Perceptions About the Dominance of English as a Global Language: Impact on Foreign-Language Teachers’ Professional Identity

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ABSTRACT
Using a novel theoretical framework that incorporates teacher identity, a school as community of practice, and English as a global language from a linguistic-imperialism perspective, this qualitative interview study with foreign-language teachers in Scotland, France, and Germany (N = 13) explores connections between foreign-language-learning decline and the impact of this decline on teachers’ identity across the three countries. Findings indicate similar trends across contexts in the dominance of English over other languages (and the identities of those who teach them) and support previous research on the importance of considering subject area, and its valuing by a range of stakeholders, as fundamental to teacher identity. Directions are proposed for future research and practice that emphasise taking an interdisciplinary approach to the notion of a subject area’s decline.

KEYWORDS
English as an international language; globalization; identity construction; language teaching; teacher identity

Introduction
Much has been written about the “decline” of interest in and uptake of language learning in predominantly Anglophone countries, given that modern foreign languages (MFLs) are in competition with perceptions about the global pervasiveness of English (e.g., Chambers, 1993; Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997; Lanvers, 2011, 2012; Macaro, 2008; Pickett, 2010). The spread of English, however, has not only impacted language learning in Anglophone contexts. To a lesser extent, there has also been exploration of parallel perceptions, and trajectories of decline, that hold for foreign languages other than English (FLOEs) in countries where English is not an official or widely spoken first language (see Dörnyei & Csizer, 2002, and Csizer & Lukács, 2010, on comparative studies of motivation towards English and other foreign languages in Hungary; Bernaus, Masgoret, Gardner, & Reyes, 2004, in Spain).

The wider research project from which the present teacher interview data is taken was itself an investigation into language learners’ attitudes and motivation and into the role of perceptions about English as a global language in shaping beliefs about this subject area, in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries. However, during an initial stage of data analysis, a connection emerged between valuing a specific secondary subject and a teacher’s professional identity. The identity construction of this major stakeholder in school practices is vital, as it impacts on teachers’ beliefs about their responsibilities in the school and their ability to fulfil them:

Sustaining a positive sense of effectiveness to subject [area], pupils, relationships and roles is important to maintaining motivation, self-esteem or self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and commitment to teaching. (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006, p. 614)

More recently, Thorburn (2014) has also argued for the importance of investigations into the precise nature of this relationship, and my work responds by conceptualising the participants’
schools as *communities of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the impact that various participants within these communities have upon MFL/FLOE teacher identity. This framework offers a strong precedent for connecting professional identity with attitudes (of the teachers themselves and of others within the school community of practice) towards the value of one’s subject area as it allows for interpreting expertise in one’s subject area as “competence,” and “identity [within the community of practice] as a form of competence” (Wenger, 1998, p. 153).

Unique here is the possibility of drawing preliminary comparisons across national borders, exploring the similarity of subject teaching/professional identity bonds, with “perceptions about global English” as a consistent thread: Data collection in three countries enables steps to be taken towards ascertaining whether the decline of language learning is a global(ised) trend, given a widespread belief “that the contemporary processes of English are closely associated with those of globalisation generally” (James, 2009, p. 80). To explore the role that perceptions about the pervasiveness and dominance of English (both in an L1, mother tongue, and an L2, foreign language, capacity) as a global language play in shaping MFL/FLOE teachers’ identity, Phillipson’s (1992) *linguistic imperialism* framework is used. The present theoretical approach responds to Phillipson’s (2015) identification of a gap in research into the impact of English as a global language: “Whether English constitutes a real threat to an institution or country is an empirical question. This needs thorough investigation Europe-wide” (p. 28). The findings here suggest that there is indeed a real threat, specifically at the level of the individual MFL/FLOE teacher and their professional identity, in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries.

**Background**

**Languages other than English in decline—Filling in the gaps**

There has been much debate surrounding the alleged “decline” of language learning in predominantly native English-speaking countries, and the United Kingdom is no exception. In terms of focus on the separate education systems within the United Kingdom, there has, similarly, been much examination of the state of language learning in England, though less attention has been paid to Scotland (though for notable exceptions see McPake, Johnstone, Low, & Lyall, 1999; Tierney & Gallastegi, 2011). While many of the principles and trends relating to MFL learning in the United Kingdom (and indeed England) hold true also for Scotland (e.g., Grove, 2012), and are therefore able to shed light on this context, there remain important differences that make Scotland unique and a valuable site for further exploration of language-learning motivation. Doughty (2011) specifies that these important differences manifest themselves in language-learning policy initiatives (the most recent examples of which are discussed as part of the Implications outlined towards the end of this paper) and in the school systems themselves, differences that are in turn attributed to Scotland’s devolved government. Currently, pupils in Scotland have an entitlement to 500 hours of MFL learning, typically spanning the last 2 years of primary and the first 4 years of secondary schooling. In practice, head teachers are able to exercise a degree of autonomy on the delivery of this entitlement, and such flexibility makes it difficult to state definitively when “compulsory” MFL learning starts and ends in Scottish schools (see the Scottish Government, 2011, for recent policy declaration, and Johnstone, 2001, for early reaction to this entitlement approach). Crucially, for this project, it indicates the somewhat uncertain position that MFL learning can occupy in Anglophone countries. What follows is a brief overview of work carried out beyond Scotland, focused on common themes relating to the decline of MFL learning in native-English-speaking contexts more generally, as well as FLOEs in non-Anglophone contexts.

