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Qualifications in home languages: opportunities, barriers and policy implications

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ABSTRACT

There is a recognised need for stronger language skills in the United Kingdom which could be partly addressed by valuing and harnessing the home language skills of its population. One way in which these skills could be supported is through formal accreditation, an opportunity which is not consistently being offered to pupils who speak a language at home which differs from the classroom language. This article draws on data from focus groups with multilingual pupils, interviews with mainstream and complementary school staff, and information from university admissions teams to explore the experiences of these stakeholders regarding home language qualifications, the perceived value of qualifications, as well as barriers and opportunities with regard to language qualification uptake. We discuss actions that could support higher levels of uptake and offer three short-term feasible policy interventions which could make a positive contribution to support for home language skills.

Introduction

The need for increased language skills in the UK has been the subject of numerous reports in the past decade (e.g. British Academy et al. 2020; British Council 2017). It is widely acknowledged that a stronger repertoire of language skills would have positive individual, societal, cultural and economic impacts (APPG Modern Languages 2019, 2). Above and beyond their obvious and important place in family life, home languages (HLs)[1] have always played a significant role in community cohesion due to their central position in community identity (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers 2018; Ruíz 2010) and their contribution to vibrant multicultural societies (Matras and Robertson 2015, 297). More recently, a compelling economic case has been made using a simulation analysis; Ayres-Bennett et al. show that increased language skills 'could improve the UK's GDP cumulatively over 30 years by between £11.5bn and £12.3bn' (2022, 53).[2] This is particularly pertinent following Brexit which has made engaging workers from outside the UK more difficult for employers (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers 2020). Whilst part of the solution is to increase the number of pupils learning languages at school (CBI 2019, 26), it has also been argued that the language skills of the UK's multilingual pupils could be harnessed more proactively to positive effect (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers 2018; Global Future 2021, 23; McPake, Tinsley, and James 2007).

Most pupils do not have access to HL education in mainstream schools, instead learning the language at home and/or in complementary schools (Szczepek Reed et al. 2020; Wei 2006).[3] Only a minority take a qualification in their HL. For example, in 2023, out of 658,504 pupils with a first language other than English in state-funded secondary schools in England (DfE 2023), only 38,249 took a GCSE in an 'other modern language' (JCQ 2023).[4] A minority of bi- and multilingual pupils, therefore, take a qualification that would recognise their skills (Matras and Karatsareas 2020, 6), enhance their employment prospects (Global Future 2021, 23), and send a signal within the education system and beyond that these languages are valued (Matras and Robertson 2015, 307). The positive ramifications could also begin to address inequalities in opportunity and attainment experienced by pupils from BAME and/or lower socio-economic backgrounds (Global Future 2021, 23), as well as pupils who are learning English at the time of qualifications, where an average of five to seven years is needed to reach academic English proficiency (Demie 2013), longer for pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Strand and Lindorff 2020).

In short, pupils with a HL other than English are, to use Ruíz's term, a potentially rich but currently underused 'resource'. Ruíz's widely-applied model (1984) posits three perspectives ('orientations') through which language policy can be approached: language-as-problem, language-as-resource, language-as-right. We approach the opportunities and challenges relating to HL qualifications from a 'language-as-resource' orientation, mentioning in our discussion how HLs may be viewed as a 'problem' and one context where they could (or should) be a 'right'. While a 'language-as-resource' orientation may risk overstating the instrumental benefits of HLs or diminishing their value to only what they can offer to others (Ricento 2005, 363), we argue that it could underpin an appealing argument for schools, universities and policymakers, and help to build increased understanding and appreciation of the individual, societal, cultural and economic benefits of HL qualifications (Groff et al. 2023, 170).

Research context and questions

The question of qualifications is frequently mentioned in published research on HLs (e.g. Hancock and Hancock 2021; Matras et al. 2022; Matras and Karatsareas 2020; Matras and Robertson 2015; Soliman and Khalil 2022), but is rarely the subject of deeper investigation. Notable exceptions include Gaiser and Hughes' (2015) overview of provision in Manchester, which shows that pupils, complementary-school teachers and parents see value in HL qualifications for pupils' futures, and the Global Future (2021) report which argues for greater governmental support, funding and training for HL qualifications and complementary schools. Furthermore, whilst the role of complementary schools in HL qualification provision is often highlighted (Gaiser and Hughes 2015; Matras and Karatsareas 2020, 6; Szczepek Reed et al. 2020, 52), published research has placed little focus on mainstream schools' potential contribution,[5] or on the scope for productive links between mainstream and complementary schools. This paper discusses a range of issues concerning HL qualifications, building on existing research on the complementary school sector by integrating not only mainstream school perspectives, but also those of university admissions offices and crucially, the opinions of pupils themselves about the value of HL qualifications.

This article is one component of a larger project on UK language policy.[6] Using thematic analysis of data gathered in interviews, focus groups and desk-based research from a variety of actors and stakeholders (pupils, teachers in mainstream and complementary schools, UK university admissions departments), we explore the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of multilingual pupils and of mainstream and complementary schools regarding HL qualifications?
2. What is the perceived value of HL qualifications from the perspectives of pupils, teachers, and universities?

