Willingness to identify: an exploration of the factors that influence secondary school students' willingness to identify as multilingual

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Willingness to identify: an exploration of the factors that influence secondary school students' willingness to identify as multilingual

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ABSTRACT

For decades researchers have debated the criteria for identifying someone as multilingual; however, little is known about how individuals, and particularly school-aged students, subjectively identify *themselves* as multilingual. In this paper, we therefore seek to explore students' willingness to identify as multilingual and the factors that influence this. We include demographic factors (i.e. gender and English as an additional language status), contextual factors (i.e. school, year group and whether they are currently studying a language) and, crucially, also factors reported by the students themselves. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through questionnaires completed by 1,280 Year 8 (age 12-13) and Year 10 (age 14-15) students from seven state-funded secondary schools in England. From the findings we propose a preliminary model of willingness to identify as multilingual, which we suggest is primarily an experiential and evaluative state and an important precursor to fully claiming a multilingual identity. This is underpinned by the crucial role played by home and particularly school contexts in developing students' language knowledge and the mediating role of students' evaluations of their language proficiency. We end by reflecting on the possible links between willingness to identify as multilingual and multilingual identity more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Multilingualism; languages; multilingual identity; willingness to identify; school; students

Introduction

The question of who may or should be considered as multilingual has been referred to as 'one of the most complex questions' (Grosjean 2022: 7) in the field. As such, for almost a century it has been debated by researchers, who have variously attempted to define criteria for identifying an individual as multilingual (or not). Institutions such as schools have, in turn, developed their own criteria for labelling students as multilingual which may have wider implications for their sense of belonging or the level of educational support they receive. However, much less attention has been given as to whether and how individuals identify *themselves* as multilingual which has important implications for their multilingual identity (MLID), that is, individuals' explicit understanding of themselves as users of more than one language (Fisher et al. 2020). In this paper we therefore explore what we refer to as students' willingness to identify (WTI) as multilingual, which we suggest is an important

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precursor to fully claiming a MLID. To do so, we draw on data gathered as part of a larger, longitudinal mixed-methods study which aimed to explore the links between multilingualism, identification as multilingual and learning in school. In this paper, we focus specifically on one section of the questionnaire data collected from 1280 Year 8 (age 12-13) and Year 10 (age 14-15) students across seven state-funded secondary schools in England and we explore the key demographic, contextual and self-reported factors that influence their WTI as multilingual.

Literature review

Definitions of multilingualism by the 'gatekeepers'

Much of the debate around who may be identified (or not) as multilingual has taken place within the research community and, as noted by Ayres-Bennett and Fisher (2022: 2), researchers and others therefore often act as 'gatekeepers determining who, in their view, could or should be described as multilingual' according to a particular set of criteria. Yet, there remains little consensus among scholars around these criteria, in particular, in relation to the number of languages, level of proficiency and language use (Berthele 2021; Cenoz 2013). It should be noted that for the purpose of this paper we use the term 'multilingual(ism)' in relation to our own study, and 'bilingual(ism)' only when referring to other studies where this term was used.

Some early definitions in the field of bilingualism placed great emphasis on balanced proficiency requiring 'native-like control of two languages' (Bloomfield 1933: 56). However, such positions soon became tempered, with Haugen (1953: 7) arguing that bilingualism begins 'at the point where a speaker of one language can produce complete, meaningful utterances in the other language'. Scholars such as Grosjean (2010) and De Bot (2019) have also highlighted the importance of considering language *use* given that individuals 'use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, to accomplish different things so their level of proficiency in a language depends on their need for that language' (Grosjean 2022: 10). Yet, Diebold (1961) suggested that even these broader definitions (which still have some requirement in terms of proficiency) may exclude some of the stages of initial learning and proposed the notion of 'incipient bilingualism' which begins with the recognition of words in another language. Interestingly, such a position starts to intersect with some definitions of monolingualism as, for example, 'an active knowledge of only one language, though perhaps a passive knowledge of others' (Richards and Schmidt 2022). As noted by Ellis (2007: 175), 'even the most monolingual of speakers has access to different registers, and thus has experience of social and linguistic variation'.

While the various positions briefly outlined above only scratch the surface of debates which are still ongoing, they highlight the complexity of attempting to 'objectively' categorise individuals in a binary way as bi/multilingual or not. As such, we align ourselves more closely with Weber and Horner (2012: 3) who consider multilingualism as 'a matter of degree, a continuum, and since we all use different linguistic varieties, registers, styles, genres, and accents, we are all to a greater or lesser extent multilingual'. Indeed, this corresponds with our own broad conceptualisation of multilingualism in the school context which provides space not only for proficient multilinguals, but also learners at the beginning stages of learning an additional language in the classroom (Fisher et al. 2020; Forbes et al. 2021).

The school context is particularly important to explore since, just as researchers have developed a range of criteria through which they ascribe (or not) the label of multilingual to others, so too have schools, which undeniably has more immediate implications for students within these settings. In the context of England, for example, the Department for Education (2024) defines English as an additional language (EAL) learners (used as a proxy for multilingual) very broadly as those who are 'exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English'. However, in a recent study by the authors of 818 16-year-olds in secondary schools in England (part of the wider project on which the current paper is based), we found that the EAL data held by schools only moderately correlated with how learners defined *themselves* in relation to their

languages (Rutgers et al. 2024). In light of the increasing linguistic diversity in schools across many contexts globally, this highlights the need to consider the perspectives and subjective experiences of individual students in relation to whether and how they position themselves as multilingual, rather than relying solely on labels imposed by 'gatekeepers', such as researchers or institutions.

