

Introducing the Study

Seeks to examine:

- Impact and experience of foreign languages on participants of Erasmus+ in all education sectors: Adult Education, Higher Education, School Education, Vocational Education and Training, and Youth
- Awareness and attitudes towards foreign languages/foreign language learning in Ireland (as corollary objective)

Employs a mixed methodology, combining:

- Anonymous *online survey* (609 responses from former, current and future Erasmus+ participants, 2014-2020)
- 19 in-depth *interviews* of former participants and administrators/project leaders

THE IMPACT AND EXPERIENCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE CONTEXT OF ERASMUS+ IN ALL EDUCATION SECTORS IN IRELAND

Britta C. Jung





Key contribution


- Mixed-method design, i.e. the combination of quantitative and qualitative data
- Inclusion of data on Erasmus+ participants from all Irish education sectors, i.e. Adult Education (AE), Higher Education (HE), School Education (SE), Vocational Education and Training (VET), and Youth.
- Existing studies on language learning in the context of Erasmus and Erasmus+ have almost exclusively focused on HE, while studies on other sectors are still relatively few.
- Empirically, the present study creates a panoramic view of the role of foreign languages in Erasmus+ mobilities, while simultaneously allowing us to gain a deeper insight into personal lived experiences.

Participant	Gender and Age	Language Competences		
AC	Male, 23	Polish, English, German; some Irish and Spanish	Germany, 1 week	
SR	Female, 22	English; some Irish and French; a few words of German, Spanish, and Lithuanian	Wales, 1 academic year	
GD	Male, 47	English, Italian; some Irish, French and Portuguese	Armenia, 1 week	
PS	Male, 23	Polish, English, Spanish; some German	Spain, ¼ academic year	
GM	Male, 41	English, Irish, German, Afrikaans; some Spanish	France, Austria, Netherlands, Czech Republic, Germany, 3-4 days each + Admin	
TM	Female, 55	English, Irish, German; some French and Spanish; a few words of Italian	Admin	
AE	PC	Male, 26	English, Irish; some French and German	Spain, Germany, France, 4 days each
FET/AE	PK	Female, 59	English, French	Belgium, Portugal, 3-4 days each + Admin
FET/AE	TR	Female, 46	English; some Irish and French; a few words of Spanish	Admin
School	EMM	Female, 12	English, Irish	Croatia, Portugal, 1 week each
	HE	Female, 57	English, Irish, French, German, Russian, Hebrew	Germany, 3 weeks + Admin
	ELM	Female, 51	English, Irish, German; some Spanish and Italian	Admin
VET	JB	Male, 19	English, Irish, some Spanish	Romania, 4 weeks
	SO	Male, 42	Nigerian tribal language (not identified), English; some Irish and French	Finland, 3 weeks
	MD	Female, 60	English, Irish; some French and Spanish; a few words of Swedish	ADMIN
Youth	YT	Male, 21	Russian, English, Irish, French; some Portuguese and Turkish	Georgia, 2 weeks
	SF	Non-binary, 18	English; some Japanese and Ancient Greek	Romania, 1 week
	SC	Female, 32	Italian, English	Ireland, 1 year
	RR	Female, 26	English; some Irish; a few words of French	Admin+ 8 weeks




Introducing the Interviewees

- Erasmus+ participants under KA1 Mobility and – to a lesser extent – KA2 Strategic Partnerships as well as project leaders and administrators
 - ✓ Counter perspective: One interviewee is a non-Irish European Voluntary Service volunteer, who spent a year at a youth project in Galway
- Broad institutional and geographical spread
- Varying degrees of experience with Erasmus+
- Vastly different experiences in language learning and a wide range of language competences



Generally speaking, the study highlights that...