3. To what extent do these experiences and perceptions suggest a 'language-as-problem' orientation?
4. What actions or policy interventions could improve access to and uptake of qualifications, thereby promoting a 'language-as-resource' approach?

The Northern Irish context and the UK

The fieldwork for this article took place in Northern Ireland (NI), although the issues discussed are pertinent across the UK.[7] Nonetheless, distinctive features of any societal context may require findings to be nuanced. Although less diverse than many parts of Britain, NI is increasingly multilingual and multicultural, with immigration numbers growing since the 1998 peace process which marked the end of 'The Troubles', a three-decade long conflict.[8] According to the 2021 census,[9] 4.3% of NI residents use a 'main language' other than English or Irish, of which Polish (1.1%) and Lithuanian (0.5%) are the most common (NISRA 2022). Such changes are reflected in schools, where over 90 languages are spoken by pupils (Collen 2023, 21). NI policy discourse uses the term 'newcomer pupils', the definition of which demonstrates a clear 'language-as-problem' orientation, since it is framed in terms of deficit: 'a pupil who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher' (DENI n.d.). School records of pupils who use a HL other than English/Irish are tightly linked to newcomer pupil data; consequently and inevitably, the multilingualism of large numbers of pupils goes undocumented because their English is of a sufficiently high level for them not to be labelled a 'newcomer'. For newcomer pupils, a school's priority is rapid acquisition of the classroom language to allow pupils to access the curriculum (Carruthers and Nandi 2021; DENI 2009, iii) and there is no requirement for pupils' HLs to be nurtured within mainstream education.

In NI, England and Wales, two main qualifications can be taken in mainstream post-primary schools: General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs), usually taken aged 16, and A-Levels, usually taken aged 18.[10] In NI, language qualifications in the four main curricular languages, i.e. French, German, Irish and Spanish (Collen 2023, 7), are offered by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA, the NI examination board and by far the most popular qualifications provider). CCEA does not offer HL qualifications but these can be taken through AQA; Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR); and Edexcel. In 2023, qualifications are available in 36 languages.[11] However, availability often changes.

For pupils with a HL for which a qualification exists, there are three options for taking the qualification. First, and possibly most conveniently, a pupil's mainstream school – or another mainstream school – can enter them. Second, some complementary schools facilitate, support and host formal qualifications. Complementary schools do not, however, exist for all languages in every community, and very few function as exam centres;[12] consequently, language education and qualifications via this route are not available to all HL-speakers. Third, pupils can approach private exam centres; these are separate from schools and host exams for external candidates.

Methodology

Much of the data discussed below is drawn from a period of fieldwork (involving focus groups with pupils in mainstream and complementary schools, and interviews with complementary-school teachers) where qualifications formed one part of discussions around HLs. We further collected specific data on HL qualifications through interviews with mainstream-school teachers as well as university admissions data. We bring these together here as one dataset on HL qualifications.

Sampling

This paper focuses on the post-primary sector and two school types within this: mainstream (four schools) and complementary (nine schools). Mainstream post-primary education in NI is almost entirely state-funded and structured as follows:

1. ethos and community ([largely] protestant, [largely] catholic, integrated);
2. selective and non-selective;
3. girls, boys, and co-educational;
4. funding and governance structure (controlled, maintained, voluntary grammar, integrated);
5. language (English- or Irish-medium).

When selecting mainstream schools we sought to achieve representation across categories 1–3, although our final sample was dictated by willing schools with multilingual students and was as follows: 1: largely catholic, selective, boys-only; 2: largely protestant, selective, co-educational; 3: largely catholic, non-selective, girls-only; 4: integrated, selective and non-selective, co-educational. Although disappointing that we were unable to visit a largely protestant non-selective school, it became clear during the fieldwork and data analysis that minimal differences between schools emerged and similar themes arose, suggesting that saturation, the point at which additional data collection will not bring any new information (Adler, Salanterä, and Zumstein-Shaha 2019, 7), had been reached.

Given their importance for HL education, we also include the complementary sector. We approached 25 schools teaching eight languages across NI, located via their websites, Facebook pages and word of mouth; nine schools teaching five languages agreed to participate. The schools ranged from well-established with hundreds of pupils, to recently set-up with just one teacher. Finally, because we are interested in the value and impact of qualifications on the pupils' futures, we also explore the view of HL qualifications in the university sector.

Fieldwork

We conducted focus groups (FGs) with pupils in mainstream and complementary schools. FGs facilitate discussion between participants, potentially allowing for the appearance of unanticipated themes (Codó 2008, 163), providing rich qualitative data, and demonstrating to pupils that their experiences and feelings are shared. Furthermore, a FG with one adult researcher and a group of similarly aged pupils creates a 'safe peer environment' (Adler, Salanterä, and Zumstein-Shaha 2019, 2), helping to address potential power imbalances which would be exacerbated in a one-on-one interview. FG limitations include the possibility of '"false" consensus', with pupils agreeing with their peers, and imbalances in participation between more/less confident pupils (Edley and Litosseliti 2018, 213). At the beginning of FGs, the moderator stressed the importance of respecting each other's views and of trying to avoid talking over one another.