The importance of considering subjective perspectives on identifying as multilingual

We therefore argue in this paper that there is a need for a greater understanding of how individuals and, in particular, adolescent students in a school setting, subjectively identify themselves in relation to being or becoming multilingual, as all the components in their linguistic repertoire play an important role in shaping their identities and beliefs. While there are a number of studies on individuals' beliefs about multilingualism more broadly within the domain of education (e.g. Haukås, Storto, and Tiurikova 2022; Lundberg 2019), to date there is still little research on how individuals identify *themselves* in relation to multilingualism and the factors that influence this.

Two relevant studies in the field of bilingualism include that by Sia and Dewaele (2006) and a later replication study by Zubrzycki (2019). Both sought to explore whether self-identification as bilingual was linked to certain socio-biographical and linguistic factors (e.g. gender, age, first language, proficiency level) and collected data via a questionnaire distributed to 45 and 70 participants respectively. In addition to providing background demographic information, participants were asked to respond with either yes or no to the binary question 'are you bilingual?'. Interestingly only around 44% of participants in both studies answered yes, even though they were all recruited on the basis of being speakers of at least two languages. Both studies found that self-assessed overall proficiency in the L2 had a significant effect on their self-classification as bilingual, perhaps suggesting that 'the monolingual view of bilingualism is still deeply entrenched in the lay perception of this phenomenon' (Zubrzycki 2019: 485). This was also evident in the interview-based study by Benzehaf (2023: 1154) focusing on university students of English in Morocco, where 4 of the 12 participants did not consider themselves as multilingual 'given that they do not fully master the languages they speak'. However, there were varied findings around the role of other factors explored by Sia and Dewaele (2006) and Zubrzycki (2019) such as age, first language and educational background.

While the age range of participants in the above studies was broad, they were predominantly adults and many had either spent time living in the L2 environment and/or had studied the L2 to an advanced level. Two studies which explore similar questions among school-aged learners and focus on multilingualism are those by Haukås (2022) with 116 lower secondary students in Norway and a related study by Bailey et al. (2023) with 422 secondary students in England. Both studies collected data via a questionnaire, part of which asked students to respond yes or no to the question 'are you multilingual?'. In the Norwegian study, 64% of the students answered 'yes', while this was only around 20% for the students in England, yet participants in both studies were all studying at least one other language in school. Similar to the above studies, Haukås (2022: 298) likewise notes that 'most of those who do not think they are multilingual do so because they do not know enough languages or because they are not fluent enough in their languages'. This raises questions about the role that learning a language in school can play in how students develop (or not) their sense of themselves as multilingual.

While these studies were all conducted in different contexts and with different groups of participants, the findings indicate that an individual's willingness to identify (or not) as multilingual is complex and requires further exploration. Indeed, as noted by Zubrzycki (2019: 447), 'little is still known about the factors which make L2 speakers self-categorise as bilinguals and the ways in which bilinguals self-perceive and evaluate their language proficiency'.

Willingness to identify as multilingual

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by exploring what we refer to as students' willingness to identify as multilingual. We take inspiration here from the well-established body of work on

willingness to communicate (WTC); just as WTC can be seen as 'the final psychological step in being prepared to (or intending to) communicate in the L2' (McIntyre 2012: 689) depending on the communicative situation, we propose that WTI as multilingual similarly acts as a precursor for claiming a multilingual identity.

We consider multilingual identity as encompassing individuals' explicit understandings of themselves as users of more than one language (Fisher et al. 2020; Henry 2017). Drawing on data from the wider study on which this paper draws, we further operationalise multilingual identity as an outcome latent variable composed of three main components (the 3Es): learners' subjective *experiences* of languages and language learning (both in and out of school); their *evaluation* of languages and of themselves as language learners and; their *emotions* in relation to languages (Fisher et al. 2024). As such, we see multilingual identity as both individual and social and therefore as subject to change (Block 2007; Norton and Toohey 2011). Multilingual identity is of particular importance to educational contexts as it has been recently shown to have implications for attainment (e.g. Rutgers et al. 2024) and a sense of belonging (e.g. Little and Zhou 2024).

However, we suggest that being *willing* to claim an identity does not necessarily mean that the individual in question will necessarily proceed to fully claim such an identity. It is therefore important to gain a greater understanding of the factors which influence students' WTI as multilingual, with a view to further understanding the possible connection between this WTI and the broader construct of multilingual identity. This paper therefore seeks to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent are adolescent students in secondary schools in England willing to identify as multilingual?
2. What are the key demographic and contextual factors that influence their willingness to identify as multilingual?
3. What factors do the students themselves identify as shaping their willingness to identify as multilingual?

Methodology

Research context and participants

The data presented in this paper were derived from a larger longitudinal mixed-methods study involving over 2,000 students from seven state-funded secondary schools across the East of England and London. The overarching aims of the wider project were (a) to investigate the links between multilingualism, identification as multilingual and learning in school and (b) to devise and evaluate pedagogical approaches to support learners to develop their MLID. This involved collecting a range of quantitative data (such as questionnaires and attainment data from schools) and qualitative data (such as interviews and drawing tasks). For the purpose of this paper and due to limitations of space, we focus here on one section of the questionnaire data collected from 1,280 Year 8 (age 12-13) and Year 10 (age 14-15) students across these schools (see Table 1). The schools were selected to represent a range of geographical location, linguistic diversity and social deprivation. The Year 8 students were in their second year of secondary school and their penultimate year of statutory language learning while the Year 10 students were studying for their General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) exams typically taken at the end of Year 11. While studying a modern language was no longer compulsory for these students, there was variation in the extent to which the individual schools involved required or encouraged their students to take a language at GCSE.

