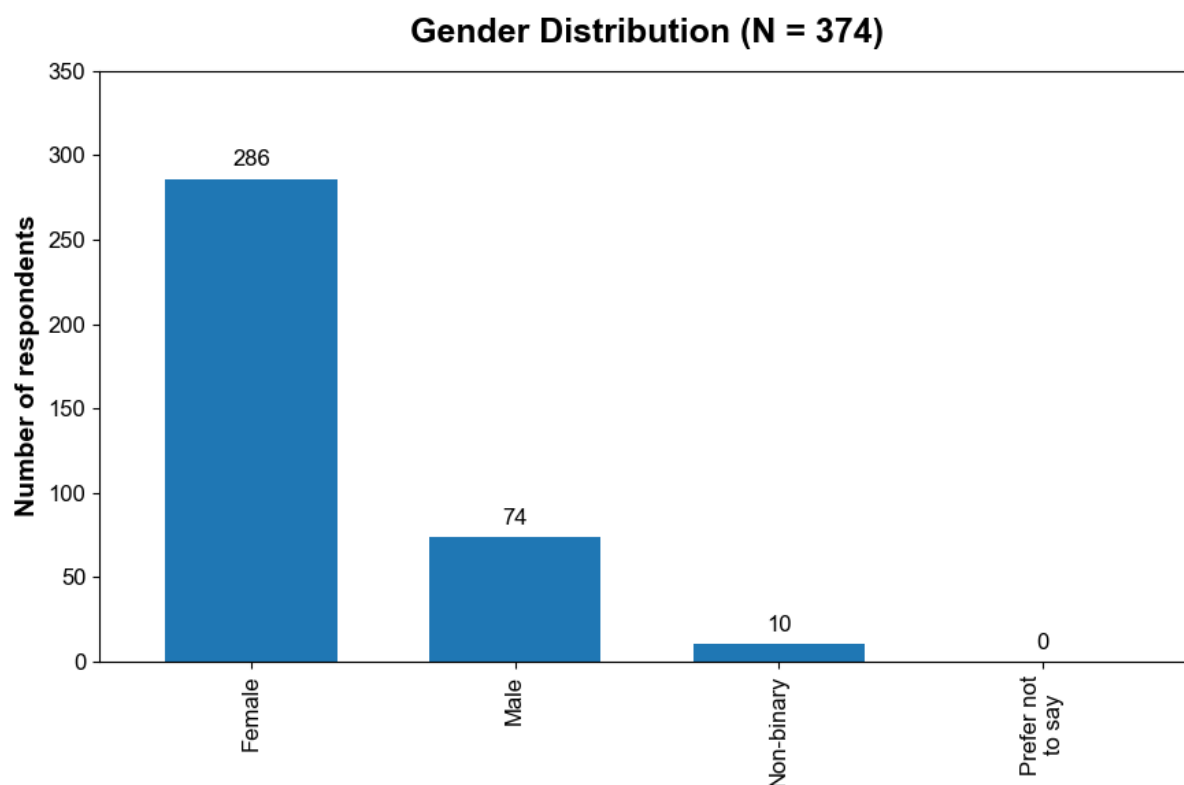
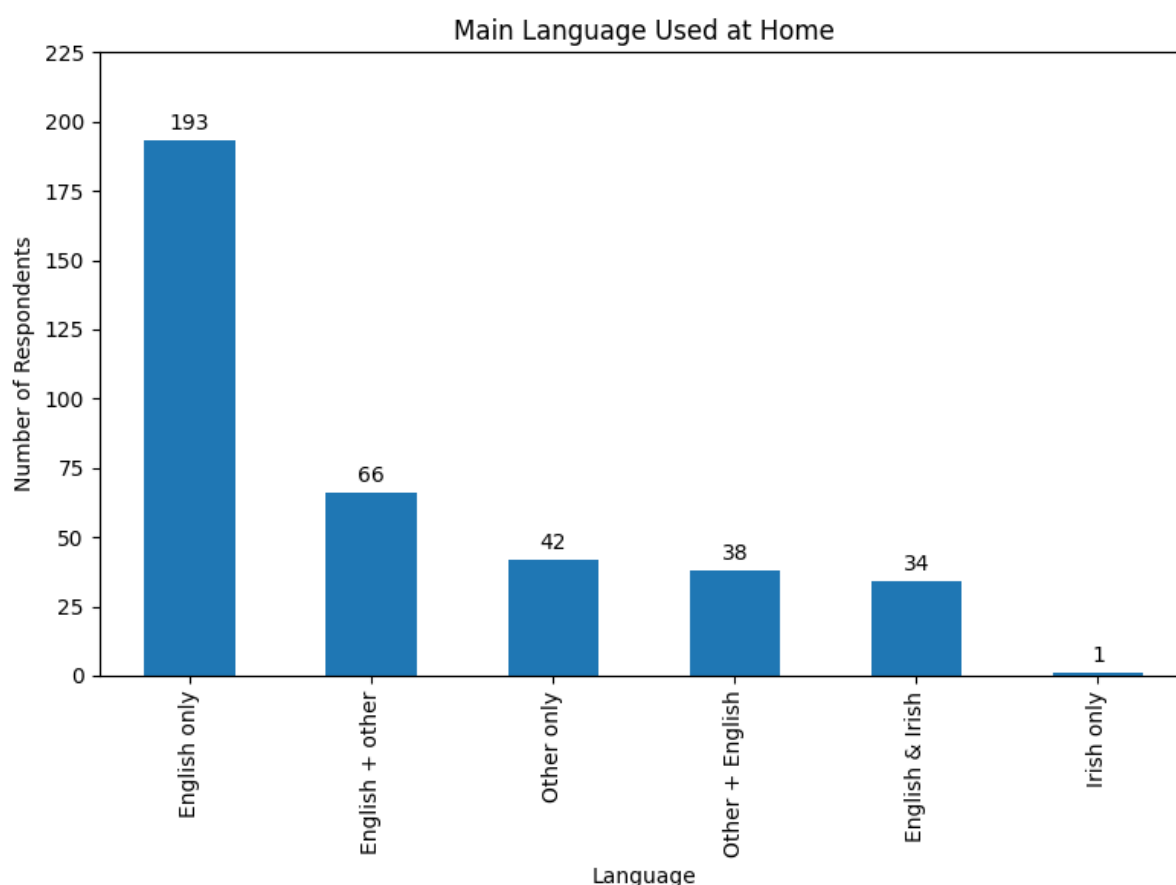


Figure 8 illustrates the main language(s) used at home by participants. Most respondents reported using only English at home ($n = 193$), indicating that English was the dominant home language within the sample. A further 66 participants reported mainly using English while also speaking some other language(s), which suggests multilingual practices are present among respondents. This finding is consistent with data from the Central Statistics Office (2024), which indicate that Ireland has experienced increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. Smaller groups reported using only other language(s) at home ($n = 42$) or mainly other language(s) alongside some English ($n = 38$). In addition, 34 participants indicated using both English and Irish at home, whereas only one respondent reported using only Irish.

Figure 8. Main Language Used at Home.

