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To cite this article: Adéla Funova Retzius, Åsta Haukås, Anna Ghimenton, Laura Molway & Lisbeth M. Brevik (21 Oct 2025): Secondary school students' beliefs about multilingualism across contexts: England, France and Norway, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2025.2571453](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2571453)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2571453>



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Published online: 21 Oct 2025.



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Secondary school students' beliefs about multilingualism across contexts: England, France and Norway

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ABSTRACT

Second and foreign language education is key to fostering global citizens who can comprehend and appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity. However, despite governing bodies' efforts to encourage student enrolment in language classes, some students do not consider it necessary to study additional languages. Studies indicate a need for research focusing on students' own perspectives on multilingualism to understand how to bring about change. This paper presents findings from the large-scale European project LANGUAGES. Drawing on a context-adapted version of the validated *Ungspråk* (Young Languages) survey, we collected responses from secondary school students ($N = 813$) in England, France, and Norway. The findings are based on analyses of students' reported beliefs about the benefits of multilingualism and views of their current multilingual selves. Key results reveal that students in England hold significantly more positive beliefs about multilingualism than students in France and Norway. At the same time, students in England are significantly less likely to self-identify as multilingual. Based on these findings, we discuss potential reasons for these differences and explore what it might take to shift students' perspectives on multilingualism and multilingual education across diverse contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 June 2025
Accepted 2 October 2025

KEYWORDS

Multilingualism; English; French; beliefs; multilingual identity

Introduction

With growing globalisation and migration, classrooms are becoming more linguistically diverse, and students' multilingualism is increasingly recognised as a valuable asset for both individuals and societies (Beiler 2021; Ghimenton, Cohen, and Minniear 2023; Mcauliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). As a result, recent trends in language education have promoted the use of students' multilingualism (Cenoz and Gorter 2025; Drachmann, Haukås, and Lundberg 2023; Tishakov and Haukås 2025). Though to varying degrees, students across contexts are encouraged to draw on all their linguistic repertoires, acquired both inside and outside of school, recognizing similarities, patterns, and differences across languages and cultures (Council of Europe 2020; Eurydice 2024; Ministère de l'éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse [MEN] 2022; Office for Standards in Education 2021). Simultaneously, in several European countries, the number of students wanting to study foreign languages in secondary school has experienced a gradual decline over the past decade despite

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governing bodies' efforts to encourage student enrolment in foreign language classes (Long and Danechi 2024; Norwegian National Centre for Foreign Languages in Education 2024; Tinsley 2019). In many countries, like England, France and Norway, learning a foreign language is compulsory, starting in primary school and at secondary school, learners are introduced to a second foreign language in their curriculum. These varying trends indicate a need for research focusing on students' own perspectives on multilingualism in order to understand this apparent incongruity between what is encouraged by education policy and how it is concretely implemented and experienced on an everyday basis.

Addressing this need, this paper explores secondary school students' beliefs about multilingualism as a potential asset across three contexts, England, France and Norway. Moreover, we relate these beliefs to the extent to which students' self-reported multilingual identities shape their perspectives (Haukås 2022; Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2022). The comparative approach to data collected in these different national educational contexts allows us to disentangle culturally specific factors from broader, more general ones that underpin students' beliefs about multilingualism.

Multilingualism: definitions and approaches

Before exploring students' beliefs about multilingualism, we will define how this term is used in our paper. Multilingualism is a complex multifaceted phenomenon with multiple definitions and approaches across different fields of study. These definitions vary depending on factors such as the number of languages people report knowing or speaking, proficiency levels, and language use (Beiler 2021; Berthele 2021; Cenoz 2013; Haukås 2022). Related terms, including plurilingualism, bilingualism and trilingualism, are also commonly used in the field. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, while in other instances, they carry distinct interpretations (Haukås 2022). In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the Council of Europe (2020) defines plurilingualism as a holistic approach to language use, describing it as 'the dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner' (p. 30). Within an educational context, we expand on the Council of Europe's (2020) definition of plurilingualism by incorporating students' perspectives on their own multilingual identity. For the purposes of this study, we will use the term multilingualism to refer to 'the dynamic and integrated knowledge and/or use of more than one language or language variety' (Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2021a, 84). Since all students in our study have knowledge of more than one language, we consider them multilingual. However, this interpretation may differ from the students' own understanding of multilingualism. Therefore, following Fisher et al. (2020), students' explicit self-identification as multilingual or not will play a key role in our analysis.

As a research object, multilingualism has steadily gained attention since Peal and Lambert's (1962) study, which reported that multilinguals in their sample outperformed monolinguals on both verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests. Since then and particularly from 2000 onwards, there has been an increased interest in the cognitive effects of multilingualism. Bialystok (2011, 2017) in particular, has written extensively on the cognitive benefits which seem to persist through the lifespan, as being multilingual is considered to delay the onset of dementia (Alladi et al. 2013). Other reported positive effects are increased executive functioning, including cognitive flexibility, creativity and intelligence (Fürst and Grin 2021; Mepham and Martinovic 2018; Monnier et al. 2021), economic advantages (Bel Habib 2011), and increased academic performance (Rutgers et al. 2021). Of particular relevance for language learning in school settings is the documentation of increased empathy and open-mindedness among multilinguals (Dewaele and Wei 2012; Tiurikova, Haukås, and Storto 2021), as well as increased metalinguistic awareness and enhanced language learning skills (Jessner 2008; Kemp 2007), especially if students are supported in becoming aware of how these benefits can be applied (Jessner and Allgäuer-Hackl 2022). Yet, several of the reported advantages linked to more general cognitive benefits are highly debated (e.g. Antoniou 2019; Gunnerud et al. 2020; Lowe et al. 2021; Paap, Johnson, and Sawi 2015). For example, in

