

## University language students' motivations for their language of study

*Anne Dahl*

*NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology*

### Abstract

*While there is abundant research on motivation in second-language learning, we know little about what motivations students may have for choosing a specific language of study in the Norwegian university context. The number of students who apply to English study programs every year is high, while the numbers for the traditional foreign languages beyond English, especially German and French, are concerningly low. The present study surveyed students in their first year of university language study, asking key questions about their reasons for choosing their language of study. Overall findings are that students of English are particularly instrumentally motivated, believing that English will be useful for future work. Students of French and Spanish, on the other hand, are more affectively motivated, while German students fall in between the other languages in responses to questions of motivation. While all students generally feel that knowledge of foreign languages beyond English is important, Spanish students were especially consistent in this response. In terms of interest in sub-disciplines of university language study, all student groups were relatively similar in showing a stronger interest in learning about the cultural and social aspects of countries where the language is spoken compared to literature and formal aspects of language. The main conclusion is that motivations may be different for studying different foreign languages beyond English and that in order to recruit more students to academic language programs, focusing on each specific language and its potential motivations is necessary.*

### Introduction

Foreign language proficiency is important for business, international relations, the media's ability to report international news, access to translations of literature and culture, and tourism (Hellekjær, 2007, 2010; Vold & Brkan, 2021; Vold & Doetjes, 2012). However, while Norwegians are consistently ranked very highly on proficiency in English as a second language (EF Education First, 2021), proficiency in languages beyond Norwegian and English is much less common (Statistics Norway, 2019), and there is widespread concern about the status of foreign languages in Norway. Yet, there is a general lack of systematic research on society's real and perceived needs for different foreign languages. We know relatively little about how motivation to learn a specific language may depend on the target language and its associated values both in Norway and globally. In all likelihood, such factors are crucial in individuals' choices about whether or not to learn a given language. Consequently, a better understanding of affective and utilitarian values associated with different languages is crucial to identifying ways to support language learning beyond English in Norway. In the present study, key aspects of motivation for language studies are investigated in a sample of first-year language students in a Norwegian university. The study's goal is to explore how motivational factors may interact with language of study in this population, who have, in fact, chosen to study language at an advanced level.

## Background

In Norway, English is omnipresent to the extent that it may no longer fit the description of a foreign language (Rindal & Piercy, 2013) and it holds a special status as a subject separate from the foreign languages in the school curriculum (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2021). English is compulsory throughout the obligatory school system and for the first year of upper secondary education, while the (other) foreign languages are introduced as electives in Grade 8, and studying one foreign language beyond English is only obligatory at upper secondary level for students in the general studies program. Despite the low starting age for English in schools, Norwegians' high English proficiency may be largely a result of massive informal exposure (e.g., Busby, 2021), but the number of students who study English formally in universities is also high (see e.g., Fremmedspråksenteret, 2021c for the numbers of students applying through the The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service).

Student numbers for those languages which still hold a traditional foreign language status in Norway, on the other hand, are comparatively low. Among the major foreign languages, Spanish has the highest number of students nationally, followed by French and German (Fremmedspråksenteret, 2021c; Vold & Doetjes, 2011). The low numbers of foreign-language students are particularly concerning given that the number of students choosing foreign languages in lower secondary education has seen an overall decrease over the past decade (Fremmedspråksenteret, 2021a), with Spanish being the only foreign language where numbers have slightly increased. While proficiency in a foreign language can certainly be achieved without university study, the low number of students in foreign languages in universities also means that we may see a shortage of language teachers, in turn limiting the number of foreign languages offered in schools (Vold & Brkan, 2021). This situation is particularly concerning regarding German, given that in schools, the number of students learning German is much higher than the number of those learning French. At university level, however, more students apply to French than to German language programs (Fremmedspråksenteret, 2021a, 2021b).

Low recruitment for foreign languages may partly result from a perceived lack of need; for example, Vold and Doetjes (2012) found that although the need for languages beyond Norwegian and English in business is well documented, it is not reflected in job announcements, which rarely ask for competence in other languages. One reason may be a concern that such requirements will limit the number of qualified applicants; another may be that employers believe that English competence is sufficient (Hellekjær & Hellekjær, 2015). The overall low interest in foreign languages beyond English in Norway can also be said to mirror the situation in English-speaking countries, where there is a general decline in studying foreign languages (e.g., Busse & Walter, 2013). There is evidence that the feeling that "English is enough" (Oakes, 2013) is not limited to English native speakers; English is the most common foreign language across Europe (Busse & Walter, 2013) and the high motivation for learning English may come at the expense of other foreign languages (Busse, 2017; Lanvers & Chambers, 2020).

## Motivation in additional language learning

In studies of motivation for second-language learning, a distinction is often made based on the idea of *integrative motivation* for language learning (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972), and, in contrast, *instrumental motivation*. The former entails a positive attitude to the target language culture and a desire to be associated with speakers of the language, while the

latter includes factors where proficiency is a means to reach an instrumental goal, such as passing an exam or obtaining a particular job (e.g, Dörnyei, 2005). Research has shown, however, that integrative and instrumental orientations cannot be clearly distinguished, but may in fact be interdependent (Dörnyei, 2005). The question of integrativeness is also complicated by much motivational research focusing on English as a second language, and the fact that the global role of English today means that learners may not associate this language with a particular group of native speakers (Busse, 2017; Dörnyei, 2005). Yet, as Dörnyei (2005, p. 67) points out, an important insight captured in Gardner and Lambert's (1972) original conceptualization is the fact that language learning, unlike other academic subjects, is "affected by a range of socio-cultural factors such as language attitudes, cultural stereotypes, and even geopolitical considerations". A more recent approach to motivation in language learning uses the terms "ideal self" and "ought self" (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei, 2009). According to Dörnyei (2005), the "ought self" as a motivational factor is more linked to extrinsic factors and to avoiding a negative outcome, while the "ideal self" is linked to intrinsic factors and the desire to attain a positive outcome, which may have more long-term effects of learning outcomes. Importantly, this intrinsic motivation of the "ideal self" may rely on both integratively oriented, affective factors, and more instrumental factors (Dörnyei, 2005).

Long-term motivation for learning a specific language, then, may be based on a combination of orientations to the target language that can be described as more integrative or affective, and/or orientations that can be described as more instrumental. However, we know relatively little about how such orientations may vary depending on specific target languages, at least for foreign languages beyond English, since many studies have focused on comparing motivations for English to those for other languages and on comparing motivations for different languages in different contexts. For example, Busse (2017) compared attitudes toward learning English to those toward learning other foreign languages in secondary students in Germany, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and Spain, and generally found more positive attitudes toward English compared to the other languages; this was particularly the case in the Netherlands, where English has a strong presence outside of the school system. Bartram (2010) investigated attitudes to learning English, French, and German among secondary students in the Netherlands, Germany, and England and found that for German, the notion of usefulness was central to students' attitudes, especially in the Netherlands, while he reported more prominent comments referring to French as aesthetically pleasing compared to German. Unsurprisingly, the general attitude to learning English was that it is useful. Bartram found that positive attitudes toward English may contribute to more negative attitudes toward German and French for the Dutch students. In a study directly comparing motivations for choices of target language at university level, Thomas (2010) found that students who had chosen to study Spanish to fulfill the undergraduate language requirement in a US university were more instrumentally motivated compared to those who had chosen other foreign languages, which is unsurprising, given that Spanish now has extended use intranationally in the US, and also given the US' proximity to Spanish-speaking countries.