Questionnaire

As noted above, this paper draws on part of the questionnaire data that particularly relates to students' willingness to identify as multilingual. Questionnaires were paper-based and were completed by students in school (e.g. during registration or pastoral time with tutors). In the first part of the

Table 1. Overview of participating schools and number of students.

School	Area	Linguistic diversity	Social deprivation	No. of students	Percentage
A	Semi-rural	High	Low	272	21.3%
B	Rural	Very low	Low	228	17.8%
C	Urban	Average	Average	150	11.7%
D	Urban	Very high	Very high	133	10.4%
E	Urban	Low	Low	137	10.7%
F	Semi-urban	Low	Low	233	18.2%
G	Urban	High	High	127	9.9%
			Total	1280	100%

questionnaire the students were asked to respond to several background questions (see Table 2). Rather than using EAL data provided by the school, we instead asked students to tell us which language(s) they considered as their first language(s). If they did not include English as (one of) their first language(s), they were considered as 'self-ascribed EAL'. Next, the students were asked to complete a multilingual visual analogue scale (mVAS) item where they placed themselves using an 'x' on a continuous 100 mm straight line with 'monolingual' and 'multilingual' at the end points (see Figure 1). The use of visual analogue scales is well-established in the evaluation of experiences and attitudes which are not necessarily categorical or binary (De Boer et al. 2004; Rutgers et al. 2024) and also aligns with the argument made above that multilingualism can be best regarded as a continuum (Weber and Horner 2012). Here, we use the mVAS as a means to assess students' willingness to identify as multilingual (Fisher et al. 2024) and felt that it would provide an opportunity for more nuanced responses and reflections than the binary questions used in other studies

Table 2. Overview of participants by key demographic and contextual factors.

		No. of students	Percentage
Year group	Year 8 (age 12-13)	714	55.8%
	Year 10 (age 14-15)	566	44.2%
Gender	Male	589	46%
	Female	657	51.3%
	Would rather not say	34	2.7%
Currently studying a foreign language	Yes	1198	93.6%
	No	79	6.2%
	No response	3	0.2%
Self-ascribed EAL	Yes	334	26.1%
	No	941	73.5%
	No response	5	0.4%

Now put a cross on the line to show where you would put yourself on this scale:

FOR EXAMPLE, on this scale, if you believed yourself to be very musical, you might put a cross here.

musical ____X_____ ***not*** *musical*

Now try it with this one:

monolingual _____ *multilingual*

Please tell us why you put the cross there:

.....

.....

Figure 1. The multilingual visual analogue scale item from the questionnaire.

(e.g. Haukås 2022; Zubrzycki 2019). Crucially, we also added an open-ended follow-up question which asked students to explain why they put the cross where they did. This enabled us to gather insights into the factors that students took into account when placing themselves on the scale.

It is important to note that the mVAS scale was preceded by a question which asked students to provide a definition for 'monolingual' and 'multilingual'. This was intended as an additional validity check to ensure that responses on the scale were meaningful. As part of the wider study, the questionnaire was originally distributed to a total of 1736 students across the seven schools; however, for the purpose of this paper, 248 were excluded as no response was provided to the mVAS scale and a further 208 were excluded due to students clearly misunderstanding the meaning of the key terms which subsequently invalidated their response to the scale (e.g. defining multilingual as 'people who are from another country'). As a result, this paper focuses on the valid questionnaire responses of the remaining 1280 students.

Data analysis

To respond to the first research question, descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of students' responses to the mVAS scale. To answer the second research question a series of tests were conducted to explore the potential connections between the dependent variable i.e. the mVAS scale, and the key independent variables i.e. gender, self-ascribed EAL status, school, year group and whether they were currently studying a language. Initial tests were run to ascertain whether the data met the assumptions for parametric tests, however, results from a series of Shapiro–Wilk tests revealed a non-normal distribution of data ($p = <.001$ for all tests) and the Levene's test for homogeneity of variance revealed significant results for the majority of the variables (with the exception of year group). Therefore, in light of the non-normal distribution and unequal variances, groups were compared using non-parametric Mann–Whitney *U* tests (two independent groups) and Kruskal–Wallis tests (more than two independent groups). Effect sizes were calculated using *r* for the Mann–Whitney tests with 0.10 considered as small, 0.30 as medium and 0.50 as large effect sizes (Field 2009) and eta-squared (η^2) for the Kruskal–Wallis tests where 0.01 indicates a small effect, 0.06 a medium effect and 0.14 a large effect (Tomczak and Tomczak 2014).

The qualitative responses to the rationale section following the mVAS were analysed using inductive content analysis. This is an approach which involves coding data in 'a systematic way in order to discover patterns' (Friedman 2011: 191) and often entails reporting the frequency with which each code occurs (Liamputtong 2020). Responses typically consisted of 1–2 short sentences which were coded according to the key factors mentioned, for example, the number of languages they know, their perceived language knowledge or their level of confidence (see Table 4 in the Results section for the full list of codes).

Ethical considerations

We gained institutional ethical approval and followed guidance from the British Educational Research Association (2024). Informed consent was gathered from school gatekeepers as well as from the participants themselves and we ensured that age-appropriate explanations of the project were provided to participants.

