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'Learning German is like … ': how learner representations, motivational beliefs, and perceptions of public views relate to motivation for continuing German study

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ABSTRACT

In England, motivation for language learning is low, especially for learning German at high school, with potentially negative educational and societal implications. Previous research has tended to overlook the relevance for low motivation of social factors such as negative messages in public discourse (Krüsemann, H. 2018. *Language learning motivation and the discursive representations of German, the Germans, and Germany in UK school settings and the press*. PhD diss., University of Reading.). This study therefore aimed to provide deeper insights through an investigation of 391 adolescent learners. They completed a questionnaire exploring not only their representations of German and the Germans (German*), their motivational beliefs about learning German, and whether they intended to continue studying it, but also how they perceived public views about German*. Whether all these factors, together with gender and socio-economic status (SES), predicted future German study intentions was also investigated. Findings showed that the negative public views highlighted by previous research were only partly mirrored in learner representations. Learners were more likely to continue German study if they believed others viewed German positively, if they had higher expectations for success, saw German as personally meaningful, and were female and of higher SES. The study thus presents new insights into motivation for learning German, providing empirical evidence for previously unsubstantiated claims of links between public discourse messages and learner motivation for German study.

1. Introduction

This study investigated the motivation for learning German of 13–14-year-olds in England and their uptake decisions. That is, whether or not they intended to continue German study to the age of 16 and gain a qualification in it. It did so by exploring their motivational beliefs about learning German, and their representations of the German language and German people. In other words, it investigated how they viewed 'German' and 'the Germans' and also what they believed the general public associated with those terms. Finally, the study examined how far learners' uptake decisions for German were predicted by their representations and beliefs, their gender and their socio-economic status (SES).

An investigation into factors related to motivation for learning German in England is important because of the particular status of that language within the England school curriculum and society more broadly. Like many Anglophone contexts, England is characterised by low language learning motivation in general, at least in school settings (Lanvers and Graham 2022). German however has seen greater levels of decline in percentages of 16-year-olds taking a GCSE in it (public examination sat at age 16) than other languages (Collen 2020), even though its importance for trade is recognised by industry (CBI and Pearson 2019) and government (DfE 2023). Such an investigation is also timely because of government commitment in 2023 to encourage greater uptake (DfE 2023). Cumulating evidence for the need for such action may have come from a particularly sharp fall in German GCSE numbers in 2014–2017 (Association for Language Learning 2015; Collen 2023) and a failure to recover from that position, especially in areas of greater social deprivation (Collen 2023). The mid-2010s was also a period of increasing tensions in the UK's relationship with the European Union (EU), perhaps reflecting a wider reluctance on the UK public's part to engage with European countries, including through language learning (Lanvers, Doughty, and Thompson 2018). Other factors that have been found to be relevant to uptake of German study include being of higher socio-economic status (SES), higher academic attainment, being female, and of white ethnicity, with school differences also apparent (Henderson et al. 2018).

Hence there is evidence that both social and individual factors need to be considered to better understand the reasons for low and socially stratified motivation for German learning in England. Previous studies, however, have largely focussed on individual differences rather than the wider social context, as well as considering languages in general, or languages other than German. For example, learners' decision to give up French at age 14 has been attributed to low levels of self-efficacy in mastering the French phonological system (Erler and Macaro 2011); giving up languages in general has been attributed to how easy or difficult learners find languages, and to how far they feel language learning is interesting and personally relevant to them (Taylor and Marsden 2014). Much of that earlier research employed questionnaires consisting almost entirely of closed items, which could be seen as a barrier to gaining more nuanced insights into learners' perceptions.

While acknowledging the importance of individual differences, this study seeks to extend our understanding of motivation for learning of languages other than English (LOTE) in an anglophone context, by focusing particularly on the learning of German and by considering it in relation to the particular social context of England. It extends previous questionnaire-based studies by implementing a learner questionnaire that complements closed items on learners' motivational beliefs with a more qualitative exploration of learners' representations of learning German, of the German people, and of how they believe others see the German language and people. As such, it responds to a call for new understandings by producing novel 'insights into the interplay between learners' motivation and their micro, meso, and macro contexts as a means of understanding motivation, classrooms and schools as embedded within wider sociocultural forces and structures' (Zhang, Wang, and Hennebry-Leung 2022: 8).

2. Literature review

Language learning motivation is a topic heavily discussed in applied linguistics and language education (Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan 2015). The number of studies exploring it in respect of LOTE and high-school-aged learners is however low (Ushioda and Dörnyei 2017; Zhang, Wang, and Hennebry-Leung 2022). Arguably too, the most widely used framework for investigating L2 motivation (Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan 2015), the L2 Motivational self-system (L2MSS; Dörnyei 2009), is less relevant for such contexts, as the Ideal L2 self might not emerge until around the age of 17 (Lamb 2012). The framework also tends to be a less useful predictor of motivation in classroom contexts, perhaps because one of its strands, the L2 learning experience, has been less fully explored than the constructs of the Ideal and the Ought-to L2 self (Al-Hoorie 2018), even though it is likely highly relevant to classroom contexts.

High school language learning might be more usefully considered using frameworks commonly applied to educational or academic motivation more broadly, especially in contexts such as England where foreign languages tend to be positioned principally as school subjects (Graham and Santos 2015) and where learners' main experience of the language is in the classroom. In England, in many schools, learners choose at the age of 13–14 whether to continue studying a language until the age of 16. At that age, they take examinations (GCSEs) which play an important role in determining their future job prospects and entry into university. Importantly, however, high examination grades are more difficult to obtain in languages than for other subjects, both in reality (Ofqual 2019; Thompson 2024) and in learners' perceptions (BBC 2023). This suggests that those who do decide to continue studying a foreign language may be motivated by 'strong or personal reasons' (Al-Hoorie 2018: 735), as well as believing that they can gain a good grade, even if to do so may seem a challenging task.

Both of these last points indicate the suitability of expectancy value theory as a framework for considering language learning motivation in England. Indeed, expectancy-value theory (henceforth EVT) has often been used in the wider educational literature to investigate school subject choice (see for example Lin, Ettekal, and Simpkins 2016). Broadly speaking, EVT presents a 'model of achievement-related choices, persistence and performance' (Eccles and Wigfield 2020: 1), key elements that together contribute to achievement motivation.y Expectancy refers to an individual's expectancies or expectations for success. The value aspect of expectancy-value can be broken down into sub-components, namely *intrinsic value*, covering how enjoyable and interesting the activity in question is for the individual, *utility value*, how relevant the activity is seen to be for the individual's goals, and *attainment value*, 'the relative personal/identity-based importance attached by individuals to engage in various tasks or activities' (Eccles and Wigfield 2020: 5). As well as resonating with recent work on multilingual identities and their importance for how learners perceive language learning (e.g. Forbes et al. 2024), *utility* and *attainment value* are not always clearly distinguishable from each other, in that both concern goals that are more or less central to the individual's sense of identity or core values (Eccles and Wigfield 2020). A final aspect of EVT is *cost*, how far the activity brings negative consequences, which has been less widely investigated perhaps because it can be difficult to operationalise (Eccles and Wigfield 2020).