Some reports exist on Norwegian students' perceptions of different foreign languages at secondary school level. For example, previous research has found that students may choose to study Spanish because they associate it with vacations and an exoticization of Spanish-speaking cultures (see Eide, 2013). Eide (2013) furthermore argues that an interest in Latino culture via the US may contribute to an interest in learning Spanish, a claim supported by

findings in Grønn & Christiansen's (2017, 2019) interviews with upper secondary learners of Spanish. Lindemann (2008) found that upon starting foreign language study in lower secondary school, students of Spanish tended to be motivated by a desire to travel, which was partly shared by students of French. However, both French and German students were more motivated by the usefulness of the language for future work or education. After a year of study, she found that French and German students were still happy about their choice of language, but that students of French were generally more intrinsically motivated compared to German students. On the other hand, students of Spanish were generally more disappointed with their choice to study the language, which they found more difficult than expected.

While university students in language programs have chosen the given language as a central area of study and can be expected to be highly motivated, specific motivations for their language of study may still vary in ways similar to those described above. Differences in motivations may lie precisely in whether orientation to the language is more affective or more instrumental. In particular, one may assume that students of English may be more instrumentally motivated compared to those languages still labelled foreign languages in Norway. Furthermore, when it comes to language studies at university, the question of motivation must necessarily go beyond that of motivations for learning the language itself. Studying a language at university also involves studying formal aspects of the language and literary and culture studies. Thus, a proper investigation of motivations for choosing to study a language at university must ask questions beyond those traditionally addressed in L2 motivation research.

### **The present study**

The study sought to investigate key aspects of motivation in university students of foreign languages and English, and asked the following research questions:

1. Are university students of English and foreign languages motivated by the same factors in their choice of language of study?
2. Are they equally motivated for different sub-disciplines of university language study?

### **Participants**

Students in their first year (i.e., basic level) of English and Foreign language courses (German, French, and Spanish) at a major Norwegian university were invited to participate in the study (see Table 1). Participants were recruited during a lecture in a cross-language course on language and society available to students in all languages from certain study programs, and subsequently during breaks in language-specific classes in language and linguistics for each language. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and would have no impact on their academic assessment. The project was registered with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Response rates for those students present in class were 100% for English and German, 88% for Spanish, and 83% for French.

### **Materials and procedure**

Participants received a paper-and-pen survey consisting of 44 statements, 12 of which focused on motivation and are analyzed for the present study. The first eight statements targeted common motivational factors in choosing a language of study and were based on informal

piloting with former and current language students. Two of these statements clearly reflected affective aspects of language, i.e., an affinity with the language itself or its culture.

Three statements targeted instrumental motivation, asking about the perceived usefulness of the language for future employment, and the need for languages beyond English. Three statements about motivational factors for language choice could not be clearly categorized as affective or instrumental, or may reflect both orientations, i.e., asking about improved proficiency in the language as a motivational factor, as well as the participants' desire to travel to or live in a country where the language is spoken. The last four statements analyzed in this study focused on language study as a university subject, targeting four main areas of academic language study: Structural and formal aspects of language, sociolinguistic functions, literature, and culture and history.

For each statement, participants were asked to indicate their agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". The questionnaire was administered in Norwegian<sup>1</sup> (see Appendix). Before responding to the statements, participants provided basic background information about age, gender, native language(s), and experience with or plans for university study of other languages.

### *Scoring and analysis*

Some participants occasionally marked the scale in between the given categories, for example halfway between "Neither agree nor disagree" and "Somewhat agree" or between "Somewhat disagree" and "Completely disagree". In such cases, responses were marked as "Somewhat agree" or "Somewhat disagree", respectively, for analysis, since they indicated that the participant leaned towards somewhat agreeing or disagreeing. The scale was treated as ordinal, indicating that Completely Agree was a more robust agreement than Somewhat Agree, but the distance between the different responses was not necessarily equal. For this reason, and because group sizes differed, non-parametric statistical tests were used for analysis. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.

## **Results**

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of basic information (age and gender) and language background. Most students had Norwegian as (one of their) first language(s), and very few reported the target language as a first language. The table also illustrates that most students had not studied another foreign language or English at university in addition to their current language. Furthermore, none had studied more than one foreign language, although a few reported potentially planning to study another language later; they reported a variety of potential future languages, both those offered at the same university and several other languages.

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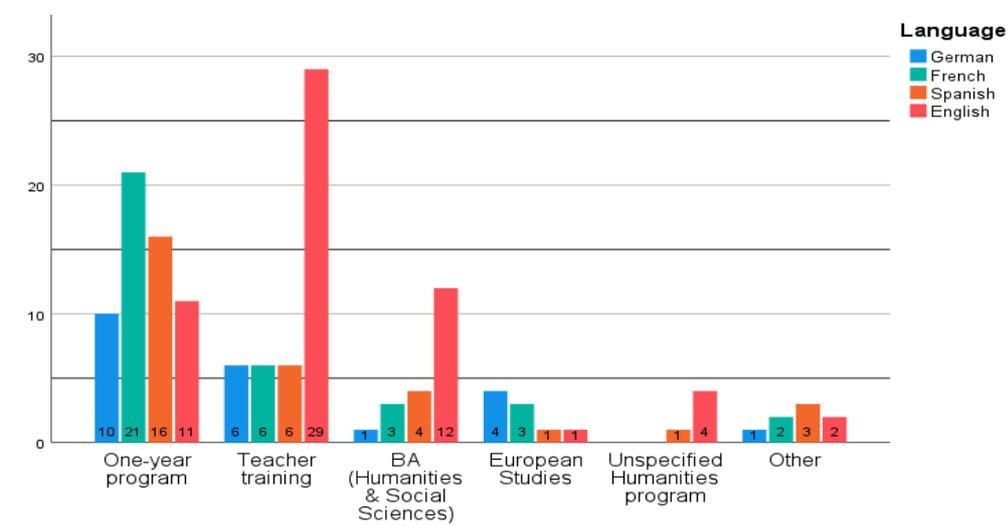
<sup>1</sup> Two students of German were exchange students who did not understand Norwegian and completed the questionnaire in English. However, to ensure that all participants had received the exact same wording in the questionnaire, and because the aim was to understand students' motivations in Norway, these two students were excluded from the analysis.

**Table 1:** Background information for all participant groups

	Language of study			
	German (n=22)	French (n=35)	Spanish (n=31)	English (n=59)
Female/male/not specified	13/9/0	29/6/0	21/9/1	33/24/2
Age	18-22: 19 23-28: 3 28+ : 0	18-22: 31 23-28: 3 28+ : 1	18-22: 22 23-28: 9 28+ : 0	18-22: 46 23-28: 12 28+ : 1
Has studied another foreign language or English	1 (English)	0	4 (English)	1 (German)
Plans to study another language	6	8	2	11
Not Norwegian as L1	0	1	4	4
Target as L1	0	2	2	3

The students were enrolled in a variety of language programs, which they were asked to report as free text in a separate question. These programs are illustrated in Figure 1, where the bars represent the number of students in each language enrolled in each program.