Data from mainstream- and complementary-school staff were collected via semi-structured interviews, i.e. pre-prepared questions with space to diverge (Rolland, Dewaele, and Costa 2019, 280).[13] Interviews focused mainly on the practicalities of entering pupils for a non-curricular language qualification, and on interviewees' perception of the value of languages. Semi-structured interviews were desirable as interviewees' experience levels vary greatly; some have years of experience while others were unaware that HL qualifications exist. Interviews rather than FGs were a practical decision (trying to arrange one time for multiple teachers from different schools was not feasible) and the semi-structured nature of the interviews still allowed for unexpected discussions to arise (cf. Karatsareas 2022, 101). Interviewees who raised concerns about their level of English received the interview structure in advance.

Table 1. Data sources and question topics.

Source	Summary of question topics
Post-primary mainstream schools	
Two staff interviews in two schools	The process of entering pupils for HL qualifications; pupil and parent motivations; perceived value of HL qualifications
Eight FGs with pupils in four schools	Including: perceived value of HL qualifications; experiences of HL qualifications
Complementary schools	
11 staff interviews in nine schools	The process of entering pupils for HL qualifications (where relevant); pupil and parent motivations; perceived value of HL qualifications
One FG with pupils in one school	Including: perceived value of HL qualifications; experiences of HL qualifications
Universities	
Desk-based research into university admission procedures in UK and ROI	N/A
One interview with a University Admissions Manager	Position of university on HL qualifications; process for discerning applicant's L1

The university perspective draws on desk-based analysis of admissions guidance on university webpages, supplemented by one semi-structured online interview with a member of a university admissions team and email correspondences with several UK-based universities. Data are summarised in Table 1.

Annotation and analysis

NVivo was used to conduct thematic analysis of the data, combining *a priori* and inductive approaches (Ryan and Russell Bernard 2003). Interviews and FGs revolved around key question topics (see Table 1), decided *a priori* through a review of the literature and a written questionnaire survey with post-primary pupils.[14] FGs and interviews were first coded by question topic, grouping together all responses to similar questions, then by the developing themes (inductive). Themes clustered around three major areas: teaching and assessment challenges (teachers' and pupils' voices); inequitable accessibility and provision (teachers' voices with some pupils' voices); and mixed views of the value of HL qualifications (pupils, teachers and universities). Participants are anonymised and identified with codes. Languages are redacted and replaced by language type (European curricular, European non-curricular, African non-curricular, Asian non-curricular).[15] Information which could reveal participants or schools is redacted. This study was approved by the ethics committee in the School of Arts, English and Languages at Queen's University Belfast.[16]

Findings

Teaching and assessment challenges

This section draws on interviews with mainstream- and complementary-school staff as well as pupil FGs to explore teaching and assessment challenges which affect pupil access to HL qualifications. Interviewees reported uptake for HL A-Levels as low in comparison to GCSEs. Consequently, we focus primarily on GCSEs.

From the perspective of mainstream schools, the one significant barrier to a pupil obtaining a HL qualification is the availability of a speaking examiner:

1. Exams_officer_mainstream

   we can organise an exam in absolutely anything, the difficult part for trying to help any kid is trying to organise someone who can conduct the speaking exam. […] that's the biggest um stumbling block

In some instances, the Exams Officer explained, this incurs a cost to be met by either the school or the family. Currently no formal process for recruiting a speaking examiner exists. Over time,

schools build connections with, e.g. 'the local imam', other schools and universities, or rely on word of mouth, with parents also contacted to help to locate suitable individuals. Relationships with local complementary schools are beneficial here:

2. Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_A

> the schools here in [location] um they would actually like, uh, try to contact us and ask for um ask for a person who can be that moderator

Quite simply, if a school cannot locate or pay an examiner, the pupil cannot take the exam.

Languages GCSEs require pupils to demonstrate proficiency in four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, each weighted equally (in a majority of cases). For many pupils, their lack of confidence or ability in writing caused reluctance regarding HL qualifications:

3. Pupil_European_non-curricular_1

> I prefer not to do it because obviously at that point I couldn't like really read or write

Attending a complementary school where staff are aware of the exam specification is helpful here:

4. Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_B

> you have to know for GCSE you know how to speak, how to write basic things, and how to read so we we are focusing on those three abilities

HL usage is, for most of the pupil participants, primarily limited to oral and aural skills. However, an upcoming exam can be the motivating factor for pupils to improve other skills:

5. Pupil_European_curricular_12

> it definitely helped with like my grammar and my like vocabulary and sentence structure and all that

Maintenance of the HL was cited by mainstream- and complementary-school staff as a parental factor in encouraging their children to take a qualification, as reported here:

6. Language_teacher_mainstream

> very often it's so that they don't lose their home language. It's about maintaining it and making sure they keep learning whilst they're getting so much English

If an upcoming exam is motivation for a pupil to develop their language skills, then qualifications are beneficial for the pupils themselves and society more broadly, nurturing multilingual young people with written and oral competences.