One recent example of empirical research that has explored MFL decline in an Anglophone setting is Lanvers (2011), who conducted an exploration of media representations of the state of foreign-language learning in the United Kingdom, as well as collecting university language students’
interview data on their perceptions of the country’s attitudes towards the subject area. Despite this valuable contribution to the body of “languages decline” research, there remain gaps, which this present study seeks to address. Firstly, I add teacher interview data to the media and student viewpoints presented by Lanvers to gain the practitioner perspective on this decline (the majority of work that has explored the impact of perceptions about the English language’s dominant global role has tended to focus on learners of other languages, rather than those who teach them; e.g., Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Chambers, 1993; Pickett, 2010). Furthermore, it would appear that there has been little work specifically on the impact of this decline on the construction of teacher identity. Secondly, I build on Lanvers’s work looking at attitudes towards the learning of languages other than English by presenting data gathered from not just the United Kingdom but also from non-Anglophone countries to compare attitudes towards FLOEs in different national contexts.

Moreover, there is a small body of work within L2 motivation and attitude research that has set a precedent for exploring FLOEs being learned in non-Anglophone countries. Bernaus et al.’s (2004) questionnaire study among immigrant secondary school pupils investigated motivation to learn Catalan, Spanish, and English. Findings indicated that both integrative and instrumental orientations are “language specific,” with Spanish and English ranking more favourably among this group of learners and with English especially being “viewed as the international language that might be a passport to their future jobs in Spain or abroad” (p. 82). Csizér and Lukács’s (2010) questionnaire study looked at the possible influence of learning more than one foreign language on a learner’s attitude and motivation. Participants were learning both English and German (100 having started with English, and 100, with German). Of particular relevance here is the fact that they allowed for the potentially powerful role of the “global” language of English being one of the languages in question. Key findings included the following: (a) There was higher motivation for English learning and more favourable attitudes towards this foreign language in general; (b) the role of parental encouragement and attitudes was only found to have a positive impact for pupils who had started learning English first but otherwise had a negative impact; and (c) there was a strong indication of a preference to learn English as the first foreign language (L2), followed by German as the second (L3), and indications of more-favourable levels of motivation for both languages when studied in this order.

However, Henry and Apelgren’s (2008) results of a questionnaire study among Swedish adolescents suggest that, at least in the early stages of learning an L3 (that is to say, a foreign language in addition to English), attitudes towards this L3 are even more positive than those towards English. They note that this is in marked contrast to wider societal perceptions of the (lesser) value of languages other than English. More recently, Kobayashi (2013, 2014) has also brought into question the dominance of English, both in foreign-language policies (such as that of Japan) and foreign-language-motivation research. She calls for greater focus on languages other than English in these domains, arguing specifically for the increasing importance of Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language.

The English language evidently occupies a powerful role in Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries alike, a role that is further characterised by ambiguity and complexity in the latter contexts especially. This research project aims to elucidate the role English plays by making cross-context comparisons.

**Theoretical framework**

Drawing on the theoretical notions of linguistic imperialism (e.g., Phillipson, 1992), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and work on identity in language learning and teaching situations, I propose a framework for the analysis of impacting factors on teacher identity (which is at the micro-level of the diagram, represented by the central circle), where the subject area is a modern foreign language other than English, either in an Anglophone or non-Anglophone setting.

The widest circle represents English as a language of global communication, specifically, societal perceptions at this macro-level of its role, status, usefulness, and pervasiveness, held in wider society, and
the dominance that such perceptions may facilitate it to exert over other languages. These societal-level perceptions feed into the second circle, which represents how school participants (the meso-level) view English’s role, especially in relation to other languages. These attitudes at the school level shape interactions with MFL/FLOE teachers and, in turn, feed into constructions of their professional identity.

I am not suggesting that the English language itself is an autonomous actor, capable of exerting influence and dominance over other languages and people. I support Phillipson’s (2015) point that to “attribute agency” to the English language is akin to ignoring those institutions and individuals that perpetuate its spread. However, it is not the main focus of this paper to identify, or explore the role of, such institutions. Nor do I mean to imply that teachers are unable to shape their own identity rather than have it be the mere object of external influences. However, these external influences, and the nature of the impact on teacher identity, constitute a major element of the analysis. Although the communities-of-practice model places great emphasis on both the “individual and collective” (Wenger, 1998, pp. 145–147) elements that contribute to the process of identity formation, I focus more on the social—that is to say—the role that others’ attitudes play.