Results

RQ1: To what extent are adolescent students in secondary schools in England willing to identify as multilingual?

To gather insights into students' willingness to identify as multilingual, students were asked to place themselves on the mVAS scale by putting a cross on a 100 mm line between monolingual (0) and

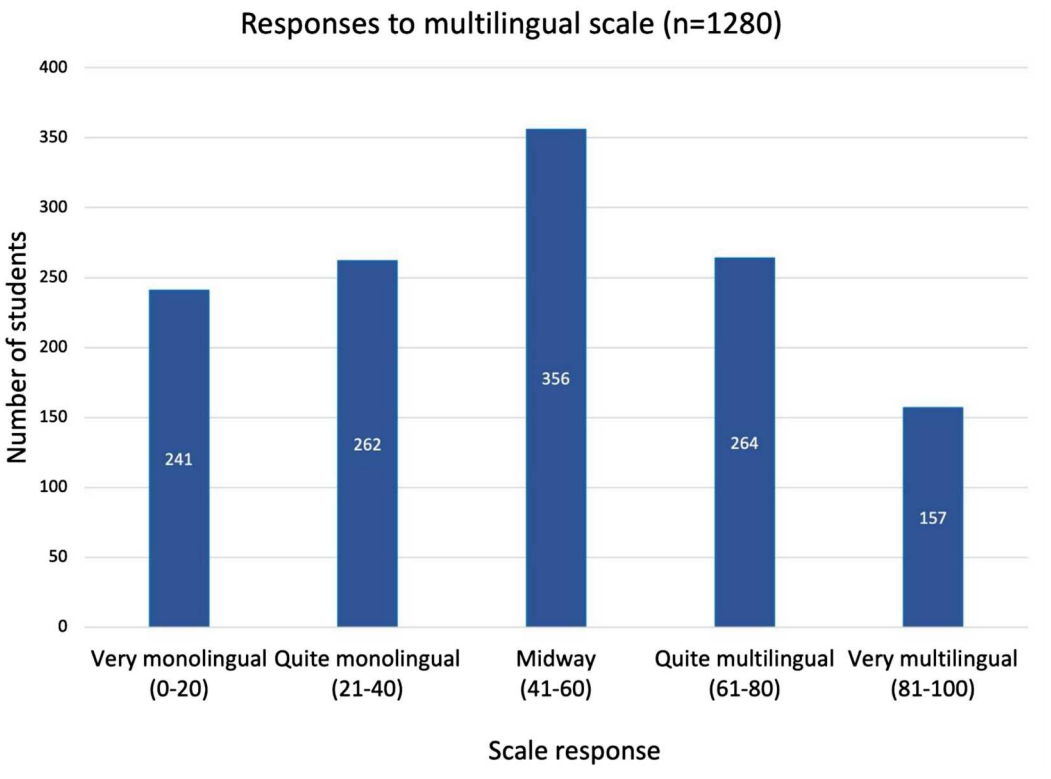

Figure 2. Reponses to the mVAS.

multilingual (100). In order to get a clearer sense of the overall distribution of responses they were grouped into five categories from 'very monolingual' (i.e. 0mm-20 mm) to 'very multilingual' (i.e. 81mm-100 mm), as illustrated in Figure 2. While proportionately more students placed themselves at the 'monolingual' end of the spectrum, it is important to note that the full range of the scale was used. This indicates the huge variation in students' willingness to identify as multilingual and therefore further analysis was required to understand some of the factors which may underpin individuals' responses.

RQ2: What are the key demographic and contextual factors that influence their willingness to identify as multilingual?

In order to further explore the demographic factors which may have influenced students' willingness (or not) to identify as multilingual, we analysed the mVAS responses in relation to students' self-reported gender and EAL status using non-parametric tests. We then explored the potential influence of various contextual factors related to school i.e. the school itself, their year group and whether or not they were studying a language at the point of completing the questionnaire.

Gender

Given the very small proportion of students (2.7%) who responded to the question of gender with 'would rather not say', these students were excluded from this analysis and therefore only the categories of male and female were used. The median mVAS score for male students ($n = 589$) was 50 while the median score for female students ($n = 657$) was slightly lower at 48. However, a Mann–Whitney U test revealed that there was no significant difference between the groups with a very

small effect size, $z = -1.060$, $p = .289$, $r = -.03$. There was no evidence in our data, therefore, that gender particularly influenced students' willingness to identify as multilingual.

Self-ascribed EAL

The median mVAS score for students who defined themselves as EAL ($n = 334$) was 70 while the median score for students who did not define themselves as EAL ($n = 941$) was substantially lower at 36. A Mann–Whitney U test confirmed that there was a significant difference between the groups with a large effect size, $z = -17.682$, $p = <.001$, $r = -.50$. Therefore, students who defined themselves as EAL were significantly more likely to identify as multilingual, which is not surprising, and highlights the role of home language background. However, it is worth noting that while overall there was a substantial difference between the median scores, the mVAS scores for both groups ranged from 0-100, suggesting that while having a home language other than English is indeed a powerful factor for identifying as multilingual, it is not the only factor. At the extreme ends of the scale, for example, 2.3% of EAL students indicated scores of <20 (i.e. very monolingual) and 4% of non-EAL students indicated scores of >81 (i.e. very multilingual).