Key findings (Nagengast et al. 2011) in studies exploring expectancy-value in a range of curriculum subjects are that, first, expectancy beliefs predict performance outcomes because of their importance for persistence, but subject choice is more strongly predicted by value beliefs, and second, expectancy and value should be considered as multiplicative rather than additive. In other words, overall achievement motivation, in which both choice and persistence matter, is highest when both expectancy and value are high; if one is low, the impact of the other will be diminished (Nagengast et al. 2011).

A small but growing number of studies have used EVT as a framework for examining language learning motivation in different settings (Nagle 2021, in the US; Zhang, Yi Jiang, and Chen 2023 in China), and it has been argued to be highly relevant for studying language learning motivation with non-adults in schools (Hu and McGeown 2020; Loh 2019). More recently, Eccles and Wigfield (2020) have developed what they call Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT), in which they emphasise how expectancies and value are influenced by cultural context. This emphasis is logical, given the way in which expectancies and value, themselves motivational beliefs, are underpinned and driven by other beliefs and perceptions (at least in the view of EVT presented by Eccles and Wigfield). Perceptions of value and expectancies for success are not only underpinned by how experiences are interpreted, the perceptions of others and the relevant successes of others, but by more culturally situated, perhaps stereotypical, beliefs in relation to activities and roles. These beliefs may concern the nature of ability, self-concept and personal and social identities, the latter potentially relating to such factors as gender and socio-economic status (SES) (Eccles and Wigfield 2020, Figure 1). Being female and of higher SES have both been found to be related to continuing language study in England, although not within an SEVT framework (Henderson et al. 2018).

Internationally, as well as tending to achieve more highly than males in language study (Voyer and Voyer 2014), females have been found to have higher levels of motivation (Iwaniec 2019) and self-efficacy for language learning (Huang 2013). In one of the few studies to explore gender issues and motivation for German in England specifically, Williams, Burden, and Lanvers (2002) found through a questionnaire and follow-up interviews that while boys were more motivated to select German rather than French (reportedly associating the latter with a feminine image), they had a lower level of language learning motivation than girls overall, perceiving it to be 'uncool' to like or devote effort to it. There was also evidence of the influence of societal stereotypes about French and German, with one boy explaining: 'French is the language of love and stuff', German 'the war, Hitler and all that' (520).

The cultural context highlighted in SEVT could also encompass media discourses that may contribute to learners' sense of what is of 'value' or not. For example, Thompson (2017) argued that the media in the USA present Spanish as a language associated with poverty, a representation that potentially lowers the value of its study in learners' eyes. Such representations may well be implicit rather than overt, and as such are usefully explored using methods like Corpus Analysis (CA) which can give insights into messages which may 'even be at odds with an overt statement' (Hunston 2002: 109), through, for example, investigating how frequently certain words occur and the words or phrases with which they co-occur. Using CA and drawing on EVT, Graham and Santos (2015) investigated the messages presented in England's media (in 2007 and 2013) about the 'value' of language learning and how likely success in language learning might be for learners in England. Drawing on analyses of concordance lines and frequency counts for key terms they reported very little reference at all in the press to the 'value' of language learning, except perhaps as a school subject, and a 'persistent tone of negativity' (83) concerning the possibility of being a successful language learner. Likewise, Lanvers and Coleman (2013) investigated media discourses about language learning in newspapers in England between 2010 and 2012. They also considered whether such discourses related to the nature of the publications. The authors reported that the benefits to the individual of language learning were more clearly highlighted in the broadsheet newspapers, leading them to conclude that types of media associated with a more middle-class readership were more likely to emphasise 'personal advancement through language learning' (21).

A doctoral study (Krüsemann 2018) has also given more recent novel insights into media discourses around language learning. As well as gathering data on perceptions of German from learners themselves, the study also used corpus analysis to explore how the terms 'German' and 'the Germans' (henceforth, German*) were employed in press data from England in the years immediately preceding the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, and what representations of German* emerged. Key findings presented a largely negative picture for both German and the Germans, in which associations with politics, war, and threat predominated. For 'Germans', war had more than three times as many concurrences as the second most commonly arising theme (other nations). Collocates in the form of verbs, as an indication of public perceptions of what 'Germans do', only appeared in the war theme, and the most frequently occurring verbs – 'invaded', 'captured', 'killed', 'attack', 'occupied' -suggested a picture of 'Germans as threat'.

These three studies indicate together a consistent, largely negative message encompassed in media representations of language learning in general and in the case of Krüsemann (2018), German in particular. In other words, there is a clear social context for language learning in England against which learners' own representations should be set. Furthermore, the findings of Lanvers and Coleman (2013) concerning how language learning is presented in different types of newspapers raise an additional question of how far SES as an important contextual variable is linked to language learning attitudes and motivation, even if the link between SES and newspaper readership is more fluid than in the past (Evans and Tilley 2017). SES has not been widely explored in relation to language learning but has been considered more extensively in non-language focused educational research into academic motivation. One key finding (Davies et al. 2008) is that SES influences the likelihood of learners in England selecting subjects such as German that tend to be studied

by students of higher attainment. That is, if learners are of equal prior attainment, those of lower SES are more likely to study subjects where the average prior attainment of students taking them is lower, such as business studies.

Studies that have considered SES in relation to language learning suggest that opting for such 'easier' subjects may occur because of lower expectations for success on the part of lower SES students themselves or the school they attend (Lanvers 2016). Those lower expectations may then appear in what learners say or think about language learning, which may in turn be influenced by what they hear from others, such as peers (Bartram 2006), or from parents (Martin 2023). In Martin (2023), parental level of education, a proxy measure of SES, also explained significant if small amounts of the variance in student sense of achievement in MFL, intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, suggesting the transmission of parental values to their child. In general, however, there has been little research exploring how far the views about language learning of society more broadly, as might be articulated in the press, impact (directly or indirectly) on school-aged learners in terms of what they say and think about language and their subject choice decisions. That represents a significant research gap, especially in respect of German study, given the strength of negativity towards German* emerging from the press (Krüsemann 2018), and the particular issues regarding German GCSE uptake. In other words, our understanding of the factors that might influence motivation for learning German and ultimately learners' decision to study it to age 16 is less than complete.

Such understanding may also be limited by the methodological approaches taken by previous studies to explore learners' choices regarding language study. Learners' expectancies for success and sense of value are likely difficult to access fully through closed and direct methods alone (Eccles and Wigfield 2020), as might be found in typical questionnaires or interviews asking learners directly about their opinions on learning German. Helping learners to 'articulate beliefs that they might previously have been unaware of' (Fisher 2013b: 376), through more indirect methods such as metaphor elicitation tasks that tap into unconscious dispositions, may be more useful (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie 2017). Like Corpus Analysis, such an approach can tap into implicit rather than overt attitudes and beliefs. It is arguably especially important to do so in the case of German and Germany, given what research has established and anecdotal evidence suggests about societal negative representations of that language and culture (Grix and Lacroix 2006; Williams, Burden, and Lanvers 2002), and to which learners may be less willing to admit.

