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Motivation for learning Chinese compared to European languages: An exploration in English secondary schools

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Abstract

There is little published research on school-aged learners of Mandarin Chinese in anglophone contexts. This article explores English secondary school pupils' motivation for learning Chinese compared to European languages. The research questions were: (1) What is the strength and nature of pupils' self-reported motivation for learning languages? (2) How does pupils' motivation for learning Chinese compare with their motivation for learning European languages? Focus groups were conducted with 43 pupils (aged 11–12) in their first year at five state-funded secondary schools. In all languages, culture and a desire to connect with speakers were strong motivators; classroom experiences were also key, underlining teachers' central role. Motivation for Chinese was frequently linked to novelty, difference, challenge, and enjoyment of the character-based writing system. The article highlights practical classroom implications, particularly the need for teachers to consider the motivational impact of pedagogical decisions relating to curriculum content, task design, and classroom organization.

KEYWORDS

Chinese (Mandarin), foreign/second language learning/acquisition, high school, middle school/junior high, motivation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Motivation for second language (L2) learning has been a focus of intensive research and has seen a "publication surge" in recent years (Boo et al., 2015). However, this research has focused predominantly on students in tertiary education learning L2 English. Learners of languages other than English (LOTE) and pupils in primary and secondary (K-12) education are underrepresented, despite their large numbers. Further, most research on learning and teaching Chinese[1]—the main focus of this article—has similarly involved adult participants (often university students), with few studies investigating school-aged learners (Chan et al., 2022). Notable exceptions include studies of Chinese character learning by Xu and Padilla (2013) and Yang (2018); an exploration of learner proficiency levels by Xu et al. (2015); Neal's (2022) investigation of learners' pronunciation; and Zheng, Lu, and Li's (2023) study of motivation.

In England, it is currently mandated that school pupils learn a foreign language as part of the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013) throughout Key Stages 2 and 3 (ages 7–14). However, recent reports indicate that, on average, just 45 min per week (in Primary schools) and 1–2 h per week (in Secondary schools) are allocated to language learning across these years (Collen, 2022, 2023). Furthermore, 84% of state-funded secondary schools in England offer only one language in Key Stage Three (ages 11–14) (McDonald, 2023). Transition from primary to secondary schooling is also problematic, with many pupils unable to continue learning the same language when they move from Key Stage 2 to 3 (Collen, 2023).

Language learning in England has been described as "in crisis" (Bowler, 2020). There are persistent problems of low pupil motivation, poor outcomes, and low uptake beyond the age of 14 (Long & Danechi, 2024). It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that over two-thirds of young people in the UK recently reported that they could read and write in only one language (their native language), compared to just 10%–30% in every other EU country (European Commission, 2018). Lanvers (2021) attributes these problems in part to a "linguaphobia" in anglophone countries—literally 'fear of languages' but used here to denote an aversion to or hostility toward learning them. Many school pupils have not actively chosen to learn an L2 and—as native speakers of English, the global lingua franca—may struggle to see a clear rationale for doing so.

Against this backdrop, however, the learning of L2 Chinese in English secondary schools is enjoying rapid growth: amongst languages taught as part of the main school curriculum, it now ranks fourth in popularity after the so-called 'big three' of French, Spanish and German (Collen, 2023, p. 23)—although it is still taught in only around 7% of secondary schools, compared to 91%, 73% and 36% for French, Spanish and German respectively (Collen, 2022). This growth is likely due to several initiatives actively promoting Chinese in schools; in turn, this reflects the rising political and economic power of China and answers calls to diversify language provision in UK schools (Lanvers, 2021). In a report for the British Council, Tinsley and Board (2017) ranked Mandarin Chinese second in a list of languages of "crucial importance for the UK's future prosperity, security and influence in the world" (p. 4).

It is essential that the increase in L2 Chinese be underpinned by a sound, research-based understanding of how the language is learnt and taught—particularly compared to the more frequently taught European languages. Teachers need to know to what extent effective pedagogy is similar or different across these typologically distant languages. Understanding learners' motivation is fundamental to this endeavor—particularly because learning Chinese "is likely to pose particular motivational challenges, especially for Western learners" (Chan et al., 2022, p. 16).

The current article explores pupils' motivation for learning Chinese versus European languages in English secondary schools. It forms part of a larger study, partially replicating

Coleman et al.'s (2007) national survey of L2 motivation amongst pupils in their first 3 years at English secondary schools. However, whilst Coleman and colleagues gathered data solely via a questionnaire, the current study added semi-structured focus group interviews. These were conducted with 43 pupils with varying characteristics and motivational profiles, nominated by their teachers as likely to be comfortable contributing in this format. The resulting qualitative data, providing a deeper understanding of pupils' motivation, form this article's main focus.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION

A wide array of theories has been proposed to explain motivation for L2 learning. Coleman et al. (2007), the current study's antecedent, used a questionnaire originally based on Gardner's (2001) socio-educational model of L2 motivation. However, rather than adopting a particular theory to frame the current study, this article draws on various theoretical perspectives. This decision was taken because motivation is a complex and multifaceted construct; the different theories and frameworks may illuminate it from different angles to provide a more complete understanding. Four key theories are considered below, beginning with Gardner (2001). The following section then considers the nature of learning Chinese in particular, and implications of this for L2 motivation.

2.1 | The socio-educational model

In Gardner's (2001) highly influential "socio-educational model" of language learning motivation, a key factor is one's degree of "integrativeness," defined as 'genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer psychologically to the other language community' (p. 7). This can be contrasted with "instrumental" motivation, which reflects "an interest in learning the second language for pragmatic reasons," such as to get a better job or travel abroad (p. 7). The theory originated in Canada, where learners of French or English had a concrete target language community of which they may (or may not) wish to become part. However, in a context of globalization, in which many people learn English as a lingua franca for international communication with other L2 speakers, there may be no clear "other language community" to which learners wish to "come closer psychologically" as a driver of language learning.