their meta-reviews, Gunnerud et al. (2020) and Lowe et al. (2021) found either a very small or no effect at all on executive functioning in bilingual children compared to monolingual children. Moreover, they suggest that some of the reported positive effects may be attributable to publication bias. Instead of positioning our paper within this particular debate, we suggest a new perspective on the issue. Given that scientific research documenting these benefits has contributed to the circulation of ideas about multilingualism in educational contexts, education blogs and in social media sites, where multilingualism is portrayed as a marketable asset, we investigate how, and to what extent, these circulating discourses are reflected in students' beliefs about multilingualism.

Student's beliefs about multilingualism

Students' beliefs are often shaped by personal experiences and contextual factors and considered key contributors to individual learner differences in the language classroom (Ellis 2008; Tanaka and Ellis 2003). These beliefs can influence learners' behaviours in various ways, for example, in their decisions about which languages to learn or avoid, their mindsets and motivation, and their preferred learning approaches. Moreover, beliefs are integral to individuals' identities, shaping how they perceive themselves and others, construct knowledge, and engage with the world (Cohen and Ghimenton 2024; Jeoffrion et al. 2014).

Understanding student's beliefs about multilingualism and their multilingual identity is essential for developing effective pedagogical approaches. For instance, positive beliefs toward multilingualism can inspire students to dedicate time and effort to language learning, whereas negative or unrealistic beliefs may hinder their motivation by making multilingualism seem less relevant (Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2022). Regarding students' identities, Fisher et al. (2020) argue that fostering a multilingual identity in students is important, as it may encourage them to more actively engage in learning and maintaining their languages. In her research conducted in France, Stratilaki-Klein (2023) investigated secondary school students' perceptions of their own multilingualism. The students in the sample had recently arrived in France and were interviewed at two different stages. The results highlight the effect of students' judgement about their home languages on their feelings of linguistic insecurity and identity. Some students began to question their place in school together with the appropriateness of the ways they spoke and consequently became discouraged. Others felt more confident and pursued their efforts in furthering their language skills. Stratilaki-Klein (2023) corroborated Hélot's (2008) findings on the monolingual habitus promoted in French schools, undermining students' multilingual resources and affect for other languages besides French. Taking these considerations altogether, it is possible to say that in the context of growing globalisation and increasing diversity in both communities and classrooms, adopting a multilingual identity might contribute to stronger social cohesion within schools and beyond.

Questionnaires have been widely used in second and foreign language contexts to investigate students' language learning beliefs, with Horwitz's (1985) BALLI questionnaire being perhaps the most well-known. However, only a few questionnaires have been developed to examine students' beliefs about multilingualism in school settings. In England, Lanvers, Hultgren, and Gayton (2019) conducted a teaching intervention to examine the attitudes of Anglophone students toward multilingualism and language learning. The study involved 97 students aged 12–13 with a pre- and post-questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards multilingualism and the global status of English. The results indicated that many students held an Anglocentric point of view, perceiving multilingualism as difficult, distant, and unnecessary due to the widespread use of English worldwide. However, the intervention demonstrated that teaching students about multilingualism and its potential benefits could positively influence their Anglophone attitudes. By challenging the belief that 'English is enough,' the intervention made students recognise the importance and prevalence of multilingualism (Lanvers, Hultgren, and Gayton 2019, 100).

In Norway, Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova (2021b) provided insights into students' beliefs about multilingualism and its potential benefits by developing the digital Ungspråk survey. Of particular interest for this study is the Beliefs about Multilingualism (BAM) construct. For BAM, participants are asked to consider on a five-point Likert scale to what extent they agree with eight commonly reported benefits of multilingualism. Thereafter, participants are asked to define what it means to be multilingual ('To be multilingual means ...') and then to report whether they identify as multilingual themselves or not. The Ungspråk researchers invited secondary school students aged 13–14 years from seven Norwegian lower secondary schools to respond to the survey. Published results from their research showed that the majority of the participating students self-identified as being multilingual (Haukås 2022). Moreover, the students ($N = 593$) expressed positive beliefs about benefits related to the language learning process, believing that knowing more languages provided insight into the languages they already knew and helped when learning an additional language (Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2022). However, students were less positive about general cognitive advantages of multilingualism, such as being smarter or more creative. Moreover, the study did not find significant relationships between students' beliefs and their multilingual identity. Interestingly, students with migration backgrounds and those who reported having lived abroad expressed significantly more positive beliefs about multilingualism than those without such experiences (Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2022).

Parrish and Bailey (2024) used the Ungspråk survey and supplemented it with items from established self-determination theory instruments in the English context. They conducted an online survey among 422 students aged 11–16 from 16 schools in a predominantly monolingual area. Their findings indicated that students with more multilingual lives held more positive beliefs about multilingualism, suggesting that exposure to languages had a positive effect on beliefs about languages. Notably, identifying as multilingual was strongly associated with more positive perceptions of their teacher and classroom environment. However, other characteristics, such as gender and level (i.e. school year), had minimal impact on students' beliefs.