In summary, previous studies suggest the benefits of using expectancy-value theory as a lens to investigate language learning motivation within school settings. Few have done so while also considering the wider social context in which expectancies and attributed value are situated, that is, taking an SEVT perspective for a very specific language learning context, namely German learning at high school in England. The current study addresses this gap by presenting an analysis of the learner data collected in Krüsemann (2018), and setting it against the wider social background emerging from the press data in the same study. We explore in this paper learners' own representations of German*, in terms of what it means to them, their expectancies for success for German learning and the value they attach to it. Furthermore, it also explores learners' perceptions of public views of German*. The data were collected from a particular point of decline for German, namely 2015 (Association for Language Learning 2015), which coincided with Europe featuring prominently in public discourses (Krüsemann 2018). Although we are now some years away from then, the decline in German as a GCSE continues and tensions around the UK's relationship with Europe persist (Garton Ash 2023), making an investigation of this kind still relevant for current language learning issues.

Finally, the current study goes beyond the analyses conducted in Krüsemann (2018), and also beyond the important analysis of learner metaphor responses conducted by Fisher (2013a, 2013b) by investigating whether learner representations and perceptions of public views predicted how likely learners were to opt for GCSE German study. That analysis also takes into consideration the

predictive effect of other factors that have been identified as relevant to subject choice, namely SES and gender, controlling for school attended. In doing so, the study aims to provide new insights into how personal and social factors all contribute to decisions regarding language study when it is no longer compulsory. The following research questions were hence addressed:

1. What is the nature of learner representations of German* at age 13–14, and how do they perceive public views of German*? To what extent do learner representations overlap with those found in the UK press?
2. How far do learner representations of German* and perceptions of public views relate to continuing or dropping German language study, alongside the factors of SES, gender and school?

While the answers to these questions are presented for the most part in the Results section below, the overlap between learner representations and those found in the press is considered mainly in the Discussion.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study of learners' representations of German* adopted a cross-sectional, mixed-methods triangulated design. Data were gathered from learners through a questionnaire containing both quantitative and qualitative items, around the time when they were deciding whether to study German at GCSE level, namely mid-way through the academic year when they were 13–14 years old. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Reading, and full informed consent/assent for learner participation was given by schools, parents and participants themselves.

3.2. Participants

Four schools in England were selected to take part in the study, chosen through convenience sampling and to represent a range in terms of socio-economic status, as measured through the percentage of students in receipt of free school meals (FSM index, a measure of economic deprivation), location (rural/urban), type of school (state-maintained and comprehensive (i.e. non-selective) or private (i.e. fee-paying, with admission based on academic selection)), and overall levels of attainment at age 16 (percentage of learners gaining good GCSE grades). Resource limitation prevented us from including more schools in the study, especially given the in-depth qualitative data analysis involved (see Analysis below). In two of the schools, learners were obliged to select at least one language for study at GCSE level; in the other two schools, GCSE language study was optional. In all schools, learners were required to study two languages up to age 13–14 (in Schools 1–3, one of these languages had to

Table 1. Schools participating in the study.

School code	Number of learners completing questionnaires	School type	Language study post-14	School FSM[a]
S01	104	Urban, mixed gender, comprehensive[b], non-fee paying	Optional	41.4%
S02	118	Rural, mixed gender, comprehensive[b], non-fee paying	Optional	10.1%
S03	129	Rural, mixed gender, comprehensive[b], non-fee paying	Compulsory	12.9%
S04	40	Urban, girls, selective, fee-paying	Compulsory	N/A[c]
Total	391			

[a]Percentage of pupils eligible in the school for free school meals; national average at time of questionnaire: 29.3%.
[b]Non-selective.
[c]FSM data not available for fee-paying schools.

be German; in School 4, learners could choose between Spanish and German to add to French). In other words, in all schools in the study learners had some element of choice regarding whether to take German specifically at GCSE. Table 1 shows key details about each school and the number of learners in each who completed a questionnaire, totalling 391.[1] As explained in the Analysis section, responses from all 391 learners were analysed for the qualitative data, but for statistical analyses, responses from the 304 learners only who provided details on their SES were used.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. The learner questionnaire

Learners completed a questionnaire (piloted before use) that included a total of 24 items, closed and open (see Appendix 1, where items reported on in this article are given in bold). For reasons of space, we focus first on a smaller number of items, that respectively gave data on learners' representations of German*, perceptions of public views of German*, and *expectancy-value*. As shown in Krüsemann (2018), findings emerging from the questionnaire items not included in this paper were consistent with what we report below.

3.3.1.1. Learners' representations of German*. Learner representations are considered in relation to responses to two, two-part open metaphor items, based on those used by Fisher (2013a, 2013b), that sought to provide more nuanced insight into how learners conceptualised German:

1. *For me, learning German is like … , because …*
2. *If German was an animal it would be a … , because …*

Strictly speaking, the elicited data were similes rather than metaphors, as the formula 'A is like B' was employed. Fisher (2013b) found that using items that asked learners for similes as opposed to metaphors was conceptually easier for young teenagers, and therefore the same approach was used in the present study, but retaining the term 'metaphor' as Fisher (2013a, 2013b) did.

The questionnaire also included items designed to firstly probe learners' perceptions of public views of German*. Learners were asked to imagine what 100 random British people would say if they were asked for the first word or phrase that came into their heads when they thought of (a) German, (b) the Germans, and (c) Germany (not discussed here for reasons of space). We called this section the 'Family Fortunes' task, to reflect a popular gameshow from UK television, in which contestants guess the most popular responses given by 100 members of the public to questions such as 'We asked 100 people to name something you would take on holiday with you'. The item phrasing was chosen so that learners would consider the general public's views rather than any particular group such as family or friends.

3.3.1.2. Expectancy-value. Learners responded to six closed items designed to tap into expectancy and different forms of value. In designing these items we drew on studies conducted in anglophone contexts with similar contexts, including Taylor and Marsden (2014) and Courtney (2017). Both studies indicated the importance of learner enjoyment, hence *intrinsic value*. As Taylor and Marsden (2014) showed that perceiving language learning as personally relevant for them and their own goals predicted learners' decision to study languages post-14, we chose items that reflected *attainment value* and *utility value* respectively and combined them into one scale. Although having separate scales for each of *attainment* and *utility value* would have been preferable (Arens, Schmidt, and Preckel 2019), we were very mindful of the need to limit the length of the questionnaire, which was already fairly extensive because of the open-ended items. In addition, the single scale can be justified by the close relationship between utility and attainment value noted by Eccles and Wigfield (2020). Initially, nine items were developed, three for each of *expectancy*, *intrinsic* and *attainment/utility value*, but one item from each scale was discarded for analysis to improve internal consistency. Measured by Cronbach's Alpha at .81, .90 and .70 for the three scales

respectively, internal consistency was good to satisfactory (Hair et al. 2010; see Appendix 2 for scale and item information). While two items per scale is a small number, it is comparable to Arens, Schmidt, and Preckel (2019) in whose questionnaire there were three items for expectancy, two for attainment value and two for intrinsic value. Participants indicated a level of agreement on a six-point Likert scale from totally correct (1) to totally incorrect (6), which was reversed for the subsequent analysis.