In this light, a more relevant construct for understanding motivation may be "international posture": "a tendency to relate oneself to the international community rather than any specific L2 group" (Yashima, 2009, p. 145). This may encompass, for example, an "interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and [...] openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures" (Yashima, 2002, p. 57). Thus framed, international posture may be equally relevant to L2 learners in anglophone countries, even though they already speak the major global lingua franca.

2.2 | L2 motivational self-system

An alternative conceptualization is Dörnyei's (2005) "L2 Motivational Self System" (L2MSS). Central to this framework is the concept of the "ideal self," an imagined future version of

oneself which one might aspire to become (or become more like); motivation arises through a desire to reduce the discrepancy between one's current and ideal selves. A recent empirical study conducted in Hong Kong used the L2MSS to analyze the motivation of 13–15-year-old Cantonese-L1 learners of L2 English and L2 Mandarin (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). Pupils' perceptions of their "ideal L2-selves" were frequently found to be distinct for English and Mandarin, providing evidence for different motivational profiles associated with different languages. This finding is highly relevant to the current study, which compares secondary school pupils' motivation for learning Chinese and European languages.

Dörnyei's L2MSS also includes an "ought-to self," comprising 'the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes' (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). In a school setting, where pupils may be encouraged (or even compelled) to learn a language by their school and/or parents, the "ought-to self" may be particularly important (Lanvers, 2016).

The third component of the L2MSS is the "L2 learning experience," concerning one's experiences of the immediate language learning environment, for example: one's relationship with the teacher and classmates; and the extent to which classroom tasks are perceived as enjoyable and productive. Enjoyment is a particularly important emotion associated with motivation and attainment in language learning (see Dewaele et al., 2019). The "learning experience" component of the L2MSS model is likely to be particularly significant for learners whose L2 learning takes place largely (or entirely) through their school curriculum. Indeed, the teacher, peers, and the nature of the learning tasks all emerged as important factors of the learning experience for a small sample of English secondary school pupils engaged in an intensive Chinese program using Content and Language Integrated Learning (Zheng, Lu, and Li, 2023).

In the context of school-based L2 learning in England, Lanvers (2016) proposed an elaboration of Dörnyei's (2005) L2MSS, the "Self-Discrepancy Model for Language Learners". This reintroduces the distinction, made in Higgins' (1987) original self-discrepancy model on which Dörnyei (2005) drew, between two standpoints: one's own, and that of others. It further distinguishes between "known others" (e.g., teachers, parents, friends) and the "wider milieu" (e.g., the national community) (p. 84), providing for a distinctive motivational profile within this model: the so-called "rebellious learner" (p. 90) who reacts against perceived pressure from others. In her sample, Lanvers identifies amotivated school pupils (aged 13–14) who rebelled against the positive language-learning influences of their school or parents, supported by the negative views of language learning in wider English society.

2.3 | Expectancy-value theory

Another perspective on motivation, particularly relevant in schools, is Eccles et al.'s (1983) expectancy-value theory. This holds that learners' motivation and achievement are determined by both (a) how well they expect to do in an activity, and (b) how much they value success in that activity. On the expectancy side, research in English secondary schools (e.g., Graham, 2004, 2007) has focused particularly on L2 learners' self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997): that is, how confident they are that they will succeed in future L2 tasks (such as a listening comprehension exercise). Graham (2004) found that learners who attribute their poor performance on language tasks to factors beyond their control (e.g., they are simply not good at languages) are more likely to give up when they encounter difficulties, and develop a negative sense of self-efficacy, than those who explain their performance based on controllable factors

(e.g. they could have used more effective learning strategies). A recent research review conducted in England by the government's inspectorate of education identified self-efficacy as a key influence on L2 learning, arguing that it "consistently results in academic achievement more than other motivational factors" (Ofsted, 2021, p. 9).

2.4 | A person-in-context view

Finally, much of the research described above adopts a positivist perspective, for example, using single-administration questionnaires to measure constructs such as integrativeness or self-efficacy. However, there are clearly limitations to such an approach for understanding something as complex and dynamic as motivation. Furthermore, by aggregating responses across large samples, it may be argued that the focus is on the motivational constructs themselves, rather than individual learners as human beings embedded in their social contexts (Ushioda, 2009). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) have therefore argued for a "person-in-context relational view" of motivation which "focuses on the intentional agency of real people embedded in an intricate and fluid web of social relations and multiple micro- and macro-contexts" (p. 354). The current study attempts to account for this perspective by using focus group interviews.

2.5 | Summary

The above review has considered several widely used theoretical frameworks for understanding L2 motivation. Whilst the frameworks overlap in some ways, each offers a distinctive view of this complex construct. Gardner's (2001) socio-educational model foregrounds learners' attitudes toward the target language and its community. Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System emphasizes the role of a learner's sense of self—who they are now and how they imagine themselves in the future—in shaping language learning efforts. Expectancy-value theory (Eccles et al., 1983) focuses on learners' evaluations of L2 tasks in terms of their likelihood of success and the personal value of that success. Finally, Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) person-in-context view highlights the dynamic nature of L2 motivation and its embeddedness in sociocultural settings. By drawing on these complementary perspectives, each illuminating different aspects of motivation, the current study hopes to gain a more complete picture of participants' motivations for language learning.

3 | MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING CHINESE

3.1 | The nature of Chinese

Yang's (2018) study of 179 pupils in two English secondary schools found high motivation to learn Chinese. What factors might influence anglophone pupils' motivation for the language, compared to the more frequently taught European languages? First, China's political and economic power as the world's second largest economy (World Bank, 2023) may make the language attractive for instrumental reasons; yet recent years have also seen a climate of Western mistrust toward China (e.g., Corera, 2022). Second, for learners in England, China is more distant geographically than France, Germany, or Spain, potentially reducing pupils'

perceived likelihood of visiting the country—especially given Graham et al.'s (2016) finding that "travel abroad" was a key motivator for learning French amongst English secondary school pupils. Third, Chinese may have a "novelty factor" which promotes motivation: the sounds of the language, its writing system, and its cultural associations all offer something "different" for many pupils (Duff, 2017; Ueno, 2005). Fourth, as a relative newcomer to the curriculum, Chinese lacks the "baggage" associated with European languages: anecdotally, teachers speak of pupils whose parents tell them "not to worry about French because I was no good at it either."