A small number of pupils expressed hesitancy about taking an extra qualification in their HL because of additional workload. One pupil felt that it would be too much work, preferring to devote time to their curricular language GCSE, although they would happily swap another GCSE with their HL were that an option. This concern about competing pressures was reiterated by complementary-school staff who explained that attendance drops off at GCSE age. Familial support may be needed to prepare pupils for exams. Both mainstream teachers highlighted that school support for non-curricular qualifications was limited to administration:

7. Language_teacher_mainstream

> it's made clear to them if they're entered that they will have to accept responsibility and they will have to help with the teaching at home of the content and the exam itself as well because we have no support there for that

One pupil expressed it as follows:

8. Pupil_Asian_non-curricular_4

> I'm not really sure if I would want to do one or not, I think, it's more like if it's actually laid out then maybe we
> could think about it but now I'm not sure

The emerging factors, from knowledge of the system to motivation, and time, may all amount to a
socio-economic split in provision:

9. Language_teacher_mainstream

> we would have a lot of students who are whose parents may be bilingual, English as a second language, but
> they are high achievers and have high level jobs and employment. Whereas a previous school it was kind of the
> other end of the scale. And we were working with students who who didn't have great parental support or
> academic support. And they were working maybe in big factories or, you know, things like that. So there's
> there's different levels of attitudes

Inequitable accessibility and provision

In this section, we use interviews with mainstream- and complementary-school teachers to explore
the process of entering pupils for HL qualifications and factors which affect whether pupils are
entered. We show that accessibility to a HL GCSE falls on a spectrum, from good to patchy to
non-existent. Good provision relies not only on best practice but on numerous variables aligning.

We interviewed teachers at two mainstream schools about their experiences of entering pupils
for non-curricular language qualifications. The first mainstream school has offered this opportunity
to pupils for at least a decade and has hosted exams in multiple languages. The second mainstream
school reported an increase in the number of non-curricular exams hosted at the school in the past
few years, although the figures remain low. Each entry incurs a cost, covered either by the school,
the family, or both; engaging an external speaking examiner may incur further costs.

In some cases, schools host pupils attending another mainstream school, allowing for the sharing
of invigilation and other logistics. Whilst the two mainstream schools interviewed were happy to try
to facilitate a HL qualification, not all schools may be:

10. Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_A

> not all the schools would, you know, give the pupils this opportunity and so either it's because obviously some
> schools are saying we are not teaching it, therefore we are not doing the exam

Complementary schools may also contribute to preparing pupils for qualifications and/or the logis-
tics of provision in mainstream schools. We interviewed staff at nine complementary schools and
found significant variability. Two schools currently offer GCSE preparation classes; one has done so
for at least seven years, the other for the first time in 2022. Four schools previously offered GCSE
classes but do not currently, one hopes to offer the classes again in the future. Several schools report
appetite for preparation classes on the part of parents. Two complementary schools teach a Euro-
pean non-curricular language for which no qualification is currently available. None of the comp-
lementary schools interviewed is a registered exam centre.[17] As for mainstream schools, a
complementary school's ability to prepare and enter pupils for qualifications is highly variable
and reliant on multiple factors aligning, including the goodwill of its volunteers.

To give one example of good provision from our dataset, we visited a large and well-established
complementary school which offers GCSE and A-Level preparation classes, and has a long-standing
partnership with a mainstream school which only charges pupils the exam entry cost. The main-
stream school handles the administration and hosts the exam, with a complementary-school tea-
cher facilitating the speaking exam. In summer 2023, 20 pupils registered to sit the GCSE, and

four the A-Level. With the preparation and logistics handled, the process is straightforward for pupils and their families and, being well-established, awareness of the qualifications is high.

Pupils attending a majority of complementary schools must approach their mainstream school to facilitate the exam or a private centre. In some advantageous cases, as reported in two interviews, a mainstream-school staff member will be a speaker of the language, able to provide extra-curricular support:

11. Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_A

> in my [mainstream] school we had this advantage that I was there and um and the senior management team allowed me to to take few lessons to prepare them

Otherwise, as we saw above, preparation falls on the pupils and their families.

Familial knowledge and awareness of qualifications are key to GCSE uptake, as it was confirmed by both teachers and pupils that the idea to take a HL qualification frequently comes from the family. If the family has little knowledge of the school system and the pupil does not attend a complementary school, the likelihood of a pupil being entered for a HL qualification is greatly reduced, as shown by FG pupils who did not know a GCSE in their HL existed. The positive effect of complementary school attendance is also supported by FG data. Seven of the 32 pupils have a HL GCSE, five of whom attend or have attended a complementary school (Table 2). The remaining two have a HL which is also a curricular language.

However, not all complementary-school staff, especially in small-scale services, are aware that a UK qualification exists for their language, e.g. one interviewee who teaches an Asian language. All of the interviewed teachers are first-generation immigrants with varying knowledge of post-primary schooling in NI. The potential effects of this are exacerbated by the lack of collaboration between complementary and mainstream schools reported by interviewees. One complementary-school teacher recounted the reactions of mainstream-school colleagues when she joined as a teaching assistant:

12. Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_B

> they were actually shocked that there are two [language] schools existing here for so many years and be like, oh, really? So what do you do? You teach English there?