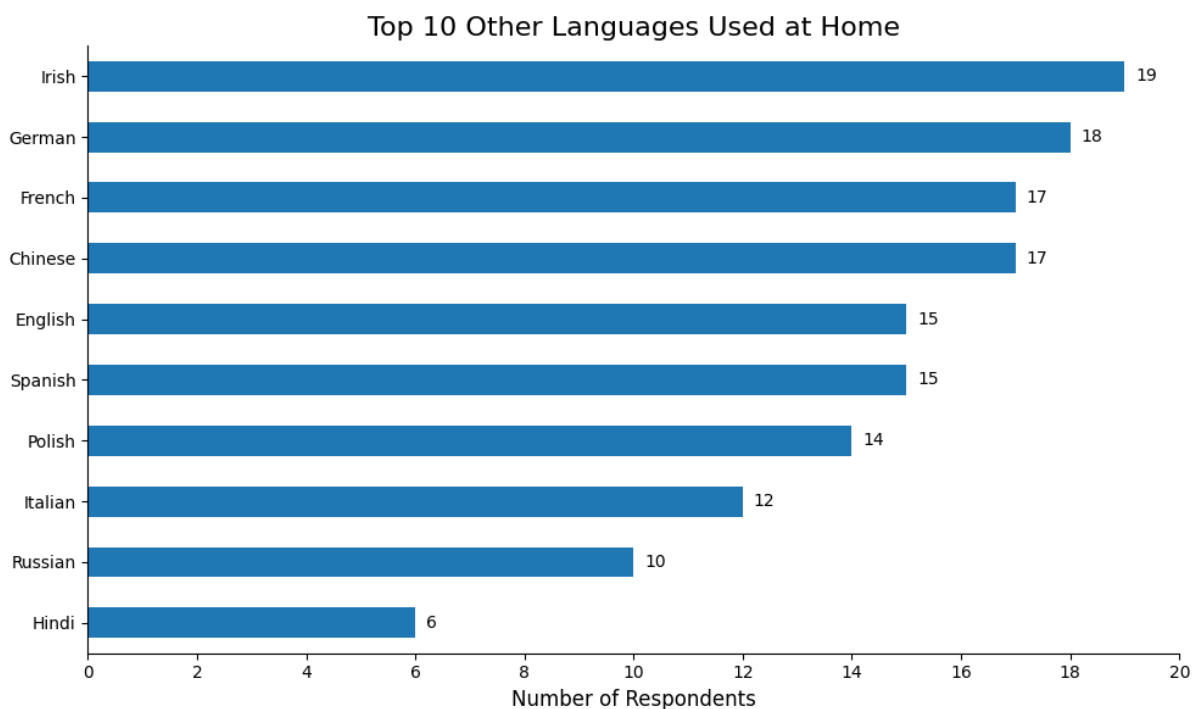


Specifically, Figure 9 presents the ten most frequently reported other languages used at home by participants. Irish was the most reported language ($n = 19$), followed closely by German ($n = 18$), while both French and Chinese were reported by 17 participants each. English and

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Spanish were each identified by 15 respondents, and Polish was reported by 14 participants. Italian ($n = 12$) and Russian ($n = 10$) were also relatively common, whereas Hindi was reported less frequently ($n = 6$).

Figure 9. Top 10 Other Languages Used at Home



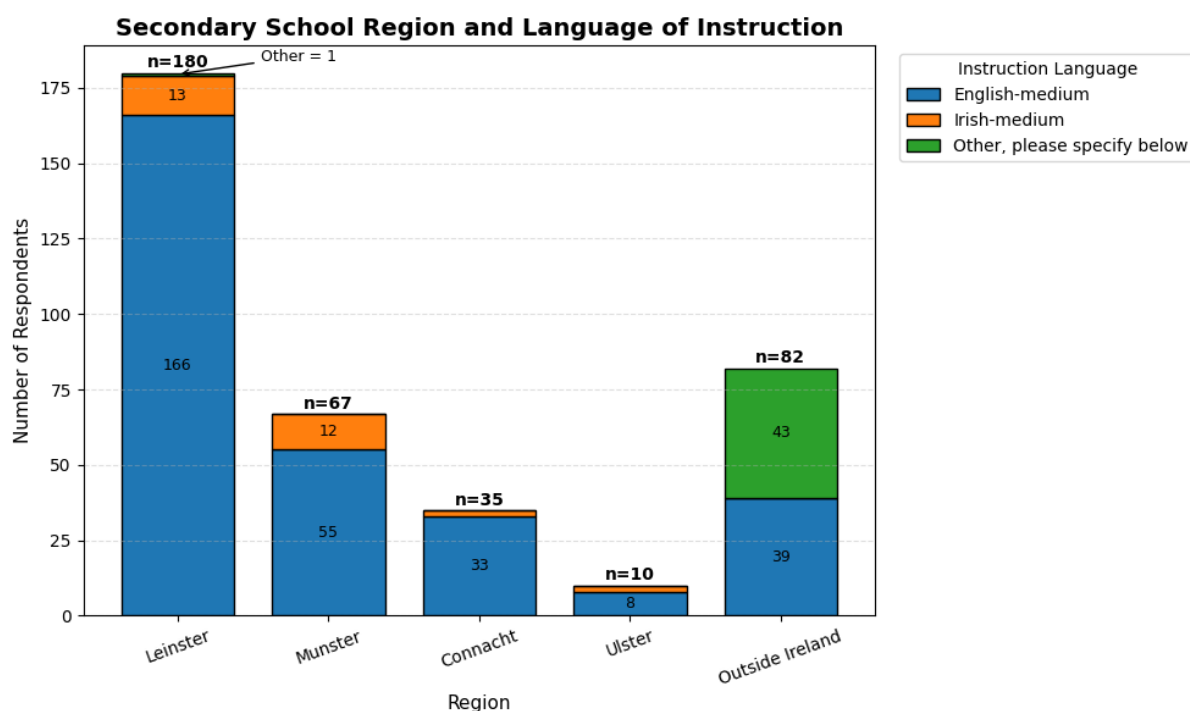
Overall, the findings suggest that while English was the predominant home language, the sample also reflected a degree of linguistic diversity and multilingualism, with a broad range of European and non-European languages represented in the home environment. This finding echoed data from the Central Statistics Office (2024), which indicate increasing linguistic diversity in Ireland.

4.2.2 Part 2: Secondary School Language Learning Experience

As shown in Figure 10, English-medium instruction was the dominant educational experience across all regions in Ireland. Leinster accounted for the largest number of respondents ($n = 180$), the majority reported English-medium instruction ($n = 166$), while a smaller proportion

attended Irish-medium schools ($n = 13$). Similar patterns were observed in Munster, where most participants reported English-medium instruction ($n = 55$), alongside a smaller number of Irish-medium respondents ($n = 12$). In Connacht and Ulster, nearly all participants reported English-medium schooling, with only very small numbers indicating Irish-medium education.

Figure 10. Secondary School Profiles Among Participants



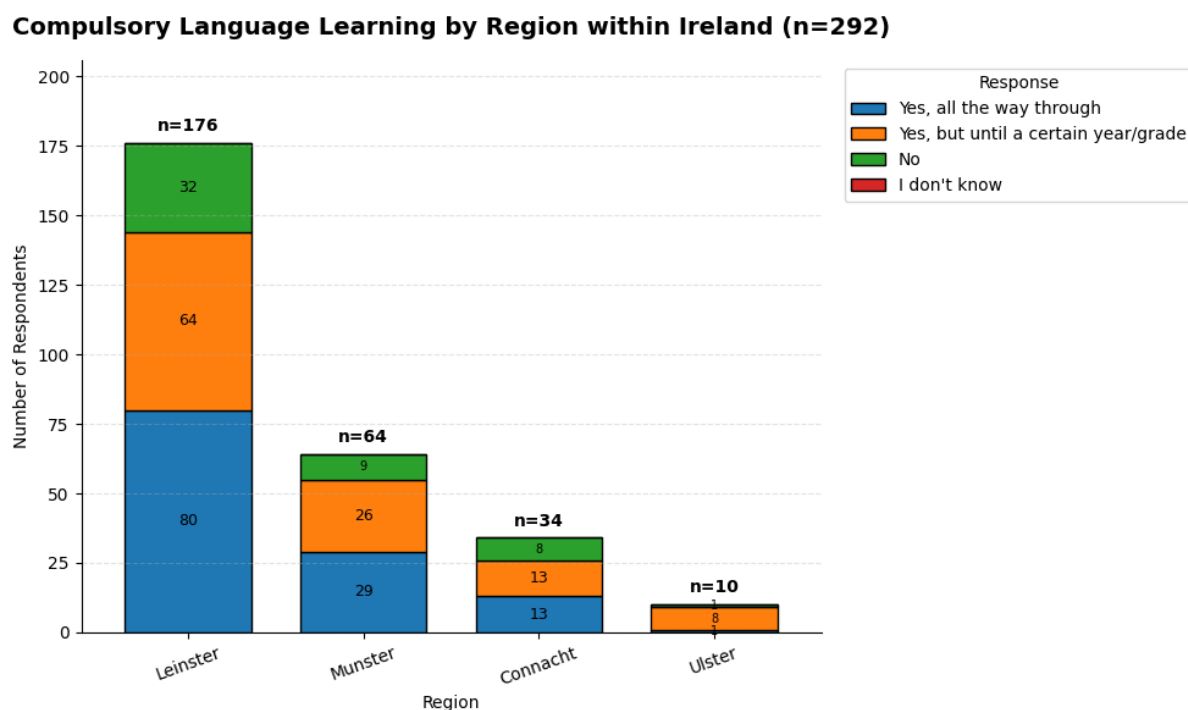
In contrast, respondents educated outside Ireland displayed substantially greater linguistic diversity. Among participants educated outside Ireland ($n = 82$), 43 reported their school instruction through “other” languages, slightly exceeding those who experienced English-medium instruction ($n = 39$). Regarding “other” instructional languages, Italian was the most frequently reported instructional language ($n = 6$), followed by Chinese ($n = 5$), Spanish and French (both $n = 4$). Smaller numbers of participants reported Arabic, German, Romanian, and Polish (each $n = 2$), while several additional languages, including Czech, Japanese, Slovenian, Slovak, Ukrainian, Norwegian, Turkish, Bulgarian, and Portuguese, were each represented by a single participant. Among these respondents, most participants experienced monolingual instruction ($n = 39$), while bilingual instructional experiences were comparatively uncommon ($n = 4$), including Belarusian and Russian, Chinese and English, Danish and English, and English

and German. Only one participant reported a multilingual instructional background involving three languages (English, French, and Spanish).