- Use of a language does not refer just to a general ability to speak it, but involves a combination of **ability**, **opportunity**, and **positive attitude**
- Need to pay more attention to the affectual dimension of language learning
 - ✓ Foster a more holistic approach to languages that links foreign languages to Ireland's native languages and makes use of shared, underlying proficiencies
 - ✓ Provide the learners with more agency in the selection and learning process
 - ✓ Foster a feeling of belonging to the linguistic community
 - ✓ Foster communicative empathy
 - ✓ Instil more confidence in the learners' own language competencies and in that of their teachers
 - ✓ Manage the learners' expectations



A journey that never ends – a journey that some people might not be on themselves, but which nevertheless impacts the journey of others, either by providing them with emotional, financial, institutional resources, or by draining them.

“Like stopping the offering of a language module in this context is just terrible, or other things have happened where people offer a language but only on five programmes, and it’s three hours on a Friday afternoon, so you can do languages while everybody else goes down to the pub. That’s like offering your violin lessons to a child but it’s on a Sunday morning when they want to sleep in. And painting languages in a bad light; or saying it’s hard, like German is so hard and Spanish is so easy. You hear all this stuff and you know it’s wrong, but people are so willing to believe it.”
(TM, Higher Education)



Key Findings

General findings relating to the language practice and language learning in Ireland among study participants

- **Great linguistic curiosity** that ranges from minority languages to those with greater “linguistic capital”, such as German, Spanish and French
 - ✓ Concerns regarding the **achievability** of learning the language (e.g. time constraints, nature of learning process)
 - ✓ Despite linguistic curiosity and positive learning experiences, there is a **lack of interest in formal and higher-level qualifications**
 - ✓ Only a few foreign language encounters take place in the workplace, or in relation to work
 - ✓ Accordingly, the majority of study participants see the benefit of learning a foreign language in the personal sphere rather than the professional sphere, with almost one in every three survey respondents perceiving foreign language skills as not particularly beneficial for their professional development



Key Findings

General findings relating to the language practice and language learning in Ireland among study participants

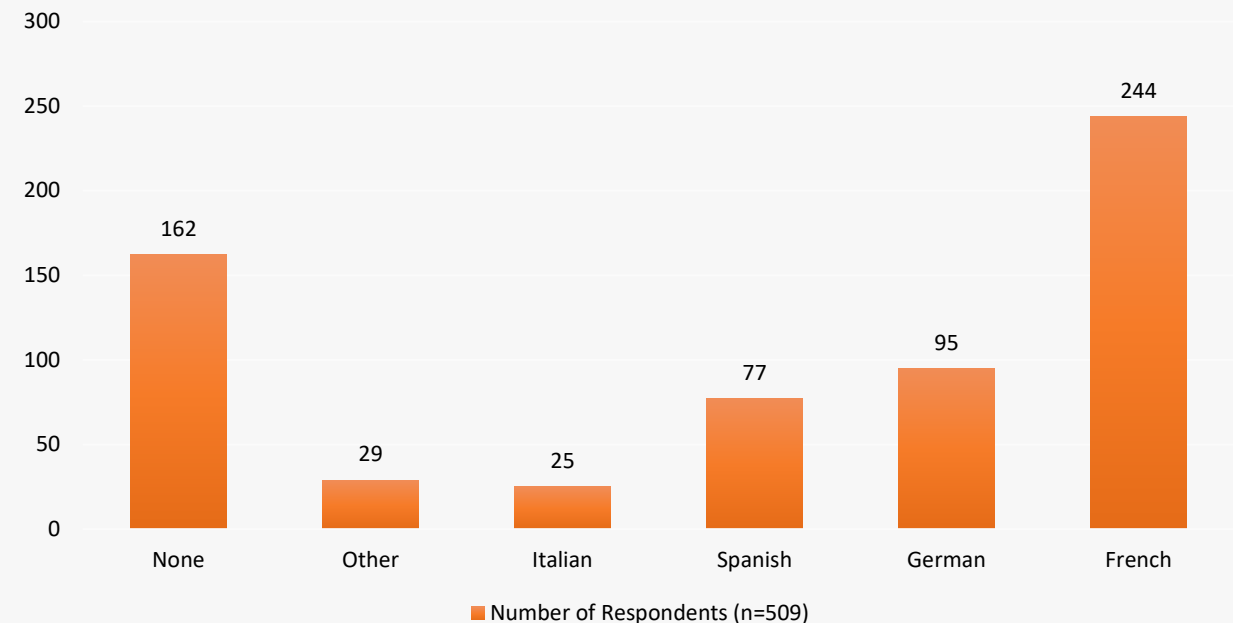
Overwhelming majority of participants enjoy learning a foreign language both in school and outside school