Crossover of staff between the two sectors has enabled the school regularly to facilitate GCSEs in the non-curricular language, with the teacher interviewed assessing pupils' speaking abilities. This good provision, however, relies on happenstance.

Private exam centres are a further option for pupils; however, with their costs described as 'extortion' by one complementary-school teacher, this option is not financially viable for all. Finally, currently there are no GCSE or A-Level specifications for many home languages: in our data, this includes three languages taught at three complementary schools visited and 11 languages spoken by FG pupils.

Table 2. GCSE data for FG participants

32 pupils with 18 different HLs	
Seven of the 18 languages have a current GCSE specification	
These seven languages are spoken by 18 pupils[22]	**Seven** have taken the GCSE
	One is taking the GCSE this summer
	Ten have not and currently will not take the GCSE
Of the seven who have taken the GCSE	**Two** have a HL which is also a curricular language
	Five attend(ed) a complementary school

Mixed views of the value of home language qualifications

The views of pupils and teachers

All pupils were asked whether they would like a HL qualification and why. We spoke to pupils with 18 different HLs; 11 of these languages, spoken by 18 pupils, do not currently have a GCSE or A-Level specification (Table 2). Mainstream- and complementary-school teachers were also asked if they saw value in HL qualifications and if they sensed that wider NI society would value them.

In a FG starter exercise, ten pupils reported that they would like to take a HL qualification; eight would not. Pupils' reasons for not wanting to take a qualification include not having competence in all four of the examined skills,[18] not wanting the pressure of an exam, and not needing a qualification. However, not wanting hypothetically to take an exam did not mean that the pupils did not see value in the qualification for themselves or for their futures:

13. Pupil_Asian_non-curricular_10

   like the whole world is becoming more international, so yeah, in any job [it will be useful]

Given that the idea to take a qualification usually comes from the family, it may be, if the qualification existed, with generally positive sentiments about their value already, plus some familial encouragement, that pupils would sit the exams, benefiting themselves and broader society.

Communication was often implicitly presented as the main benefit of having another language. Some pupils highlighted that a qualification is only useful if they continue to use their language in the future and expressed concerns about meeting the expected level in the future:

14. Pupil_Asian_non-curricular_11

   I'm just not sure whether I can back that up and like when the time comes, if I have to use that qualification, whether I'd be able to, you know, dish it out

Without use, another pupil explained, language skills fade and render the qualification irrelevant, whether a home or curricular language. In these cases, having the skills associated with a qualification are valued more highly, i.e. speaking the language, than the qualification itself. Many pupils described positive feelings associated with HL qualifications, including enjoyment and validation, e.g.:

15. Pupil_Asian_non-curricular_9

   I think it would be fun to do like as a personal thing, but not in the academic sense, like just to see how good I am

Regardless of whether the qualification would be academically beneficial, many pupils want to test their skills and have their HL included and acknowledged in their education.

Three complementary-school interviewees teach European non-curricular languages which do not currently have a formal UK qualification. All three interviewees agreed that they would like to see qualifications introduced, citing reasons including the opportunity 'for families to save their language', a chance at a good grade for pupils who are learning English ('at least one good mark for child'), and greater options for the future:

16. Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_I

   I think it will be very helpful for children to have a GCSE in [language] too. You never know like what life is like preparing for you

One teacher, however, who voluntarily runs a school with five teachers, noted that complementary schools would need greater support to make offering qualification preparation plausible.

All complementary-school teachers and most pupils believed that a HL qualification would be useful for the pupils' futures. However, some uncertainty was raised by mainstream-school teachers and a small number of pupils. Many teachers and pupils believed that the benefit of a qualification was that employers and university admissions teams would have a certifiable record of their HL competence:

17. Pupil_European_non-curricular_30

it's different different between saying you can speak it a second language and having a qualification in it, so having that will make it a lot easier to prove to like employers that I can speak multiple languages

18. Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_C

with the kids born here, whenever you're [nationality], it doesn't mean that you actually know [language] like, well, whenever you have [nationality] parents, it doesn't mean that you learn that you know how to speak right and um read in [language] so, that would probably be beneficial as well

Formal qualifications were seen as a recognisable proof of their credentials, useful in NI, in countries where their HL is an L1, and generally.

Frequently, pupils and complementary-school teachers stated that all qualifications are added value, regardless of the subject, and for pupils this was often a motivating factor:

19. Pupil_Asian_non-curricular_4

a GCSE's always useful

20. Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_F

having an extra GCSE or A-Level even in a different language must be an advantage. Cannot be different way

Many pupils mentioned that qualifications would be useful for them abroad with little to no further detail. Not all pupils agreed, however, with two pupils stating that the level of language needed at GCSE is much lower than that used by L1s and therefore of limited use in practice, e.g.:

21. Pupil_31_European_non-curricular

they definitely learn it at like a higher level than we would here so that qualification wouldn't matter as much as their [language] qualification

Many teachers also alluded to enhanced communication skills which are sought by increasingly international businesses, e.g. 'British companies moving to [country] with their production' (Teacher_complementary_European_non-curricular_H).