Overall, the findings indicate that English-medium education predominated across Irish regions, whereas participants educated outside Ireland were considerably more likely to have experienced instruction through other languages, reflecting a degree of linguistic and educational diversity.

As shown in Figure 11, regional variation was evident in compulsory language learning experiences among the Irish sample ($n = 292$). Leinster accounted for the largest number of respondents ($n = 176$), followed by Munster ($n = 64$), Connacht ($n = 34$), and Ulster ($n = 10$). Across all regions, the most common responses were either that language learning was compulsory throughout secondary school or compulsory until a certain year or grade. Respondents reporting that language learning was not compulsory were fewer in number but present across all major regions, particularly Leinster ($n = 32$).

Figure 11. Compulsory Language Learning by Region within Ireland



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Overall, the findings demonstrate that compulsory language learning formed a substantial component of secondary education across Irish regions, although the duration and consistency of compulsory provision varied.

As shown in Table 3, Irish was the most commonly taken language ($n = 251$), followed by French ($n = 162$), Spanish ($n = 100$), and German ($n = 98$) in the senior cycle, despite most students coming from English-medium schools and a reported decline in uptake of Irish as a Leaving Certificate subject since 2021 (NCCA, 2025). This may be attributed to the fact that Irish is a compulsory subject throughout secondary education in Ireland (Flynn & Murchadha, 2026) unless students are exempted.

Table 3. Distribution of Language Uptake in Irish Secondary Schools

Language subject	n
Irish	251
French	162
Spanish	100
German	98
Chinese	14
Italian	13
Polish	7
Russian	7
Ancient Greek	6
Japanese	6
Arabic	3
Portuguese	2
Lithuanian	2
Ukrainian	2
Hebrew Studies	1
Other non-curricular language	37
I didn't take any language(s)	13

The pattern of language subjects taken in the final year of secondary school broadly reflects trends in Leaving Certificate modern foreign language uptake. It also aligns with our audit of language provision at third level, where Irish is widely offered across undergraduate programmes (See Section 4.1).

In addition, smaller numbers of participants reported studying languages such as Chinese and Italian (both $n = 14$ and $n = 13$ respectively), while languages including Polish, Russian, Ancient Greek, Japanese, Arabic, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Hebrew Studies were selected by relatively few respondents. Additionally, 37 respondents reported studying another non-curricular language, which suggests the presence of international student backgrounds in the university settings. Only 13 participants indicated that they had not studied any language subjects during secondary school.

Table 4 presents the number of language subjects taken among participants. While 76 respondents reported studying only one language subject, the majority of participants studied two languages ($n = 225$). A further 56 respondents studied three languages, and four respondents reported studying four languages during secondary school. Overall, these findings suggest that multilingual language learning was a common educational experience among participants, with bilingual learning practice being particularly dominant. Nevertheless, caution is required when interpreting these results, as the sample is not representative of the wider Irish population. National-level data indicate that participation in multilingual language learning remains relatively low in Ireland compared with other EU countries (Eurostat, 2024).

Table 4. Number of Language Subjects Taken in Secondary Schools

Number of language subjects	n
0	13
1	76
2	225
3	56
4	4

Moreover, according to Table 5, the most common language combination was French and Irish (n = 93), followed by German and Irish (n = 57) and Spanish and Irish (n = 43). These findings suggest that Irish was most frequently studied alongside another European language rather than in isolation. One possible explanation is the structure of the Leaving Certificate curriculum, which requires most students to study the two national languages, English and Irish (unless exempt), while allowing them to choose a modern foreign language as an additional subject (Department of Education and Skills, 2017; Flynn & Murchadha, 2026). More complex multilingual combinations were also evident, including French + Irish + Spanish (n = 12) and French + German + Irish (n = 12), indicating that a certain number of participants engaged with three-language learning trajectories during secondary education, which further highlights the predominance of multilingual language learning practice in Ireland.

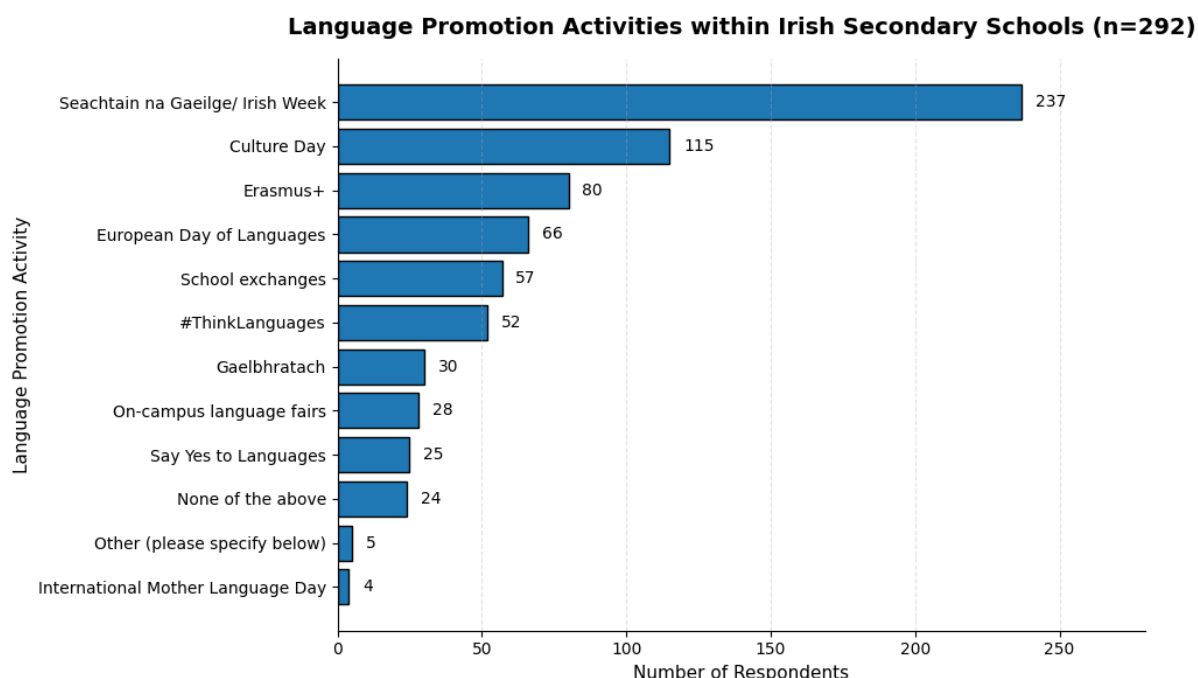
Table 5. Most Common Language Subject Combinations

Language combination	n
French + Irish	93
German + Irish	57
Spanish + Irish	43
French + Irish + Spanish	12
French + German + Irish	12

Among Irish sample (n = 292) as shown in Figure 12, Seachtain na Gaeilge/Irish Week was the most widely experienced activity, reported by 237 respondents. This suggests that Irish-language cultural promotion remains highly visible within secondary schools. The second most frequently reported activity was Culture Day (n = 115), followed by Erasmus+ participation (n = 80), European Day of Languages activities (n = 66) and #ThinkLanguages (n = 52). These findings demonstrate a substantial emphasis on intercultural and multilingual awareness within the school environment, reflecting one of the key objectives of *Languages Connect* (2017). It also suggests that most participants had encountered at least one form of language promotion activity during secondary school. This finding is consistent with the Language Trends Ireland 2025-26 report (McKelvey et al., 2026), which identified school exchanges and cultural events as the most successful language learning enrichment activities,

highlighting the important role of extracurricular and intercultural initiatives in promoting language learning.

Figure 12. Language Promotion Activities with Irish Secondary Schools



Regarding mobility opportunities, such as school exchanges ($n = 57$), were also relatively common, indicating that many students were exposed to initiatives promoting language learning beyond the formal curriculum. This finding is consistent with European language policy and *Languages Connect* (2017), which emphasises the importance of student mobility and intercultural exchange as key components of language learning.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that language promotion within Irish secondary schools appears to be strongly shaped by Irish-language initiatives alongside broader European and intercultural language-learning programmes including those organised by Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI).