- ✓ Main reason provided for not using existing languages competences is a **perceived lack of proficiency**
- ✓ Attitude towards language learning in general, as well as specific languages, is related to the **personal connection** a learner has with a language
- ✓ Learning success is highly dependent on encouragement and **positive role models**, as well as the quality and enthusiasm of the teacher and the language teaching provided
- ✓ Learners' **confidence** in the language competence and intercultural knowledge of the teacher play an important role
 - Danger of creating/perpetuating the myth that only those who start early can achieve proficiency
 - Danger of creating/perpetuating the myth that only native speakers make 'good language teachers'

Key Findings

General findings relating to the language practice and language learning in Ireland among study participants

- The language provision in Irish schools and post-secondary education not only **lacks diversity but often also agency**, in that many students/learners do not get to choose from a selection of languages
- Compared to their European counterparts, the language selection in Ireland's third-level institutions remains somewhat limited, continuing the focus of secondary language education on French, German, Italian and – more recently – Spanish; and lacking, at times, *ab initio* options for these languages
 - ✓ Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Cork (UCC)





Interview Excerpts

Lack of agency
Personal connection
Positive role models

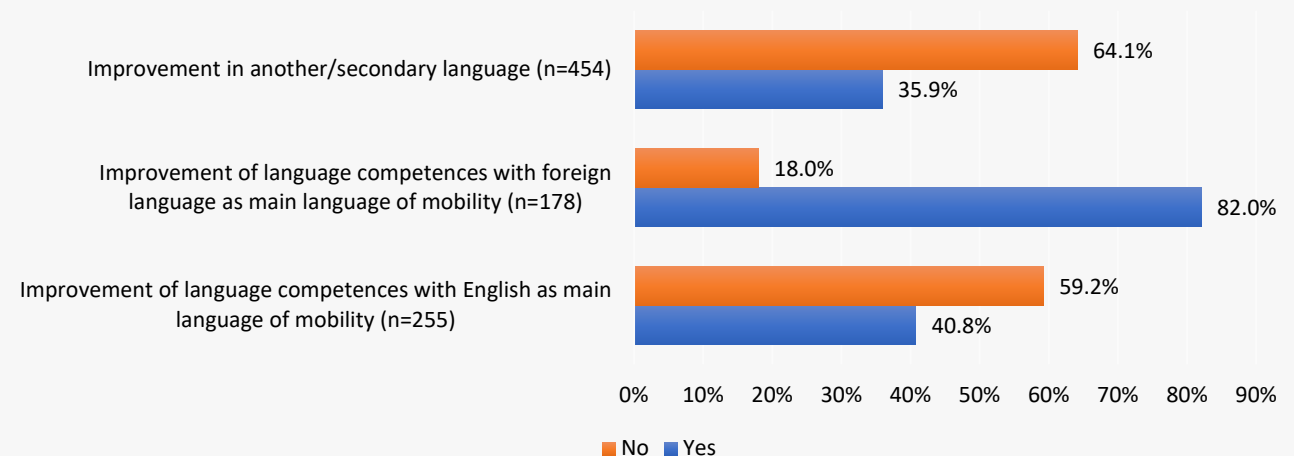
- It was chosen for me, the year I entered school: that entire year was German, and the previous year was German, then the next two years were French. It was just the way they organised it in school. [...] I had no choice in which language to pick. Everybody did German that year. It wasn't offered. (GM, Higher Education)
- Spanish, I didn't really enjoy it. I just did it because I had to do it. Irish, I kind of liked. I like speaking Irish and stuff like that. [...] [The difference is that] I care about one. The language of the island. The other one I did because other people told me I had to do it. (JB, VET)
- I did Spanish in secondary school for five years and I really enjoyed it. It was one of my favourite subjects and I also visited Spain before a few times. I liked the culture and I wanted to see more and learn more. (PS, Higher Education)
- A lot of students complained about our teachers, not just to each other but also to the school because some teachers didn't come into school for long periods of time because of personal reasons. So, students started lacking in their French. So, it's really important to have the teacher emphasise the learning of the language because some of them would encourage learning the language, like reading in French outside of school hours. Others would encourage just to learn exactly what was on the piece of paper, so that's why I don't remember anyone saying, "My next class is French, I can't wait! (YT, Youth)