More varied reasons were given as to why NI employers would value a formal qualification, e.g. because they are increasingly international (Example 13 above), they value multilingualism (Example 22), and will want employees who can work with migrant communities (Example 23):

22. Pupil_European_non-curricular_1

perhaps, yeah, definitely, yeah definitely because you can put multilingual as a skill which a lot of employers would find useful

23. Pupil_European_non-curricular_21

it'd be useful in Ireland, because there's so many [nationality] here

Pupil_European_non-curricular_20

> yeah exactly

Pupil_European_non-curricular_21

> and half of them don't like, they just recently came here and they don't understand English, so if you have like a [language] GCSE you could easily just become a translator

One pupil highlighted that this effect is heightened in the UK where they perceived a prevailing monolingualism which is not present elsewhere:

24. Pupil_Asian_non-curricular_9

> there's plenty of countries where the standard is to speak two or more languages, like in [country]. Everyone speaks a minimum of two languages, which would be [Official Language], and then their like home language. So I think here it's impressive. Maybe not so much if I was applying for a job in like [country]

Overall, the prevalent sentiment amongst pupils and complementary-school teachers was that a HL qualification would be viewed positively by UK employers and universities, echoing Gaiser and Hughes' (2015) findings.

The two mainstream-school teachers were less certain that employers would view HL qualifications favourably:

25. Exams_officer_mainstream

> I'm not totally sure to be honest because I'm not involved in careers, but I know for sure, like in school here we're quite happy to say well look if you want to give up French and do your Polish that will count as your language GCSE, which will help you so the school policy is obviously that it's no different

The languages teacher interviewed saw great value, personally, in the qualifications, stating that communication is important in a globalised world, and that the recognition would benefit pupils' confidence and increase their study and work opportunities. However, when asked specifically about the value of qualifications in NI, a less optimistic picture arose:

26. Language_teacher_mainstream

> we have a long way to go to improve attitudes towards any other languages and we've been battling for a long time even just to maintain the value of the languages that we teach, French and Spanish and uh, German, for example, which has kind of fallen by the wayside, but there is a very strong attitude of why? Everyone speaks English. Why should we bother

Whilst a generally negative view towards languages in NI is expressed, which is consolidated further in a later section of the interview ('language is always a bone of contention in Northern Ireland'), a hierarchy of languages is also invoked, with 'modern languages' sitting below English and above 'home languages'. An awareness and internalisation of a linguistic hierarchy was also observed in pupils' FGs:

27. Pupil_European_non-curricular_25

> Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian like sort of Eastern Europe are sort of pushed away pushed to the back compared to like Spanish, French and Irish. They're like the three like main languages that you know, they teach in schools and stuff

This is not the case for all pupils, some of whom explicitly state that a HL qualification is equivalent to any other qualification.

At one mainstream school, pupils can exchange a curricular language for their HL and these are treated on an equal basis by the school (Example 25). The Exams Officer was unclear about how these A-Levels are perceived by university admissions:

28. Exams_officer_mainstream

> they won't know why you did Italian A-Level rather than French A-Level, so it'll just be an A-Level. Um I suppose it would only be if you were maybe applying to one of the sort of Russell Group or Cambridge whether they might query it more

However, pupils who discussed applying to university all believed that a HL A-Level would be beneficial, e.g.:

29. Pupil_European_non-curricular_32

> I was talking to teachers and my parents and we decided that I should do A-Level course it will be better or get to uni and stuff

We shall return to this issue in the next sub-section.

The views of universities

Admissions to undergraduate degrees at UK universities are usually based on a pupil's A-Levels or equivalent qualifications, notably in relation to an offer of a particular set of grades. However, even for grade requirements that are not attached to specific subjects, not all UK universities allow applicants to include a HL qualification in their offer.

For the most part, it is unclear in public-facing admissions information whether a HL qualification can be used in a pupil's offer (20/35 universities sampled). Of the 15 with clear online statements, one university categorically excludes HL A-Levels. Eight accept HL A-Levels in all cases. The remaining six statements contain a caveat or suggest situations in which a qualification is not accepted, e.g. 'We are usually able to consider native/first language A-Levels' and 'we may not be able to accept a language qualification designed for non-native speakers when presented by a native speaker'. It is worth noting, however, that some universities which state that they always accept a HL A-Level, do not accept A-Levels taken across more than one diet of exams (discussed below).

Universities' positions rely on being able to distinguish between a pupil taking an A-Level in their L1 or L2/L3. These decisions are often made without consultation with the applicant, using information which cannot accurately determine a person's L1 – the application itself does not require applicants to list their language(s) or level (see UCAS n.d.). This issue is mentioned explicitly by the London School of Economics (LSE) who explain that they instead use information including: 'nationality, schools attended (pre- and post-16), completed language qualifications, normal place of residence and information from your referee' to help make a decision. If still unclear, LSE may then contact the applicant or their referee for further information (LSE, n.d.). LSE's position is, however, transparent; many universities do not specify their position on HL qualifications nor how an applicant's L1 is ascertained.