Finally, we cannot ignore the difficulty of Chinese. Ma et al. (2017, p. 823) refer to "the uniqueness and complexity of Chinese language acquisition." Typologically more distant from English than the European languages, it lacks cognates that can facilitate L2 learning (e.g., Tréville, 1996). It also uses lexical tones (patterns of changing voice pitch) to distinguish between otherwise phonologically identical words (e.g., 八 (bā), "eight"; 拔 (bá), "pull"; 靶 (bǎ), "target"; 爸 (bà), "father"; 吧 (ba) [question particle])—a concept absent from Indo-European languages (Lin et al., 2010). Further, Chinese characters represent morphemic units with little phonological information, unlike the Roman alphabet shared by English and the "big three" languages taught in English schools. Accordingly, the US Foreign Service Institute (n.d.) classifies Mandarin Chinese as one of only five "super-hard languages" for English-speakers, requiring around three times longer than Spanish or French to reach "professional working proficiency." Consequently, motivation must be maintained over a much longer period in the case of Chinese, which led Xu et al. (2015) to advocate for early and sustained learning. From an expectancy-value perspective, the language's difficulty may also reduce learners' expectations of success and thus their motivation, irrespective of how highly they value learning it.

4 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study sought to increase understanding of pupils' motivation for learning L2 Chinese compared to European languages. In the context of beginner learners in their first year of secondary schooling in England, the research questions were:

1. What is the strength and nature of pupils' self-reported motivation for learning languages?
2. How does pupils' motivation for learning Chinese compare with their motivation for learning European languages?

5 | METHODS

5.1 | Overall design

The wider study had both quantitative and qualitative strands. In the former, an adapted version of the L2 motivation questionnaire from Coleman et al. (2007) was completed by pupils in Year 7 (the first year of secondary education in England) who were learning Chinese and/or a European language in school. Subsequently, focus group (FG) interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of pupils. This article focuses on the FG data. Whilst the findings of the questionnaire are briefly summarized below, they will be reported in greater detail in a separate article. FG participants were invited to give their views on how important they think it is to learn languages in general, and to learn the specific language(s) they were learning at school. FG prompts were designed to

elicit responses related to key constructs from the motivation theories that framed the study, whilst also allowing for additional follow-up questions (see https://www.iris-database.org/). Data were collected in June 2023. The end of the school year was chosen so that all pupils had had significant exposure to the target language(s) over their first year of secondary school.

5.2 | Participants

Five non-selective, state-funded secondary schools in South-East England participated in the study, referred to by the Greek letters Alpha to Epsilon. The schools each had between 700 and 1700 pupils, varying widely in socio-economic status, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), first language status and academic attainment. In schools Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, a minority of pupils learnt Chinese whilst the remainder learnt French, German, or Spanish; in school Delta, pupils learnt either Chinese, French and Chinese, or Spanish and Chinese; and in school Epsilon, all pupils learnt both French and Chinese (Figure 1). French was overwhelmingly the most frequently studied European language in our questionnaire sample ($n = 472$ pupils), followed by Spanish ($n = 90$), then German ($n = 48$). Chinese was studied by 379 pupils (189 of these studied both Chinese and French, $n = 154$, or Chinese and Spanish, $n = 35$). Schools Delta and Epsilon were unusual in offering most pupils the chance to learn two languages in Key Stage 3, placing them amongst the 16% of state-funded schools in England that offer more than one language to this age group (McDonald, 2023). In school Epsilon, pupils had only one Chinese lesson per fortnight, compared to 2 h per week of French. Language lessons in all other schools comprised two lessons per language per week.

All Year 7 pupils (aged 11–12 years) learning languages in the participating schools were invited to respond to the questionnaire; almost all ($n = 810$) did so. Class teachers then nominated pupils representing a mix of attainment levels, motivation, and gender who they felt would contribute well in the FG format. Forty-three pupils were nominated, and consent was

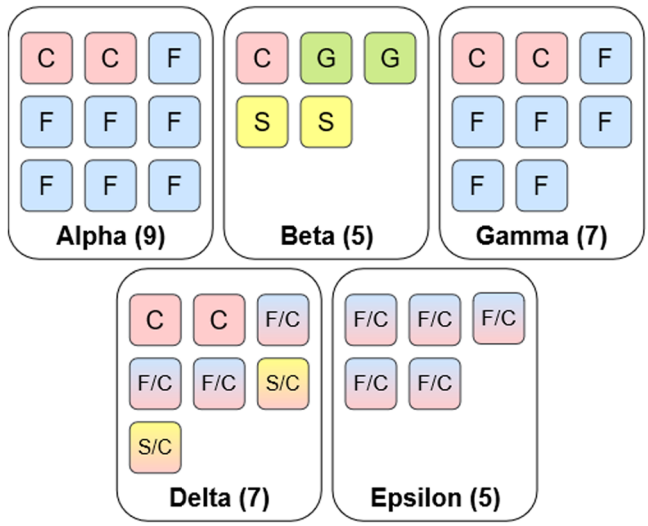

FIGURE 1 Numbers of teaching groups and their target languages, by school (French (F), Chinese (C), German (G), Spanish (S)). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

obtained from them and their parents. There were 2 or 3 FGs per school, each comprising 2 to 6 pupils. Similar proportions of FG participants reported being exposed to a language other than English in their home environment (30%) and having learnt a language at primary school (88%) as was the case for the wider sample (33% and 89% respectively) (Table 1). The languages studied by FG participants were as follows: Chinese ($n = 35$), French ($n = 13$), Spanish ($n = 2$), and German ($n = 2$).