At the end of the questionnaire, learners were asked whether they were male or female or preferred not to say, whether they would continue studying German the following year (yes or no), and what the main job of their father, mother or carer was (with a response possible for as many adults as were relevant in the case of each respondent). This final question was based on one used by Croll, Attwood, and Fuller (2010) to gauge SES in a study of children's educational aspirations at secondary school. Croll et al. judged that a question about parental employment was likely to be more easily answerable by teenagers than one about parental education.

3.4 Analysis

3.4.1. Metaphors

Starting with the open item, *Learning German is like … because … ,* codes were assigned through a process of close reading and intense familiarisation with the data. First, detailed finer-grained codes, with a minimum of two items per code to constitute a category, were assigned and an initial codebook drawn up. Then, the data were revisited at regular intervals over several months, during which time codes were checked. In some instances, data were recoded, and then in a second cycle coding step (Saldaña 2016) codes were grouped into over-arching themes, which in turn had emerged from the finer-grained codes, or sub-codes. In this process, the themes established in Fisher (2013a, 2013b) were also drawn upon and found to match closely those in the present study.[2] It also became clear that it would be helpful to apply as many codes as necessary to one statement, rather than try to fit a multi-layered statement onto one single code. The 'because' phrase also emerged as very helpful for grouping codes into themes, as it often shed light on learners' rationales for their choice of metaphor and therefore the meaning they wished to imply. For example, the item 'Learning German is like learning how to drive' could possibly be coded under 'worthwhile pursuit', but since the participant then continued ' … because it's a completely different experience, and I don't understand it!', it was coded as 'confusing/hard to understand', which fell under the broad theme of 'difficulty'.

Based on the above method, the following six broad themes emerged (in order of frequency): 1. Learning German as difficulty, 2. Learning German as pleasure, 3. Learning German as drudgery, 4. Learning German as ambivalent experience, 5. Learning German as unpleasantness, and 6. Learning German as worthwhile pursuit. Some responses did not fall clearly into any category or were non-metaphoric, and so were classed as 'Other'. This thematic analysis also suggested that responses could be categorised into ambivalent, dynamic, and static views of German, resulting in the creation of a categorical variable, *Learning German is like,* with three levels. 'Ambivalent' views applied where German learning was seen as conflicting, with both positive and negative aspects, for example 'Learning German is like reading a book, because sometimes it's boring, and sometimes it's exciting'. Items were coded as 'dynamic' where German was seen as a process over time, with an implied awareness of the future, either from negative to positive as in 'it's rewarding in the end', but equally from positive to more negative over time as in 'it's nice at first but loses taste quickly'. Items were coded as 'static' where categorical sentiments were expressed, e.g. 'everybody hates it'.

For the closed metaphor item, *If German were an animal, it would be … , because,* a different method of analysis was applied, as the domain of the vehicle or source was prescribed ('animal'). First, the data were simply categorised by animal, using content codes. Then, the 'because' phrases were categorised into emergent content themes, largely as the reasons given for choosing the most commonly named animal, dog, were diverse, such as 'it is scary but tameable', or 'sometimes I like dogs, sometimes I don't'.

In order to maximise reliability of all coding of the metaphor responses, 50 randomly selected metaphors items (approximately 10% of the data overall, O'Connor and Joffe 2020) were shared with a second rater and coded independently using the above coding system. The agreement percentage in all instances was above 90% and rose to 100% in moderation meetings.

3.4.2. Family Fortunes

These data were first coded into themes and then for the overall attitudinal feeling expressed through the statement according to whether it represented positive, negative or neutral sentiments towards German and the Germans. That resulted in a further 3-level categorical variable, 'Perception of public views'. As the Family Fortunes data were less nuanced than the metaphor data, making interrater reliability checking less crucial, reliability of this coding was checked by returning to the coded data some months later and checking that the initial coding held good, which it did.

3.4.3. Expectancy – value data

A composite score for each of *expectancy, intrinsic value* and *attainment/utility value* was calculated for each learner by summing responses for items in each scale and then calculating the mean.

3.4.4. SES

The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC), used in all UK official statistics and surveys (ONS, n.d.), was adapted and used for coding learners' SES, following the arguments of sociologists such as Goldthorpe (1987) that social class can be linked with occupation and employment status in a concrete and, for social research purposes, pragmatic way. Additionally, when the job or more than one parent/carer was given by a respondent, Croll, Attwood, and Fuller (2010) were followed by employing the 'dominance approach', where the parent/carer with the highest class code was defined as an individual learner's household reference person. While it is acknowledged that such a categorisation of learners' socio-economic background is an approximation (albeit also used by such bodies as the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency, https://www.hesa.ac.uk/), 81% of the responses from the initial 391 learners to the occupation question could be coded in that way. As SES data were not available for all learners, we analysed data by SES only for the 304 learners for whom we had both SES and scores for *expectancy-value* items. The SES coding framework is given in Appendix 3, through which learners were initially categorised into four SES groups (1. higher managerial/administrative/professional; 2. intermediate; 3. routine and manual; 4. unemployed), which we then collapsed into two, High (original groups 1 and 2, 185 learners) and Low SES (original groups 3 and 4, 119 learners) respectively.

For statistical analysis we thus had the variables shown in Table 2. We firstly calculated frequencies and descriptive statistics followed by chi square, Mann–Whitney U tests and Spearman's correlations (data were not normally distributed) to explore the following: whether uptake decisions, learner representations and perceptions of public views differed by gender and SES; whether

Table 2. Variables used in statistical analyses.

Variable name	Type
Decision	Binary (continue, drop)
Gender	Binary (male, female)
SES	Binary (low, high)
Learning German is like	Categorical (ambivalent, dynamic, static)
Perception of public views: German, Germans	Categorical (positive, negative, neutral)
Expectancy	Interval (1–6)*
Intrinsic value	Interval (1–6)*
Attainment/utility value	Interval (1–6)*

Note: Items in italics were considered as learners' representations of German*.
*As these items, originally at ordinal level, were summed and averaged, they were treated as interval data.

learner representations and perceptions of public views differed by uptake decision; and whether *expectancy* and *value* scores were related. We then used generalised linear mixed effects models (GLMMs) in R (version 4.30; R. Development Core Team 2023), selected because the dependent variable was binary (continuing/dropping German, where (0) was 'drop' and (1) 'continue') and individual learners were nested in schools, necessitating a mixed effects approach. Models were run with the *lmerTest* package (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, and Christensen 2017), to determine the extent to which continuing or dropping German was predicted by key variables in the learner data, namely the fixed factors of *expectancy, intrinsic* and *attainment/utility value*, representations of German*, SES and gender. The fixed effects structure of the model was theoretically driven to answer the research question, and hence included all these predictors. We started our analysis with a maximal random effects structure (Barr et al. 2013), that is, including all factors that might cause random variability in the dependent variable, at the level of individual participant and the school they attended. As this maximal model did not converge (i.e. could not be computed), we simplified it by removing 'individual participant' as a random effect, giving a final converged model.