Despite growing interest in multilingualism, large-scale research on students' beliefs about multilingualism and their multilingual identity across different national contexts remains limited. By comparing students' beliefs across countries with different language constellations and language learning traditions, we seek to better understand how these differences may influence students' perception of their own multilingual identity and beliefs.

Context: England, France and Norway

The position of multilingualism in the three countries provides an important context for this paper. Our study investigates students' beliefs in contexts where languages hold different statuses in society and education.

Multilingualism in England

Despite England's growing linguistic diversity, language learning remains an area of challenge in education since 2004 (Parrish and Bailey 2024). The National Curriculum Framework mandates that students study a modern foreign language between the ages of 7 and 14, after which it becomes optional (DfE 2013). When this policy change was introduced in 2004, there was an immediate decline of approximately 64,000 exam entries for modern foreign languages in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), representing a 12% drop. Since then, the number of students taking a language GCSE has fallen to nearly half of its peak level. During the academic year 2022–23, 47% of students entered a GCSE final exam in a modern foreign language at the age of 16 (Long and Danechi 2024). The GCSE entries included over 21 languages, with French being the most commonly chosen (19%), followed by Spanish (18%) and German (5%) (Long and Danechi 2024).

As of the 2021/22 Census, 16.8% of the UK population was born outside the country (ONS Census 2022). Although the foreign-born population has likely increased in subsequent years, no reliable data is available for later years. In secondary schools across England, 37% of students come from a minority ethnic background (including all ethnic groups except White British) and 20.8% of students were reported to have a home language other than English (DfE 2024). Many of these students fall into the category as having English as an Additional Language (EAL). Despite the linguistic diversity within schools and the selection of languages offered (e.g. French, German, Spanish), there is little evidence that educational policies, curricula, or classroom practices actively support multilingualism for students who choose a modern foreign language or for students with EAL (Costley and Leung 2020; Szymczyk, Popan, and Arun 2022). Research further indicates that this lack of multilingual support influences students' self-identification as multilingual. Many students do not identify as multilingual, even after studying an additional language at school, as they associate multilingualism with a level of fluency beyond their own abilities (Bailey, Parrish, and Pierce 2023).

Multilingualism in France

Despite its longstanding monolingual national ideology (Hélot 2008), France is in contact with many languages spoken on its territory. Already back in the 1990s, Cerquiglini (1999) reported a list of 75 languages spoken by French nationals, despite French being inscribed in the constitution as the official language of the republic (see Article 2 of the French constitution). According to the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (2021), over 10% of the population is born in a country other than France and in 2023 it was reported that 27.4% of French nationals had at least one parent of foreign nationality. As Berthomier et al. (2023) noted, 54% of French nationals declare themselves monolingual only, meaning that nearly half of the population considers themselves as multilingual. Since 2015, growing efforts in the French education system have been made to provide more inclusive approaches towards languages (MENSER 2015). From pre-primary school, teachers are encouraged to include the children's languages in the classroom using different practices, like songs or riddles. From age 6 onwards, foreign language learning is compulsory, and English is studied by most of the learners. According to a Ministry circular, the French Ministry of National Education (MEN 2022), over 99% of secondary school learners have English as their foreign language. The same circular mentioned that foreign language learning was a priority and that by 2025 every secondary school student aged 15 will have participated in a national foreign language evaluation campaign. The objective is that at least 80% of learners reach an A2 level in English (MEN 2022).

Multilingualism in Norway

In Norway, students learn Norwegian and English throughout mandatory schooling (Years 1–10; age 6–15). Additionally, during lower secondary school (Years 8–10; age 13–15), students have the option to study a foreign language alongside English. While most schools offer French, German, and Spanish, some schools offer other languages, such as Italian, Latin or Russian. In the academic year 2023–24, 73% of Year 8 students chose to study a foreign language, with 11.2% choosing French (Norwegian National Centre for Foreign Languages in Education 2024). An in-depth analysis of the curricula for the school's language subjects (Norwegian, English, foreign languages) shows that multilingualism is embraced as an important goal both for individuals and for society (Drachmann, Haukås, and Lundberg 2023). However, Norway as a multilingual society is also enriched by a growing population with an immigrant background, meaning they are either immigrants themselves or born in Norway to immigrant parents, with 21.4% of students in primary or lower secondary school having an immigrant background (Statistics Norway 2025).

Research questions

Based on the literature review and insights from the three contexts, our study was guided by the following two research questions (RQs), using a context-adapted version of the Ungspråk survey for the LANGUAGES project:

RQ1: To what extent do students express positive beliefs about multilingualism across England, France and Norway? We hypothesise that in countries where multilingualism is seen as an asset in education, students feel more positively towards multilingualism.

RQ2: To what extent do students across the three countries self-identify as multilingual? We would expect to see students who live in countries well-known for their monolingual ideologies and habitus (i.e. France and England) to be less inclined to consider themselves as multilingual compared to students in Norway.