The macro-level—Societal perceptions viewed through a “linguistic imperialism” lens

Linguistic imperialism may be defined as “[focusing] on how and why certain languages dominate internationally . . . [and being] manifestly a feature of the way nation-states privileged one language, and often sought actively to eradicate others, forcing their speakers to shift to the dominant language” (Phillipson, 2009a, pp. 1–2). Relevant to English’s role in MFL/FLOE teacher identity, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2010) claim that linguistic imperialism incorporates the following elements: impositions over time of governmental or educational (for example) institutions on individual actors, in terms of the “[management] of linguistic capital,” and the related “decision-making, language policy and planning” processes (p. 82), and the gradual shift of a widely spoken, high-status language such as English, being used in ever-more situations in place of others, which they refer to as linguistic capital accumulation. They support a move toward facilitating increased linguistic diversity, “where interaction between users of languages does not allow one or a few to spread at the cost of others,” (p. 4) termed language ecology.

Figure 1. Societal and school-level influences on MFL/FLOE teacher identity.
Both linguistic imperialism and language ecology can be applied to a secondary curriculum context: foreign languages are being sidelined either in favour of L2 English, or simply its use as a mother tongue, and this linguistic imperialism has a profound effect on teacher identity. Furthermore, there is a consequent decrease in linguistic diversity throughout the curriculum, with the perception that English is the only necessary L2 or that all L2s are superfluous in Anglophone countries.

In the context of *linguistic human rights* (a concept closely connected to linguistic imperialism, as it relates to the support for maintaining languages in decline, in the face of more dominant languages), Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2008) emphasise a consideration of identity. They see language as a symbol contributing to identity construction, and on this language-identity relationship they comment that these elements “are necessarily relational and fluid, hence an integral part of struggles for political recognition, and for economic and social rights” (p. 8). Although Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson typically refer to the rights associated with one’s mother tongue (for example, access to L1-medium education), their argument can nonetheless be extrapolated to the foreign-language context. If language is an important indicator of identity, then (L1 or L2) language skills that underpin an MFL/FLOE teacher’s career may also be strongly bound to identity construction, given that career is an important facet of individuals’ identity. Furthermore, notions of support and recognition are also highly pertinent in secondary education, where diverse subjects compete for funding, resources, and time allocation: a teacher feeling supported by senior members of staff depends on decisions taken about their subject area, and this is crucial to fostering their professional identity within the school community.

**The meso-level: The school as a community of practice**

The school is loosely conceptualised as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which is an interrelated group of individuals connected by the activities to which members contribute and the significance they ascribe to them; their aims and the process followed to achieve them; and manners of speaking, or doing certain things, which the group assumes over time (Wenger, 1998). Inspiration for its application came from Chen (2010), who used the framework to understand multifaceted pupil identity in the context of attitudes towards language use and competence. Communities of practice also provides a structure for exploring teacher, as well as learner, identity, and how it interacts with their subject area, as negotiated in the school environment. A member’s identity can be conceived of “as a form of competence” (Wenger, 1998, p. 153), which is knowledge and actions that one is comfortable with and confident about; this “familiar” knowledge makes it clear to us “who we are” (Wenger, 1998, p. 153). I interpret *familiar competence* as subject area. Beyond familiar knowledge, individuals’ professional identities within a community of practice “are affected by the picture they build of their position. They see themselves as participants in social processes and configurations that extend beyond their direct engagement in their own practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 173). I have reflected this by demonstrating how perceptions at both a societal (i.e., beyond the community of practice of the school) and school level (i.e., within the community of practice) may impact a teacher’s perceptions of their professional role. Finally, communities of practice allows for an understanding of membership to be marginal, because of the (perceived value of the) role that a member plays within, and the relative validity of the contributions they make to, the community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

**The micro-level: Teacher identity**

Although focusing on learners’ construction of foreign-language identities, Huhtala and Lehtih-Eklund’s (2012) work bears relevance here, given its emphasis on the temporal nature of identity. It may be constantly adapting, they say, influenced by those we meet and the nature of communication with them. As they propose that “learning as a process of participation is […] a continuous
process of identity construction” (p. 9), teaching may be considered in the same way, as education professionals interact with different students, colleagues, management staff and policy makers (and indeed the output of the latter).

Norton (2000) and Norton Peirce’s (1995) poststructuralist approach to language learning identity emphasises the power differentials in communication situations: “[A] language learner [has] a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 13). Language teacher identity is also constructed amid unequal power distributions, and here, I consider specifically the dominance of English as exerting influence on MFL/FLOE teacher identity.

Sikes (1992) discusses the influence that curricular or policy change can have on professional identity. Pertinent here is how “imposed” changes to schools’ priorities impact upon a teacher, if there arises a mismatch between the professional’s values and the institution’s (Sikes, 1992, p. 41). Imposed changes resonate with linguistic imperialism, which incorporates the imposition of institutions’ “top-down” decision-making about officially sanctioned use and promotion of certain languages over others (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2010, p. 82), which relates closely to the way decision-making about the (both monetary and more abstract) support afforded MFLs/FLOEs can impact upon teachers’ identity.