4. Results

4.1. What is the nature of learner representations of German* at age 13–14, and how do they perceive public views of German*? To what extent do learner representations overlap with those found in the UK press?

4.1.1. Learning German is like … because …
Six broad themes emerged from the analysis of this metaphor item (Table 3, given in order of frequency of responses coded into each theme).

As Table 3 shows, the most common response was to see German learning as hard, confusing, impossible, vividly expressed in the example responses given. Other 'negative' themes, although applying to a smaller number of responses, depicted German as boring, or as an undesirable and pointless activity. The 'learning German as unpleasantness' theme included responses with considerable strength of feeling, some depicting 'learning German as physical suffering'.

Table 3. Learner responses to *Learning German is like … because*, broad themes and frequencies.

Broad theme	Number of occurrences	Example responses
1. difficulty/struggle	151	• *running up a hill – it gets harder and harder the further you go* • *trying to swim through cement – they are hard to do*
2. pleasure	126	• *breaktime – we do nice things and the learning can be fun* • *going to a party – it's very social and you have fun learning it*
3. drudgery/waste of time/doing it against my will	100	• *playing golf – it's boring and it feels like it goes on forever* • *doing chores – it's boring and I'm forced to do it*
4. ambivalence/dependent on other factors/neutral experience	87	• *cleaning my room – rarely I enjoy cleaning my room and learning German but it's okay sometimes* • *chasing a tortoise – it's easy to grasp yet hard to really get out of the shell*
5. unpleasantness	78	• *giving birth to a whale – it is so painful* • *sitting in a room full of spiders – spiders are scary*
6. worthwhile pursuit	61	• *learning a sport at first you can't and don't know how to do it then when you get the hang of it you enjoy it* • *learning how to ride a bike at first it's quite difficult but it gets easier and sometimes you can get confused, like falling off a bike but you get back up*

The second most common theme was 'learning German as pleasure', where learners reported finding German fun, easy, interesting, and rewarding. Likewise, many learners saw positive as well as negative aspects to learning German, involving fun and social interaction. Indeed, some learners perceived learning German as an ultimately rewarding endeavour, that, after some time and with considerable investment of effort, yielded a reward.

The picture emerging from the open metaphors could not therefore be described as overwhelmingly negative. In order to gain a clearer view of how negative that picture was, responses were then coded into ambivalent, dynamic, and static views of German (Table 4). The high percentage of responses coded as static in Table 4 indicates that learners saw German as something unchanging and perhaps unchangeable, possibly denoting a lack of sense of agency or low expectancies for success on their part. When these static metaphors were then further coded as positive, negative or neutral, 73% emerged as negative. By contrast, the majority (83%) of learners who had chosen dynamic metaphors expressed a positive view of German.

4.1.2. If German was an animal it would be a … , because …

Altogether, 91 different animals were named in response to this item. Table 5 shows a list of the animals which 10 or more learners linked with German. Noticeable in Table 5 is the number of animals with potentially negative connotations, associations with slowness and lethargy (sloth, snake, tortoise, snail) and unpleasantness (spider, pigeon). It was again important to also look at learners' responses to the 'because' phrase, however, to ascertain whether the named animal was being viewed from a positive or negative perspective. For example, lions and tigers might be viewed positively as well as negatively. This further coding resulted in at total of 492 codes being applied, from which the same themes as from the *Learning German is like* analysis (Table 3) emerged, albeit with a different order of frequency (Table 6). Table 6 reveals again a mixture of sentiments about German but with a preponderance of negative feelings around unpleasantness, drudgery and difficulty.

Some responses in the largest, 'unpleasantness', category could also be characterised as 'German as a threat', angry-sounding like a dog – 'it's yappy and quite an angry sounding language', scary like a snake – 'it is poisonous and no-one understands it' – or wasps – 'I don't like them I get anxious' and a wild force which needs to be controlled or tamed: 'it is scary but tameable'. Some learners took the

Table 4. *Learning German is like … because …* responses coded as ambivalent, dynamic or static.

	n	% (rounded)
Ambivalent	61	15
Dynamic	70	17
Static	198	49
Missing/non-classifiable	75	19

Table 5. *If German was an animal …* by frequency of mention of animal.

Animal	Frequency of mentions
Dog	34
Cat	33
Sloth	22
Lion	19
Tiger	16
Tortoise	15
Snake	16
Spider	13
Snail	12
Giraffe	11
Pigeon	10

Table 6. Broad themes for *If German was an animal it would be … .. because … … .*, by percentage (rounded) of codes applied.

Broad theme	Percentage of all codes applied	Example response
Unpleasantness (annoying aggressive, angry, can hurt you, sounds angry, harsh, rough, scary)	27	(dog) *it's yappy and quite an angry sounding language*
Ambivalent, neutral	24	(cat) *sometimes it's quiet and boring and sometimes it's fun*
Drudgery	21	(sloth) *it takes a long time to learn it*
Pleasure	14	(horse) *elegant and refined due to the amount of grammar*
Difficulty	10	(shark) *it's hard to catch and scary*
A worthwhile pursuit	4	(butterfly) *it is hard to get the hang of it but when you you've got it it's easy to do*

Table 7. Perceptions of public discourses around 'German' and 'the Germans' (percentages rounded).

Sentiment coding	'German' % thus coded	'Germans' % thus coded	Examples
Positive	9	20	industry, good at football, rich, friendly, interesting, useful
Neutral	48	33	big, lederhosen, camping, sausages, school
Negative	39	40	angry, harsh language, boring, history, war, 3rd Reich
Uncategorisable	4	7	

theme of 'German as threat' further and depicted it with its own agency, a powerful force pursuing its own, sinister agenda, positioning themselves as its victim: '[lion] it's scary and it hunts me down', 'a hippo – it looks all nice at first, but hippos actually kill more people than lions do'. Taken together, the 'unpleasantness', 'drudgery' and 'difficulty' themes accounted for nearly 60% of responses, and considered through the lens of SEVT, seem to express a view of German as something associated with defeat or danger, and hence for which expectations for success are low.

4.1.3. Family Fortunes

Learners were asked to say what they thought the public associated with German and the Germans. Responses were coded thematically and for the overall attitudinal feeling expressed through the statement according to whether it represented positive, negative or neutral sentiments towards German and the Germans (Table 7). This categorisation indicated that most learners in the sample believed that the British public held neutral or negative views in relation to the term 'German'. For 'Germans', although a larger percentage believed public views were positive than was the case for 'German', negative perceptions still accounted for the largest percentage (40%). It is also noteworthy that for both 'German' and 'Germans', the word 'angry' often appeared in 'negative' responses - for example, 'angry accent', 'stern and angry' - perhaps reflecting the animal metaphors where the German language was often depicted as something scary, angry or threatening. It is also possible, of course, that responses to the Family Fortunes question were influenced by those given for the animal metaphor question, which preceded it in the questionnaire. In addition, however, 'negative' responses often referred to 'war', especially in relation to 'Germans', which would likely not have been influenced by the preceding questionnaire item.