Methods

This study is part of the large international project LANGUAGES that combines observations, achievement data and self-reports from secondary schools in England, France, and Norway (Brevik, Cohen and Myhill [forthcoming](#)). The project aims to advance our understanding of language development in English and French classes, among students from different proficiency levels and language backgrounds. This article is the first study in the LANGUAGES project to examine students' reported multilingual beliefs based on the LANGUAGES context-adapted Ungspråk survey (see also Funova [2023](#)), which was distributed to consenting students in all three countries in 2022–23 (Year 10 in England, Year 9 in Norway and 4ème in France; students aged 13–15 years). All students chose their level of involvement, including whether to complete the Ungspråk survey (Brevik, Cohen and Myhill [forthcoming](#)). The LANGUAGES project received ethical approval in 2021 from ethical boards in Norway (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, reference number 165072), England (University of Oxford, reference number CIA-22HT-072; the University of Exeter Research Ethics Committee) and France (Service de Protection des données, certificat number 2-22124). For this study, all participating students and parents provided written informed consent in line with ethical requirements in each context (Brevik, Cohen and Myhill [forthcoming](#)).

Sample

The study used survey responses from all schools in the LANGUAGES project. The schools were strategically sampled (Brevik [2022](#); Tashakkori, Johnson, and Teddlie [2020](#)) to represent variation in socioeconomic status and language diversity in the three countries (Brevik, Cohen and Myhill [forthcoming 2025](#)). The sample included eight French classes and eight English classes in each country, totalling 48 language classes. In these classes, a total of 997 students participated, of which 813 provided answers to the LANGUAGES context-adapted Ungspråk survey, see [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Context, participants and data material (school year 2022–23).

Context	Age	Students	Survey responses
England	13–14	365	292
France	12–13	286	230
Norway	13–14	355	291
In total		997	813

Data collection instrument

The LANGUAGES project developed a context-adapted version of the validated Ungspråk student questionnaire (Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2021b), to capture students' language knowledge and use, their beliefs about multilingualism and multilingual identities across the three countries. The survey consists of three sections. In the first section, participants are asked to report all the languages they know and are currently learning. The second section includes three constructs: Beliefs about Multilingualism (BAM), Future Multilingual Self (FMS), and Open-Mindedness (OPM). For the purposes of this study, only BAM was used. For a discussion of the inclusion of the specific BAM items linked to eight commonly reported benefits, see Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova (2021b). In the third section, participants were first asked to define what it means to be multilingual ('To be multilingual means ...'), and then to indicate whether they consider themselves multilingual. This section also included questions related to the participants' backgrounds. The contextual adaptation included making the survey shorter and thus quicker to answer by removing some variables including the construct Future Multilingual Self (FMS), questions about students' grades in the language subjects, and parents' educational backgrounds. Moreover, we made the survey context-neutral by removing specific questions linked to the Norwegian educational context. The original Norwegian questionnaire (see Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2021b) was translated into English and French by the research team using a multi-step process to ensure accuracy and clarity. First, one researcher translated the questionnaire from Norwegian into English and French. Then, the entire research team, proficient in at least two of the languages, reviewed and compared the translated versions with the original questionnaire to identify any discrepancies, ambiguities, or shifts in meaning. Any necessary refinements were made before the final versions were distributed in each country's official language.

The questionnaire was distributed by researchers in the classroom and conducted online or on paper, depending on the teachers' preference and available computers. To investigate RQ1, we analysed the eight BAM items, see Table 2. Each of the eight items from Section 2 (BAM1-8) was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with a neutral mid-point 3 (not sure). All statements were written in a single direction with positive wording.

Table 2. Items from the LANGUAGES context-adapted Ungspråk survey (English version).

Item	Statements
BAM1	The more languages you know, the easier it is to learn a new language
BAM2	People who know several languages are usually smarter than others
BAM3	People who know several languages are usually more creative than others
BAM4	People who know several languages, usually earn more money than others
BAM5	Learning new languages helps you to better understand the languages you already know
BAM6	Knowing several languages makes you better at other school subjects
BAM7	Knowing several languages helps you understand other people's feelings better
BAM8	Knowing several languages helps you to see things in different ways

A Cronbach's alpha test for the BAM scale, conducted on the dataset from the original Ungspråk study, revealed moderate to strong correlations among all items and the resulting Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 indicates good internal consistency (for further details on the piloting of the questionnaire, see Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2021b). Similarly, when Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the BAM scale in the LANGUAGES dataset ($N = 813$), all items again demonstrated moderate to strong correlations, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75, indicating a good fit. Since the process of translation resulted in distinct versions of the questionnaire for each country, we also report the Cronbach's α scores separately: England ($\alpha = .73$), France ($\alpha = .71$), and Norway ($\alpha = .78$). To address RQ2, we analysed the question 'Are you multilingual?' from the LANGUAGES context-adapted Ungspråk version, Section 3. The question had three response options (Yes, No, I'm not sure).

Analysis

We used SPSS version 29 to analyse the data. To explore the extent to which students agreed with particular beliefs about multilingualism, we calculated the mean scores (M), standard deviation (SD), and 95% confidence interval (CI) for each item.