**Figure 1:** Participants by study program



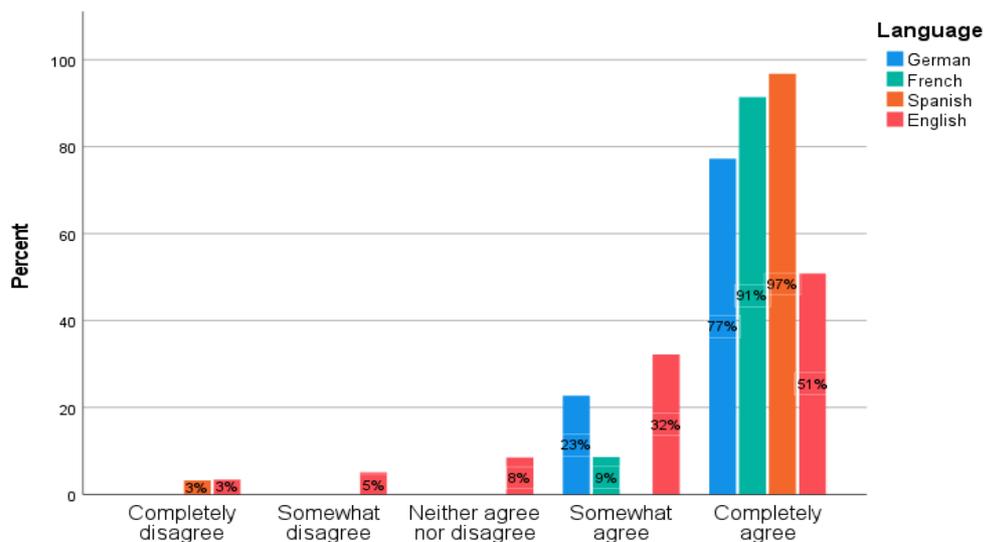
The most common program for students in the three foreign languages was a one-year study of their target language. Six students in each foreign language and 29 students in English were enrolled in a teacher training program with the target language as their main or second

subject. Some students were enrolled in a BA program in the humanities or the social sciences, again with the target language as their main or second subject. Some were enrolled in a European studies program; students may choose one language as part of this program. A small number of students did not specify their study program, only their main subject (i.e., "English" or "History"); these are listed as Unspecified, but all of them reported a humanities subject as their main subject. Finally, a small number reported being enrolled in other programs; some only took one individual course, while others were enrolled in, for example, science programs.

*Motivation for choice of language of study*

In the following figures, bars represent percentages for each target language. Figure 2 shows the responses of all participants to the statement that they decided to study their given language to improve their proficiency. The overall results show that this was a motivation for choice of study for the vast majority of students in all languages. Still, that agreement was generally more consistent for the three foreign languages than for English.

**Figure 2:** Agreement with statement "I started studying this language to improve my proficiency". Percentages per language group.

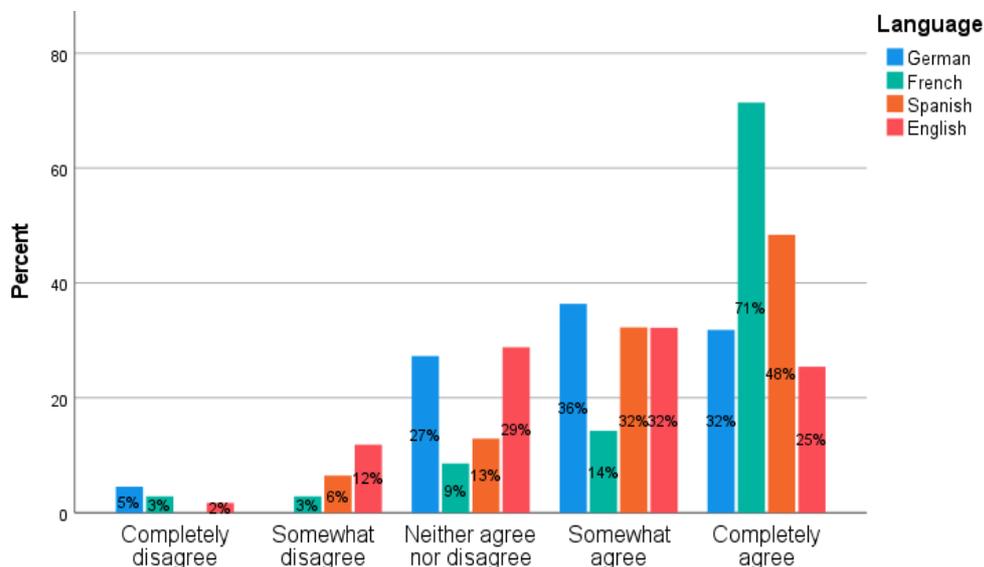


A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups in overall agreement that increased proficiency was a goal,  $H(3)=30.7, p<.001$ . Pairwise comparisons showed that there was a significant difference between students in English and German ( $p=.009$ ) between English and French ( $p<.001$ ), and between English and Spanish ( $p<.001$ ). However, there were no significant differences between students of the three foreign languages.

Figure 3 shows responses to the statement that participants had started studying the language because they thought it was a beautiful language. The overall pattern shows a relatively high

degree of agreement with this statement, but with especially French students and to some extent Spanish students indicating strong agreement with the statement.

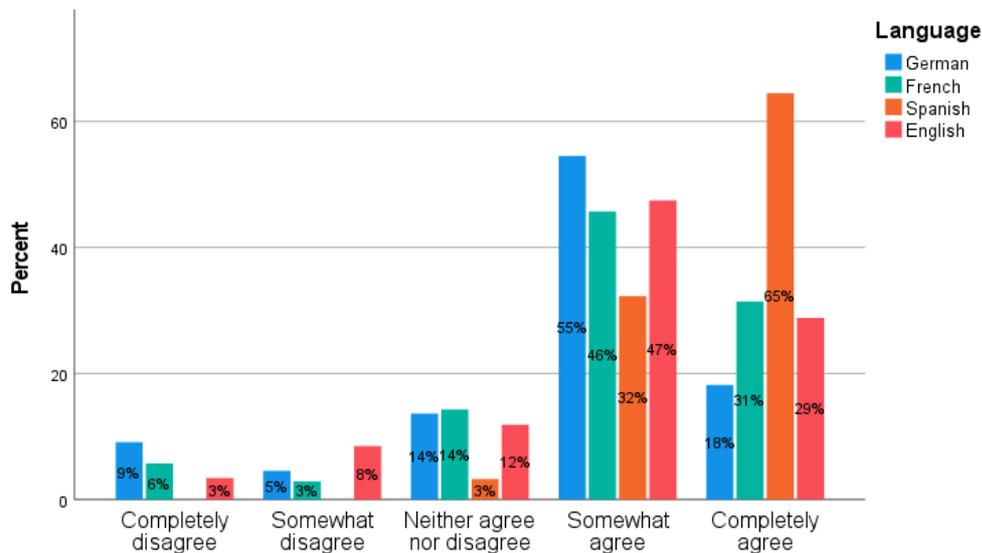
**Figure 3:** Agreement with the statement "I started studying this language because I think it is a beautiful language". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups overall in whether they had chosen their language because they thought it was beautiful,  $H(3)=18.7, p<.001$ . Pairwise comparisons showed that there was a significant difference between students in English and Spanish ( $p=.015$ ) and between English and French ( $p<.001$ ), but not between English and German. There was also a significant difference between responses from students in German and French ( $p=.014$ ), but not between German and Spanish nor between French and Spanish.