The timing of when a pupil takes an A-Level may affect an application, with some universities accepting only those qualifications taken in one academic session, as one Russell Group university which otherwise views HL A-Levels as equal to all others explained via email correspondence. Similarly, A-Levels which are not taught in an applicant's mainstream school are sometimes excluded; this is highly relevant to HL qualifications which are often non-curricular. A university can, of course, apply any restrictions they see fit; issues arise, however, when they are not clearly signposted (e.g. the Exam Officer's uncertainty about university positions (Example 28)).

A number of universities, both Russell Group and post-92, accept HL qualifications without exception. For instance, in email communication, a member of one university's Admissions

team explained that their position on HL A-Levels had recently been reviewed after concerns were raised that an exam in a HL gives an applicant an unfair advantage. Upon reviewing, A-Level specifications were inspected, confirming that they examine much more than linguistic competence. It was also considered that, given that curricular languages are accepted with no knowledge of an applicant's prior exposure, it would be discriminatory to treat non-curricular languages differently. Furthermore, the team emphasised that even if they wanted to single out L1 speakers, it would not be possible from the information provided.

In short, universities' attitudes to HL A-Levels are not always favourable. When pupils are taking an additional qualification in their HL, the impact of a university's position is lessened. However, when a pupil is 'replacing' a curricular A-Level with a HL A-Level, this could limit their options.

Discussion

A 'language-as-problem' orientation (Ruíz 1984) seems to dominate the experiences of HL speakers. Accessibility of qualifications is patchy both *across* languages and *within* the same language. Of our 32 FG pupils, only 22% took a GCSE in their HL, while only 39% of those where a GCSE was available actually took it, and accounts from three teachers reported pupils travelling over 50 miles to attend a complementary school.

Multiple factors must align for a pupil to gain a HL qualification. At the most basic level, the qualification must exist. One complementary-school teacher discussed the importance of grassroots movements, including petitions calling for the UK government to offer GCSEs in more languages. The Department for Education (DfE - England) made their position clear in relation to a petition concerning Romanian.[19] Although directed at central UK government and relevant to NI and Wales, the DfE's response explained that exam boards decide which languages are offered as GCSEs and cited 2011 Census figures of the number of speakers in England as justification for not offering Romanian.

Where a qualification exists, our data suggest that the system relies heavily on the goodwill and knowhow of various individuals, notably mainstream-school staff (often taking on extra administrative work), complementary-school staff (some of whom are volunteers), as well as familial motivation and knowledge. Taken together, these factors mean that first-generation immigrants to smaller linguistic communities are disproportionately disadvantaged. Moreover, private exam centres, technically available to all pupils (though there are only three in NI) can be expensive, introducing a socio-economic divide which underscores the evidence that familial capacity and motivation are instrumental in complementary provision (Weekly 2020, 46). Exam centres charge additional fees beyond the entrance fee to cover their overheads and, presumably, some profit.[20] Given the effects of socio-economic background on curricular language learning in mainstream schools (see Henderson and Carruthers 2022), additional formalised supports are needed for awareness-raising around HL qualifications, as are practical arrangements (e.g. in relation to speaking exams) to mitigate inequalities in access.

Negative attitudes in the UK towards languages, and specifically towards HLs, are so pervasive that even speakers of those languages perceive their value to be diminished (Weekly 2020). Pupils and teachers in our data referenced a languages hierarchy, in which non-curricular languages are seen as less important than curricular languages, a hierarchy we also see played out elsewhere (e.g. Haukås 2022, 288). Indeed French, German and (more recently) Spanish are historically entrenched as curricular languages in the British education system (McLelland 2018, 7–8). This ideological hierarchy of languages, often maintained by social structures (Block 2015) such as schools, universities and the media, affects pupils' perception of the value of their own language and their identity (Block 2022). Overall, the views of pupils, mainstream teachers and universities towards the value of HL qualifications are mixed, with some pupils seeing an extra qualification as added pressure for uncertain gain. Universities have differing approaches to HLs and many do not recognise them on an equal footing with other languages in admissions processes. Worryingly, a

lack of clear information has caused uncertainty amongst mainstream-school teachers, with potential negative consequences for pupils' entry to university. Given the precarious position of even the most established curricular languages in some higher education institutions (Muradás Taylor and Taylor 2023), varying attitudes (including indifference) towards HL qualifications should perhaps be unsurprising.

While a 'language-as-problem' orientation is widespread, there is certainly evidence that points towards the possibility of a more positive 'language-as-resource' approach. Pupils' self-assessment of their language skills seems to counter criticism often levelled at HL qualifications that they are too easy (Global Future 2021, 9) and that results raise the standard to the detriment of other pupils (Ofqual 2017).[21] Rather, our evidence suggests that taking a qualification motivates pupils to improve or learn reading and writing skills. Many pupils express positive sentiments about the value of having a HL qualification for their confidence (through validation of their linguistic skill-set), for the maintenance and enrichment of family connections, and for their future in a globalised employment context. In terms of practical support, there is clear evidence of the value of successful collaboration between mainstream and complementary schools (cf. Lamb 2020, 118) which can maximise resources to facilitate HL qualifications. Finally, equal treatment of home and curricular languages for admission by some universities not only suggests a 'language-as-resource' orientation but also a 'language-as-right' perspective which is to be welcomed.