4.2. How far do learner representations of German* and perceptions of public views relate to continuing or dropping German language study, alongside the factors of SES, gender and school?

For the following analysis, a smaller sub-sample of 304 learner responses was used, to include only those learners for whom SES and expectancy-value data were held. First, frequencies followed by chi-square tests relation to continuing or dropping German were calculated for gender and SES. These

suggested that both gender and SES were related to uptake decisions (Table 8), with more girls and higher SES learners classed as continuers.

We next calculated frequencies (Table 9) followed by chi-square tests with Bonferroni-corrected p values to explore whether continuers and droppers differed in their representations of German, that is, for *Learning German is like*, and in how they perceived public views of German*. We also used chi-square tests to explore whether there were differences for those variables across gender and SES. These analyses showed that, for German, droppers were more likely to say others had negative [χ^2 (1) = 14.36, p < .001, φ = 0.22] or neutral [χ^2 (1) = 4.41, p = .036, φ =0.12] views than continuers were, who were more likely to attribute positive views to others [χ^2 (1) = 10.76 p = .001, φ = 0.19]. For Germans, no significant differences between droppers and continuers emerged, although as Table 9 shows, descriptively many more droppers than continuers attributed negative or neutral views to others. Droppers were also significantly more likely than continuers to use static metaphors to indicate what *Learning German is like* [χ^2 (1) = 7.91, p = .005, φ = 0.16]. There were, however, no significant differences for the variables across gender and SES.

Similarly, we explored whether continuers and droppers, then gender and SES groups, differed across *expectancy* and *value* scores (*intrinsic*, and *attainment/utility value*). Descriptive statistics were calculated, followed, first, by Mann–Whitney U tests (Table 10). We also ran Spearman correlation analyses to explore the relationship between *expectancy* and *value* scores (Table 11). These analyses indicated that droppers had significantly lower scores for *expectancy* and both *intrinsic* and *attainment/utility value,* with medium to large effect sizes (Plonsky and Oswald 2014). While there were no significant differences for gender, high SES learners had significantly higher scores than low SES learners for both *intrinsic* and *attainment/utility value (*both with small effect sizes*)*, but not for *expectancy*. There were positive, significant and strong correlations between *expectancy* and both forms of *value*.

Table 8. German GCSE uptake decision (continue or drop) by gender and SES (percentages rounded).

	Continuers (%)	Droppers (%)	Chi square test
Male* (n = 122)	38 (31)	84 (69)	χ^2 (1) = 4.68, p = .031, φ = 0.012
Female* (n = 172)	75 (44)	97 (56)	
High SES (n = 185)	84 (45)	101 (55)	χ^2 (1) = 12.60, p < .001, φ = 0.2
Low SES (n = 119)	30 (25)	89 (75)	

*Gender information was not given by all participants.

Table 9. Perceptions of German and public views on German, by GCSE uptake decision, gender and SES (percentages rounded).

	Continuers (%) (n = 114)	Droppers (%) (n = 190)	Male (%)* (n = 122)	Female* (%) (n = 172)	High SES (%) (n = 185)	Low SES (%) (n = 119)
Learning German is like …						
Ambivalent	24 (21)	25 (13)	19 (16)	29 (17)	32 (17)	17 (14)
Dynamic	25 (22)	32 (17)	21 (17)	36 (21)	40 (22)	17 (14)
Static	41 (36)	101 (53)	60 (49)	78 (45)	82 (44)	60 (50)
Non-classifiable/missing	24 (21)	32 (17)	22 (18)	29 (17)	31 (17)	25 (21)
Perception of public views of German						
Positive	18 (16)	9 (5)	12 (10)	15 (9)	18 (10)	9 (8)
Neutral	64 (56)	83 (44)	59 (48)	84 (49)	93 (50)	54 (45)
Negative	29 (25)	90 (47)	45 (37)	66 (40)	69 (37)	50 (42)
Non-classifiable/missing	3 (3)	8 (4)	6 (5)	5 (3)	5 (3)	6 (5)
Perception of public views of the Germans						
Positive	29 (25)	33 (17)	23 (19)	36 (21)	38 (21)	24 (20)
Neutral	30 (26)	69 (36)	40 (33)	55 (32)	55 (30)	44 (37)
Negative	48 (42)	73 (38)	51 (42)	68 (40)	83 (45)	38 (32)
Non-classifiable/missing	7 (6)	15 (8)	8 (7)	13 (7)	9 (5)	13 (11)

*Gender information was not given by all participants.

Table 10. Expectancy-value variables, by GCSE uptake decision, gender and SES, means (SD) and Mann–Whitney U tests.

	Continuers (%) (n = 114)	Droppers (%) (n = 190)	Mann–Whitney U test	Male* (n = 122)	Female* (n = 172)	Mann–Whitney U test	High SES	Low SES	Mann–Whitney U test
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Expectancy	4.45 (1.00)	2.88 (1.20)	**z = 9.98, p < .001, r = .57**	3.41 (1.47)	3.55 (1.27)	$z = 0.74, p = .46$	3.55 (1.42)	3.35 (1.25)	$z = 1.47, p = .14$
Intrinsic value	4.65 (1.00)	3.12 (1.21)	**z = 9.62, p = .001, r = .55**	3.57 (1.42)	3.83 (1.32)	$z = 1.33, p = .18$	3.84 (1.43)	3.48 (1.28)	**z = 2.30, p = .022, r = .13**
Attainment/utility value	4.33 (1.10)	3.08 (1.16)	**z = 8.33, p = <.001, r = .48**	3.50 (1.36)	3.62 (1.22)	$z = 0.54 \ p = .59$	3.75 (1.31)	3.25 (1.21)	**z = 3.15, p = .002, r = .18**

Table 11. Correlations between expectancy and value scores.

	Spearman's rho	Significance (2-tailed)	95% Confidence intervals (2-tailed)	
			Lower	Upper
Expectancy – Intrinsic value	.74	<.001	.68	.79
Expectancy – Attainment/Utility value	.65	<.001	.58	.71
Intrinsic value – Attainment/Utility value	.64	<.001	.56	.70

Finally, as these analyses indicated that decisions around continuing German study were related to learner representations, perceptions of public views, *expectancy-value* scores, SES and gender, we next analysed the questionnaire data using generalised linear mixed effects models. That allowed us to control for the influence of school and to see how far each factor predicted uptake when all other factors were also included in the model.

A model was built including the following fixed factors: *expectancy*; *intrinsic value*; *attainment/utility value*; *perception of public views for German/Germans* (positive, neutral or negative); *Learning German is like* (ambivalent, dynamic or static); gender (male or female); SES (low or high). We used the relevel function in R to set negative, static, male and low as the reference group for *Perception of public views, Learning German is like*, gender and SES respectively. In other words, each level of the respective categorical variable was compared with the reference group (e.g. for SES, high was compared with low). The random effects structure included by-school random intercepts, after by-participant random intercepts were removed because including them prevented the model from converging (see Analysis section).