In our further analysis we sought to determine whether mean scores differed significantly across our three independent groups (England $n = 292$, France $n = 230$, and Norway $n = 291$). We have assumed that our Likert scale data approximates a scale with equal intervals between data points. For the overall 8-item BAM scale, although Shapiro–Wilk tests indicated departures from normality ($p < .05$), visual inspection suggested approximate normality with very little skew (max .16) or kurtosis (max .32). Levene’s test was significant, $F(2, 810) = 6.25$, $p < 0.05$, suggesting unequal variances, and therefore Welch’s ANOVA was used. For individual BAM items, distributions were sometimes skewed, as expected for Likert-type responses. However, ANOVA is robust to deviations from normality with large sample sizes and the use of a parametric test facilitated comparison of our findings with those of others (e.g. Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2022). When significant differences were found, Tukey’s HSD post-hoc test was used to identify which specific countries differed from one another. Additionally, Cohen’s d was calculated to assess the magnitude of differences between groups and to facilitate comparisons across studies. Effect sizes were interpreted as follows: 0.2 represents a small effect, 0.4 a medium effect, and 0.6 a large effect (Calin-Jageman and Cumming 2019). For transparency we report both parametric results and non-parametric equivalents (Kruskal–Wallis H test with Dunn–Bonferroni pairwise comparisons).

Lastly, we used descriptive statistics (percentages) to present the proportion of students in each country who answered ‘Yes’, ‘No’, or ‘I’m not sure’ to the question ‘Are you multilingual?’ We then conducted a one way ANOVA for the three independent groups to examine significant differences in beliefs about multilingualism between students who self-identified as multilingual and those who did not, across all three contexts. Assumption checks indicated homogeneity of variances (Levene’s test: $F(2, 810) = 2.99$, $p = .051$) and visual checks indicated approximate normality with little skew (max .21) or kurtosis (.23 to .4) although slight deviations were indicated by Shapiro–Wilk $p < .05$.

Findings

Key results from this study revealed that students in England held significantly more positive beliefs about multilingualism than their counterparts in France and Norway. At the same time, students in England were significantly less likely to self-identify as multilingual. In the following, we present these findings, before we discuss potential reasons for these differences and what it might take to shift students’ perspectives on multilingual education across diverse educational contexts.

The extent of positive student beliefs about multilingualism across England, France and Norway

The mean scores reported in Table 3 show students’ reported beliefs about multilingualism across the whole sample, and within each of the three countries.

The overall mean score on the BAM scale is moderate ($M = 3.2$; $SD .69$), suggesting that these multilingual benefits are not strongly endorsed or students are unsure of the suggested benefits.

Table 3 further indicates that regarding the individual scale items, students expressed more positive beliefs for items BAM1, BAM5 and BAM8. The three items had the highest score both for each country and across countries. The highest average scores were obtained for the first item (BAM1; $M = 3.8$), which suggests that students believe the more languages one knows, the easier it becomes to learn new languages, and for the fifth item, which indicates that many students held the positive belief that learning new languages enhances their understanding of the languages they already know (BAM5; $M = 3.8$). Moreover, students believed that knowing several languages helps you

Table 3. Mean scores and standard deviations for each item (BAM1-8) and each context.

Items	Statements	Overall		England <i>n</i> = 292		France <i>n</i> = 230		Norway <i>n</i> = 291	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
BAM1	The more languages you know, the easier it is to learn a new language	3.8	1.00	3.9	.88	3.6	1.05	4.0	1.04
BAM2	People who know several languages are usually smarter than others	3.0	1.20	3.5	1.00	2.6	1.23	3.0	1.21
BAM3	People who know several languages are usually more creative than others	2.9	1.11	3.2	.98	2.9	1.18	2.6	1.11
BAM4	People who know several languages, usually earn more money than others	3.1	1.15	3.3	1.04	3.1	1.29	3.0	1.12
BAM5	Learning new languages helps you to better understand the languages you already know	3.8	1.05	3.9	.91	3.7	1.22	3.7	1.04
BAM6	Knowing several languages makes you better at other school subjects	3.0	1.13	3.2	1.05	2.9	1.21	3.0	1.14
BAM7	Knowing several languages helps you understand other people's feelings better	2.7	1.22	3.1	1.15	2.5	1.22	2.4	1.19
BAM8	Knowing several languages helps you to see things in different ways	3.5	1.18	3.6	1.06	3.6	1.22	3.2	1.21
Whole BAM scale		3.2	.69	3.5	.59	3.1	.69	3.1	.71

see things in different ways (BAM8; $M = 3.5$). Together, this perspective suggests that students recognised the benefits of investing time and effort in language learning, not only for acquiring new languages, but also for improving their overall linguistic awareness and proficiency.

Table 3 shows that the items with the lowest mean scores across countries were BAM3 and BAM7, with both items receiving a mean score below the neutral mid-point of the Likert scale. The lowest score was observed for BAM7 ($M = 2.7$), which suggests students somewhat disagreed or were not sure whether knowing several languages would help them better understand the feelings of others. Students were also unsure whether people who knew several languages were usually more creative than others (BAM3; mean score 2.9), smarter than others (BAM2; $M = 3.0$), earned more money than others (BAM4; mean score 3.1), or made you better in other school subjects (BAM6; mean score 3.0). Notably, these items are not directly related to language learning or language use but instead reflect more general cognitive or socio-economic benefits (e.g. flexibility, creativity, intelligence, income). In summary, most students reported less positive beliefs in such broader benefits of multilingualism, while showing more positive beliefs regarding benefits directly tied to the language learning process.