5.3 | Procedures

FGs were conducted in quiet, private locations (e.g., empty classrooms) by the third author, a qualified Languages teacher and experienced interviewer who was unknown to any participants. The pupils' normal class teacher was not present during the interviews. Interviews varied in length from 11 to 38 min (mean 18 min), depending on factors such as group size, pupils' loquacity, and a range of other practical constraints (e.g., interruption from a fire alarm; timetabling issues). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The study was informed by BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines and received ethical approval through the authors' university.

5.4 | Analysis

FG transcripts were imported into NVivo and inductively coded to analyze participants' comments on L2 motivation. While FG prompts were designed to align with existing L2 motivation theories, inductive coding was chosen to avoid bias from a priori codes drawn from theoretical frameworks developed largely in relation to learning European languages. Themes and subthemes were identified and refined iteratively. Three authors collaboratively coded the first five transcripts, until saturation was reached. The resulting coding structure (https://www.iris-database.org/) was then applied independently by all three authors to the first three transcripts; discrepancies were discussed and resolved, leading to further code refinement. Authors two and three then independently coded three further interviews (97% agreement, Kappa = 0.82). With the structure deemed reliable, the third author coded the remaining interviews.

6 | RESULTS

To provide context for the FG responses, the findings of the quantitative strand of the study (to be reported in a separate article) will first be briefly summarized. Questionnaire responses from the roughly 800 pupils across the five schools indicated that their overall motivation level for L2 learning (calculated as the mean across all 29 items and all participants) was 2.6 for both Chinese and European languages (SD 0.6 and 0.5, respectively), that is, close to the neutral midpoint of 2.5 on the 4-point Likert scale. This broadly resembled the findings of Coleman et al. (2007) using the same questionnaire almost 20 years ago. The overall motivation level for the FG participants was 2.9, indicating that they reported being slightly more motivated overall than the wider sample. This presumably reflects the fact that pupils nominated by their teachers as likely to contribute well to the FGs were also more engaged in language learning.

Overall motivation scores on the questionnaire provided some evidence of higher motivation for Chinese than European languages; however, the difference was small, and both

TABLE 1 Prior exposure to language learning in the whole sample and focus groups.

	Are there any main languages used in your home, apart from English?	Did you learn a language at primary school?	Did you learn French at primary school?	Did you learn Spanish at primary school?	Did you learn German at primary school?	Did you learn Mandarin at primary school?
Whole Sample % of pupils ($n = 810$) who responded "YES"	33%	89%	60%	21%	3%	10%
Focus Group % of pupils ($n = 43$) who responded "YES"	30%*	88%	47%	23%	12%	14%

*Two Focus Group pupils reported exposure to Spanish at home. The following home languages were reported by one Focus Group participant each: German, Mandarin, Portuguese, Dutch, Romanian, Polish, Slovak, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Luganda, and Afrikaans.

TABLE 2 Numbers of utterances coded for each theme within the focus groups (excluding interviewer comments).

Theme	Number of focus groups within which this theme occurred	Number of individual pupils whose utterance(s) were coded to this theme	Total number of utterances coded to this theme
1: Learning experiences	11	41	125
2: Level of enjoyment	11	37	92
3: Language to connect and understand	10	33	91
4: Language for practical purposes	11	37	79
5: Perceptions of language value	11	33	61
6: Expectations of success and failure	10	20	32
7: Cognitive benefits of L2 learning	6	13	28
All themes	**11**	**43**	**508**

languages showed wide variation in motivation between individual pupils. Finally, a Principal Components Analysis suggested that the nature of participants' motivation differed according to the language being learnt. In particular, "perceived language aptitude" emerged as a separate component for pupils learning a European language but not Chinese. This may reflect pupils' greater prior experience of learning European languages and using the Roman alphabet, giving them a clearer sense of whether this is something they are "good at."

Turning now to the FG interviews, the analysis resulted in 36 individual codes, arranged hierarchically into seven themes (Table 2). When noting the frequency of comments made in relation to each theme, readers should be aware that all eight question prompts were discussed in each of the FGs, except in FG 2 in Epsilon School, where only three question prompts were covered before the discussion ended.

The following sections describe each theme in turn, ordered from most to least frequent in the data. Where quotations are used, individual pupils are indicated by codes comprising the letter representing their school (Alpha to Epsilon) and an ID number.

6.1 | Learning experiences

All 11 FGs included discussion of pupils' learning experiences, with 41 of the 43 students making comments in this theme.

6.1.1 | Experiences of learning characters

Twenty-one pupils, across all seven Chinese-related FGs, mentioned learning Chinese characters as a salient element of their classroom experience. The "artsy" (A6), creative, problem-

solving nature of classroom-based character learning seemed to capture pupils' imagination. In the words of one participant:

> *All the characters are quite different [...] I normally get bored of writing the same letters over and over again, but in Mandarin, I'm constantly writing different things, so it's actually enjoyable to write*. (G5)

Specific challenges with writing characters are also discussed, including issues with memorizing stroke order ($n = 4$ pupils); the lack of a phonetic representation in the character ($n = 3$); the physical challenge of writing ($n = 3$), which "can ... really work your brain and hurt your hand as well" (G4); the slow pace of learning ($n = 3$); the need to learn *pinyin* as well as characters ($n = 1$); the sheer quantity of characters to be memorized ($n = 1$); and the repetitive nature of character drilling ($n = 1$).

6.1.2 | Teacher and peer group factors

Pupils' perceptions of their teacher were a key aspect of their learning experience (15 pupils, seven FGs). Ten pupils across three schools highlighted positive relationships with teachers who made lessons enjoyable ($n = 6$), offered help ($n = 5$) and were kind ($n = 2$). Three pupils also valued effective behavior management, which is "useful for the people who actually want to learn" (D5). Indeed, peer influence and classroom climate were mentioned by nine pupils in four groups. Four pupils in schools Delta and Gamma emphasized the value of strategic seating and groupings to maximize productivity. Three pupils in school Beta complained that disruptive peers prevented them from learning "to our full capabilities or potential" (B2).