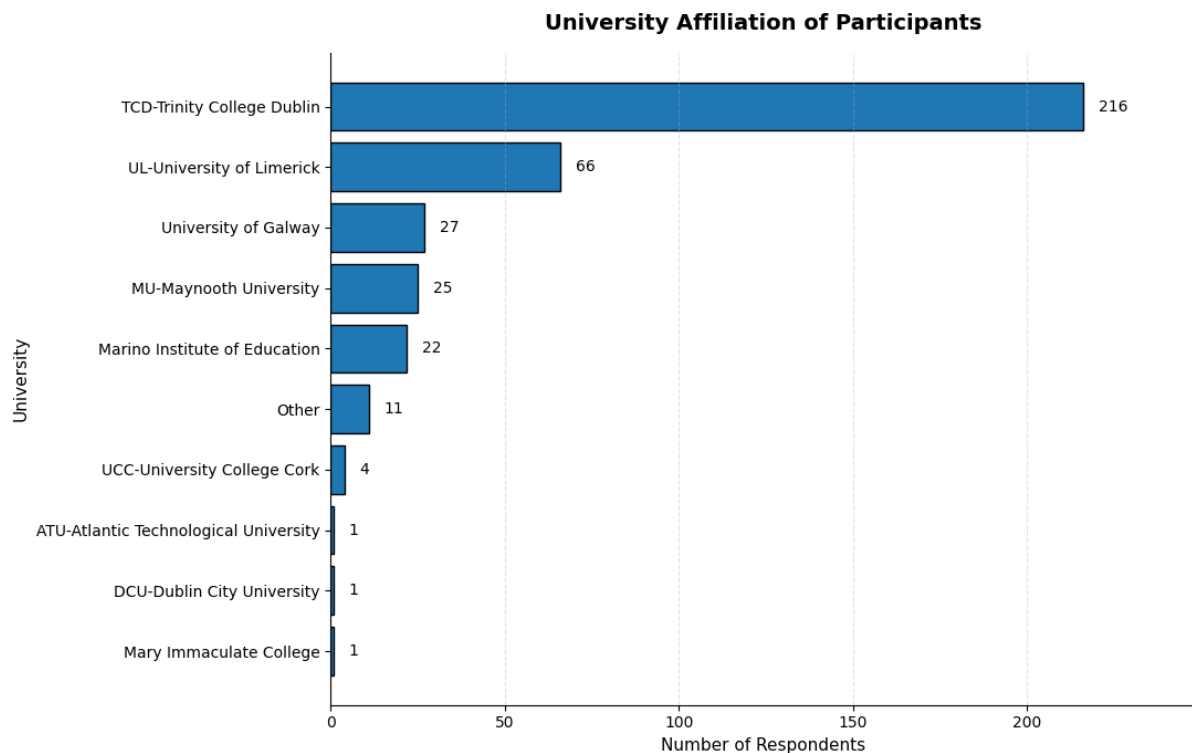
4.2.3 Part 3: University Study Profile and Language Participation

As shown in Figure 13, the majority of respondents were affiliated with Trinity College Dublin ($n = 216$). The second largest group of participants came from University of Limerick ($n = 66$), followed by University of Galway ($n = 27$) and Maynooth University ($n = 25$). A smaller

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proportion of respondents were affiliated with Marino Institute of Education ($n = 22$), while all remaining institutions accounted for relatively few participants, such as University College Cork ($n = 4$), Atlantic Technological University ($n = 1$), Dublin City University ($n = 1$), and Mary Immaculate College ($n = 1$). Overall, the findings suggest that the sample was predominantly drawn from a limited number of universities, particularly Trinity College Dublin.

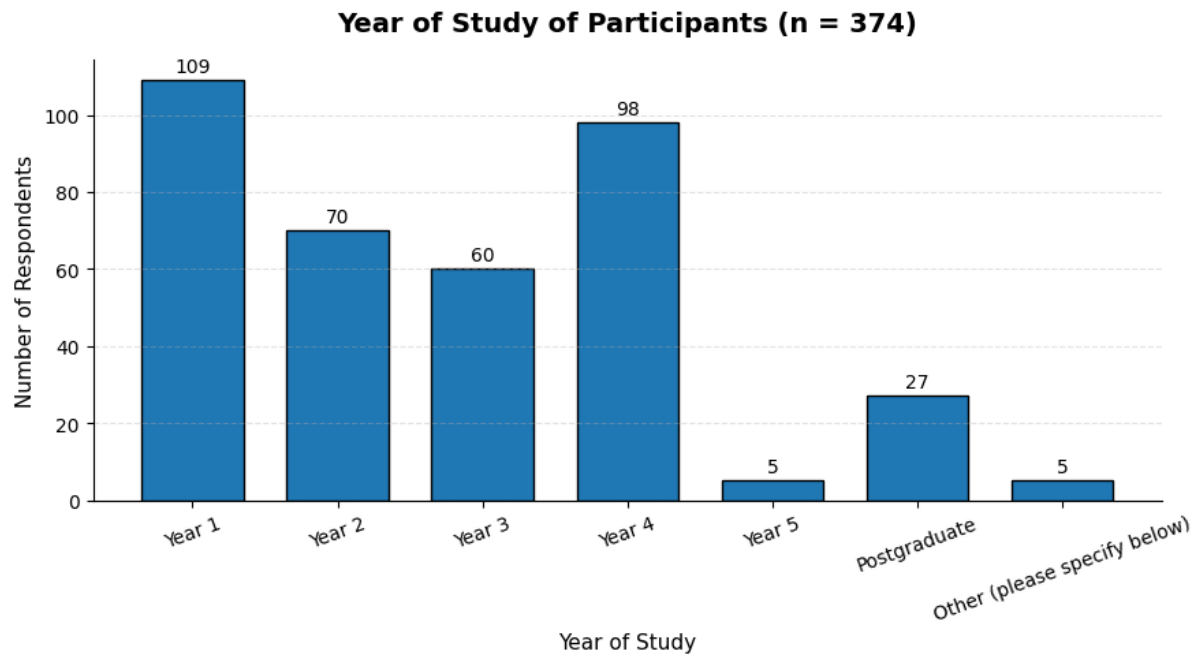
Figure 13. Distribution of University Affiliation among Participants



As shown in Figure 14, Year 1 students represented the largest group of respondents ($n = 109$), followed closely by Year 4 students ($n = 98$). Year 2 students accounted for 70 participants, while Year 3 students comprised 60 respondents. Only small numbers of participants were enrolled in Year 5 programmes ($n = 5$) or selected the “Other” category ($n = 5$). Postgraduate students accounted for 27 participants. The distribution indicates that the sample was composed predominantly of undergraduate students, particularly those in the first and final years of study.

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Figure 14. Distribution of Year of Study Among Participants



As displayed in Figure 15, most participants ($n = 241$) reported that they were studying a language course at the time of the survey. In contrast, approximately one-third of participants ($n = 125$) indicated that they were not enrolled in a language course. Only a very small proportion of respondents ($n = 8$) reported that they were not currently studying a language but planned to enrol in one in the future.