Differences between contexts

Welch's ANOVA revealed significant between-group differences in students' reported beliefs across the scale ($F(2,516) = 28, p < 0.001$). Post hoc tests revealed that students in England ($M = 3.5$) reported significantly more positive beliefs overall than both students in France ($M = 3.1, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.23, 0.51], d = 0.58$) and students in Norway ($M = 3.1, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.20, 0.46], d = 0.50$). Medium effect sizes were found for both pairwise comparisons.

At the level of individual BAM scale items, the analysis revealed statistically significant differences between at least two countries for all items, as summarised in Table 4. For BAM 1 (*The more languages you know, the easier it is to learn another*), students in both England ($M = 3.9$) and Norway ($M = 4.0$) reported significantly stronger agreement than students in France ($M = 3.6$) with a small to medium effect size ($d = 0.37$ and $d = 0.43$ respectively).

The largest effect size ($d = 0.81$) was found for BAM2 (*People who know several languages are usually smarter than others*) and related to the difference between students in England ($M = 3.5$) and students in France ($M = 2.6, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.66, 1.14], d = 0.81$). A small to medium effect size was also found for the difference between England and Norway ($M = 3.0, p < 0.001$,

Table 4. Summary of Tukey HSD and Dunn-Bonferroni Post Hoc Comparisons Across Countries * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.001$. Cohen's d is added for significant pairwise comparisons.

Item	Tukey HSD Pairwise Comparisons				Dunn-Bonferroni Pairwise Comparisons				
	Comparison (England = E, France = F, Norway = N)	Mean difference	SE	p-value	95% CI	Cohen's d (for significant results)	Mean rank difference	Z score	P (Bonferroni adj.)
BAM1 (new languages)	E vs F	0.353**	0.087	<.001	[0.15, 0.56]	0.37	74.97**	3.82	<.001
	E vs N	-0.093	0.082	.496	[-0.28, 0.10]		-33.94	-1.84	.200
	F vs N	-0.446**	0.087	<.001	[-0.65, -0.24]	-0.43	-108.91**	-5.54	<.001
BAM2 (smarter)	E vs F	0.900**	0.101	<.001	[0.66, 1.14]	0.81	166.90**	8.31	<.001
	E vs N	0.462**	0.095	<.001	[0.24, 0.69]	0.420	88.10**	4.67	<.001
	F vs N	-0.437**	0.101	<.001	[-0.67, -0.20]	-0.36	-78.81**	-3.92	<.001
BAM3 (more creative)	E vs F	0.291*	0.096	.007	[0.07, 0.52]	0.27	102.84**	5.52	<.001
	E vs N	0.511**	0.090	<.001	[0.30, 0.72]	0.49	56.47**	2.85	<.001
	F vs N	0.220	0.096	.057	[0.00, 0.44]		46.37	2.34	.06
BAM4 (richer)	E vs F	0.263*	0.101	.025	[0.03, 0.50]	0.23	46.19	2.32	.06
	E vs N	0.298*	0.095	.005	[0.08, 0.52]	0.28	58.50**	3.12	<.001
	F vs N	0.035	0.101	.936	[-0.20, 0.27]		12.31	0.62	1.00
BAM5 (language awareness)	E vs F	0.236*	0.093	.029	[0.02, 0.45]	0.22	32.56	1.65	.30
	E vs N	0.196	0.087	.063	[-0.01, 0.40]		38.05	2.06	.12
	F vs N	-0.040	0.093	.902	[-0.26, 0.18]		5.49	0.28	1.00
BAM6 (school subjects)	E vs F	0.304*	0.099	.007	[0.07, 0.54]	0.27	58.56**	2.93	<.001
	E vs N	0.178	0.093	.138	[-0.04, 0.40]		34.35	1.83	.20
	F vs N	-0.126	0.100	.416	[-0.36, 0.11]		-24.22	-1.21	.68
BAM7 (people's feelings)	E vs F	0.608**	0.105	<.001	[0.36, 0.85]	0.51	112.34**	5.60	<.001
	E vs N	0.666**	0.098	<.001	[0.44, 0.90]	0.57	124.08**	6.58	<.001
	F vs N	0.058	0.105	.844	[-0.19, 0.30]		11.74	0.58	1.00
BAM8 (more flexible)	E vs F	-0.008	0.103	.997	[-0.25, 0.23]		-7.28	-0.37	1.00
	E vs N	0.403**	0.096	<.001	[0.18, 0.63]	0.35	74.91**	4.00	<.001
	F vs N	0.411**	0.103	<.001	[0.17, 0.65]	0.34	82.19**	4.12	<.001

Table 5. Student responses on whether or not they consider themselves multilingual across contexts.

Response Options	England n = 292		France n = 230		Norway n = 291	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Yes	105	36%	154	67%	209	71.8%
I'm not sure	122	41.8%	44	19.1%	40	13.7%
No	65	22.3%	32	13.9%	42	14.4%

95% CI [0.24, 0.69], $d = 0.42$). For this item, students in Norway ($M = 3.0$) also reported significantly more positive beliefs than students in France, with a small to moderate effect size ($M = 2.6$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-0.67, -0.20], $d = 0.36$).