6.1.3 | Classroom tasks

Games were frequently mentioned as enjoyable classroom tasks (9 pupils, 5 FGs). Creative tasks such as making posters and story writing were also a recurrent theme and something which participants enjoyed (6 pupils, 4 FGs). 10 pupils (2 FGs) noted the frequency of tests in their language learning, seen by some as pressurizing or stressful ($n = 3$) but, for one pupil, "good because we get to track our progress" (G7).

Eight pupils of both European ($n = 2$) and Chinese ($n = 6$) languages, in six FGs, spoke about their experiences of learning to pronounce the new language. For Chinese, specific difficulties with learning tones were mentioned ($n = 3$). For French, L1 interference was referred to: "you'll like keep slipping back into how you would say it in English. And it is hard to like roll your Rs like they do in France" (A13). Further, two pupils in Delta school highlighted anxiety about making mistakes when speaking in front of classmates.

6.1.4 | Relevance of the curriculum

Two FGs had extended discussions about the perceived lack of relevance of the Languages curriculum. In school Alpha, three pupils felt that their learning about "interior design and stuff" was not useful: "I don't think I would ever like say anything like that again" (A16). Similarly, four pupils at school Gamma felt that the kinds of high-frequency language needed to

communicate were not sufficiently covered in their Chinese curriculum: "Like we probably know more about pizza and fish than we know about how to say like 'and'" (G10).

6.1.5 | Timetabling

Pupils at both Beta ($n = 2$) and Epsilon ($n = 4$) schools mentioned a need for more frequent Mandarin lessons to feel a sense of progress. (Recall that school Epsilon offered only one Chinese lesson per fortnight, significantly less than the other schools). Pupil E6 explained that it is hard to remember "what you learnt in Mandarin like 2 weeks ago"; E5 agreed, stating "it's just a wasted lesson." Beta school, by contrast, offered two Chinese lessons per week but even so, B2 commented that if an extra lesson were added, "we could learn a lot more."

6.2 | Level of enjoyment

6.2.1 | Difficulty and challenge

Twenty-four pupils in 10 FGs highlighted the difficulties and challenges presented by L2 learning as a factor influencing their enjoyment. This was particularly the case for Chinese, with 20 pupils referring to the language as "challenging," "tricky," "frustrating," "quite difficult," "complex," or "hard." Twelve pupils linked this difficulty to learning characters. However, 12 of the 20 pupils who found Chinese difficult suggested that it was precisely because of this difficulty that they enjoyed learning the language. For example:

> *I also sort of enjoy it 'cause it's tricky because, like it's a challenge and when I've done something, I'm like ohh cool. I'm proud of myself,'cause I've actually done it. I really like that about it. (B2)*

> *I just like how it is a hard language. So, you get lots of pride. (B4)*

By contrast, only three participants made comments about the difficulty and challenge of European languages impacting positively on their enjoyment.

6.2.2 | Intrinsic enjoyment

Eighteen pupils, across all 11 FGs, expressed an enjoyment of L2 learning for its own sake, without linking this to any specific end-goal: for example, "it's a fun language to learn" (A2); "I just like the language really" (B5). Eight pupils indicated that they would like to continue learning their language or become fluent in it ($n = 5$), due to their enjoyment.

6.2.3 | Novelty and difference

Twenty-four pupils in 10 FGs commented on the novelty of learning Chinese as a motivator. Pupils in 7 FGs ($n = 18$) talked positively about Chinese characters as a novel aspect of the

language, which they enjoy. Seven pupils were intrigued that there were two different writing systems in Chinese: "because it is not just characters. It is characters and pinyin, so it is like learning two things" (A011). In one FG, four pupils expressed their interest and enjoyment in learning about "the history behind the characters" (G004), again something novel for them.

Ten pupils in 6 FGs expressed a sense of "feeling special" because they are learning Chinese. As participant G8 explained, "I have a lot of friends in different schools, and they're not learning Mandarin, so I feel like [...] it's a really good opportunity."

Finally, eight pupils in five FGs made more general comments relating to Chinese being a novel or different language (including two comments about the culture in China being different), giving an incentive to learn the language.

6.3 | Language to connect and understand

This theme brings together instances where pupils talked about language learning as a way of connecting with others and better understanding them, either at the level of individual people, or at the level of countries and cultures (33 pupils, 10 FGs).

6.3.1 | Connect with people

Twenty pupils in eight FGs envisaged that through their language learning they would be able to "communicate with" (n = 3), "connect with" ($n = 3$), "talk to" ($n = 4$), "speak to" ($n = 3$), make friends with ($n = 3$) or simply "understand" ($n = 1$) a wider range of people. Five pupils envisaged that learning widely spoken languages such as Spanish and Chinese would allow them to communicate with large numbers of people worldwide: "That's two billion people who will be able to understand you if you speak their language" (E3).

6.3.2 | Global orientation

Twenty pupils in nine FGs made comments indicating what we termed a "global orientation," meaning that they demonstrated an outward-looking attitude and seemed to see their future selves as globally mobile, multilingual, and open to other countries, cultures, and their peoples.[2] As described in relation to other codes (i.e., "connect with people," "language for practical purposes"), pupils showed a global orientation in their desire to learn languages to live and study abroad and to connect with people around the world. Furthermore, several pupils envisaged a multilingual future for themselves, with five hoping to become "fluent" in their new language, whilst two others indicated that they wanted to "learn it until I know everything" (G6), or to "understand it fully to like the maximum I can possibly do" (E2). One pupil thought "it would be cool to like know it so well, you could even like think in that language" (A3). Five pupils wanted to learn further languages beyond those offered in school because of an attraction to the countries in which they are spoken, including Germany ($n = 1$), Poland ($n = 1$), and Japan ($n = 3$). Finally, two pupils indicated a wish to learn languages to help other people, such as "refugees, and like you know people don't really speak like English (...) so you can help out instead of just being English and completely not knowing what to do" (A14).