This brief overview concludes with a consideration of the influence of others. Kelchtermans (1996) identified the vulnerability of teachers, to the opinions and evaluations of others both located within the school community and beyond. Pietsch and Williamson (2010) also found teacher identity to be affected by different participants, specifically within the school community: Positive teacher identity is largely fostered by a sense of feeling valued and being of high worth. Thorburn’s (2014) findings suggested that evaluations of senior management play a crucial role in classroom teachers’ conceptualisation of professional identity. Jin (2013) posited that classroom teachers’ frustration at management’s lack of subject area support is detrimental to the school’s overall development; teachers in her interview study considered themselves to be victims of this marginalised status, and that their subject area competence was being undermined. Marginalisation relates to the point made earlier regarding how others’ beliefs about one’s role and overall value of one’s contributions to a community of practice can impact upon the construction of professional identity.

The study

Participants

The interest in both the perceived decline of MFL learning in an Anglophone country and any parallels with FLOEs elsewhere necessitated a first round of data collection across different contexts, carried out between April and June 2010:

Two teachers of L2 French in Scotland (referred to here as SF1 and SF2)
Two of L2 German in Scotland (SG1 and SG2)
Two of L2 English in Germany (GE1 and GE2)
Two of L2 French in Germany (GF1 and GF2)
Two of L2 English in France (FE1 and FE2)
One of L2 German in France (FG1)

Teachers SF1, SF2, and SG1 are colleagues in an MFL department in a rural Scottish coeducational secondary school, whose student body represents a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds. SG2 is from a different rural secondary school, which has a similar student demographic (though only a sixth of the student population). Interviews were conducted in a vacant classroom in these secondary schools.
Teachers GE1, GE2, GF1, and GF2 all work in the same secondary school in a large town, close to a major German city. There are similarities between this school and the ones in Scotland in that they are all coeducational and represent a range of socioeconomic backgrounds (it is also close in size to SF1, SF2, and SG1’s school). As in Scotland, interviews were conducted in vacant classrooms at the school.

I employed a snowball sampling technique (e.g., Robson, 2011) to access participants in all locations, and while this proved straightforward in Scotland and Germany, this was not the case in France. I was only able to identify three teachers, instead of the desired four; furthermore, time constraints made it unfeasible to travel to France to conduct face-to-face interviews. They were therefore carried out via Skype. FE1 works in a rural coeducational secondary school, and FE2 and FG1 are colleagues in an MFL department in a different rural location at a school with a similar student demographic.

In June 2011, I interviewed two Scotland-based L2-French teachers, who also had experience as L2-English teachers in France (SFE1 and SFE2). These interviews were conducted face-to-face, at my faculty premises. This enabled me to fully explore patterns that had emerged from the first round of data collection, with these two individuals who offered unique insight given their dual roles as L2-English teacher in secondary schools in their own country, then L2-French teacher in secondary schools in Scotland. The importance of these teachers’ perspectives, based on their unique experiences, is supported by an element of the communities of practice framework, which Wenger terms reconciliation—that is to say, the shifting from one community of practice to another. In doing so, individuals must cope with a situation in which they are experiencing multiple, and possibly divergent, conceptualisations of their identity, and encountering new ways of understanding their competence (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, Chen (2010) found that using communities of practice as an analytical framework facilitates an understanding of identity as being multifaceted and conflicting, depending on the specific teaching/learning context in which an individual finds him- or herself.

The common thread amongst all 13 teachers interviewed was their experience in state sector secondary schools in Scotland, Germany, or France (or in more than one of these countries, in the case of the final 2 participants). Here, I foreground the responses of seven teachers. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that a theme’s frequency within a data set is not necessarily important, and I argue that this notion of teacher identity having been explored by some though not all the participants does not render it invalid.

Table 1. Biographical data of the participating teachers (N = 13).

| Teachers   | Gender | L1   | L2 taught       | age range | Language of interview | Face-to-face or Skype |
|------------|--------|------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Scotland   |        |      |                 |           |                       |                      |
| SF1        | F      | English | French          | 50s       | English              | face-to-face         |
| SF2        | F      | French  | French          | 40s       | English              | face-to-face         |
| SG1        | F      | English | German          | 50s       | English              | face-to-face         |
| SG2        | F      | German  | German          | 40s       | English              | face-to-face         |
| Germany    |        |      |                 |           |                       |                      |
| GE1        | F      | English | English         | 40s       | English              | face-to-face         |
| GE2        | M      | German  | English         | 20s       | English              | face-to-face         |
| GF1        | F      | French  | French          | 30s       | French               | face-to-face         |
| GF4        | F      | German  | French          | 60s       | French               | face-to-face         |
| France     |        |      |                 |           |                       |                      |
| FE1        | F      | French  | English         | 40s       | English              | Skype                |
| FE2        | M      | English | English         | 40s       | English              | Skype                |
| FG1        | F      | French  | German          | 60s       | French               | Skype                |
| Teachers of both contexts (France and Scotland) |        |      |                 |           |                       |                      |
| SFE1       | F      | French  | English/French  | 20s       | English              | face-to-face         |
| SFE2       | F      | French  | English/French  | 20s       | English              | face-to-face         |
Methodology and analysis

There were two main analysis phases. Initially, I took an inductive approach to the data-coding process, coming to the data free of any theoretical leanings as far as possible, at which point the key theme of teacher identity emerged. Indications of this theme then prompted me to conduct the final two teacher interviews, to explore it (and possible parallels between the Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts) further. With this final stage of data collection completed, I returned to the 13 interviews for a second stage of analysis, keeping in mind the possible value of employing linguistic imperialism as a framework for understanding the role of English in relation to opinions towards other languages and the communities of practice framework for understanding how best to approach the school environment. These three theoretical notions guided this second analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 83–84, for further discussion of inductive and theoretical approaches to thematic analysis).