School

As noted above, the seven schools in this study were selected to represent a heterogeneous range of geographical contexts, linguistic diversity and social deprivation. The schools also had varied approaches to language teaching with some (e.g. School A) establishing language learning as a core part of the curriculum until the age of 16 and offering a wide range of language options, and others (e.g. School F) offering just one language which is compulsory only until the age of 14. As such, it was important to explore how the mVAS scores varied across schools. Firstly, a Kruskal Wallis test was conducted and this revealed a significant difference in scores according to school, with a small effect size, $H(6, N = 1280) = 58.444$, $p = <.001$, $\eta^2 = .046$. However, while there was substantial variation in the median scores, it is interesting to note that students in all of the schools used almost the full range of the scale from 0-100, as indicated in Figure 3.

In order to further explore these results, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using a Bonferroni correction. Significant differences remained between over half of the comparisons as

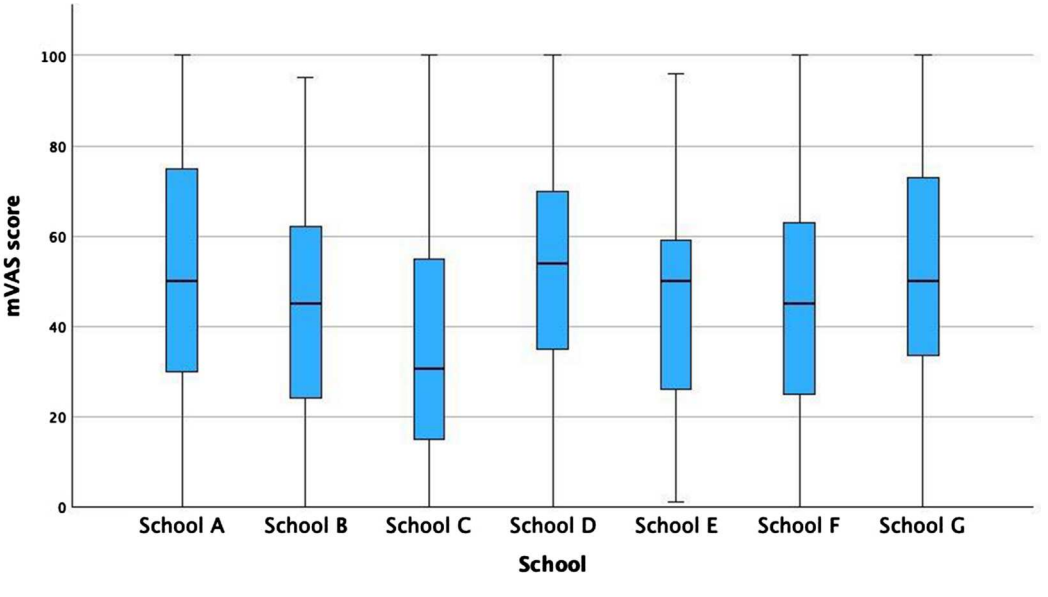

Figure 3. Boxplot showing mVAS scores by school.

Table 3. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons between schools.

Comparison	*z*	Adj. Sig. (*p*)[a]	Effect size (*r*)
School C – School E	1.704	1.000	.05
School C – School F	1.964	1.000	.05
School C – School B	2.156	.652	.06
School C – School A	5.426	.000*	.15
School C – School D	−4.766	.000*	−.13
School C – School G	−5.394	.000*	−.15
School E – School F	−.039	1.000	−.001
School E – School B	−.235	1.000	−.01
School E – School A	3.346	.017*	.09
School E – School D	−3.009	.055	−.08
School E – School G	−3.646	.006*	−.10
School F – School B	−.227	1.000	−.01
School F – School A	3.879	.002*	.11
School F – School D	−3.332	.018*	−.09
School F – School G	−4.033	.001*	−.11
School B – School A	3.621	.006*	.10
School B – School D	−3.125	.037*	−.09
School B – School G	−3.826	.003*	−.11
School A – School D	−.150	1.000	−.004
School A – School G	−.917	1.000	−.03
School D – School G	−.667	1.000	−.02

[a]Significance value adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.
*Significant at the .05 level.

indicated in Table 3, which highlights the distinctions between the schools overall. However, this also revealed some clusters of more similar schools. Most notably, there were no significant differences between School A ($Mdn = 50$), School D ($Mdn = 54$) and School G ($Mdn = 50$), with an adjusted significance of $p = 1.000$ for each comparison. This is perhaps not surprising given that these were the three most linguistically diverse schools as indicated by the percentage of EAL students. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the mVAS responses across the following three schools which were less linguistically diverse: School C ($M = 30.5$), School E ($Mdn = 50$) and School F ($Mdn = 45$), with an adjusted significance of $p = 1.000$ for each comparison.

One might assume, therefore, that the difference between the scores among these clusters of schools may simply be due to the number of EAL students i.e. if a school has a greater number of EAL students then it is likely to have a greater number of students identifying as multilingual (given the importance of EAL status in shaping mVAS scores as noted in the previous section). In order to explore this, the group was further split by self-ascribed EAL status and the Kruskal Wallis test run again. The significant difference according to school remained both for the EAL students ($H(6, n = 334) = 22.575$, $p = <.001$, $\eta^2 = .052$) and the non-EAL students ($H(6, n = 941) = 21.533$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .024$). This suggests that the difference across schools is related to, but not entirely explained by the level of linguistic diversity in the school.