6.3.3 | Intercultural understanding

The "intercultural understanding" code captures instances where pupils showed an interest in the cultures associated with the language(s) they are learning. Sixteen pupils across eight FGs made comments in this category, mostly learners of Chinese ($n = 14$). Three referred specifically to the country's history and three to its food, whilst two spoke about Chinese characters and their historical development as an aspect of culture that interests them, including the 'folklore to them, or stories behind them' (G9). The following comments are illustrative:

> *The culture in China is very different than the culture in England [...] that's really fun to have kind of two ideas of culture in my head* (G8).

> *I'm really interested in the history of China and like how they've got a different way of life* (A6).

By contrast, only four pupils explicitly referred to an interest in the culture(s) of European languages. However, one of these stood out as revealing the pupil's deep desire to identify with the target language and its speakers:

> *I want to like be part of France, have France, like the culture in my head and being able to converse in French – that would be just really like cool* (A13).

6.4 | Language for practical purposes

6.4.1 | Travel/holiday

Twenty-seven pupils in 11 FGs thought learning a language would facilitate future travel or holidays. A few of these ($n = 4$) expanded their answers, for example, by saying that it would enable them to "get the most out of traveling" and "add a lot more enjoyment" (B3) if they could speak the language. The popularity of France as a tourist destination and its proximity to England were referred to by five pupils as a reason for wanting to learn French. Similarly, three pupils mentioned that learning Spanish would enable them to travel to many Spanish-speaking countries. However, five pupils had greater ambitions to travel, as exemplified in the following quotation: "if I take both of them [Spanish and Chinese] I can just travel pretty much all over the world" (G8).

6.4.2 | Work

Fifteen pupils in ten FGs expressed a belief that learning a language would be beneficial "because you can get like better jobs [... and] more opportunities" (E4).

6.4.3 | Qualifications

Fourteen pupils in nine of the FGs referred to qualifications, such as GCSE and A level,[3] as a motivation for learning. As one participant put it, "I feel like that's a smart thing to do" (G8). In

two cases, these school qualifications were seen as stepping stones to further study: for example, "universities that you want to go to will recognize that you put your time and effort into the language" (E5).

6.4.4 | Living abroad

Four pupils in three FGs mentioned living abroad as a reason for learning a language. In two cases, the country referred to was France; in one case, Japan; and in another, not stated.

6.5 | Perceptions of language value

Where pupils commented on the importance of specific languages, these were frequently linked to how widely spoken the language was perceived to be, and its economic, business, political, and cultural value. Thirty-three pupils in all 11 FGs offered comments within this theme.

6.5.1 | Widespread use

Twenty-two pupils in nine FGs talked about their target language's geographical spread and the opportunities this brings. Thirteen pupils in six FGs referred specifically to Chinese as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world ($n = 6$). On the other hand, in one FG, three pupils discussed where Chinese is spoken, concluding that it is restricted to China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and therefore not particularly useful for them. They also felt that many speakers of Chinese would speak English anyway, "so it wouldn't be as necessary to like learn it, unless you want to do trading and all that, and then it might be useful" (E7).

By contrast, French was perceived in two FGs to be more widely spoken than Chinese. For example:

> *There's a lot of countries around the world that have French as their main language, but Chinese if you're not going to that area then you don't really need it as much. (E5)*

Two pupils in another FG similarly mentioned French as a global language, spoken in "lots of places like in Canada and in Africa and lots of different places" (A13), making it "a good language to learn." Likewise, seven pupils across six FGs mentioned the widespread usage of Spanish worldwide (referencing Central America, Mexico, and Spain), making it an important language.

In contrast to these positive comments about the value of language study in school, one pupil—who spoke Chinese as a heritage language in addition to English—saw no need to learn another language, as they "don't really visit anywhere else [other than China ... and] they probably all speak English" (A10).

6.5.2 | Economic, business, political, and cultural value

Eleven pupils in six FGs made comments about the economic, business, political, and cultural importance of their L2. Nine participants (in six FGs) referred to the importance of Mandarin in

terms of future business and trading opportunities; China is "a big industrial center" (E3) and "it's meant to be one of the languages like that will be taken forward, that will become more popular in the future" (B3). Furthermore, two pupils (in two FGs) saw L2 learning as politically significant:

> *[I]t helps with like global communication because imagine like world leaders if they didn't have translating devices or something, how would you communicate globally? (G7)*

Two pupils saw political value in French: for example, one felt it "is a good language to learn because Britain is quite close in terms of relationships with France, and France is just over the water" (E003).

6.5.3 | Other

Fourteen pupils in nine FGs made various other comments ($n = 23$) about languages being important, valuable, or useful. Most ($n = 17$) of these comments were positive, with languages being seen as "really in general a good skill to have" (B5). The remaining comments ($n = 6$), made by pupils in two FGs, were more ambivalent: for example, "it might like come in useful in the future, but it's probably also not going to change your life knowing a different language" (E6).

6.6 | Expectations of success and failure

Overall, 20 pupils in 10 FGs made comments relating to whether they expected to succeed in their language learning and factors influencing these expectations.