Our fieldwork has been carried out in NI, where certain societal issues are relevant, notably the more recent patterns of migration for some communities (provision for long-established communities is more comprehensive), the size and distribution of communities (e.g. population density is much lower than in England (ONS 2022)), and attitudes to linguistic diversity (which for some is coloured by negative discourse around language rights). With no evidence of NI complementary schools functioning as exam centres, and only three private centres, private provision is less accessible than in Britain (JCQ, n.d.).

Conclusion and policy recommendations

In summary, a 'language-as-problem' orientation is evidenced by serious inequities in HL qualification provision, with accessibility dependent on multiple factors aligning. Provision varies (even for speakers of the same language), socio-economic inequities can be exacerbated by examination costs, and many universities do not recognise HLs on an equal footing with other languages. However, some evidence of a 'language-as-resource' orientation emerges in successful collaboration between mainstream and complementary schools, equal treatment of home and curricular languages by some universities, and positive sentiments from many pupils around the value of HL qualifications.

We propose three short-term policy interventions which could help to support the UK's home languages and promote a 'language-as-resource' approach:

(i) The establishment of a geographically determined database of examiners (e.g. by region) willing to assess speaking exams. This is essential to opening up the possibility of examinations for more pupils.
(ii) Building relationships between local mainstream and complementary schools, since this clearly impacts positively on qualification uptake. A regional forum which meets annually or semesterly with representatives from local schools from each sector could facilitate resource and information sharing, beneficial to pupils and schools alike, and reduce the burden on under-resourced complementary schools. This could build upon existing structures (e.g. the Area Learning Communities in NI).
(iii) The production of a toolkit for university admissions offices around the UK, including details of A-level specifications (to avoid misunderstandings around what is assessed) and, if universities continue to distinguish between HL speakers and other applicants, a consistent reliable methodology for ascertaining pupils' HLs.

In the longer term, the possibility of creating qualifications for those languages where there is a substantial population but no existing qualifications must remain open for discussion.

Notes

1. The terms 'community', and 'heritage' languages are also used. We use the term 'home language', as this was the term pupils used in our discussions with them.
2. For an earlier study, see Foreman-Peck and Wang (2014).
3. Also known as supplementary or community language schools. Usually run by volunteers outside of main-stream-school hours, they 'serve specific linguistic or religious and cultural communities, particularly through mother-tongue classes' (Creese and Martin 2006, 1).
4. Any language except French, German, Irish, Spanish and Welsh (JCQ 2023).
5. Global Future (2021) is one exception.
6. Arts and Humanities Priority Area Leadership Fellowship (Modern Languages): AH/P014313/1.
7. Note that in Scotland, post-primary qualifications are different from the rest of the UK. Scotland's '1+2' language policy enables community languages to be embedded in the curriculum, although implementation of this provision is challenging (Hancock and Hancock 2021).
8. See Corrigan (2020) for a detailed history of NI migration.
9. Sebba and Ayres-Bennett (2021) highlight that the framing of the language question likely leads to underreporting.
10. 'Qualification' here refers to GCSEs and A-Levels.
11. This includes GCSEs, A-levels, Foundation Certificates of Secondary Education, international GCSE and A-levels, and CCEA Online Language Assessments.
12. One significant obstacle for registering as an exam centre is the need for a staffed reception, 8:30-15:30, during term time; complementary schools usually operate one day a week from rented premises.
13. In one complementary school, what was planned as a semi-structured interview with one volunteer became a FG with four volunteers.
14. This was part of a broader data collection about language learning, where 144 of 1,278 pupils who self-reported as speaking a HL other than English or Irish answered closed questions (yes/no or scales) about how their HL is viewed and accommodated in school.
15. Although reductive, this classification ensures the anonymity of schools and pupils, some of whom speak a language spoken by a very small number of NI pupils.
16. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants and gatekeepers (school principals, parents, pupils, teachers, university admissions staff).
17. Whilst the reasons for this were not discussed in the interviews, it was clear from interviewees' descriptions of how the schools are run that none of the schools would meet the necessary criteria, e.g. maintaining a staffed reception.
18. This is also mentioned above in 'Teaching and assessment challenges'.
19. https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/617718.
20. To give one example, in January 2023, Pearson Edexcel charged schools £46.10 per entry for the GCSE in Arabic; entry via one NI exam centre costs candidates £390.
21. Ofqual's (2017, 58) report suggests 'a small, yet important effect, of native speakers in A level MFL', however, attempts to prove this are limited by difficulties in identifying L1 speakers and the heterogeneity of their language competencies.
22. Some pupils speak multiple HLs, one which might have a GCSE and one which does not.

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