Table 12 shows that the significant predictors of deciding to continue studying German, in descending order of strength, were perceiving that the public viewed the German language positively, *expectancy*, being female, high SES, and *attainment/utility value*. *Intrinsic value* was not a significant predictor. Learners who felt that others viewed German positively were nearly eight times as likely to decide to continue studying the language than those who felt others viewed German negatively.

Table 12. Uptake decision as predicted by learner variables.

		Decision	
Predictors	Odds ratios	CI	P
(Intercept)	0.08	0.02–0.29	**<.001**
Perception of public views of German [neutral]	1.33	0.58–3.05	.50
Perception of public views of German [positive]	7.73	1.56–38.25	**.012**
Perception of public views of Germans [neutral]	0.71	0.29–1.77	.47
Perception of public views of Germans [positive]	0.86	0.31–2.36	.77
Learning German is like [ambivalent]	1.55	0.57–4.23	.39
Learning German is like [dynamic]	0.86	0.35–2.12	.74
Expectancy	3.75	1.95–7.22	**<.001**
Intrinsic value	1.51	0.82–2.77	.19
Attainment/Utility value	2.16	1.21–3.87	**.009**
SES [high]	2.46	1.08–5.63	**.03**
Gender [female]	2.69	1.16–6.24	**.02**
Random Effects			
σ^2		3.29	
$\tau_{00 \ school}$		0.13	
ICC		0.04	
N_{school}		4	
Observations		228	
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2		0.645 / 0.659	

Converting the Odds ratio for *Perception of public views* to Cohen's *d*, a large effect of 1.13 was found. For every one unit increase in *expectancy*, learners were nearly four times more likely to continue language study, although the effect of *expectancy* at *d* = 0.73 should be viewed as only marginally medium, and the other significant but weaker predictors in Table 11 as small. Finally, Table 12 shows that around 64.5% of the variance in the uptake decisions for studying German was explained by the fixed factors alone (in other words, a large amount) and that school contributed only a further 1.4% to the variance, a much smaller amount than might be expected from previous research which has indicated that school factors might influence learners' decisions about language study (e.g. Henderson et al. 2018; Lanvers 2016). This may also however be because of the small number of schools included.

5. Discussion

This study set out to explore the nature of learner representations of German*, their perceptions of public views of German*, and how, alongside gender, socio-economic status (SES) and motivational dimensions, they were related to uptake decisions in adolescent German learners in England. Using Situated Expectancy-Value Theory as a framework, we first established through a review of the literature, including the larger study from which the present data were drawn, the social context in which German learning was taking place. That larger study indicated that German and the Germans were heavily associated with politics, war, and threat rather than more positive connotations. The learner discourses presented in this paper mirrored these findings to a certain extent, in terms of *Learning German is like* responses in which the largest theme was 'German as difficulty', accompanied by other negative themes including 'drudgery' and 'unpleasantness'. When learners were asked to imagine German as an animal, responses indicating slowness, unpleasantness and fierceness were dominant. Viewed from a SEVT perspective, these responses suggested low expectancies for success and lack of agency that appeared to be in concordance with the surrounding social discourse; German emerged as something difficult to challenge and on which moving forward was problematic and arduous. That learners were able to express their perceptions of public views on German* indicates that they were not untouched by media and other discourses around them, although such influence may well have been more indirect than direct and no direct causal link can be implied.

When we explored the relationship between learner representations, SES, gender and uptake decisions, the strongest predictor of continuing with German was believing that the public viewed the language positively, followed by having high levels of *expectancy* and *attainment/ utility value*, being female and of high SES, in that order. *Intrinsic value* was not a significant predictor, which was perhaps unexpected given the emphasis placed on making lessons enjoyable and interesting by many practitioners (Wingate 2018). Interpreting the influence of gender and SES from an SEVT perspective, the study thus provides evidence that notions of value stem from 'the assumed fit of perceived task characteristics with the individual's core self-schema, social and personal identities' (Eccles and Wigfield 2020: 5).

Our most novel and significant finding, however, relates to the strong predictive role for GCSE German study of believing that the public holds positive views about the German language. This provides powerful evidence of the importance of having access to positive discourses about German learning, although an alternative explanation could also be that participants who liked German and believed they were good at it surrounded themselves with those expressing more positive narratives. In other words, the direction of any causality that might be inferred is not clearly established. Given the age of our participants, the former explanation does, however, seem more plausible.

Furthermore, although our chi-square analyses did not find a signficant relationship between SES and perceiving others to be positive about German, other studies have suggested that access to such positive discourses is likely to be easier and more frequent for higher SES learners, especially female ones, for whom language learning can be seen as more of the 'norm' (Lanvers 2016; Williams, Burden, and Lanvers 2002). Such learners are hence more likely to assimilate these positive

discourses and attribute a higher value to German study. While we asked learners about 'public' views, they may perhaps have included the opinions of family and friends in that wider group, as well as those from school teachers and school leaders, who may frame lower SES learners as having less to gain from the study of languages than higher SES learners (Lanvers 2016).

SES was not significantly related to *expectancy*, perhaps because low self-efficacy for language learning is a common phenomenon across learners in England overall (Lanvers and Graham 2022). Our data reveal that across all learners, *expectancy* had the lowest mean for droppers, but was the second strongest predictor of continuing with German, followed by *attainment/utility value* at quite some distance (Odds ratios of 3.75 vs 2.16). Additionally, the chi square analyses indicated an association between SES and *intrinsic* and *attainment/utility value* scores, which were both significantly higher for High SES learners. These findings suggest, first, that expecting to be successful at learning German is an important route for encouraging continued German study for all learners, regardless of their SES, but that SES is important for its relationship with perceptions of *value*. It is possible, furthermore, that SES influences *expectancy* indirectly through *value*, although this study did not investigate that relationship, an area that further research might usefully explore, potentially through Structural Equation Modelling. Second, the fact that *expectancy* was more important than *value* for subject choice, in contrast to what has been found in other studies (Nagengast et al. 2011), may perhaps reflect the particular context in England. There, languages are more widely perceived as being difficult and needing particular cognitive strengths for success (Molway et al. 2023). Third, the strong positive correlation between *expectancy* and *value* shows they are clearly related and that boosting one may well boost the other. Fourth, the fact that *intrinsic value* did not significantly predict taking a German GCSE suggests that enjoying lessons and finding them fun loses its importance in the face of more powerful and influential factors such as those discussed above.

Finally, although there were strongly negative aspects to learners' representations of the German language, the second largest theme for *Learning German is like* was German as pleasantness, with many learners viewing it as an ultimately rewarding endeavour on a personal level after time and investment. That indicates that they were able to see beyond the more one-sided image of the language that the press data in Krüsemann (2018) suggested was current in wider society at the time.

