



Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the findings of the following project: [UK secondary school students' motivations for learning Chinese as a foreign language](#) by R. Woore, L. Molway, C. Savory, J. Sparks, and K. Guo. Funding Agency: Swire Chinese Language Foundation.

## Motivation for Mandarin and European Languages

### What is this research about and why is it important?

Despite rapid growth in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese in England, there is little published research on school-aged learners of this language in anglophone contexts. Beginning to address this gap, we explored secondary school pupils' motivation for learning Mandarin compared to the more commonly-taught European languages (French, Spanish and German). Chinese is very different to European languages: it lacks cognates (words with similar etymological roots, such as French *poulet* and English *poultry*); is tonal (the pitch of your voice changes the meaning of words); and has a character-based rather than alphabetic writing system. China is also culturally distinctive and geographically distant compared to European countries. For these reasons, we anticipated that pupils' motivation may differ for learning Mandarin versus European languages.

### What did we do?

We used a questionnaire and focus group interviews to explore two questions: (1) What is the strength and nature of pupils' motivation for learning Mandarin and European languages? (2) How does pupils' motivation to learn Mandarin compare with their motivation to learn European languages?

- In July 2023, all Year 7 pupils (aged 11-12 years) learning foreign languages at five non-selective, state-funded secondary schools in Oxfordshire, UK were invited to complete a foreign languages motivation questionnaire. They rated their agreement with statements like 'I do my homework for this language class carefully' on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). 810 pupils completed the questionnaire. 431 were studying French, Spanish or German; 190 were studying Chinese; 189 were studying both Mandarin and a European language. This last group of pupils completed the questionnaire twice, once for each language.
- 43 pupils participated in audio-recorded, follow-up focus group interviews to further explore their motivation. (There were 11 focus groups comprising between 2-6 pupils each).

### What did we find?

1. The average motivation score was 2.6 for learners of Mandarin, and also 2.6 for the European language learners. This is close to the neutral mid-point in the 1-5 scale. However, there was large variation in pupils' responses for both languages, ranging from almost entirely negative to almost entirely positive. There were also differences in overall motivation between schools.
2. For pupils studying just one language, those learning Mandarin reported higher motivation on average (2.8) than those learning a European language (2.6). This difference was statistically significant, but small.

3. Quantitative analysis of questionnaire responses suggested that pupils' motivation for learning Chinese and European languages may differ in nature as well as magnitude. A Principal Components Analysis found three main components for the European language learners but only two for Mandarin. Whilst there was overlap in the two main components, a 'perceived language aptitude' component emerged for European languages but not for Mandarin, indicating pupils who see themselves, or believe they are seen by others, as 'good at languages'.
4. Pupils in the focus groups articulated various benefits of learning languages. Many were excited about their learning. For all pupils, the target language culture and a desire to connect with speakers of the language were reported as strong motivators. Pupils' classroom experiences were also central, highlighting the key role played by teachers in shaping learners' motivation.
5. Echoing the analysis of the questionnaire, the focus group data suggested that there were differences in pupils' motivation depending on the language being learned. Motivation for Mandarin was frequently linked to novelty, difference, high levels of challenge (in a positive sense) and an enjoyment of learning the character-based writing system.
6. Pupils raised the issues of limited time being dedicated to languages in some settings and the variability in the quality of their prior experiences of language learning.

### What does it all mean anyway?

1. Overall levels of motivation for language learning were similar to those found in English secondary schools almost twenty years ago, using the same questionnaire (Coleman et al., 2007). Despite numerous government initiatives to improve language learning in schools, we found no evidence that the motivational dial has shifted significantly. That said, our focus group interviews revealed a more encouraging picture, suggesting that many pupils enjoy and value language learning.
2. Classroom experiences are key. Teachers should explore the motivational impacts of their pedagogical choices – for example, in the learning tasks they design.
3. We recommend that teachers capitalise on pupils' enthusiasm for cultural learning by integrating culture throughout the language-learning process, from its outset. For example, this might be achieved through the use of video clips, songs, photos, maps, food and realia.
4. Practising writing Chinese characters may be a valuable use of lesson time, even if it is something that could be practised effectively at home or mediated by technology, because of the positive experiences and opportunities for creativity this generates.
5. School leaders should consider the importance of timetabling sufficient hours for languages, at sufficient frequency, to enable pupils to feel that they are making substantial progress, since this is known to be crucial for sustaining motivation. This is likely to be especially true for Mandarin, given the known difficulty of learning this language for native speakers of English.
6. Further longitudinal research is needed to track pupils' language learning experiences and motivation. If the novelty of Chinese wears off, does pupils' motivation decline? Does the difficulty of learning Chinese hamper pupils' sense of progress over time?
7. Future research should also aim for a larger sample and number of schools. Pupil-level data (regarding special educational needs and disabilities, gender, socio-economic status, etc.) should be gathered, to explore any associated patterns in motivation.

**Material, data, open access article:** Following publication of the research, the questionnaire used in this study will be made available via the Iris database: <https://www.iris-database.org/>

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