Language study at school

We then analysed the data according to whether or not the students were currently studying a language or not. The median mVAS score for students currently studying a language ($n = 1198$) was 50, while the median score for those not currently studying a language ($n = 79$) was substantially lower at 23. A Mann–Whitney U test confirmed that there was a significant difference between the groups with a small effect size, $z = -6.598$, $p = <.001$, $r = -.18$. Therefore, students currently engaged in studying a language were significantly more likely to identify as multilingual than those not currently studying a language, even though almost all of these students will have studied a language up until just a few months before taking the questionnaire. When looking further at the data for language study at school according to EAL status, we found that while the above pattern held

true for non-EAL students, there was no significant difference for EAL students depending on whether they were currently studying a language ($n = 324$) or not ($n = 9$), $z = -1.281$, $p = .200$, $r = -.07$. This highlights the importance of language learning in the school context in shaping students' willingness to identify as multilingual, particularly for those students not exposed to a language other than English in the home.

Year group

The third contextual factor considered was students' year group. The median mVAS score for Year 8 students ($n = 714$) was 50 while the median score for Year 10 students ($n = 566$) was lower at 40. A Mann–Whitney U test confirmed that there was a significant difference between the groups with a small effect size, $z = -6.008$, $p = <.001$, $r = -.17$. Therefore, Year 8 students were significantly more likely to identify as multilingual than the Year 10 students. This was somewhat surprising as we would have perhaps expected the Year 10 students, who have had more time to develop their proficiency in the language and, in some cases, choice over whether or not to study a language, to be more likely to identify as multilingual. Therefore, we explored this further.

At the point of completing the questionnaire, 98.1% of Year 8 students were currently studying a language (unsurprising as language learning was still a statutory part of the curriculum), but only 83.8% of Year 10 students were, which may have skewed the analysis. We therefore removed the students *not* currently studying a language from the sample, but the significant difference between the mVAS scores of the Year 8 ($n = 706$) and Year 10 ($n = 492$) students currently studying a language remained, $z = -4.809$, $p = <.001$, $r = -.14$.

Given that the seven schools in the study had different policies in terms of the number of languages offered in the curriculum, the number of languages students studied in Year 8 and whether it was compulsory within the school to continue with a language in Year 10 (even though it was no longer a compulsory part of the National Curriculum at that stage), we then explored trends by school and found that the median mVAS score was higher for the Year 8 students across all seven schools. Interestingly, this pattern did *not* hold true for the EAL students, where there was no significant difference between the mVAS scores of Year 8 ($n = 202$) and Year 10 ($n = 132$) EAL students, $z = -.041$, $p = .967$, $r = .002$. This suggests that the difference between year groups may be primarily due to taught languages.

Overall, therefore, analysis for the second research question revealed that while the most powerful factor influencing students' willingness to identify as multilingual seems to be having a home language other than English, the school context itself also plays an important role in terms of not only providing access to language study, but also perhaps in terms of the broader school culture.

RQ3: What factors do the students identify as shaping their willingness to identify as multilingual?

While the above analysis is helpful in exploring how some key demographic and contextual factors may have shaped students' mVAS responses, it was driven by factors identified in advance by the research team and from existing literature. As such, it is crucial to also consider the rationale provided by the students themselves to gain a more holistic understanding of the various factors that influence whether and how students consider themselves as multilingual. Table 4 provides an overview of the results of the content analysis of the mVAS rationale open-ended question, along with an example for each code and the number of times it was mentioned (in order of prevalence). It should be noted that a single student's response may have been given multiple codes and also that the codes were based on the rationale itself, regardless of where the cross was placed on the mVAS.

By far, the most prevalent rationale provided by students to justify their willingness (or not) to identify as multilingual related to the number of languages they know, with those who put their

Table 4. Rationale provided for students' mVAS responses.

Code	Example	No. of students	% of students
Number of languages	'Because I speak 4 languages'	687	53.7%
Perceived language knowledge	'Because I mainly speak English but can speak a little Spanish and French only the basics'	486	38%
Learning	'Because I speak English, French and I learn German at school'	316	24.7%
Fluency	'Because I don't speak any language other than English fluently'	265	20.7%
Ability	'I'm not good at learning French'	208	16.3%
Confidence	'Because I'm not overly confident in Spanish yet'	56	4.4%
Difficulty	'Because I think it's very hard to learn a language'	38	3%
Enjoyment	'Because I enjoy studying other languages'	30	2.3%
Family	'Because I sometimes talk Punjabi at home'	24	1.9%
Holidays	'Because I know a bit of language because I use French and Spanish when I go on holiday'	9	0.7%
Living abroad	'Because I have lived in many countries and I find it easier to learn when people are speaking it'	5	0.4%
Culture	'Because I'm surrounded by many cultures and languages. I speak 2 languages fluently'	3	0.2%
No response	N/A	59	4.6%

cross towards the multilingual end of the scale often mentioning knowing several languages and those at the monolingual end of the scale stating that they 'don't know many languages' or 'only speak English'. In line with the 3Es model of multilingual identity outlined above, this aligns with the importance of experiences with languages in influencing students' willingness to identify as multilingual. Interestingly the context for these experiences mentioned most frequently by students was the school (i.e. learning) which highlights the importance of the instructed language learning environment in shaping students' willingness to identify as multilingual. By contrast, experiences of using languages with family was mentioned by fewer than 2% of the students, despite 26.1% of them identifying as EAL. This is surprising given the strong link between EAL status and willingness to identify as multilingual presented in relation to the previous research question. One possible explanation may be that students were completing the questionnaires in school and were therefore more likely to be thinking about learning in that particular setting. References to experiences with languages in other contexts (e.g. on holiday or living abroad, which is in turn associated with culture) were limited.