6.6.1 | Self-efficacy

Fourteen pupils in nine FGs spoke about their ability to learn a language. Ten expressed largely positive beliefs, indicating expectations of success: for example, one said that they "get the hang of things very quickly" in Chinese and "do quite well" (B4). Three pupils talked about their ability to understand Chinese "a bit more" than French (D4) or "better" than other subjects (E2). In contrast, one pupil felt they were "good" at French and "not so good" at Chinese (D6), and two pupils mentioned that Spanish was easier to learn than Chinese. For example:

> *I prefer Spanish, it just like it sticks in my head more, but then it's probably also because we already know the alphabet. So it's a lot easier.* (D2)

There were further comments from pupils learning Chinese relating to feeling happy at passing tests (G6); a sense of confidence (G2) or a good feeling when writing characters, making "you feel like you know what you are doing" (G6); and a sense of making progress (G7). This latter was also commented on in relation to French: "when you get along like progressing, as you get better in French, it's like a nice feeling" (E005).

Four pupils were more ambivalent about their perceived ability to learn a language. One commented that they had "not yet been able to pick up the language as it is too hard," although "it can still like be really fun if you just have the right attitude toward it" (G8). Another said, "I'm not the best in it and it's very tricky (...) but if I get the hang of it, if I understand something, it's a lot better. So, like, I'm really trying in Mandarin to do my best" (B2).

6.6.2 | Time already invested

Five pupils in three FGs talked about the time and effort they had already spent learning a language, including at primary school. One described their wish to continue learning French at school, having started the language in Year 7, because they are "invested now" (A14). Three other pupils mentioned that learning Chinese in primary school had given them "a head start," which was a motivating factor. Contrastingly, one pupil reflected on their lack of progress in primary school: "my school tried and failed at teaching us languages" (B2).

6.6.3 | Vicarious experiences

Two pupils in one FG mentioned a family member successfully learning a language, which motivated them to learn the same language themselves.

6.7 | Cognitive benefits of language learning

Cognitive benefits of language learning were mentioned by 13 pupils in six FGs. Eleven pupils said that learning an L2 helped them make connections between languages and build foundational knowledge for further language learning: for example, one saw Mandarin as "a stepping stone on the way to quite a lot of Asian languages," such as Japanese (E3). Five pupils expressed a more general belief that language learning can help to "develop your brain" (G7) and "gets your brain working" (E2).

7 | DISCUSSION

The FG interviews provided rich insights into pupils' motivation for L2 learning. Many were excited about learning languages, articulating a wide range of reasons for wanting to do so. There was no evidence of the "linguaphobia" noted by Lanvers (2021) in anglophone contexts, nor the "crisis" of L2 motivation often associated with English schools. However, because teachers recommended participants they felt would contribute well in the FGs, the sample may have been skewed toward more positive L2 learners, a caveat to keep in mind.

Research Question 1 investigated the strength and nature of pupils' self-reported motivation for learning languages. Seven main themes were identified, each discussed in turn below. Research question 2 compared pupils' motivation for learning Chinese and European languages. Where differences emerged between Chinese and European languages in each theme, these are highlighted below.

"Learning experiences" was the most frequently attested theme in the data (125 comments by 41 pupils). This connects to Dörnyei's (2005, 2019) "L2 learning experience" and Ushioda's (2009) view of L2 learners as individuals "located in particular cultural and historical contexts" (p. 216). The salience of this theme reflects the concrete classroom setting of the participants' language learning: for example, when they speak the target language, they do so in front of their teacher and peers. Other aspects of the school setting—including the nature of the curriculum, the classroom atmosphere, and pupils' relationship with their teacher—also emerged as important factors. This underlines the pivotal role of the teacher in shaping pupils' L2 learning experiences and motivation.

The second most frequent theme was "level of enjoyment" (92 comments, 37 pupils) and the factors affecting this. In relation to Research Question 2, some differences emerged here between Chinese and European languages. First, many pupils found Chinese difficult, yet enjoyed the challenge. Chinese has indeed been identified as "super-hard" for English-speaking learners (US Foreign Service Institute, n.d.). The pupils in this study were just beginning their journey in the language; it remains to be seen how the relationship between perceived difficulty and motivation develops over time, as pupils gain more experience of the language and better understand its challenges. Some pupils wished to achieve fluency, but once they realize how wide the self-discrepancy gap is between their current L2 self and their ideal future self (Dörnyei, 2009), this gap may prove too large to sustain motivation. From an expectancy-value perspective (Eccles et al., 1983), greater awareness of the difficulty of Chinese may temper pupils' expectations of success and thus their motivation, even if they highly value learning the language.

A second difference that emerged between Chinese and European languages within this theme related to the "novelty and difference" of Chinese. Pupils often highlighted its character-based writing system in this regard, and reported a sense of pride and "feeling special" for studying a lesser taught, difficult language (echoing Ueno, 2005). The teaching of Chinese remains infrequent in English schools, despite recent growth. It is possible that at least some participants' enthusiasm for Chinese depends precisely on its rarity—whereby any significant increase in popularity could dilute this motivation. Indeed, this "exclusive club" effect seemed particularly notable in schools Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, where learners of Chinese were a small minority.

Turning now to the theme "language to connect and understand," 33 pupils made 91 comments expressing a wish to form personal connections with speakers of the target language, to understand them better, and engage with their cultures. This theme, which arose for both Chinese and European languages, relates to Gardner's (2001) construct of "integrativeness"; a particularly clear example of this was the pupil who wanted to "be part of France, have France, like the culture in my head and being able to converse in French." More often, however, comments in this category reflected an enthusiasm for engaging with other people and cultures more broadly, beyond any single target language community. Indeed, various comments in this theme were grouped under the heading "global orientation," which aligns closely with Yashima's (2009) "international posture."

The National Curriculum for Languages in England (Department for Education, 2013) opens by stating that learning a language is "a liberation from insularity"; Ofsted (2021) similarly argues that it "opens pupils' minds," "develops a deep cultural awareness" and helps them "broaden their horizons" (page 27). Encouragingly, many participants were *already* far from insular in outlook: instead, they expressed an enthusiasm and openness toward people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Culture emerged as a key motivator for L2

learning, especially for Chinese, which benefited from its perceived cultural distinctiveness and novelty.