All interviews were fully transcribed (see Appendix for transcription conventions), and subjected to a thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) posit that thematic analysis can be used to approach qualitative data from an essentialist, realist, or critical realist perspective, and it is the final one that has been adopted here, in that I sought to let the analysis show the way the participants “make meaning of their experience, and in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of ‘reality’” (p. 81).

This qualitative data offers an important and illuminating complement to quantitative work carried out by Bernaus et al. (2004) and Csizér and Lukács (2010); while broad trends in attitudes and motivation towards English and other languages have been identified, this work should enhance such findings by offering a depth of opinion from current MFL/FLOE practitioners and comparisons across national contexts.

As the focus on teacher identity emerged, so did the following research questions: (1) In non-Anglophone countries such as France and Germany, to what extent are the professional identities of L2-English and FLOE teachers valued differently (by pupils, parents, colleagues and wider society)? and (2) To what extent do parallels exist between FLOE teachers in France and Germany and MFL teachers in Scotland, in terms of having their professional identity valued?

Findings

The analysis of the data will be divided into two sections, each dealing in turn with one of the research questions. Throughout these two sections, I will refer back to the different levels within the analytical framework proposed in Figure 1.

[The pupils] are all aware that English is a language you just need

This introductory quote from an English teacher in Germany (GE2) indicates how English is prioritised, unquestioningly, and how FLOEs are comparatively sidelined. Further,

C’est l’anglais première langue … On parle de pourquoi le français pourquoi [continuer] le français et eh surtout pourquoi- pourquoi n’avoir pas que l’anglais … On parle de pourquoi une deuxième langue étrangère et après on parle de pourquoi le français comme deuxième langue étrangère.

[It’s English which is the first language … we talk about why French why continue with French and eh above all why- why not just English … we talk about why a second foreign language and after that we talk about why French as a second foreign language.] (GF1)

Il est catastrophe. [Les nombres des élèves qui étudient l’allemand] baissent beaucoup, parce que c’est l’anglais qui domine, et puis les jeunes pensent que même s’ils vont en Allemagne ils peuvent parler en anglais.

[It’s a catastrophe. [The numbers of pupils who study German] are really decreasing, because it’s English which dominates, and since the kids think that even if they go to Germany they can speak in English.] (FG1)
These excerpts demonstrate that attitudes towards the value of L2-English are markedly different to those regarding FLOEs. GF1 discusses a hierarchical relationship between English, the “first” foreign language, and others, in a secondary position. From FG1, the language used is powerfully emotive: English “dominates,” the situation being described as a “catastrophe.” This comment demonstrates how the apparent dominance of English can impact upon the perceived worth of other foreign languages. There is an indication here also of “domain loss” (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2010, p. 82) to an extent, with English’s role as a lingua franca negating any need to learn other L2s. The pupils’ perceptions lead to lower numbers taking the subject, which in turn indicates less interest in the FLOE as a subject area, rendering the teacher’s role less pivotal within the school.

Related to this reported decline is FLOE teachers, needing to work harder than their L2-English colleagues to promote their subject:

Je sais pas si les profs d’anglais sont obligés de- de faire de la pub comme ça. Je pense pas. Les élèves sont motivés de- début. Ou alors ils sont pas forcément motivés mais ils savent qu’ils doivent continuer, que sans-que sans anglais c’est eh- ils ne sont rien.

[I don’t know if the English teachers are obliged to publicise like that. I don’t think so. Pupils are motivated from the start. Or rather not so much motivated but they know that they have to continue, that without- that without English it’s eh- they’re nothing.] (GF1)

All of them know that English is important so they have that drummed into them from eh- by all teachers from everything they hear outside the classroom, eh parents generally would like their children to be very good at English and employers obviously require English as a- a- as a language, so I don’t think really they need convincing uh about the importance of English. (FE2)

I’ve never had anybody actually saying to me what’s the point of learning English. Nobody is stupid enough to say anything like that. (FE2)

Teacher GF1 suggests that, even if students are not particularly motivated, they will learn English regardless, given perceptions about its importance. FE2 indicates that the perceived value of English is reinforced beyond the classroom by other teachers, parents, and even society, meaning that, in class, the teacher’s motivating role is already done. The widest circle of the model is feeding in to the middle one: Societal perceptions about English influence pupils’ perceptions, which in turn (positively) impact on L2-English teachers’ identity. So strong are the perceptions about the value of this subject area that to question its importance would be “stupid.” Teachers of L2-English have their professional identity reinforced by this belief about the importance of their subject, which is strong enough to attract pupils who are not particularly interested or motivated to learn it.