6. Implications

Perceiving others to be positive about the German language emerged as a key factor in learners' decisions in England about further German study, although as mentioned above, the study is not able to demonstrate causality nor the direction of any causality. That finding does, however, indicate the influence potentially exerted by the messages from significant others such as the general public, family, friends, and school, as well as the press. Initiatives to improve uptake of German study at school could focus on promoting more positive views and tap into the notion of German as a challenging but worthwhile pursuit, as was present in some learners' representations in this study. For example, Fisher (2013a, 2013b) reported some success in shifting learners' views of German as difficult, painful and slow through an intervention that involved them discussing metaphorical depictions of it as a hard but worthwhile endeavour for learners personally, and not just in terms of economic benefits it might bring. In the present study, SES and gender also predicted uptake, and SES was related to *intrinsic* and *attainment/utility value*. That suggests that more needs to be done to offer learners from less advantaged backgrounds, and male learners, targeted support to address any sense they have that language learning has no relevance for them. This might include mentoring from older students with similar backgrounds who have continued with German, who can highlight that challenges and set-backs are common but that it is possible for all learners to find personal relevance in language study (see, for example, the mentoring scheme in Wales, http://mflmentoring.co.uk/). Such approaches might then offer learners an alternative and more positive narrative to counteract any messages they receive that languages are not 'for them'.

7. Limitations

Whilst schools with different SES profiles were selected for participation in the study, it is acknowledged that the limited number of schools in this study (four) cannot represent all schools in England. However, for reasons of time, cost, and space, the number of participating schools had to remain limited, and from within the same geographical region. We had no access to learner attainment data, so no conclusions regarding language competence (as opposed to perceived expected success) can be drawn. All data, including parental occupations, were self-reported by learners, which poses limitations in respect of the reliability of SES categorisation. Finally, the data were drawn from a particular time-period, although present day German uptake figures and reported pupil perceptions (BBC 2023) suggest they remain highly current and relevant.

8. Conclusion

In spite of these limitations, this study has contributed new understanding of motivation for language learning in anglophone contexts by showing that the relationship between public views and learners' perceptions of them, social class, gender, learner motivation and uptake for language learning is a complex one. Insights into that complexity have been facilitated by a novel combination of data from closed and open questionnaire responses, the latter using metaphor items to probe learner representations and perceptions in a way that closed items alone cannot. By showing how public representations of German*, as presented in the press (Krüsemann 2018), find echoes in learner representations and what they perceive the public to believe about German*, the study has also illustrated the appropriateness of using Situated Expectancy-Value Theory as a framework for exploring language learning motivation. Doing so has provided new insights into how the decline in German language learning motivation in England might be addressed.

Notes

1. A small number of learners (22) who stated they were undecided or gave no response about continued study were omitted leaving a sample of 391.
2. Fisher (2013a) found that learner open metaphor responses could be categorised into six groups: '(1) learning German as difficulty/impossibility; (2) learning German as drudgery; (3) learning German as mystery; (4) learning German as a surmountable challenge; (5) learning German as pleasure and (6) learning German as physical suffering' (122).

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Learner Questionnaire. Relevant items are shown in bold.

<div align="center">

Learning German - your views

Thank you for your help!

</div>

A. Please complete the statements below.

Example: For me, playing football is like _ *eating chocolate*_____

because ___*I love football and chocolate*____

1.   **For me, learning German is like:**

_____

_____

because_____

_____

2.   If German was a food it would be a:

_____

_____

because_____

_____

3.   If German was an animal it would be a:

_____

_____

because_____

_____

4.   When I'm learning German I feel :

_____

_____

B. If we asked 100 random British people about the first thing that comes into their heads when they think of a particular word, what do you think they would say? Please write it down.

Then, circle whether you think this opinion is totally correct or totally incorrect or somewhere in between (please circle only a whole number).

Example: Sharks: _____*danger*_____.
In my view, that opinion is:

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

i.   **German:**

_____

In my view, that opinion is:

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

ii.   **The Germans:**

_____

In my view, that opinion is:

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

iii.   Germany:

_____

In my view, that opinion is:

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

C. What do you think people who learn German are like?

People who learn German

are_____

because_____

_____

D. Now please answer the following questions for yourself:

1.   I enjoy German lessons

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

 1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

2.   I don't like our German learning materials (like for example text books)

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

 1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

3.   German is useful for getting a good job

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

 1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

4.   For me personally, it is important to be able to speak German

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

 1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

5.   **For people in the UK today, it is not important to be able to speak German**

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

6.   **I would like to travel to Germany someday**

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

7.   **I am good at German**

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

8.   **My teacher makes German lessons fun**

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

9.   **When I leave school I will have a good level of German**

Totally correct   *Totally incorrect*

    1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*

E. Nearly done! Please just answer the questions on the next page:

1.   Did anyone give you advice regarding continuing or dropping German? If so, please write who (e.g. parents, teacher etc.):

_____

_____

2.   **Have you chosen German for GCSE?**   **yes** □   **no** □

Why/why not? Please write down your reason(s).

_____

_____

F. If there is anything else you'd like to tell us about learning German, please write it down here:

_____

_____

3.   **I am a:**   **boy** □   **girl** □

4.   At home, do you speak any language(s) other than English? If yes, please write down which one(s)

_____

     5.   **What is your father/carer's main job?**_____

     6.   **What is your mother/carer's main job?**_____

Thank you very much for filling in this questionnaire!

Appendix 2

Final Closed Questionnaire Items and Reliability

Scale and items	Cronbach's Alpha
Expectancy	.810
When I leave school, I will have a good level of German	
I am good at German	
Intrinsic value	.901
I enjoy German lessons	
German lessons are fun	
Attainment/utility value	.704
German is useful for getting a good job	
For me personally, it is important to be able to speak German.	

Appendix 3

Coding structure for SES used in the study

Depending on the analytic purposes and nature of the data, the eight classes of the NS-SEC (ONS, n.d.) can be collapsed into a five, or a three-class framework (plus 'never worked'). This study used the three-class framework as it represents a hierarchical form of social status, whereas the eight- and the five-class version, according to the manual, should be regarded as ordinal scales. 'Unemployed' was added in rather than 'never worked' to reflect more closely the responses learners gave. Secondly, owing to the specific quality of the study's data (possibly misrepresented and incomplete, with a high proportion of cases excluded because of missing or 'unclassifiable' data), the model with the fewest tiers arguably offered the best chances of coding parental occupations in the most appropriate category. Since the study's data did not include any responses that could be distinguished as 'never worked', 'long-term unemployed' or 'unemployed', these categories were collapsed into on single category of 'not working'.

Code	Label	Examples
1	higher managerial, administrative, professional	global director, GP, professor, vicar, chartered accountant, national accounts manager
2	intermediate	teacher, accountant, company director, business owner, nurse, chemical engineer
3	routine and manual	hairdresser, teaching assistant, nursery nurse, mechanic
4	unemployed	unemployed, no occupation
99	unclassifiable	Tesco's [supermarket in the UK], don't know, none of your business, retired