Figure 4 shows responses to the statement that participants had started studying the language because they were fascinated by the culture of countries where the language is spoken. Again, we see a high degree of general agreement with this statement, but a much higher percentage of Spanish students agreed completely compared to the other languages.

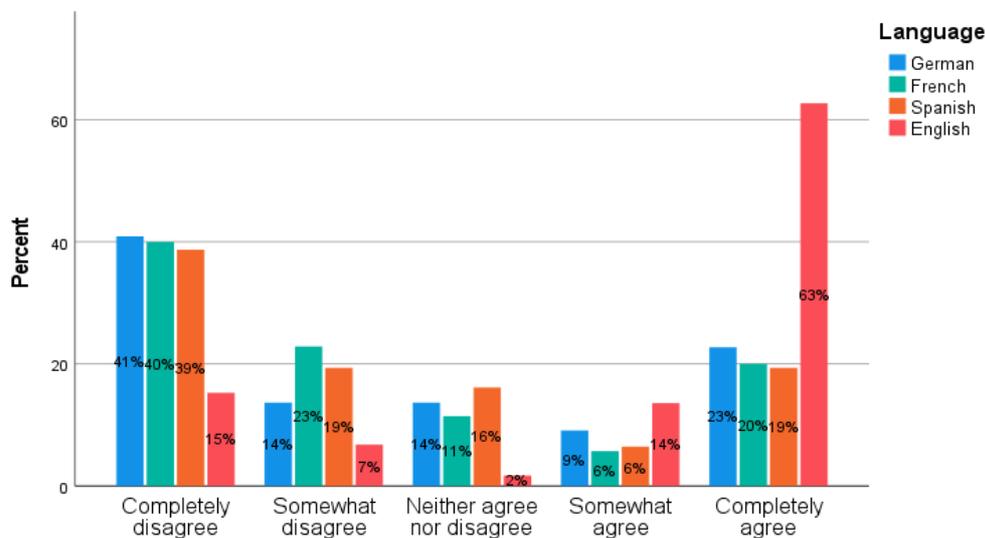
**Figure 4:** Agreement with the statement "I started studying this language because I am fascinated by the culture of countries where it is spoken". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups overall in how strongly they indicated an interest in the culture of target-language countries,  $H(3)=17.0, p=.001$ . Pairwise comparison found no significant differences between the students of English, German, and French, but a significant difference between students of English and Spanish ( $p<.001$ ), between students of German and Spanish ( $p<.001$ ), and between students of French and Spanish ( $p=.003$ ).

Students were also asked to respond to the statement that they were planning to become teachers of the target language, even though they had already reported on their study program (see Figure 1). Asking for students' explicit opinions on whether they were planning to become teachers was assumed to be a better indicator of this intention compared to enrollment in the program, given that Spanish as the only language cannot be taken as the main subject of the teacher training program at the given university, that it is possible to train as a teacher based on enrollment in other language programs, and that even enrollment in the teacher training program does not guarantee that students are certain they want to become teachers. Figure 5 shows the responses to the statement that participants were planning to become teachers of the target language and shows that students of English were more likely to completely agree compared to students of other languages.

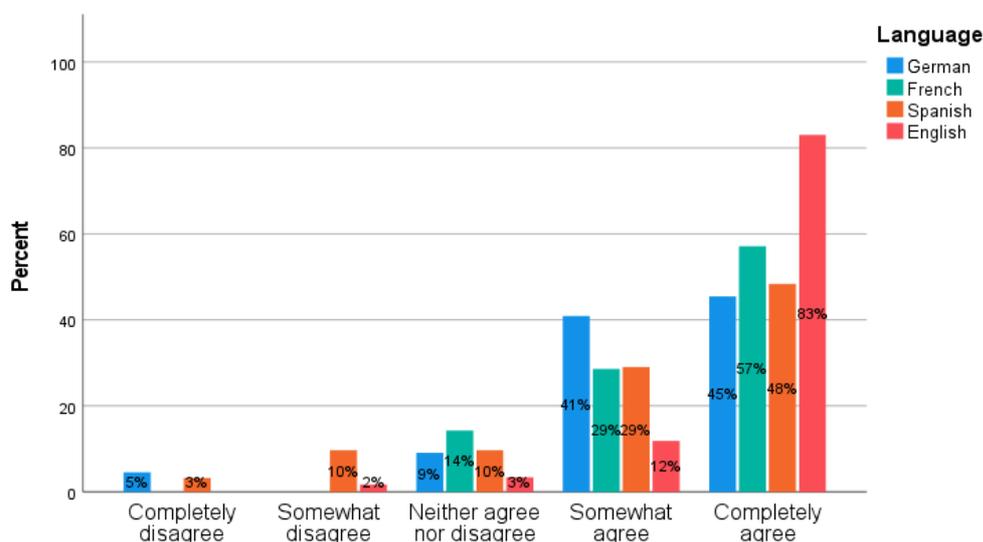
**Figure 5:** Agreement with the statement "I am planning to become a teacher and teach this language". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups overall to responses on this statement,  $H(3)=28.8$ ,  $p<.001$ . Pairwise comparison found significant differences between students of English each of the three foreign languages; German ( $p=.001$ ), French ( $p<.001$ ), and Spanish ( $p<.001$ ), but no significant differences between the foreign languages.

The next statement asked whether participants had chosen their given language because they thought it would be an advantage for work, without specifying an intended profession. Figure 6 illustrates that agreement with this statement is generally higher than for the statement about plans to become a teacher and that a majority of students in all languages somewhat or completely agreed that this was a motivating factor for them. However, English students clearly agreed more consistently than students in the foreign languages.