The rationale data also indicated that students' willingness to identify as multilingual was strongly influenced by their evaluations of themselves as language learners. This was most evident in their comments relating to their perceived language knowledge which was the second most prevent factor in Table 4. This intersects closely with the more specific codes relating to fluency, ability, confidence and difficulty. Interestingly, there were some similarities in the evaluation rationale provided by learners who placed themselves at both ends of the mVAS. For example, comments such as 'I can speak *a bit of* some other languages' were used as a justification for being monolingual but also as a justification for being multilingual (e.g. 'because I can speak *a little* Spanish'). This highlights both the complexity of willingness to identify as a construct and the importance of eliciting the views of students themselves.

Preliminary model of WTI as multilingual

As shown in the data presented above in response to the three research questions, WTI as multilingual is strongly influenced by students' experiences of languages in the home and at school which constitute the primary contexts in which they develop their language knowledge. The establishment of some level of knowledge then enables students to self-evaluate their proficiency in their languages which may, in turn, lead to a WTI as multilingual. Based on these findings we therefore present a preliminary model of WTI as multilingual (Figure 4), which we discuss further in the following section.

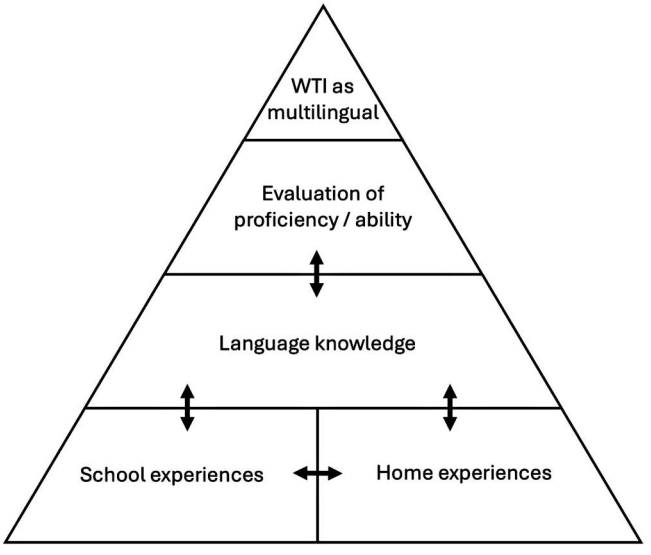

Figure 4. Pyramid model of willingness to identify as multilingual.

Discussion

The overarching aim of this paper was to explore the willingness to identify as multilingual among secondary school students in England and, in particular, to understand some of the key factors that influence this. In this section and as introduced in Figure 4, we discuss the findings that highlight (a) the foundational role of the home and school contexts in providing students with experiences of languages and (b) the importance of students' own evaluations of their language knowledge in influencing their WTI as multilingual. We then reflect further on the possible connections between students' WTI as multilingual and the broader construct of multilingual identity.

The foundational role of language experiences in the home and school contexts in shaping students' WTI as multilingual

What came out most strongly in our data was the crucial and foundational role played by the home and school contexts which form the bottom layer of Figure 4. These provide students with exposure to languages and constitute the means through which they develop their linguistic knowledge across the various languages in their repertoire; such knowledge was identified by students as a key factor in their WTI as multilingual. Just as WTC tends to be higher 'when learners have greater opportunities for contact with speakers of the L2' (McIntyre 2012: 690), WTI as multilingual is enhanced through opportunities to experience languages and language learning across different contexts.

Unsurprisingly, we found that the EAL students, who had exposure to a language other than English at home, were significantly more likely to identify as multilingual than non-EAL students, though interestingly these students made little reference to the home or family themselves in providing their rationale. For non-EAL students it was their exposure to other languages in school (i.e. through studying a language) which was identified as a significant factor and this was in turn supported by students' rationales provided in the open-ended section where almost a quarter referred to instructed language learning. This aligns with findings from Sia and Dewaele (2006) where participants who were currently studying the L2 were more likely to identify as bilingual than those who were not. Indeed, for all students in our study the school itself played an important role which was shown to be related to, but not entirely explained by, the level of linguistic diversity in the school

community. The difference in mVAS responses across schools suggests that the role of the school goes beyond simply providing access to language study and may also extend to creating a wider ethos and culture which promotes and values languages. In doing so, the boundary between the home and school contexts may become more porous, with home languages being recognised in school and languages learned in school perhaps being spoken (about) at home.

The mediating role of students' self-evaluations of their language knowledge in shaping WTI as multilingual

While the contexts of home and school were both crucial in providing students with exposure to languages through which to develop their linguistic knowledge, students then self-evaluated their own knowledge and ability in each of their languages, as indicated in the rationale data. Evaluation of language knowledge therefore emerged as a key mediating factor in their WTI as multilingual. In line with other studies mentioned above (e.g. Haukås 2022; Zubrzycki 2019), our findings similarly foreground the importance of individuals' perceptions of their proficiency; just as 'an individual's perception of his or her own competence might influence WTC more than that person's actual level of competence' (McIntyre 2012: 689), so too were self-evaluations of proficiency more important for WTI as multilingual than any external validation or benchmarks of proficiency. This further highlights the importance of considering subjective perspectives on identifying as multilingual rather than 'imposing' external criteria on learners. This was additionally illustrated by the complexity and individual nature of learners' self-evaluations with, for example, some self-defined EAL students positioning themselves as monolingual with others willing to identify as multilingual on the basis of knowing 'just a bit' of another language.