Figure 15. Language Enrolment Status at University

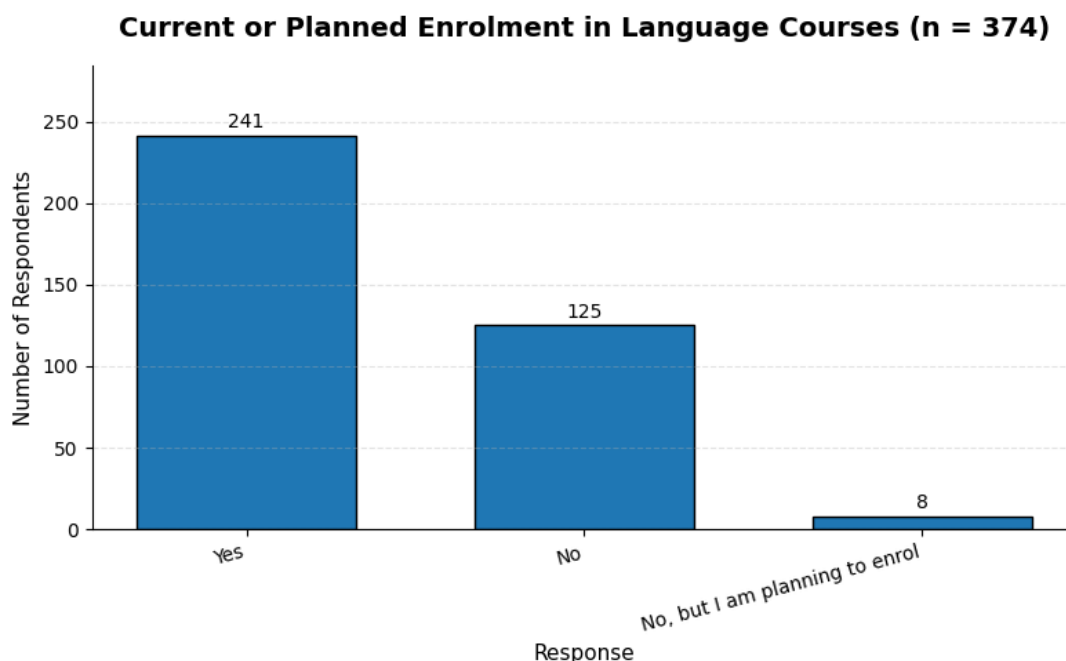


Figure 16 presents whether university language courses contributed academic credit towards students' degree programmes in the sample. It should be noted that the total number of responses for this question ($n = 237$) is slightly lower than the number of respondents who reported being enrolled in a language course ($n = 241$). This discrepancy arises because four participants who indicated that they were currently studying a language course did not provide a response to the follow-up question regarding whether the course carried academic credit. Consequently, the analysis of language-course credit status is based only on the 237 valid responses available for this item. Among the 237 respondents, the majority reported that their language course carried academic credit ($n = 221$). In contrast, only 16 respondents indicated that their language course did not contribute credits towards their degree.

Figure 16. Language Course Credit Contribution

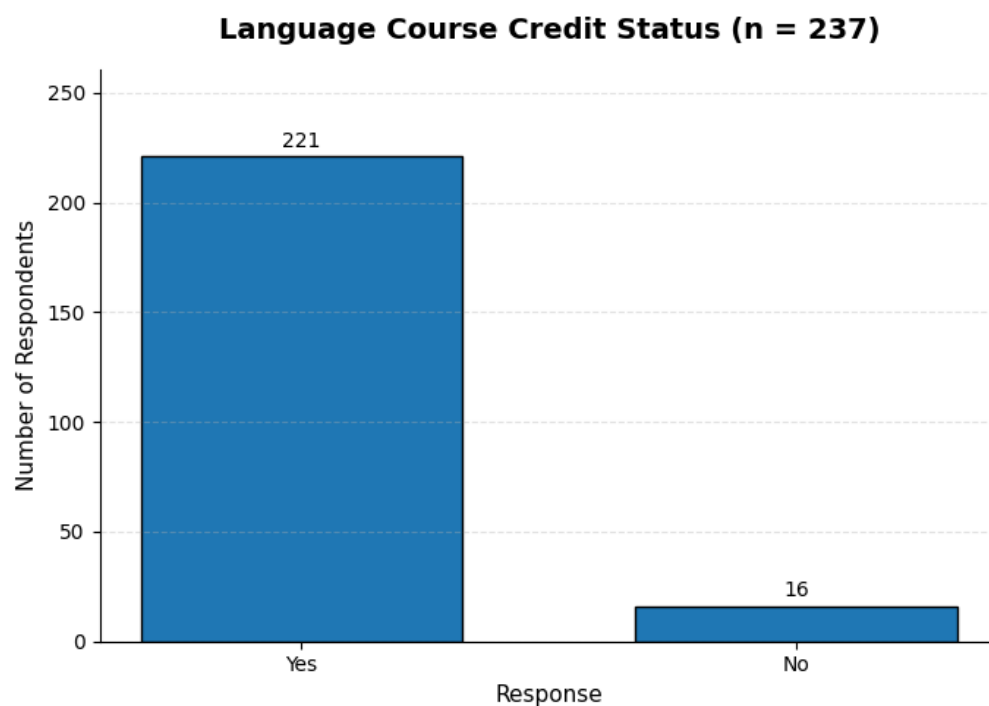
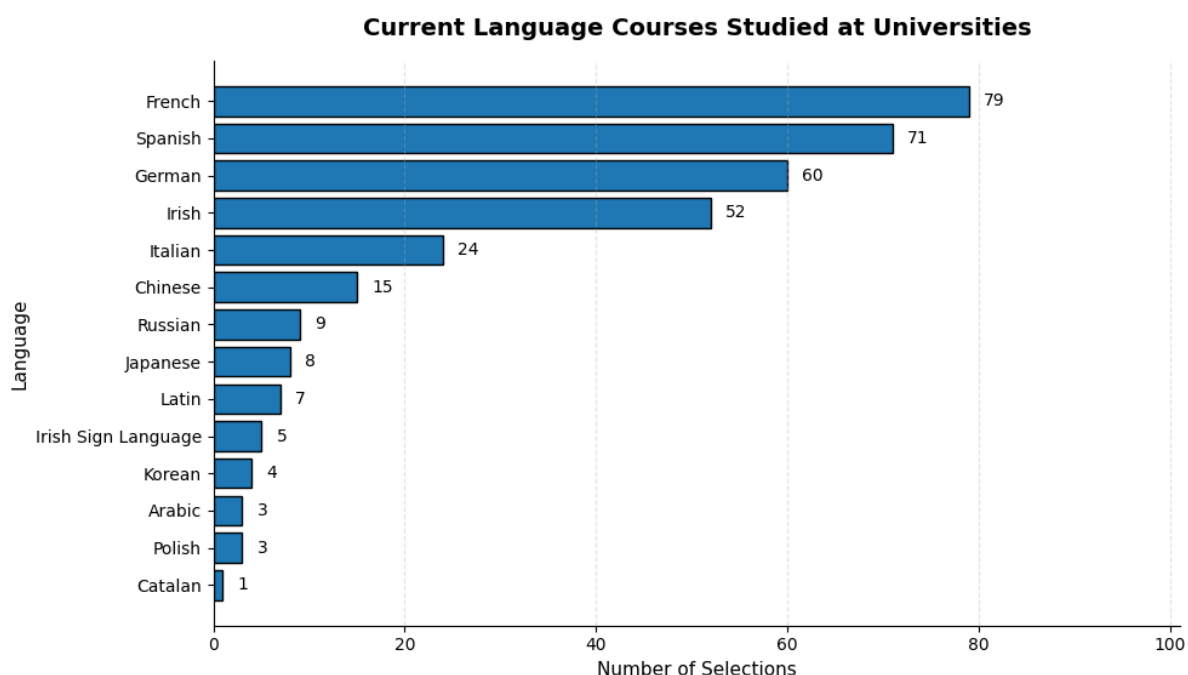


Figure 17 shows the languages currently being studied by participants at university. French was the most commonly studied language, selected by 79 respondents, followed by Spanish (n = 71), German (n = 60), and Irish (n = 52).

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Figure 17. Current Language Courses Studied at Universities



Note. Multiple selections were permitted.

These findings indicate that language study among participants was concentrated primarily in widely taught European languages. Although a range of other MFLs were represented, enrolment in these subjects was comparatively limited.

In addition, while Irish dominated language learning in secondary school due to its compulsory status as discussed in Section 4.2.2, its uptake decreased substantially in higher education within the sample. This finding is consistent with national trends indicating a decline in the uptake of Irish as a Leaving Certificate subject since 2021 (NCCA, 2025).

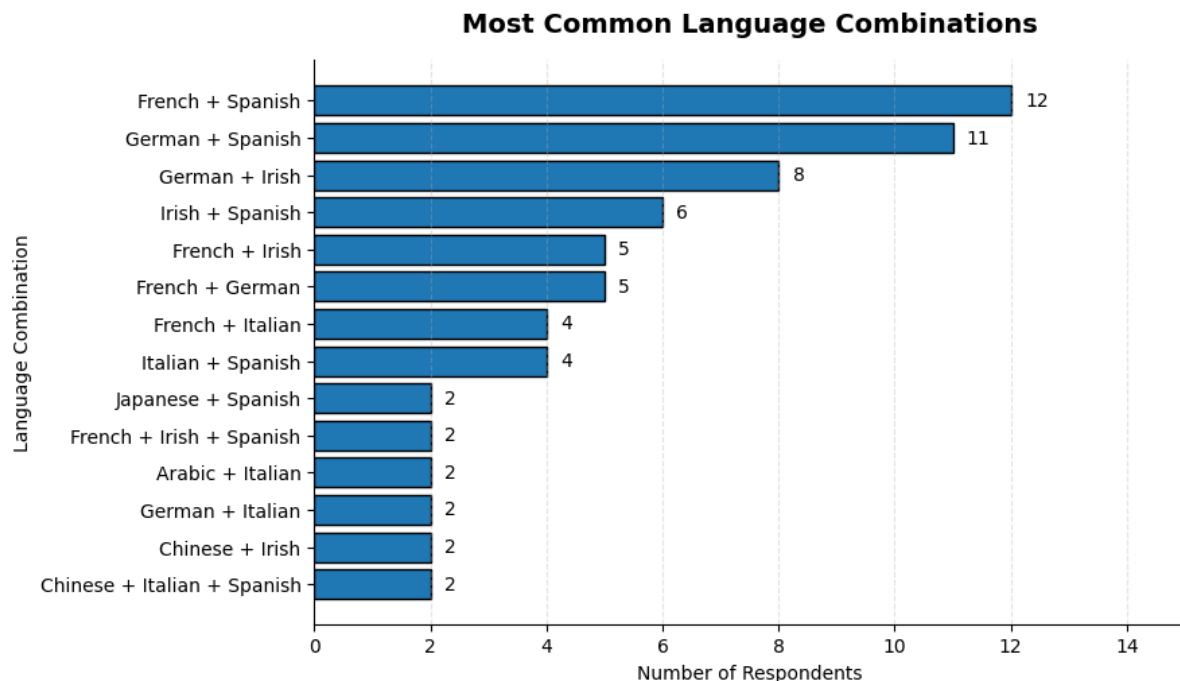
By contrast, French remained highly popular across both educational levels and became the most studied language at university among participants. Spanish and German also maintained relatively strong representation, which may suggest student interest sustained in major European languages beyond compulsory schooling.