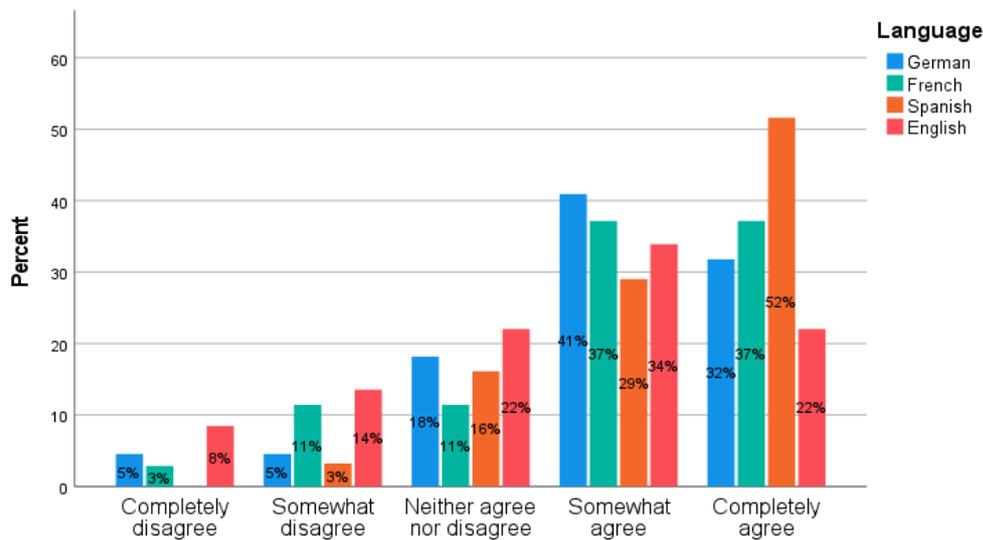
**Figure 6:** Agreement with the statement "I started studying this language because I think it will be useful for work". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups overall to responses on the statement that they had chosen the language of study because they thought it would be beneficial in obtaining work,  $H(3)=16.3, p<.001$ . Pairwise comparison found significant differences between students of English each of the three foreign languages; German ( $p=.003$ ), French ( $p=.015$ ), and Spanish ( $p=.001$ ), but no significant differences between the foreign languages.

Figure 7 shows responses to the statement that participants had a desire to live in a country where their target language is spoken. Many students did agree to this statement, but Spanish is the only language for which more than half of the students completely agreed with the statement, compared to only 22% of English students.

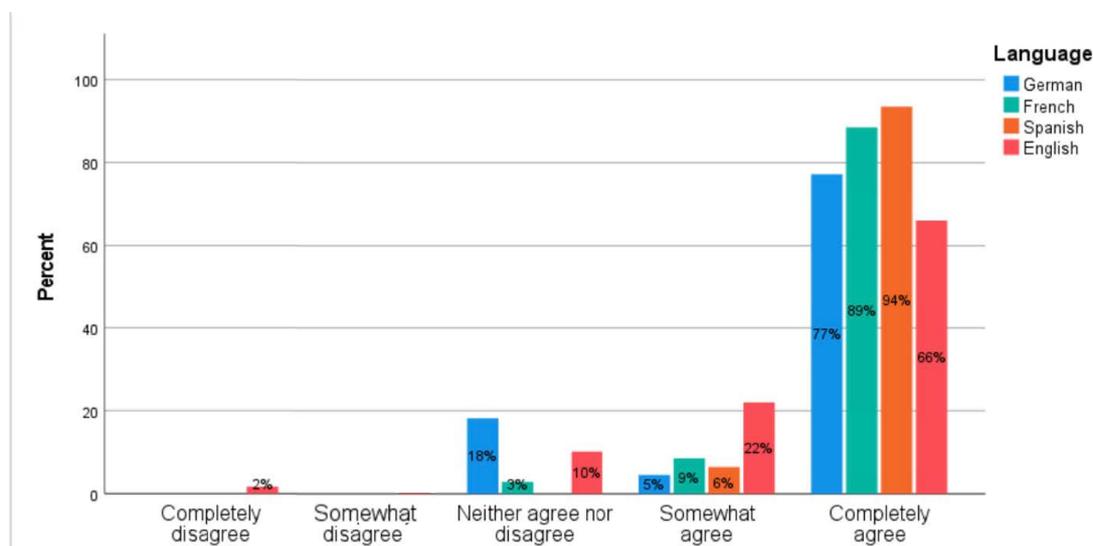
**Figure 7:** Responses to the statement "I would like to live in a country where this language is spoken". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups overall in responses on this question,  $H(3)=11.0$ ,  $p=.011$ . Pairwise comparisons found a significant difference between English and Spanish students,  $p=.001$ , but not between any of the other groups.

Figure 8 shows the participants' responses to the statement that they would like to travel to a country where the language is spoken. We see overwhelming agreement with this statement, but it is somewhat higher for students of Spanish and French, and lower for students of English.

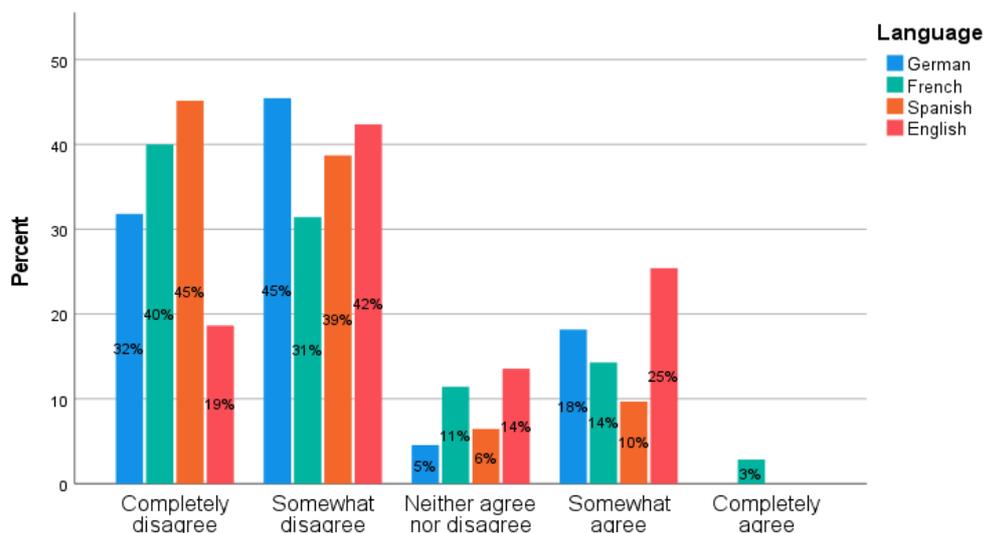
**Figure 8:** Responses to the statement "I would like to travel to a country where this language is spoken". Percentages per language group



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups overall in responses on this question,  $H(3)=11.9$ ,  $p=.008$ . Pairwise comparisons found a significant difference between English and French students ( $p=.010$ ), and between English and Spanish students ( $p=.002$ ), but not between any of the other groups.

To investigate to what extent the students, both those studying English and those who had in fact chosen to study other languages, had a feeling that "English is enough," the next statement was formulated as a negative, claiming that if you know English, knowing other foreign languages is not that important. As figure 9 illustrates, most participants disagreed with this statement, although the disagreement was least consistent among students of English. Students of Spanish showed the most consistent disagreement with the statement.

**Figure 9:** Responses to the statement "If you know English, knowing other foreign languages is not that important". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups overall in responses on this question,  $H(3)=9.05$ ,  $p=.029$ . Pairwise comparisons found a significant difference between English and Spanish students ( $p=.005$ ), but not between any of the other groups.