Concluding this first section are two excerpts from a teacher who has worked in France teaching English and in Scotland teaching French. They not only support earlier comments relating to the way L2-English is valued, and indeed the related ease of motivation, but also introduce the following section, which brings into focus the valuing of MFLs and teacher identity in the Scottish context, in order to compare this with themes that have already emerged with FLOEs in France and Germany:

It’s really- like really different teaching English in France to teaching French [in Scotland] cos English in France is considered a very important subject. (SFE1)

I didn’t know [Scottish pupils] didn’t care about [French] because there’s not a- that was not something I found difficult in France to motivate them because it’s easy. (SFE1)

L2-English is valued much more highly within its French curricular context than is L2-French within the Scottish curriculum. Furthermore, SFE1 differentiates between motivating pupils in these contexts—she believes it was “easy” to motivate French pupils to learn English (which supports other teachers’ comments), compared to Scottish pupils learning French, where she encountered a sense from pupils of their being uninterested in the subject area. The way her “competence” (Wenger, 1998) is valued varies depending on the community of practice she works within, and the nature of the wider societal influences upon it.
“I don’t feel [modern foreign languages are] particularly supported or valued” (SG1)

To begin, a consideration of whether MFLs are valued within the Scottish curriculum: SFE1 suggested that she did not feel that this was the case, especially compared to her own experience as an English teacher in France. Here again is a sense of a teacher’s identity being in flux, depending on contextual factors. She makes other illuminating comments about the value of MFLs within the Scottish curriculum:

You know parents don’t think that learning French is as important as [for instance say] learning English so um I feel like it’s [completely different situation], cos people like pupils in France mm know that English is important, and in France like anywhere in the media they are like (xxx) commercials like speak English it’s good for you, and there’s many English programmes in France so like the- the society is saying learn English it’s important for you (xxx) it’s the international language. Being an English teacher was- was different.

Here most of the comments I heard is like- even from- the Scottish people I- I meet it’s oh I remember my French, [oh I don’t use it anymore], oh it’s not useful cos no-one speaks French and so I hear that from others [who learned French], and I hear [those comments] from most of my pupils, French is not useful and- and I- I don’t care I won’t use French or- why are we learning French, so they’re not seeing the point of it.

[The pupils are] not wrong why do they learn French. They speak English everywhere so when ah one of the pupils say that to me it’s like how do I answer that. So I have to think.

For me I feel like [French is] like eh art or music or PE. We don’t need to teach French. I really feel that like art music or PE you know eh is- like something you can do as a leisure, or something you can do if you have a talent, but not something you need.

I don’t want to be negative about art or music or PE but it’s like . . . there’s some subjects like you don’t think oh they’re not all on the same level. (SFE1)

Firstly, the influence from wider societal perceptions, down to pupil beliefs, and subsequently how she feels about her role as a teacher, was markedly different. Secondly, she makes specific reference to low parental opinions of French in Scotland. Thirdly, she agrees with pupils, admitting that she can at times find it difficult to justify the worth or learning French. This demonstrates that wider societal perceptions can even impact negatively on MFL/FLOE teachers themselves in the middle level and on other participants within the school community. Finally, her comments about French with explicit reference to other subject areas are significant. She likens French to other subjects that she does not see as core, explaining that some are more valuable than others. Furthermore, these subjects are talked about in direct contrast with L2-English, and making reference to the latter she uses the word “need” on two separate occasions (echoing GE2’s vocabulary choice in the previous section).

Overall, her comments indicate an influence on teachers’ professional identity at the three different levels of interaction and negotiation. Firstly, at a macro-, society-wide level, with members of the public and media making comments about the importance of English and the lack of importance of other languages; secondly, at the meso-level of both participants, closely connected (colleagues and pupils) and more peripheral (parents) to the school community of practice, and also subject areas competing with one another to “occupy territory” (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2010, p. 82) within the curriculum; and finally at the micro-, internal level, where the impact of these attitudes and the struggle for subject area support and recognition at the two levels can be seen in the conflicting feelings of professional role and identity.

Other Scotland-based teachers indicated similar opinions about how MFLs are valued and related issues surrounding motivation:

There’s always these initiatives or these claims that languages is being supported and it’s important and this that and the other I don’t- in reality I don’t feel that’s necessarily the case, you know I feel languages is not particularly valued- you know I don’t feel it’s very supported or valued. (SG1)

Languages is really a low priority I think in pupils’ learning these days in Scotland particularly in (this rural area). I think it’s maybe different in various parts of Scotland, but in (this rural area) it’s quite a low priority,
even in management. Eh languages come at the end you know. We’re not really part of a- you know kind of top priority, whatever you know it’s just not em on the agenda so much, you know languages are very much in- in my opinion, seen as the poor relative of education, eh way behind English or maths sciences history geography, way behind everything in fact, maybe not [religious education], and that’s just about the other thing the on- eh the only thing yeah so I think it’s very, very low in priority and it’s a shame.