Figure 18 presents the most common language combinations among students studying two or more languages simultaneously. The most frequently reported combination was French and Spanish ($n = 12$), followed closely by German and Spanish ($n = 11$) and German and Irish ($n = 8$). Other combinations included Irish and Spanish ($n = 6$), French and German ($n = 5$), and

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French and Irish (n = 5). A small number of students reported studying three languages simultaneously, including French, Irish, and Spanish (n = 2) and Chinese, Italian, and Spanish (n = 2).

Figure 18. Most Common Language Combinations at University



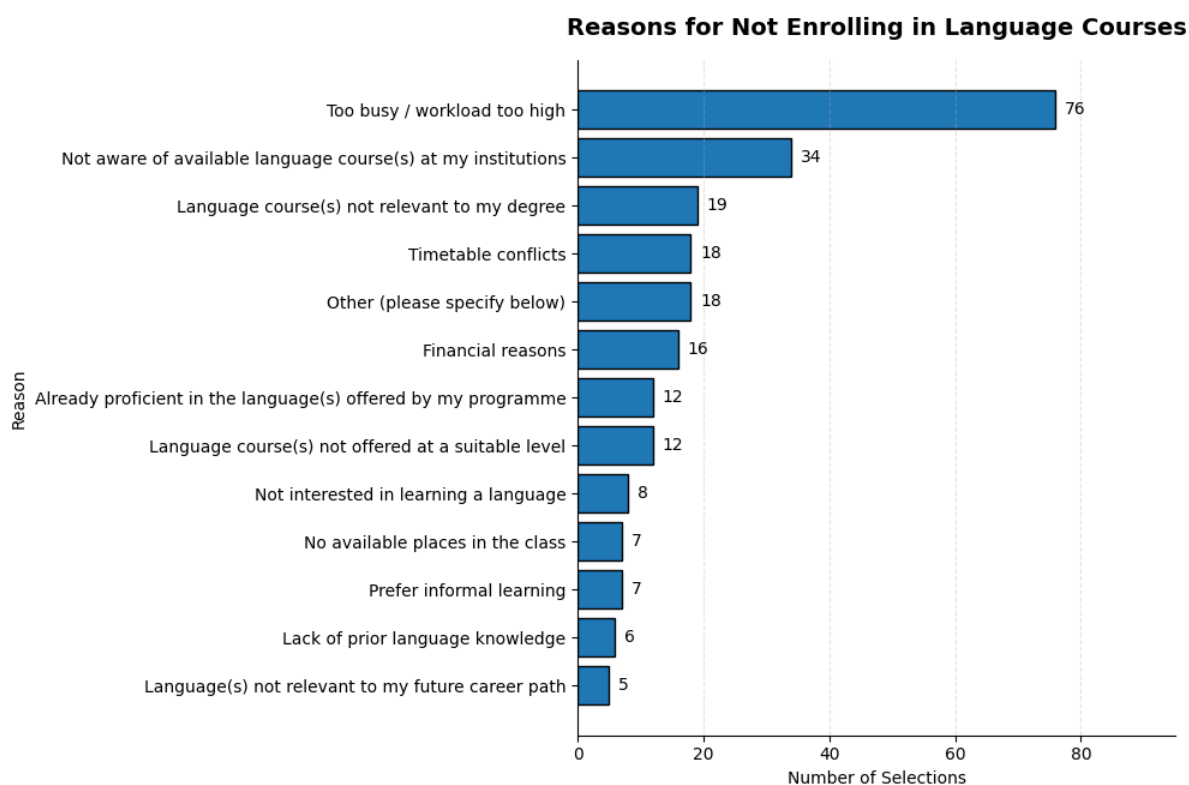
Note. Only combinations reported by two or more respondents are displayed. Single-language responses are excluded.

The results suggest that multilingual language study was relatively uncommon compared with single-language study. Nevertheless, where students did study multiple languages, combinations tended to involve the most popular languages identified in the overall distribution, particularly French, Spanish, German, and Irish. This pattern may reflect institutional language offerings and students' preferences for combining major European languages within their degree programmes.

There were 125 participants who did not enrol in language courses at their institutions. Figure 19 presents the reasons reported by students for not enrolling in university language courses.

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Figure 19. Reasons for Not Taking Language Courses at University



Note. Multiple responses were permitted.

Overall, the findings suggest that students' non-enrolment in university language courses was driven primarily by structural and organisational constraints rather than by negative attitudes towards language learning itself. The predominance of workload-related concerns ($n = 76$) and timetable conflicts ($n = 18$) indicates that competing academic demands may limit students' capacity to engage in additional language study. Furthermore, the relatively high number of respondents who reported a lack of awareness of available language courses ($n = 34$) suggests that institutional communication and promotion of language opportunities may be insufficient. The perception that language courses were not relevant to students' degree programmes ($n = 19$) further highlights the challenges of integrating language learning into non-language specialised programmes. In contrast, reasons reflecting low motivation or perceived lack of value, such as a lack of interest in language learning ($n = 8$) or irrelevance to future career paths ($n = 5$), were reported by relatively few respondents. These findings suggest that barriers to language uptake in higher education may be more closely associated with institutional and curricular factors than with students' intrinsic interest in language learning.

4.2.4 Part 4: Motivational five likert-scale statements

As stated in Section 3.2, this motivational questionnaire was divided into six dimensions: Ideal L2 Self (4 items), Intrinsic Orientation (4 items), Instrumental Orientation (6 items), Integrative Orientation (4 items), Ought-to L2 Self (4 items), and Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation (4 items).

Table 6 presents the descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliability for the six motivation constructs. Overall, participants demonstrated relatively strong motivation towards learning modern foreign languages. This is reflected in the relatively low mean scores for Ideal L2 Self ($M = 1.56$, $SD = 0.72$), Intrinsic Orientation ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 0.72$), Instrumental Orientation ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.67$), and Integrative Orientation ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.64$), indicating that respondents generally expressed strong agreement with statements relating to these motivational dimensions. Among these, Ideal L2 Self recorded the lowest mean score, suggesting that participants had particularly strong aspirations to become competent users of additional languages. In contrast, Ought-to L2 Self produced the highest mean score ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.96$), indicating that external pressures or obligations, such as expectations from parents, teachers, or society, were considerably less influential than intrinsic or self-determined motivational factors. The relatively higher standard deviation also suggests greater variation among participants in the extent to which external expectations influenced their motivation.

These findings are broadly consistent with those reported by Oakes (2013), who similarly found that Ideal L2 Self, intrinsic orientation, instrumental orientation, and integrative orientation were the dominant motivational constructs among university students studying French and Spanish in England, whereas the Ought-to L2 Self was the least influential source of motivation.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Reliability of the Motivation Scales

Dimension	Items	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Ideal L2 Self	4	238	1.56	0.72	.88
Intrinsic Orientation	4	241	1.81	0.72	.80
Instrumental Orientation	6	241	1.88	0.67	.77
Integrative Orientation	4	243	1.79	0.64	.69
Ought-to L2 Self	4	239	3.48	0.96	.80
Attitudes Towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation	4	238	2.34	0.77	.74

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha. Lower mean scores indicate stronger agreement and higher levels of motivation (1 = Very much, 5 = Not at all). *n* varies across scales because of missing responses.