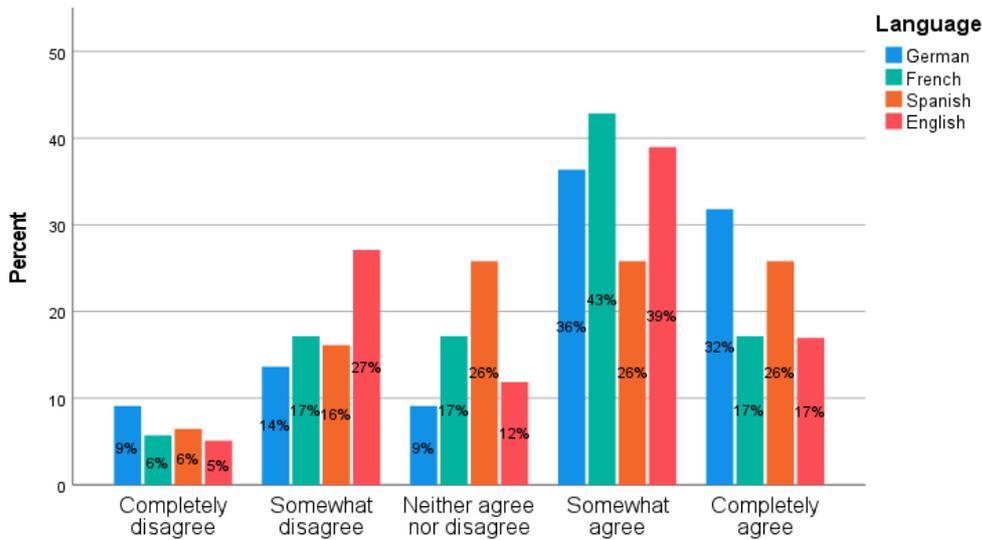
### *Interest in academic disciplines*

In addition to asking about general motivations for choices of language of study, the research questions asked about participants' interest in various sub-disciplines of university language study. Figure 10 illustrates responses that to the statement that they enjoyed<sup>2</sup> learning about

<sup>2</sup> The exact wording of this statement, and the following three, directly translates as "I think it is exciting to [...]" in English. However, the affective associations of the English word "exciting" are likely to be stronger than the corresponding Norwegian word "spennende". See the Appendix for the exact Norwegian wording of each statement.

the structure and building blocks of the language. We see that a majority of the participants at least partially agreed with this statement, although quite a few students, especially in English, partially or completely disagreed.

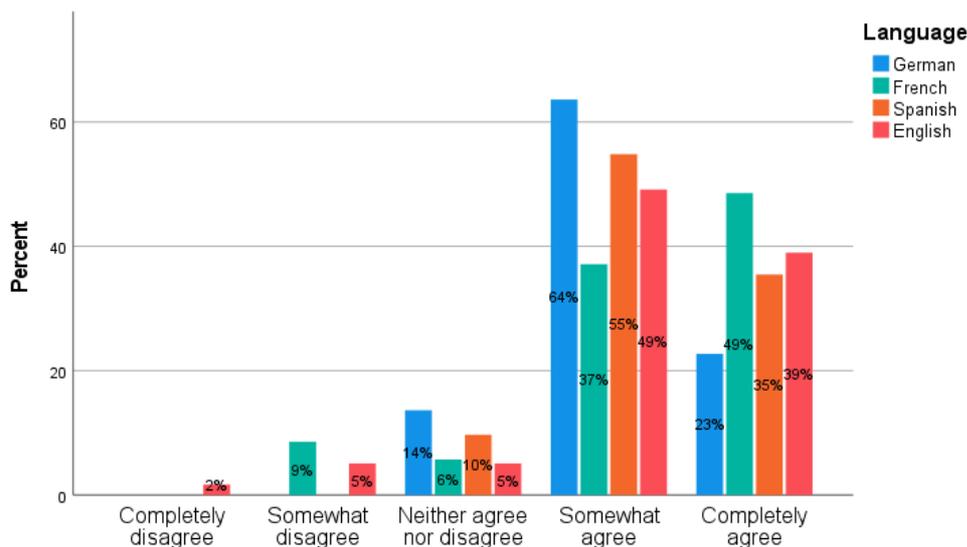
**Figure 10:** Responses to the statement "I enjoy learning about the structure and building blocks of the language". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found no significant differences between the four groups overall in responses to this statement,  $H(3)=1.564, p=.668$

Figure 11 shows participants' responses to the statement that they enjoy learning about how the language functions in society. The intention of this statement was to capture their interest in more sociolinguistic aspects of the target language, as a contrast to the structural properties in question in the previous statement. The vast majority of students of all languages somewhat or completely agreed with this statement.

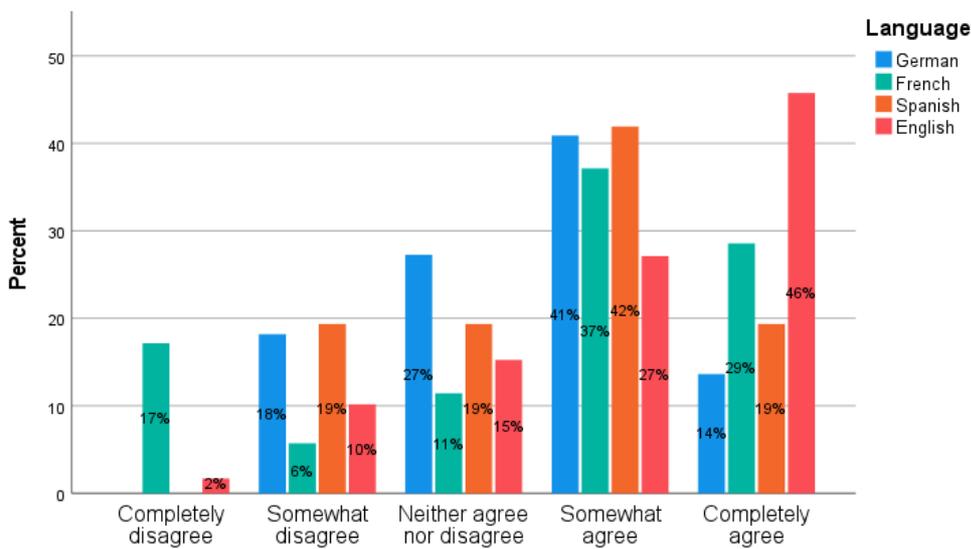
**Figure 11:** Responses to the statement "I enjoy learning about how the language functions in society". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found no significant differences between the four groups overall in responses to this statement,  $H(3)=2.245, p=.523$ .

Figure 12 shows participants' responses to the statement that they enjoy reading and learning about literature in their target language. There is fairly consistent agreement with this statement, especially for English students, but around 20% of students in each foreign language somewhat or completely disagreed.

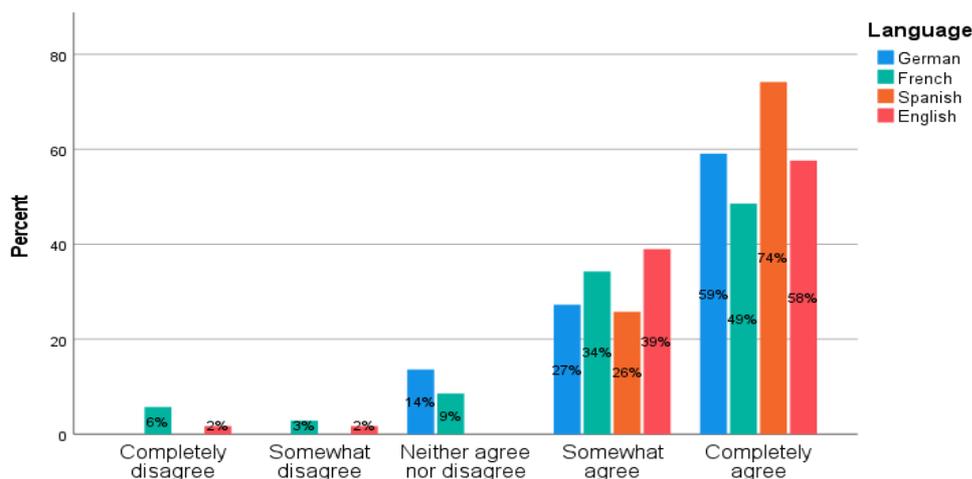
**Figure 12:** Responses to the statement "I enjoy in reading about literature in the language". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found a significant difference between the four groups overall in responses to this,  $H(3)=7.873, p=.049$ . Pairwise comparison found significant differences between students in English and German ( $p=.02$ ), and between students in English and Spanish ( $p=.04$ ), but no significant difference between any other language pairs.