Also of interest in our data was the finding that Year 8 students were significantly more willing to identify as multilingual than the Year 10 students across all schools. This is perhaps an indication that while students will likely have been developing their (more 'objective') proficiency in the language in those two intervening years, the decrease in WTI as multilingual may be down to lower self-evaluations of their proficiency or lower levels of confidence in their ability. This may be related to age, with the Year 10 students at a slightly later stage of adolescence, though it may also be influenced by the fact that they were preparing for their first high-stakes examinations and the accompanying increase in difficulty and pressures which may negatively impact their confidence. This further highlights the way in which various aspects of the school context and wider educational system may influence students' self-evaluations that, in turn, may affect their WTI as multilingual.

From willingness to identify as multilingual to claiming a multilingual identity

Based on the findings discussed above, we therefore argue that just as WTC is defined as 'a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons' (McIntyre et al. 1998: 547), WTI as multilingual (as captured by the mVAS) can be defined as a an experiential and evaluative state which represents an individual's readiness to claim a MLID at a particular time and in a particular context. However, as noted previously, we suggest that being *willing* to identify does not necessarily mean that the individual in question will proceed to fully claim a multilingual identity; therefore, also of interest in this paper is the possible connection between these two constructs.

As outlined above, to further understand MLID we draw on the 3Es model which considers multilingual identity as composed of learners' *experiences* of languages and language learning; their *evaluation* of languages and of themselves as language learners and; their *emotions* in relation to languages (Fisher et al. 2024). In the data, the vast majority of students' explanations for their mVAS responses related to their experiences and evaluations of languages (i.e. the first 2Es); the only emotion mentioned was enjoyment, but by fewer than 3% of the students. We would expect this given that most students' explanations comprised only one or two short sentences; however,

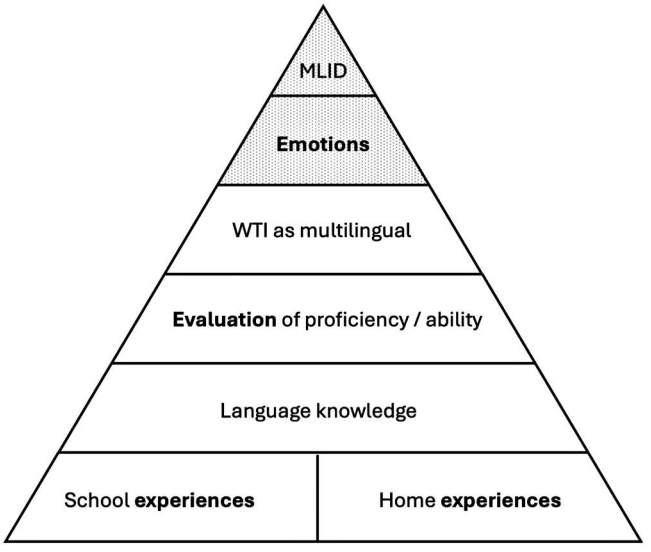

Figure 5. Hypothesised model of the connection between willingness to identify as multilingual and multilingual identity.

in light of the inevitable intersection between emotions and the evaluation constructs mentioned by students such as confidence (which may link with happiness), ability (with may be associated with pride) or difficulty (with may spark emotions of frustration) and in the wider literature (e.g. Pavlenko 2006; Zembylas 2003), we would suggest that emotions are indeed likely to have played an implicit role in students' WTI as multilingual.

Yet, the fact that they were not explicitly mentioned by students remains of interest and may represent a key point of difference between our model of WTI as multilingual as a predominantly experiential and evaluative construct, and MLID where the role of emotions is much more pronounced (Fisher et al., 2024). We therefore hypothesise that the step from being willing to identify as multilingual to fully claiming a MLID that potentially transcends time and context, may entail a further deepening (and perhaps explicit awareness) of students' emotional connection with their linguistic repertoire (see Figure 5). Therefore, while the school context in and of itself plays a foundational role in students' WTI as multilingual (as shown in the data presented here), we argue that students can be further supported to claim a MLID through identity-based classroom interventions that target not only the evaluative dimensions of the model but, crucially, also the emotional dimensions (Forbes et al. 2021; 2024).

Conclusion

Through analysis of questionnaire data from 1280 secondary school students in England, in this paper we have proposed a preliminary model for the construct of willingness to identify as multilingual, which we define as an experiential and evaluative state which represents an individual's readiness to fully claim a MLID. Our model highlights the crucial role played by home and particularly school contexts in providing students with language experiences which are key for developing their language knowledge and also the mediating role of students' evaluations of their language proficiency. However, we fully acknowledge that WTI as multilingual is a newly proposed construct and is likely to be influenced by a broader range of factors than those identified here. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the extent to which this applies in different settings and with different groups of participants and, crucially, to more fully establish the nuanced relationship between WTI as multilingual and multilingual identity. Nonetheless, we hope that the model

presented in this paper represents a helpful starting point. In addition to the theoretical contribution outlined above, this paper also has pedagogical implications; rather than researchers or schools acting as 'gatekeepers' in terms of defining who is and who is not multilingual, we argue that it is important to empower students themselves to identify as multilingual (if they wish to do so). As such, schools should seek to create a wider ethos and culture which promotes and values languages, whether these are learned at home or in school. This can be done through identity-based classroom interventions (see Forbes et al. 2021; 2024) and can have implications for students' attainment across the curriculum (Rutgers et al. 2024).

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