Key Findings

Findings relating specifically to the practice of languages and language learning in the context of Erasmus+

Participating in Erasmus+

- ✓ Creates awareness of existing language barriers and confidence in how to handle them
- ✓ Creates a unique multi- and plurilingual space in which participants get to explore their whole linguistic repertoire, as well as new languages
 - Participants improve their language competence in more than one language, with one in three survey respondents indicating that they improved their skills in a second and/or third language
 - Participants also note a positive effect on their competence in English
- ✓ Provides a space to engage more actively with Irish, i.e. in a cultural and a linguistic way.





Interview Excerpts

Multi- and plurilingualism
Improving one's mother tongue
Communicative empathy &
'Euro-English'

- “We made it our aim to live with international students when we got our accommodation. We knew we were in an English-speaking country, but because it was Erasmus, we wanted that. I lived with a girl from Denmark and a guy from Spain. Then someone from Wales as well. [...] It was really interesting because my Spanish friend was learning English, so I would help her with her English on projects. Then with the French friends, I had studied French in secondary school, so I got to use a little bit of that. The Spanish were trying to get us to learn Spanish, and I am going to see my friend in Spain, and I wish I had a little bit more Spanish, because I am going to see her. She sends me messages with some Spanish.” (SR, Higher Education)
- “They have so much more writing and presentations to do all the time with these [Erasmus projects]. They're presenting for non-English speakers, so often they think, “Can I make it simpler?” They're simplifying their language as well, by taking a look at it and how they're saying [it]. We often [ask] them, “If you were reading something in a foreign language, would you want a long bit or just a short bit?” So, they take a big text and they learn to summarise it a bit to make it easier to the people, they're presenting it to understand it.” (ELM, School Education)
- “It's very hard to communicate with people speaking another language, and I recognise that even if we learn English, for example, it's not like the native English. When you learn English abroad, if you are [speaking] European English you speak [different] [...] because the accent is different. Some words you learn are not the real words.” (SC, Youth/EVS)