Figure 13 shows participants' responses to the statement that they enjoy learning about the culture or history of countries where their target language is spoken. We see quite consistent agreement in all languages for this statement.

**Figure 13:** Responses to the statement "I enjoy learning about the culture or history of countries where the language is spoken". Percentages per language group.



A Kruskal-Wallis independent samples test found no significant differences between the four groups overall in responses to this statement,  $H(3)=6.191, p=.103$ .

While there were few significant differences between students of the four languages in terms of their interest in the four sub-disciplines of language study, it is also interesting to compare interest in each sub-discipline within each language group. Responses to each statement reported in Figures 10-12 was compared within each group in a Related-samples Friedman's Two-Way Analysis by Ranks followed up by pairwise comparisons, and the results are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** *Students' ranked interest in sub-disciplines of university language study*

Language (Overall test statistic)	Ranking, descending order (Mean rank)	Significant contrasts
German $\chi^2=16.500$ , $p=.004$	1. Culture/history (3.14) > 2. Language in society (2.59) > 3. Language structure (2.36) > 4. Literature (1.91)	Literature*Culture/history, $p=.002$ Language structure*Culture/history, $p=.047$
French $\chi^2=23.004$ $p<.001$	1. Language in society (2.97) > 2. Culture/history (cult) (2.89) > 3. Literature (2.13) > 4. Language structure (2.01)	Language structure*Culture/history, $p=.005$ Language structure*Language in society, $p=.002$ Literature*Culture/history, $p=.014$ Literature* Language in society, $p=.006$
Spanish $\chi^2=36.924$ $p<.001$	1. Culture/history (3.40) > 2. Language in society (2.68) > 3. Literature (2.00) > 4. Language structure (1.92)	Language structure*Language in society, $p=.021$ Language structure*Culture/history, $p<.001$ Literature* Language in society, $p=.039$ Literature*Culture/history, $p<.001$ Language in society* Culture/history, $p=.027$
English $\chi^2=43.476$ $p<.001$	1. Culture/history (3.03) > 2. Language in society (2.64) > 3. Literature (2.54) > 4. Language structure (1.80)	Language structure*Language in society, $p=.002$ Language structure*Culture/history, $p<.001$ Language structure*Literature, $p=.010$

**Culture/history** = "I enjoy learning about the culture or history of countries where the language is spoken."

**Language in society** = "I enjoy learning about how the language functions in society."

**Literature** = "I am enjoy reading about literature in the language."

**Language structure** = "I enjoy learning about the structure and building blocks of the language"

For all language groups, interest in how the language functions in society and in the culture or history in countries where the language is spoken is ranked higher than learning about the structure of language and about literature. For the German students, reading and learning about literature received the lowest rank, while for all other students, learning about the

structure of language was ranked lowest. For the French students, interest in how the language functions in society was ranked highest, while for all the other students, interest in learning about culture or history was ranked highest.

Students of German showed the most even interest in all sub-disciplines of academic language study, with the only significant contrast found between the highest-ranked statement, i.e., interest in culture or history, compared to both lowest-ranked statements, i.e., interest in the structure of language and in literature. For the French students, the only non-significant differences were between the two lowest-ranked and the two highest-ranked statements, implying a real difference in their interest in the two highest-ranked areas of study compared to the two lowest-ranked areas. For the Spanish students, the only non-significant difference was between the two lowest-ranked statements, i.e., interest in the structure of language and literature. In other words, their interest in learning about the culture or history of the Spanish-speaking world was clearly stronger than that in how the language functions in society, which again was clearly stronger than their interest in language structure and in literature. For English students, interest in language structure was the only aspect to significantly differ from the other sub-disciplines, meaning that they showed a clearly lower interest in this area of study compared to all other sub-disciplines.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Unsurprisingly, the overall results show that all participant groups are highly motivated for their language of study, and generally agreed with each statement indicating a potential motivation. Regarding motivational factors, and in response to research question 1, increased proficiency was a motivational factor for all groups, but it was stronger for the three foreign languages, which did not significantly differ from each other, compared to English. This is not surprising, given that participants had learned English for at least 11 years in schools and had extensive extramural exposure, and may already have been fluent in English before entering university.

In terms of more integrative or affective factors contributing to motivation, more than half of the students in each language completely or somewhat agreed that they had started studying the language because they thought it was beautiful and because they were fascinated by the culture of the language. However, French students were particularly consistent in their agreement that they think French is beautiful, while English students showed the least consistent agreement with this sentiment about their target language. The only foreign language group not to differ significantly from English students in this respect were the German students. For a fascination with the target-language culture, there was a clear difference between the high consistency in agreement from Spanish students on the one hand, and all other students on the other hand. A tentative conclusion seems to be that French and Spanish students may be more motivated by affective factors, especially by a fascination with the language or with its culture, respectively, compared to students of English and German.

For more instrumental motivational factors, English students were particularly likely to say that they were planning to become teachers compared to all three foreign languages. This is not surprising, given the central place of English in the school curriculum. It is worth noting that even though Spanish cannot be taken as the main subject of the teacher training program at the given university, there were no significant differences between students of the three

foreign languages regarding whether they were planning to become teachers. When asked more generally about whether they had chosen their language of study because they thought it would be an advantage for work, again, the English students stood out as particularly consistent in their agreement. However, the vast majority in each language agreed that their target language would be a benefit for employment. These figures included those who intended to become teachers, but agreement for general employment benefits was higher than those for an intention to become a teacher, indicating that students saw the possibility of relevant careers using the language that did not involve teaching. Another aspect of instrumental motivation for the three foreign languages specifically is whether students feel that it is indeed important to know languages beyond English. Here, we saw that Spanish students were significantly more consistent in claiming that this is the case (i.e., in disagreeing that it is not important) compared to English students, while this was not the case for French and German students. The overall conclusion seems to be that English students, as expected, are more instrumentally motivated than those of the foreign languages, which generally do not differ from each other in this respect, with the exception that Spanish students showed stronger beliefs that knowing foreign languages is important.

Two statements, namely those dealing with a desire to travel to a country where the language is spoken and a desire to live there, may be seen as either affective or instrumental, depending on whether learning the languages is seen as an instrument to fulfill a desire motivated by other factors, or whether the desire to travel or live abroad is motivated with a fascination with the language and its culture. For both these statements, English students showed least strong agreement, while Spanish students were significantly more likely to want to live in the target culture, and both French and Spanish students were more likely to want to travel to a country where the language is spoken. Students of German overall showed more consistent agreement with both statements than English students, but not significantly so.