Additionally, participants reported moderately positive Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation (*M* = 2.34, *SD* = 0.77). Although this construct received less favourable ratings than the other internally driven motivational dimensions, the mean score still indicates generally positive intercultural attitudes and an openness to engaging with speakers of other languages and cultures.

The reliability analysis demonstrated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency across all six scales. Ideal L2 Self exhibited excellent reliability (α = .88), while Intrinsic Orientation (α = .80) and Ought-to L2 Self (α = .80) showed good reliability. Instrumental Orientation (α = .77) and Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation (α = .74) demonstrated acceptable internal consistency. Although Integrative Orientation produced the lowest reliability coefficient (α = .69), it remained close to the commonly accepted threshold of .70 for exploratory research and was therefore considered adequate for subsequent analyses.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants reported relatively strong intrinsic and self-determined motivation towards learning modern foreign languages, whereas externally regulated motivation was comparatively weak. Although these motivational profiles suggest generally positive attitudes towards language learning, they do not necessarily translate into continued language study at university.

Moreover, a series of Mann–Whitney U tests (Table 7) were conducted to examine whether language learning motivation differed by gender. Overall, no statistically significant gender differences were found across the six motivational dimensions (all $p > .05$). These findings indicate that gender was not a significant factor influencing language learning motivation among participants in the present study.

Table 7. Mann–Whitney U tests comparing motivation dimensions by gender

Motivation Dimension	Male (n = 52) Median	Female (n = 175–180) Median	U	p	Rank-Biserial Correlation (rrb)
Ideal L2 Self	1.25	1.25	4475.50	.852	.02
Intrinsic Orientation	1.50	1.75	4369.00	.537	.06
Instrumental Orientation	1.83	1.83	4881.00	.548	-.06
Integrative Orientation	1.62	1.75	3862.50	.053	.18
Ought-to L2 Self	3.62	3.62	4551.50	.954	.01
Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation	2.25	2.25	3808.00	.073	.16

Although the differences were not statistically significant, male participants reported slightly stronger Integrative Orientation ($M = 1.64$) than female participants ($M = 1.83$). Similarly, males demonstrated stronger Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation ($M = 2.16$) than females ($M = 2.40$). However, the associated effect sizes were small ($rbc = .175$ and $.163$, respectively), suggesting limited practical significance. Given that lower scores reflect stronger endorsement of the motivational constructs, these findings suggest only limited gender differences in these dimensions.

In addition, a series of Spearman rank-order correlations were conducted (Table 8) to examine the relationship between age and the six motivational dimensions. These findings

suggest that motivational orientations were relatively consistent across age groups within the sample.

Table 8. Spearman correlations between age and motivation dimensions

Motivation Dimension	ρ	p
Ideal L2 Self	-0.007	.919
Intrinsic Orientation	-0.014	.834
Instrumental Orientation	0.067	.304
Integrative Orientation	-0.068	.293
Ought-to L2 Self	0.071	.274
Attitudes towards Other Cultures	-0.066	.309

Note. $p < .05$. $p < .01$. $p < .001$.

Furthermore, to investigate whether language learning motivation differed across universities, a series of Kruskal–Wallis H tests were conducted (Table 9). Significant differences were observed for Ideal L2 Self, $H(5) = 12.41$, $p = .030$, Instrumental Orientation, $H(5) = 17.74$, $p = .003$, Integrative Orientation, $H(5) = 11.45$, $p = .043$, and Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation, $H(5) = 11.65$, $p = .040$. These findings suggest that students from different higher education institutions differed in several aspects of their language learning motivation.

Table 9. Kruskal–Wallis Tests Examining Differences in Motivation Dimensions Across Universities

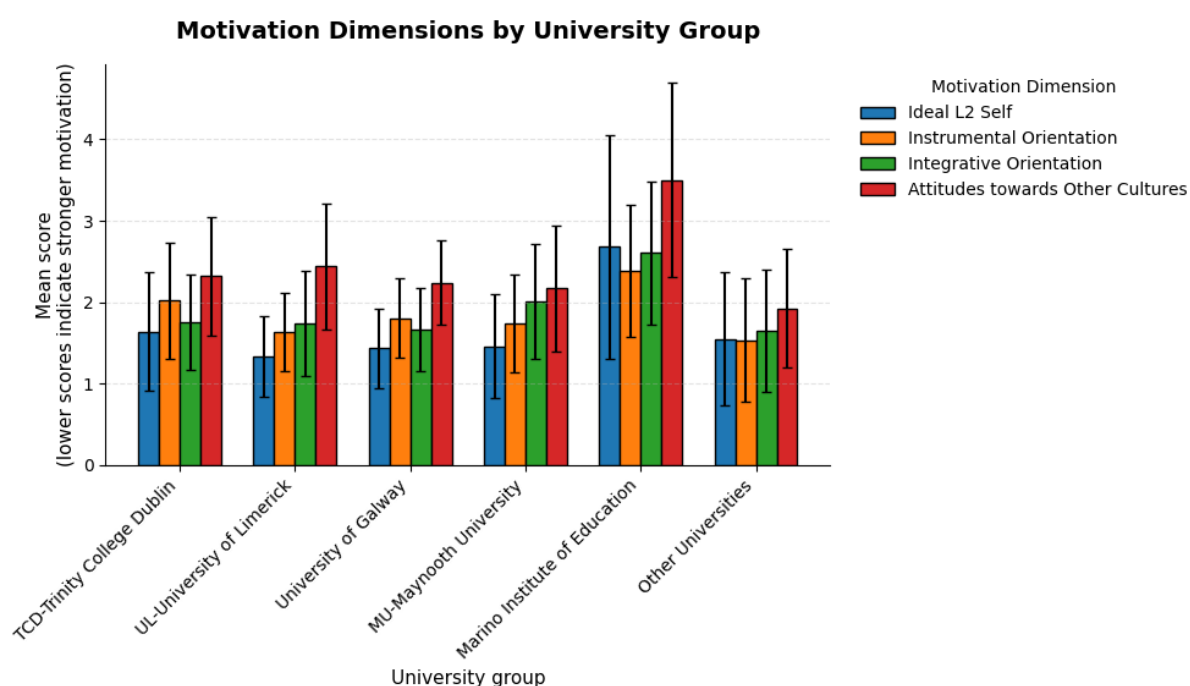
Motivation Dimension	$H(5)$	p
Ideal L2 Self	12.41	.030
Intrinsic Orientation	8.75	.119
Instrumental Orientation	17.74	.003
Integrative Orientation	11.45	.043
Ought-to L2 Self	4.14	.529
Attitudes towards Other Cultures and Integrative Motivation	11.65	.040

Note. Small university categories were combined into 'Other Universities'. Kruskal–Wallis H tests were used because the motivation scores were based on Likert-type scale data.

However, subsequent Dunn–Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons did not reveal any statistically significant pairwise differences between individual university groups (all adjusted $p > .05$).

As illustrated in Figure 20, mean motivation scores varied across higher education institutions. Students from the University of Limerick generally reported stronger Ideal L2 Self, Instrumental Orientation, and Integrative Orientation than students from other institutions, whereas participants from Marino Institute of Education reported the weakest motivational profile across four dimensions. One possible explanation is that students at Marino Institute of Education may perceive foreign language learning as less central to their academic programmes or future professional pathways than students enrolled in institutions with stronger traditions in language education. Nevertheless, given the small number of Marino participants, this interpretation should be regarded as tentative and requires further investigation with a larger sample.

Figure 20. Mean Motivation Scores Across Universities



Note. Error bars represent ± 1 SD. Lower scores indicate stronger endorsement of the motivational construct.

4.2.5 Summary

In summary, the large-scale survey provides a comprehensive picture of participants' linguistic backgrounds, language learning experiences, university language participation, and

motivational orientations. The findings reveal that participants were predominantly young undergraduate students from English-speaking backgrounds, although considerable linguistic diversity and multilingualism were evident in both home language use and educational experiences. Most participants had studied more than one language during secondary school, with Irish, French, Spanish, and German emerging as the most commonly learned languages. Language promotion activities, including Irish-language initiatives, European language programmes, and student mobility opportunities, were widely experienced and appeared to contribute to participants' exposure to multilingualism beyond the formal curriculum.

At university level, the majority were enrolled in language courses, most of which contributed academic credit towards their degree programmes. Language study was concentrated primarily in major European languages, particularly French, Spanish, German, and Irish, although multilingual language study at university was less common than in secondary school.