You know- you don’t want to promote the languages just for the sake of it and then it becomes completely artificial, because there’s not that kind of basic motivation from the pupils or parents.

[Pupils] say you know it’s useless or they don’t like it so that’s fine if they don’t like it they don’t have to do it or you know it’s mostly that kind of comment you know they can’t do it they’re miserable they don’t need it, you know can they please come out of French eh so that- this is the- we hear that. As I said I’ve never had anything said to me personally, but, you know a fair number of children have been removed from em languages classes. (SF2)

The main points here reinforce those of SFE1. At the widest, social level, SG1 talks about government initiatives to support languages, which fail to filter down to impact positively upon school community of practice participants’ attitudes towards the value of MFLs. Parents’ lack of support or interest for MFLs surfaces again, as well as a lack of senior management support. Negative attitudes from both parents and pupils, to the extent that pupils are asking to be removed from the subject altogether, are also brought to light. Like SFE1, SF2 views the valuing of the subject area from a whole-curricular perspective: SF2 feels that with the possible exception of religious education, MFLs are prioritised least. Here we see teacher identity, as it interacts with subject area, being negotiated within the secondary curriculum: Teacher identity is negatively impacted upon, because of the subject area’s perceived low priority. The final excerpt demonstrates these attitudes being explicitly presented to the MFL teachers themselves: stark comments about the lack of worth attached to the subject area and, hence, the MFL teachers’ role in the community of practice.

There are therefore a number of clear parallels to be drawn between FLOE teachers’ comments and those from Scotland-based MFL teachers. Firstly, the dominance of English, for an L1 in Scotland and an L2 in France and in Germany, contributes to a lack of prioritisation for MFLs/FLOEs in all three countries and, indeed, to declining uptake. Secondly, MFL teachers in Scotland and FLOE teachers in France and in Germany must expend significant effort to foster motivation and uptake of their subject amid decreasing interest. The value of the subjects, and teachers’ professional identity, in these contexts is questioned by pupils and parents alike. Finally, there is a disparity between national curricula regarding different subject areas’ worth: In France and Germany, English is the “first” foreign language, with all FLOEs considered secondary, and in Scotland, MFLs are the lowest priority. Teachers who have made a move from teaching English in their home countries to teaching French in Scotland experience a significant, and detrimental, shift in the way their competence (Wenger, 1998) and, hence, professional identity is valued.

Discussion

The interview data reported here support strong parallels between teachers of MFLs in Scotland and FLOEs in France and Germany, the main points highlighted below all having emerged from both. Phillipson (2015) has recently called for acknowledging the importance of “[unmasking] any academic rhetoric that claims that English is detached from its origins and the forces behind its expansion, as though it serves all equally well” (p. 36). Evidence from the data under consideration here supports his stance, as they demonstrate an example of a situation where the spread of English does not serve all equally well, MFL/FLOE teachers constituting one group who loses out. There are strong indications that teachers of MFLs in Scotland, and FLOEs in France and Germany, are required to promote and argue for the value of their subject area to a far greater extent than teachers of L2 English, given beliefs about the comparative importance of (both L1 and L2) English competence. This is evidence for pupils of L2 English (and perhaps even the teachers) not
questioning the potentially problematic nature of the role English plays and the alleged benefits it affords. As Phillipson (2015) has recently stated,

Seeing a language as purely instrumental, or seeing language teaching as ideologically neutral, as an apolitical, purely technocratic mission, entails closing one’s eyes and mind to how social structure operates nationally and internationally, and is in conflict with principles of social justice and a balanced sustainable language ecology. (p. 23)

While an unquestioning belief in the need for L2 English results in teachers being able to easily motivate their pupils, the opposite seems true for the MFL/FLOE situation, wherein there would appear to be an overall lack of motivation. The data suggest teachers’ weariness in having to motivate pupils “just for the sake of it” (SF2). Chambers’ (1993) comments from two decades ago regarding the difficulty of motivating pupils to learn foreign languages in the face of the dominance of global English still seem pertinent today for both the Anglophone contexts he was referring to then and the non-Anglophone contexts explored in this study.

Particularly striking is the evidence that even MFL/FLOE teachers themselves question their subject’s value. While views shared by Lanvers (2011), Pickett (2010), and Macaro (2008) regarding the fallacy of the “everyone speaks English” belief—or of monolingual, L1-English speakers not being on a level playing field with those who have their mother tongue plus L2 English—do likely hold weight and make intuitive sense, it appears that within this data set neither MFL/FLOE learners nor teachers believe this to be true. This links with comments about uptake within such subject areas experiencing significant decline.

In addition to light being shed on pupil and classroom teacher attitudes were illuminating comments regarding support for the subject area from schools’ senior management and parents (i.e., central and peripheral members of the school community of practice) and even government. The teachers in Scotland express the idea of MFLs failing to be valued or prioritised. Repeated comments about the way that interactions with other members of the school have left teachers and their subject area feeling like a low priority could be interpreted through the community-of-practice framework as an example of how a negative experience can foreground a sense of professional identity through the impact it has on one’s understanding of how others view their “humble status” (Wenger, 1998, p. 151).