The overall picture from this investigation of motivational factors with respect to research question 1 shows that it is not the case that English systematically differs from the foreign languages, nor that students from the three foreign languages are driven by the same motivational factors. English students generally differ from French and Spanish students in being less affectively motivated, but while German students typically do not respond significantly differently compared to those in French and Spanish, they also do not significantly differ from English students. English students were, however, more instrumentally motivated than the three foreign languages in terms of the usefulness of the language for work. For the desire to live in or travel to a country where the target language is spoken, English students were significantly different from Spanish students on both but from French students only on the latter, and students of German did not respond significantly differently compared to any of the other languages.

Regarding research question 2, interest in different sub-disciplines of language study were relatively similar for students of all languages, except for interest in reading and learning about literature, where English students stood out as especially interested, and the majority of participants in each language agreed that they were interested in each sub-discipline of study. However, there was a clear pattern of more consistent agreement across languages. Students enjoyed learning about how the language functions in society and in culture or history compared to structural aspects of language and literature, although the meaningfulness of this ranking differed between languages. In other words, students' particular reasons for choosing

their language of study may vary, but their interests once enrolled in the study program are largely similar.

The overall findings are largely in line with previous knowledge of perceptions of different foreign languages. As expected, English students showed evidence of instrumental motivations similar to those found in Bartram (2010) and Busse (2017). More affective motivation associated with the French language in the present study also echoes Bartram's (2010) reports. On the other hand, there is no evidence that students saw German as particularly useful similar to Bartram's (2010) findings for the Netherlands, which is likely explained by the fact that unlike the Netherlands, Norway does not share a border with Germany. While it can be argued that English holds a status similar to that of Spanish in Thomas' (2010) investigation in the US context, it is also noteworthy that Spanish students in the present study were those most likely to feel that language knowledge beyond English is important. There is also evidence that an interest in Spanish-language culture is a strong motivation for those studying Spanish, and it is possible that the visibility of Spanish in US American popular culture may reinforce motivation for this language even in Norway, as suggested by Eide (2013) and by findings in Grønn and Christiansen (2017, 2019)

Certain motivational factors reported in Lindemann (2008) also seem to extend to the present context. Importantly, students who study French and Spanish as a foreign language are those most likely to want to travel to a country where the target language is spoken. On the other hand, Lindemann (2008) found that many students choosing Spanish in lower secondary school were disappointed after one year of study, while students of French and German were generally satisfied. Although the percentage of secondary school students who go on to study language at university is very low for all languages, it is higher for Spanish than for German and French, indicating that there is, at least, a larger subset of those learning Spanish in school who are happy enough with their choice of language to go on to study it at university compared to for French and German.

The present study indicates that the reasons for these differences in university student numbers may lie in sociocultural and geopolitical factors (see Dörnyei, 2005) beyond the control of Norwegian educators and policymakers. For example, it is noteworthy that the pattern in responses to the need for language beyond English from students in the three foreign languages closely mirrors the number of speakers of each language globally; Spanish has about twice as many speakers as French, which again has almost twice as many speakers as German (Ethnologue, 2022). A similar pattern holds for reports about English proficiency in areas where the target language is spoken (e.g., EF Education First, 2021), where German-speaking countries generally score more highly than French-speaking countries, which again outperform Spanish-speaking countries in terms of L2 English proficiency. In other words, Spanish proficiency may objectively be more useful globally than German proficiency, because there is a larger number of first- or second language speakers of Spanish, *and* relatively fewer Spanish speakers speak English.

Furthermore, an interest in the target language culture seems important for motivation for all four languages in the survey, as especially evidenced in the ranking of academic sub-disciplines in all student groups. The high general interest in Spanish-speaking culture may, of course, indicate that young Norwegians, for various reasons, find specific Spanish-speaking countries especially interesting, but it is also a fact that more countries of the world

can be defined as Spanish-speaking than German- or French-speaking; in other words, when students of Spanish reported a strong interest in learning about the culture of countries where the language is spoken, they may have been thinking about a range of different countries. It is noteworthy that English students do not differ from students of the other languages in terms of their interest in the target language culture, although we do not know how they define "countries where English is spoken" given its lingua franca status (see, e.g., Busse, 2017; Dörnyei, 2005) and its ambiguous role as a second rather than foreign language in Norway (Rindal & Piercy, 2013). This special status of English may also go some way towards explaining why students of English were comparatively less likely to express a desire to travel to or live in a country where the target language is spoken.

It is worth remembering that all students in the present study were highly motivated for their language of study, as evidenced both in their choice to study the language, and in their general responses to the survey. The results must necessarily be interpreted with caution, since only twelve statements on motivational factors were included, and students may have had motivations not captured here. Furthermore, the findings represent the views of only one sample from a specific cohort of students and are not necessarily generalizable. However, differences in the relative weighing of motivational factors may be informative for future endeavors to increase motivation for foreign-language study. It is clearly not sufficient to simply argue that "foreign languages are important". More systematic research is needed to identify the concrete needs for each foreign language in Norway and the specific factors most likely to motivate students for each language if we are to ensure a future where foreign languages beyond English have a place in Norway.

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## Appendix. Instructions to participants and statements included in the study.

### Marker under hvor enig/uenig du er i følgende utsagn om språket du studerer nå:

1. Jeg begynte å studere det språket jeg studerer fordi jeg ønsker å oppnå bedre ferdigheter i språket. [I started studying this language to improve my proficiency.]
2. Jeg begynte å studere dette språket fordi jeg synes det er et fint språk. [I started studying this language because I think it is a beautiful language.]
3. Jeg begynte å studere dette språket fordi jeg er fascinert av kulturen i land der dette språket snakkes. [I started studying this language because I am fascinated by the culture of countries where it is spoken.]
4. Jeg har tenkt til å bli lærer og undervise i språket. [I am planning to become a teacher and teach this language.]
5. Jeg begynte å studere det språket jeg studerer fordi jeg tror det vil være nyttig for meg i arbeidslivet. [I started studying this language because I think it will be useful for work.]
6. Jeg ønsker å bo i land hvor språket snakkes. [I would like to live in a country where this language is spoken.]
7. Jeg ønsker å reise til land hvor språket snakkes. [I would like to travel to a country where this language is spoken.]
8. Hvis man kan engelsk, er det ikke så viktig å kunne flere fremmedspråk. [If you know English, knowing other foreign languages is not that important.]
9. Jeg synes det er spennende å lære om strukturen i språket og hvordan det er bygd opp. [I am interested in learning about the structure and building blocks of the language.]
10. Jeg synes det er spennende å lære om hvordan språket fungerer i samfunnet. [I am interested in learning about how the language functions in society.]
11. Jeg synes det er spennende å lese og lære om litteratur på språket. [I am interested in reading about literature in the language.]
12. Jeg synes det er spennende å lære om kulturen eller historien i land der språket snakkes. [I am interested in learning about the culture or history of countries where the language is spoken.]

*Rating scale for each statement:*