Moderate effect sizes were found for differences in relation to BAM 7 (*Knowing several languages helps you understand other people's feelings better*). Students in England ($M = 3.1$) agreed with this statement significantly more than students in Norway ($M = 2.4$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.90], $d = 0.57$) or France ($M = 2.5$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.36, 0.85], $d = 0.51$).

BAM8 (*Knowing several languages helps you to see things in different ways*) stands out as the only statement where students in France ($M = 3.6$) reported significantly stronger agreement than their counterparts in Norway ($M = 3.2$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.65]), with a small to moderate effect size of $d = 0.34$.

The extent of students identifying as multilingual across England, France and Norway

In relation to RQ2, the results in Table 5 show to what extent students answered respectively, *Yes/No/ I'm not sure*, to the question 'Are YOU multilingual?' across the three countries. The results suggest a considerable difference between countries.

In Norway and France, the majority of students reported that they identified as multilingual, respectively 67% in France and 71.8% in Norway. In contrast, only 36% of students in England considered themselves multilingual, highlighting a notable difference. Furthermore, a higher percentage of students in England (41.8%) responded 'I'm not sure' to whether they were multilingual, compared to 19.1% in France and 13.7% in Norway. The number of students who responded that they did not consider themselves as multilingual was relatively similar across the three countries, though notably higher in England (22.3%) compared to France (13.9%) and Norway (14.4%).

Students' responses on whether they considered themselves multilingual did not seem to be strongly associated with their views on the benefits of multilingualism (see Table 6). Although the mean BAM score for students who did not consider themselves multilingual is slightly lower than mean scores for students who were not sure or who did consider themselves multilingual, a one-way ANOVA found no statistically significant differences between groups ($F(2,810) = 2.74$, $p = 0.065$). In the following section, we discuss these findings in light of theory and prior research.

Discussion

The two main objectives of this study were to explore student's beliefs about the potential benefits of multilingualism and the extent to which they identify as multilingual across the three countries. The

Table 6. Mean scores and standard deviations for the BAM scale for each response to the question 'Are you multilingual?'

	Response to the question 'Are you multilingual?'							
	All responses (n = 813)		Yes (n = 468)		I'm not sure (n = 139)		No (n = 206)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
BAM scale	3.2	.69	3.3	.67	3.3	.62	3.1	.74

findings of this study indicate that students across all three countries expressed positive beliefs about benefits related to the language learning process. They acknowledged the benefits of investing time and effort in language learning, not only for acquiring new languages, but also for improving their overall linguistic awareness and proficiency. These findings are promising, as students seem to recognise the positive effects that can be actively strengthened both by their own engagement, seeing their own linguistic repertoires as a resource, and through support from teachers in their school environments, as also shown in previous research (Jessner and Allgauer-Hackl 2022; Lanvers, Hultgren, and Gayton 2019). In contrast, most students did not appear to hold strong positive beliefs regarding more general cognitive benefits associated with being multilingual. Interestingly, this scepticism reflects current scholarly debates on the existence and scope of such cognitive advantages (Gunnerud et al. 2020; Lowe et al. 2021; Paap, Johnson, and Sawi 2015). This alignment between students' perceptions and the academic discussion is noteworthy, as it suggests that young learners may intuitively differentiate between benefits that are tangible and directly observable in their daily learning, and those that remain more abstract or contested within research. Moreover, the findings revealed a notable difference among students in England, who expressed significantly more positive beliefs about multilingualism than their counterparts in France and Norway, while at the same time, were significantly less likely to self-identify as multilingual themselves.

In England, the dominant discourse often frames the country as monolingual and limited at learning foreign languages (Long and Danechi 2024; Parrish and Bailey 2024; Tinsley 2019). This discourse seems to have shaped students' perceived lack of a multilingual identity. Other potential reasons may include a perception among students that one is only multilingual if they grew up with a language other than English or if they speak more than two languages. Consequently, students with English as a home language or those who are learning just one foreign language may not consider themselves multilingual. Our finding is consistent with previous research in England, suggesting that many students do not identify as multilingual, even after studying a foreign language at school, as they associate multilingualism with a level of fluency beyond their own abilities (Bailey, Parrish, and Pierce 2023). There may even be a naïve *idealization* of what it means to be multilingual, potentially contrasting with how students in other contexts view multilingualism. Even though they were less likely to self-identify as multilingual, students in England expressed significantly more positive beliefs about multilingualism than students in France and Norway. This finding suggests that in contexts where monolingualism is seen as the norm and multilingualism is perceived as something exceptional, knowing several languages may be more strongly idealised. Moreover, we see a noticeable percentage of English students being unsure about whether they considered themselves multilingual. This uncertainty may suggest that students in England are either less familiar with the term multilingualism or less aware of their own multilingual abilities. In turn, it could indicate that unclear educational policies and curricula lead teachers to adopt classroom practices that do not actively foster students' multilingualism (Costley and Leung 2020; Szymczyk, Popan, and Arun 2022). Despite the linguistic diversity within schools and the selection of modern foreign languages offered, our findings align with prior studies who found multilingualism to be perceived by many students as something distant or unattainable (Lanvers, Hultgren, and Gayton 2019).