Finally, the motivational findings suggest that participants generally demonstrated positive orientations towards language learning. Motivation appeared to be largely unrelated to demographic variables such as gender and age, indicating a relatively consistent motivational profile across the sample. Although significant differences were identified across institutions for several motivational dimensions, no specific pairwise differences emerged in post-hoc analyses. Overall, the findings suggest that language learning in Irish higher education is shaped by a combination of prior educational experiences, institutional opportunities, and broader multilingual and intercultural influences, while barriers to participation appear to be more relevant to structural factors than from students' motivation to learn languages.

4.3 Preliminary Findings of Focus Group Interviews

Analysis of the focus group discussions with undergraduate students, language lecturers and guidance counsellors generated five overarching themes relating to modern language learning in Irish higher education and the wider educational system. While students primarily discussed their learning experiences and motivations, lecturers and guidance counsellors provided institutional and policy perspectives that explained many of the challenges identified by students. Together, the findings demonstrate that decisions about language

learning are shaped by the interaction of individual motivation, institutional provision and broader educational policies.

4.3.1 Theme 1. Language learning is valued, but opportunities remain uneven

Across all stakeholder groups, participants recognised the personal, academic and professional value of learning additional languages. Students described language learning as an opportunity to broaden cultural understanding, improve communication skills and enhance future employability. Many also appreciated the more authentic and communicative approaches adopted in university language classes compared with secondary education.

However, lecturers highlighted that access to these opportunities varies considerably across Irish higher education institutions. While some universities offer elective language modules, evening programmes and extracurricular language activities, others restrict language learning to students enrolled in specialist degree programmes. Students enrolled in non-language degrees frequently reported having little or no opportunity to study languages despite expressing interest. This suggests that interest in language learning exists across disciplines, but institutional structures determine whether students are able to act upon that interest.

4.3.2 Theme 2. Structural barriers outweigh motivational barriers

Students consistently reported practical barriers that prevented continued language study, including timetable clashes, limited elective availability, demanding degree programmes and insufficient progression opportunities, which consistently aligned with the survey data. Several participants indicated that they discontinued language learning despite remaining interested.

Lecturers echoed these concerns from an institutional perspective, identifying limited funding, reduced staffing, shrinking language provision and constrained curriculum space as major obstacles. Guidance counsellors further explained that students' subject choices are strongly influenced by university entry requirements, option structures and CAO considerations rather than lack of interest. These findings help explain the declining uptake of modern languages in Irish higher education. In particular, they align with the findings of McKelvey et al. (2026), who argue that the removal of foreign language matriculation requirements for admission to many undergraduate programmes has had unintended consequences for language learning

pathways. As fewer higher education programmes require a foreign language for entry, students are less likely to continue studying languages at Leaving Certificate level, contributing to a decline in language participation across the educational pipeline.

4.3.3 Theme 3. School experiences shape later language participation

Students frequently compared university language learning favourably with their experiences in secondary school. Many described secondary school language teaching as examination-oriented, heavily focused on grammar, reading and writing, with relatively limited opportunities for speaking, authentic communication or cultural engagement. Participants generally viewed university language learning more positively than secondary school, appreciating its greater academic depth, cultural content, and more motivated learning environment. However, many felt that language teaching at universities should place greater emphasis on oral communication, practical language use, and immersion in the target language, rather than literature introduction through English.

Guidance counsellors and lecturers complemented these observations by explaining how school-level factors, including subject option structures, parental expectations, university entry requirements and the quality of language teaching influence students' willingness to continue languages beyond compulsory education. Particularly, it is noteworthy that enthusiastic language teachers remain one of the strongest facilitators of sustained engagement. Students' university language participation begins long before university and is shaped by cumulative educational experiences.

4.3.4 Theme 4. Language learning extends beyond formal teaching

Students emphasised the importance of immersion, Erasmus, study abroad, cultural activities, informal conversation and authentic interaction for developing confidence and communicative competence. Several believed that these experiences contributed more to language development than classroom instruction alone.

Similarly, lecturers described numerous initiatives, including language hubs, conversation clubs, cultural societies, social media engagement, virtual reality learning and peer interaction that seek to create informal language learning environments. They also stressed that the

intercultural dimension of language education cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence or purely digital instruction.

4.3.5 Theme 5. Stronger system-wide coordination is needed

While students primarily discussed individual experiences, lecturers and guidance counsellors consistently highlighted broader policy challenges. Participants noted inconsistencies between national language strategies, teacher education requirements, accreditation processes and institutional implementation. They argued that expanding language learning requires closer collaboration between schools, universities, the Department of Education, the Teaching Council and higher education institutions.

Guidance counsellors also identified practical administrative barriers, including inconsistent university language entry requirements and complex exemption procedures, which can create confusion for students and schools. Therefore, findings suggested that improving language participation requires coordinated policy action across the entire educational pathway rather than isolated institutional initiatives.

Summary

The focus group findings broadly supported the survey results and provided deeper insights into students' experiences of language learning in Irish higher education. Across students, language lecturers, and guidance counsellors, participants recognised the value of language learning but identified structural barriers including limited language provision, curriculum constraints, timetable clashes, and policy factors as key influences on participation.

Overall, the focus groups highlighted the importance of expanding flexible language provision and creating more accessible pathways for students from all disciplinary backgrounds to engage with language learning in higher education. It is also suggested that more communicative and immersive approaches to language teaching are needed. Participants advocated greater emphasis on speaking practice, authentic language use, study abroad opportunities, and stronger links between language learning and future employment.

5 Implications and Recommendations

This study provides a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the attitudes, motivations, and decision-making processes that shape third-level students' engagement with foreign language study in Ireland. Drawing on findings, this section summarised the implications for *Languages Connect* and outlines the main recommendations that arise from this.

5.1 Implications for *Languages Connect*: Achievements and Challenges

The findings provide partial support for the objectives of *Languages Connect*, particularly its emphasis on increasing awareness of language learning, promoting multilingualism, and expanding opportunities for language engagement across the education system. The widespread participation reported in activities such as Seachtain na Gaeilge, Erasmus+, the European Day of Languages, and #ThinkLanguages organised by PPLI suggests that many students have been exposed to initiatives aligned with the strategy's goals of fostering positive attitudes towards language learning and intercultural awareness.

However, the findings also highlight several ongoing challenges. Despite participants reporting generally positive motivational orientations towards language learning, a substantial proportion were not enrolled in university language courses. The reasons identified, workload pressures, timetable clashes, limited awareness of opportunities, and perceived irrelevance to degree programmes, suggest that barriers to language participation are primarily structural rather than attitudinal. This indicates that increasing motivation alone may not be sufficient to achieve the objectives of *Languages Connect*.

5.2 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To support the next phase of *Languages Connect* development, policymakers and higher education institutions may consider:

1. Strengthen language learning pathways from secondary to higher education by ensuring that students who study languages at school can continue their language learning at university regardless of programme specialisation. This should include reviewing the impact of removing foreign language matriculation requirements and

investigating how elective-only language provision influences students' course selection and long-term language participation.

2. Diversify language provision across the higher education sector by expanding the range of languages offered across different institution types and geographical regions. Particular attention should be given to increasing access to less commonly taught and heritage languages, supporting the multilingualism and diversification objectives of *Languages Connect*.
3. Reduce structural barriers to participation by increasing timetable flexibility, expanding elective language opportunities, and developing cross-institutional collaboration through blended and online language programmes. Such collaboration would enable institutions with limited staffing or resources to provide students with access to a broader range of language options.
4. Improve the visibility and accessibility of language opportunities for students, particularly those enrolled in non-language disciplines, through targeted promotion, academic advising, and clearer information about available language pathways within and across institutions.
5. Strengthen the perceived value of language learning by continuing and expanding the promotion of careers requiring language skills and highlighting the employability, international, and intercultural benefits of multilingualism. Increasing students' awareness of the utility of languages may strengthen their future-oriented motivation (i.e., ought-to L2 self) and encourage sustained engagement with language learning.
6. Enhance international and intercultural learning opportunities, including study abroad, exchange programmes, virtual exchange, and other internationally oriented experiences, which students identified as valuable components of their language-learning journey and which support the internationalisation goals of *Languages Connect*.
7. Establish systematic monitoring of language participation across the education continuum, extending beyond secondary education to include higher education. Regular monitoring of language provision, enrolment, progression, and completion would provide evidence to evaluate the long-term impact of *Languages Connect* and inform future language policy and resource allocation.

Overall, students generally appear willing to engage with language learning, however, the challenge lies in ensuring that accessible and sustainable opportunities are available throughout their educational journey. The next stage of implementation should focus on translating this motivation into sustained participation by strengthening institutional provision, improving access, and enhancing collaboration across the higher education institutions.

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