The next theme, "Language for practical purposes" (79 comments, 37 pupils), encompassed various reasons for learning languages which can be related to Gardner's (2001) "instrumental" motivation, including travel and holidays, work, qualifications, and living abroad. The value of languages for travel and holidays was mentioned in all 11 FGs, by almost three-quarters of pupils. This echoes Graham et al. (2016), whose participants—pupils in Years 6 and 7 in English state-funded schools—also placed "particular value on learning French for travel" (p. 682). This motive might conceivably have been less strong for pupils learning Chinese, given the geographical distance and cost of visiting China; however, no evidence for this was found. In terms of future work, whilst 15 pupils felt that knowing other languages would help them get a job, comments in this category tended to be about languages in general rather than specific ones. Fourteen pupils were also motivated by a desire to gain Language qualifications, something they perceived as important, including for access to Higher Education.

Within the theme of language learning for practical purposes, only one pupil mentioned "translating devices" (in the context of world leaders communicating with each other). Beyond this, our sample made no reference to the growing capabilities of artificial intelligence and machine translation, nor saw these as reducing the need to learn languages for practical purposes. In any case, it is noteworthy that some of the most frequent motivational themes in the current study—including learning languages to connect with other human beings, to appreciate other cultures, and simply for enjoyment—are less threatened by such technological advances.

The fifth theme identified in the interview data was "Perceptions of Language value." This comprised 61 comments by 33 pupils pertaining to how widely spoken the target languages are and to their economic, political, commercial, and cultural importance. Of relevance to Research Question 2, most comments related specifically to Chinese as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, associated with industry and trade, and growing in influence. However, three pupils in one FG still perceived Chinese as being limited to a particular geographical area, thus restricting its future relevance; they showed little awareness of the rising importance of Chinese as a foreign language and its potential to compete with English as a lingua franca, at least in some parts of the world (Gil, 2011). By contrast, these pupils perceived French to have a wider global reach, perhaps reflecting messages given in school about "*la francophonie*" (the French-speaking world).

The final two themes emerging from the FG data were "Expectations of success and failure" (20 pupils; 32 comments) and "Cognitive benefits of language learning" (13 pupils; 28 comments). The smaller number of pupils commenting on the former makes an interesting contrast with the strong emphasis placed on self-efficacy in recent official guidance for Language teachers in England (Ofsted, 2021). When self-efficacy was mentioned, most comments were positive, particularly in relation to Chinese. A key question here is how pupils' self-efficacy will develop as they continue their language learning journey. There is potential for differential trajectories of self-efficacy in Chinese versus European languages, given the acknowledged difficulty of the former for English speakers.

Overall, the findings highlight the diversity of pupils' motivations for L2 learning. These motivations resonate in different ways with the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, which can thus be seen as complementary: each illuminates different aspects of the complex, multidimensional construct of L2 motivation. In an exploratory study such as this, therefore, adopting a single theoretical lens (which would in turn shape the instruments used to gather

data) may offer a less complete picture of learners' motivations. Nonetheless, for the school pupils in the current study, their learning experiences in the concrete classroom setting are clearly central. Of the theories considered in this article, this aspect of motivation seems best addressed by Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) "person-in-context relational view" and the "learning experiences" strand of Dörnyei's (2005) L2MSS—ironically, the least theorized and least well-integrated component of this framework.

8 | IMPLICATIONS

This study raises important considerations for teaching languages (particularly Chinese) in England's schools. First, how will pupils' motivation for learning Chinese evolve as they better understand the challenges of the language? Longitudinal research is needed to address this question, crucial for the longer-term sustainability of teaching Chinese. Second, if Chinese provision continues to grow, will this dilute pupils' sense of being part of an "exclusive" club? Educators and policymakers must be alert to how expansion may alter motivational dynamics.

These questions are closely linked to two pressing structural challenges in England: limited lesson time and problems of transition between primary and secondary L2 education. The greater demands of Chinese may require additional timetabled hours compared to European languages, if learners are to feel a sense of progress. Further, discontinuity in language provision across educational stages could disrupt momentum and affect motivation. A more coherent language-learning pathway is therefore needed.

Further classroom implications arise from the prominence of "learning experiences" in the FG data. Teachers have a key influence on their pupils' motivation for L2 learning and need to be aware of the motivational impact of their pedagogical decisions, including in relation to curriculum content, task design, and classroom organization. Specifically, they may wish to integrate cultural elements throughout the learning journey, especially in Chinese, where cultural curiosity may be a particularly strong driver. Teaching Chinese characters—especially in connection with their historical and cultural roots—may also be highly engaging for young learners.

Finally, this research demonstrates the value of employing multiple theoretical perspectives to understand L2 motivation. In the words of Hermessi (2020:103), "The search for *the* paradigm or model that captures the full picture of L2 motivation" across different contexts and learner characteristics "might simply prove neither realistic nor seminal." However, accounting for pupils' situated classroom experiences certainly appears to be crucial. Motivation does not develop in isolation; it is inseparable from the lived experiences of learners, shaped daily by their classroom interactions, environment, and sense of progress.

9 | CONCLUSIONS

Many pupils in this study were enthusiastic about learning languages to engage with other cultures and connect with speakers worldwide. Classroom experiences emerged as the most significant influence on motivation, highlighting the central role of teachers in shaping motivation through engaging curriculum content, lesson design, pace, relationships, and atmosphere. When comparing Chinese and European languages, there was some evidence of a distinct motivational profile for Chinese. The language was valued for its novelty, character-based writing system, and sense of exclusivity associated with a less commonly taught

language. Pupils noted the language's difficulty but generally perceived this as a challenge they were eager to tackle.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In this article, "Chinese" refers specifically to Mandarin Chinese, the most frequently taught variety of Chinese in anglophone countries.

[2] To gather together all instances of "global orientation," this code was applied to some comments already coded to other themes and sub-themes (i.e., these items were double-coded).

[3] National examinations in England are taken at ages 16 and 18, respectively.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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