The final point is the resulting hierarchical effect within the curriculum created by the prevalence of such attitudes towards the value of MFLs/FLOEs. Both SFE1 and SF2 talk about the way MFLs in Scotland are bottom priority compared to most other subjects; SFE1 likens them to other subject areas that she feels are perceived as not having any kind of “core” status, such as art and physical education. SFE1’s comments relating to physical education are of particular interest in light of Thorburn’s (2014) work on teacher identity in that subject area, from which a number of similar themes emerged relating to (diminishing) teacher identity interacting with policy and attitudinal changes that take place over time in a noncore subject area.

Implications

Two equally important parallels regarding the valuing of teachers’ identity have emerged: Parallel between “marginalised” subject areas within the Scottish curriculum.

- This research has demonstrated a link between previous discussions about “non-core” subject areas in Scotland (e.g., Thorburn, 2014) and current reports of MFL teachers’ sense of marginalisation and being devalued.

Parallel between foreign-language learning across countries.

- When the global language of English is involved, bringing with it perceptions about the dominant role it plays, be it as an L1 or L2, teachers of MFLs/FLOEs struggle to have their
professional identity and expertise valued by a range of stakeholders (pupils, other staff, parents, and wider society).

Ascertaining the existence of these common trends lays the foundations for possible implications for both future practice and research. Gains could be made by teachers from noncore, more-sidelined areas of the secondary curriculum, to work together to share good practice in terms of motivating pupils and effectively conveying the value of their subject areas. It could also be beneficial for MFL teachers in Anglophone countries to communicate frequently with FLOE teachers elsewhere to share suggestions about ways to overcome the dominance of (both L1 and L2) English that MFL/FLOE teachers perceive.

Furthermore, much previous research into the “decline” rhetoric surrounding MFLs in Anglophone countries has failed to acknowledge that perhaps this is not unique to MFL learning but, indeed, can be identified in other “marginalized” subject areas (although the contributing factors to this marginalisation may not be the same). I propose that future research into MFL decline in Anglophone countries is located within the context of trends in other (noncore) subjects, to benefit from the greater light that can be shed by this more holistic approach. The theoretical framework proposed here could be equally applicable to such research into teacher identity in other subject areas, as it facilitates an exploration of how societal- and school-wide perceptions about the value and status of a subject contribute to the shaping of teacher identity.

When considering the Scottish context particularly, there has been a major development in MFL policy since these interview data were collected—namely, the Scottish government’s stance on implementing a 1 + 2 approach⁵ to MFLs. There was evidence in the data that such claimed commitment merely pays lip service to valuing the subject area with little tangible improvement. Certainly, prior to the Scottish focus on 1 + 2, Phillipson (2009b) commented that in other EU countries the initiative “[remained] wishful thinking” (p. 336). In further developing our understanding of how actors at this governmental level impact the shaping of teachers’ professional identity, however, it seems crucial to collect interview data from Scottish MFL teaching professionals that explore their experiences since the 2012 pledge to the 1 + 2 approach (and throughout its ongoing implementation) to ascertain whether the quite substantial, top-down proposals have had a positive effect on teachers by supporting their linguistic human rights through official recognition of the value of their multilingual professional identity, in contrast to the evidently negative effect felt as a result of past governmental policy changes that have further enshrined the comparatively higher worth of English. Such an initiative, which instead claims to value other languages equally alongside English, may have the effect of filtering down from a macro-level to that of the school, influencing non-MFL members of staff and students positively. While there may be evidence of teachers having felt little impact of such initiatives (and indeed the above comment from Phillipson about its limited implementation, at that time of publication at least, might suggest this to be the case), the EU-wide 1 + 2 initiative does nonetheless seem, in principle, to fit a model that Phillipson (2009b) himself has proposed for overcoming the dominance of English. It has the potential to be an “international English [project] that [strikes] a sustainable balance between English and other languages, through processes that lead to multilingual competence” (p. 338). Future data from MFL/FLOE practitioners in Anglophone and non-Anglophone European countries, similarly analysed from a linguistic imperialism perspective, might shed light on whether or not this initiative has gone any way to realising that potential.

Notes

1. Day et al. (2006, p. 611) have also outlined the relevance of these different levels in terms of conceptualising teacher identity, and my own approach takes some inspiration from this.
2. For all of these codes, the first letter is the initial of the country in which the teacher currently works and the second/third is that of the language(s) they teach.
3. I am using the communities-of-practice framework to conceptualise the abstract notion of school, rather than any one specific school, given that the teachers interviewed are employed at different educational institutions across three different countries.
4. Where the interview was conducted in French, I present the data in that original language, followed immediately by its English translation.

5. 1 + 2 refers to pupils having skills in their mother tongue plus two foreign languages.

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**Appendix**

**Transcription Conventions**

- hesitation or self-correction
- (xxx) incomprehensible speech, each x representing a syllable
- [italics] unclear speech, although likely words guessed at by transcriber
- (italics) replacement of information by which participants might have been identified
- [normal] clarification (i.e., elaboration on pronoun usage)
- , short pause
- . longer pause