World Conference on
Teaching, Learning, and Education

16 - 18 October 2026

Milan , Italy

Attitudes, Motivations, And Barriers to Studying Foreign Languages in The Largest Third-Level Institution in Ireland

Dr. Eileen Bowman

University College Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

This study investigates the attitudes, motivations, and barriers shaping third-level students' engagement with foreign language learning at University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland, using a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from almost 500 undergraduate and postgraduate students via a validated survey instrument measuring motivations (Q7), barriers (Q9), perceived value (Q11), institutional visibility (Q13), and future intentions (Q15). Qualitative data were generated through six focus group discussions (FGDs) with participants spanning Arts/Humanities, STEM, Business, Social Sciences, and postgraduate programmes. Findings reveal a compelling motivational paradox: students demonstrate high perceived value of language learning ($M > 4.1/5.0$) and strong future intentions ($M > 4.0/5.0$), yet enrolment remains constrained by structural and institutional barriers. Factor analysis identified two distinct barrier dimensions: academic risk and self-efficacy concerns, and structural/institutional obstacles (e.g., timetable clashes, degree inflexibility). Non-current language students perceived significantly greater structural barriers than their enrolled peers ($p < .001$). Field of study moderated barrier perception, with Health Sciences and STEM students reporting the greatest constraints. Qualitative themes corroborated quantitative patterns, revealing that GPA-neutrality, flexible scheduling, improved institutional visibility, and clear progression pathways were the most consistently requested interventions. These findings challenge deficit-model explanations of low language uptake and argue instead for a systemic re-orientation of institutional provision. Implications for curriculum design, institutional policy, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Barriers; Foreign Language Learning; Higher Education; Ireland; L2 Motivation; Mixed Methods; Motivations; Self-Determination Theory