In contrast to students in England, the majority of students in France self-identified as multilingual, a finding that may appear to contradict France's longstanding monolingual national ideology (Hélot 2008). While students in both England and France grow up in countries with strong monolingual national ideologies and at the same time surrounded by rich linguistic environments both inside and outside of school, the differences in their self-identification as multilingual may reflect the influence of policy efforts. In particular, the initiatives by the French Ministry of National Education (MEN 2022) to prioritise foreign language learning may have had a positive impact on the teachers' pedagogical stances and classroom practices, suggesting that there is a need to more strongly highlight multilingualism as a resource in language education policy documents in England as well. In our study, French students also expressed positive beliefs about multilingualism

regarding the language learning process, while being less positive regarding the general cognitive advantages of multilingualism.

In Norway, we see a similar high degree of multilingual self-identification, paired with some scepticism about the broader benefits of multilingualism. This finding aligns with previous findings by Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova (2022), where the majority of students identified as multilingual and expressed positive beliefs about the benefits of language learning, while being less convinced of the general cognitive advantages of multilingualism, such as increased intelligence or creativity (BAM2 and BAM3). While still highly debated in research, a potential reason for the lack of perceived general cognitive benefits of being multilingual across these national contexts may be that many students have experienced the benefits of multilingualism primarily linked to language learning, but not directly in terms of personal or social advantages such as making more money or through increased empathy. These latter advantages may feel too abstract, less relevant, or difficult to perceive. In Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova (2022), however, students who had lived abroad or had friends with home languages other than Norwegian were significantly more positive about the benefits of multilingualism. These findings suggest that creating opportunities in all three national contexts for students to experience direct, tangible benefits of multilingualism could enhance their perceptions, for example by meeting and using their languages in authentic communication with others, whether via digital platforms or physical student exchanges.

It might be considered a limitation of the present study that we examined students' beliefs about the benefits of multilingualism in general, rather than linking them to specific languages learned in or outside of school. However, it seemed more pertinent for a large-scale comparative and intercultural study to focus on how the concept *multilingualism* was perceived and indexed rather than on the perceptions of the language systems involved. Future research exploring beliefs in relation to particular languages could provide complementary insights for more targeted approaches, both in fostering specific benefits and in helping students recognise the value of all languages as important resources, including those often perceived as less prestigious languages spoken in the home (Erling et al. 2022).

Conclusion

All secondary school students in England, France, and Norway have experience learning more than one language, and many of them have a different home language than the language of schooling (Long and Danechi 2024; MEN 2022; Statistics Norway 2025), meaning that we consider them multilingual. However, our study indicates that over a quarter of the participating students did not identify as multilingual themselves. As hypothesised, secondary school students in Norway self-identified as multilingual more frequently than their counterparts in France and England (both contexts well-known for their monolingual ideologies and habitus). However, this study indicates that students in France were embracing a multilingual identity significantly more frequently than their counterparts in England, suggesting a positive shift in attitudes that may reflect the impact of recent policy initiatives on teachers' pedagogical stances and classroom practices.

The participating students in our study demonstrated mild agreement with most statements about the benefits of multilingualism, particularly in relation to language-learning benefits. Our hypothesis that in countries where multilingualism is seen as an asset in education, students would feel more positively about multilingualism was not confirmed in our study, which revealed more positive beliefs about multilingualism amongst students in England, where there is not yet an established policy discourse promoting multilingualism as an asset in the classroom. This finding reveals an interesting tension in our study: perhaps if students consider multilingualism to be something exceptional and out of reach, this may inflate their perceived benefits of multilingualism. The danger here though, is that students' motivation to learn languages could be undermined by the enormity of the gap between their current capacities and the unrealistic fluency goals. We recommend that teachers in England take note of students' reluctance to claim a multilingual identity

for themselves and consider ways to dispel any limiting beliefs that only ‘fluent’ speakers can adopt and embody such an identity. In France and Norway, our study highlighted weaker agreement with some of the statements regarding broader social and cognitive benefits of language learning than in England. We therefore encourage teachers in these contexts to help students become aware of these reported – and sometimes debated – benefits and values, and to explore them critically together in class.

Developing a sense of multilingual identity can be both empowering and motivating for students in learning and maintaining their languages (Fisher et al. 2020; Haukås 2022; Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2022). Given the significant minority of participating students across all countries who did not see themselves as multilingual, a key implication of our study is that it may be beneficial for teachers to raise students’ awareness of their own multilingual identities and to celebrate these. In a language subject classroom, the Ungspråk questionnaire (Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2021b), the adapted LANGUAGES questionnaire or selected statements about the potential benefits of multilingualism, may be used to prompt reflection and raise students’ awareness of multilingualism and their own multilingual identities. Lastly, we acknowledge that policy-level endorsement of the integration and celebration of language diversity and funding for teacher development are both needed to support teachers’ efforts to promote positive multilingual identity development in the language classroom across contexts.

Acknowledgement

We wish to thank all teachers and students who participated in the study. In addition, sincere thanks go to data manager Gunnar Lid at the Teaching Learning Video lab at the University of Oslo. We would also like to thank all members of the LANGUAGES research group for invaluable contributions throughout the research process: Debra Myhill, University of Exeter; Nicole Dingwall, University of Oxford; Cathy Cohen and Joséphine Rémon, École Normale Supérieure de Lyon; Eva Thue Vold, Stephanie H. Wold, Sarah M.Ø. Eiene, Estelle Fohr-Prigent and Simen Grung, University of Oslo.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Research Council of Norway [grant number 315985].

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