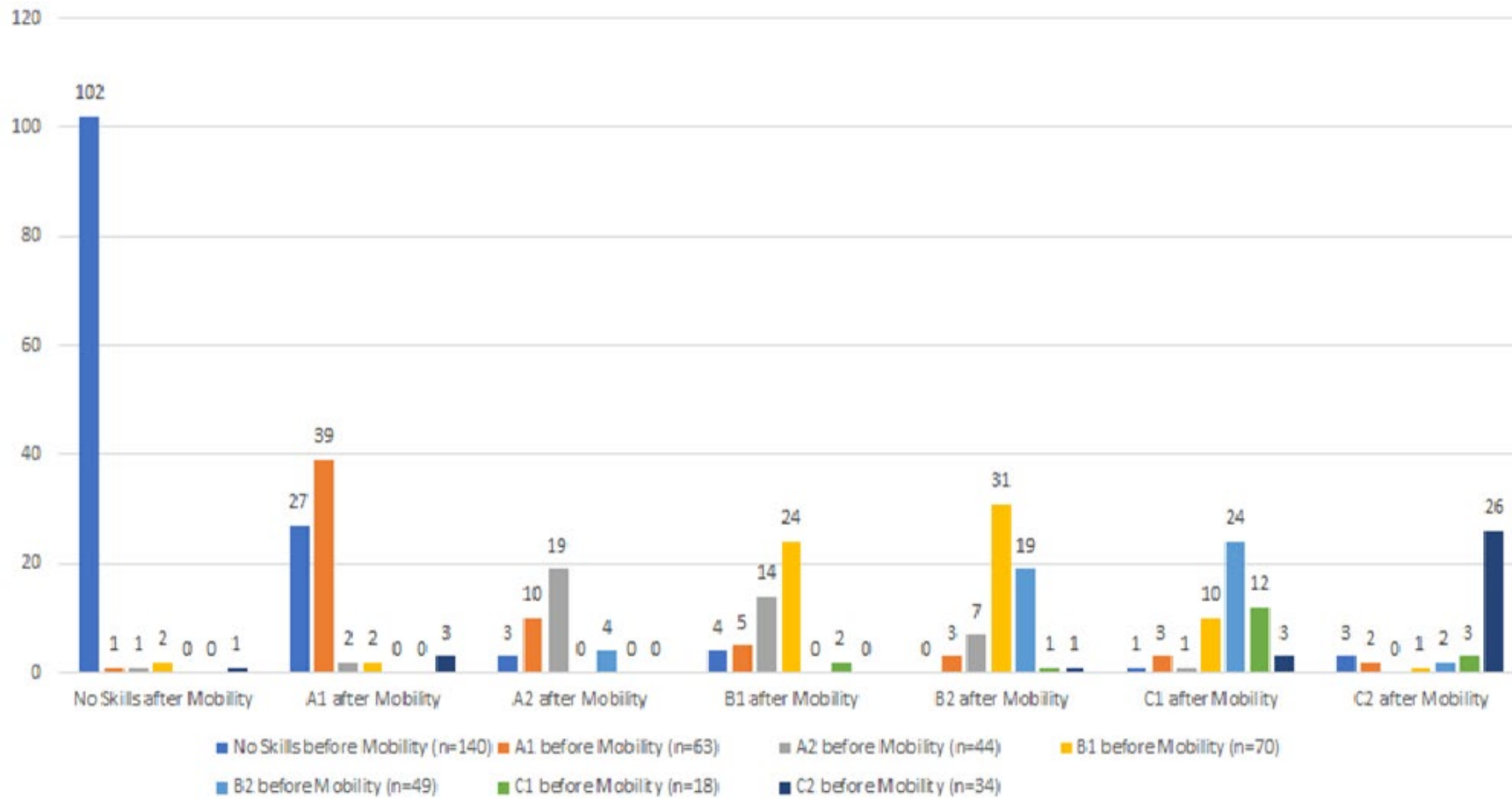


Interview Excerpts

Irish

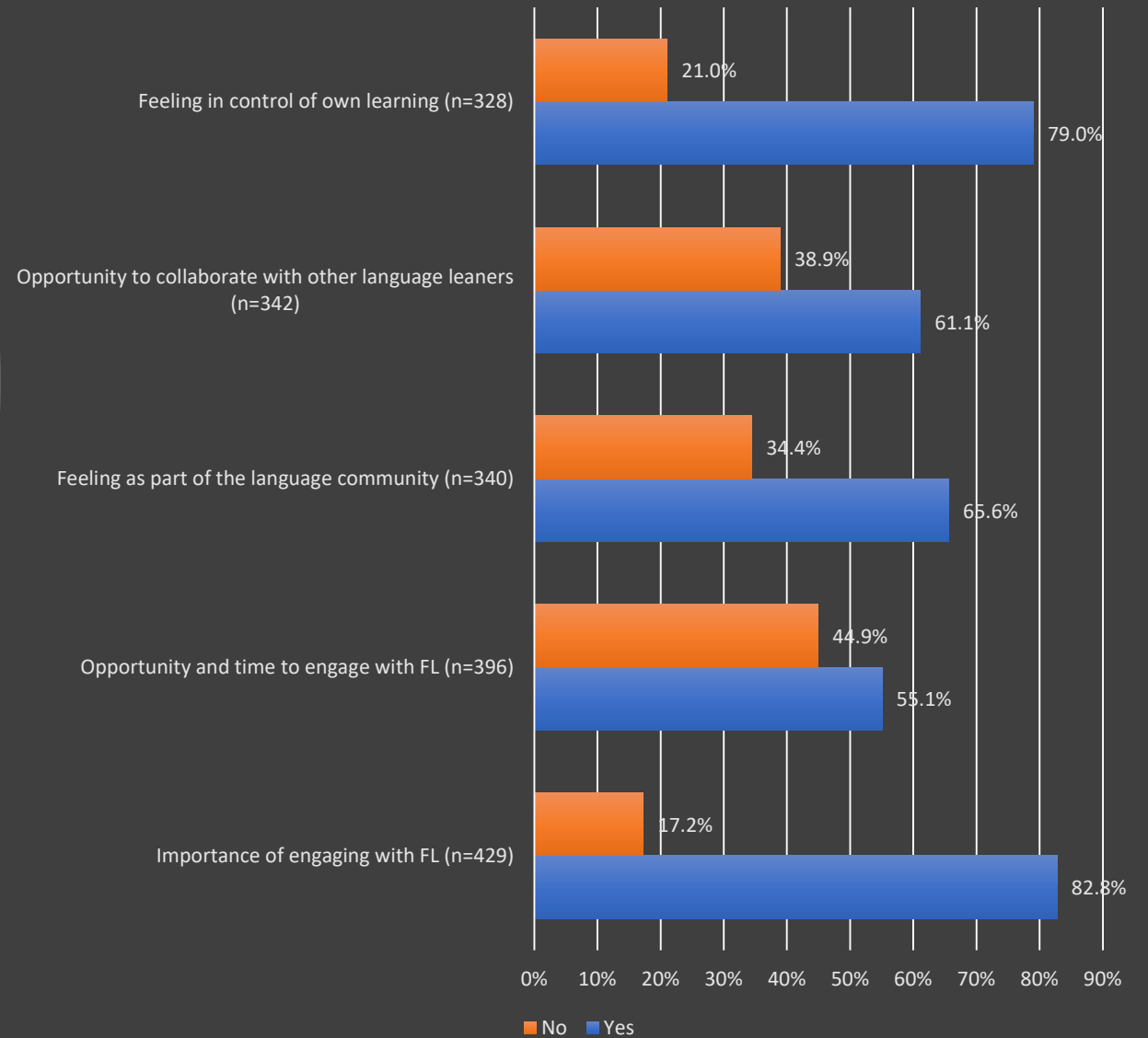
“So, then the subject of Irish came up. The Romanian group were asking why they don’t speak Irish, that’s your second language. But we were saying that’s not the case for most people. [...] They were horrified. They were saying it’s your national language. That was a big thing as part of the second leg [of the mobility], as part of the cultural comparison and how we value our own language and traditions. I would say the Irish group got quite emotional, but at the same time, kind of let down because they couldn’t say, “Yeah, we do know this language,” or even the national anthem. It’s in Irish. The Romanians sang their national anthem, and we played it off YouTube, because we didn’t know. [...] They felt quite embarrassed in terms of culture, so they said next time they’re learning the national anthem. So, that’s something that is really small and funny, but it had a huge effect on them. It’s a comparison of how you value culture and traditions, and the language of your country. We really couldn’t give them an answer. We didn’t know the answer.” (RR, Youth)

Self-assessment on the Common European Framework of Reference



Participating in Erasmus+

- ✓ Allows for and facilitates an engagement with other languages in more informal, unregulated settings, shifting the focus from an exam-based learning culture to a communicative one
 - Learners feel as part of the language community and exert great control over the way they engage with the language
 - Reduction of language anxiety and increase of the learners' (linguistic) confidence, including a willingness to make mistakes.





Key Findings

Findings relating specifically to the practice of languages and language learning in the context of Erasmus+

- ✓ The HE sector reports that it occasionally struggles to persuade Irish students to participate in Erasmus+ due to:
 - negative perceptions of the “usefulness” of going to a European partner country instead of an English-speaking country
 - language requirements of a mobility to these countries
 - lack of confidence in their language competence, in cases where students already have some language skills
 - financial impact.

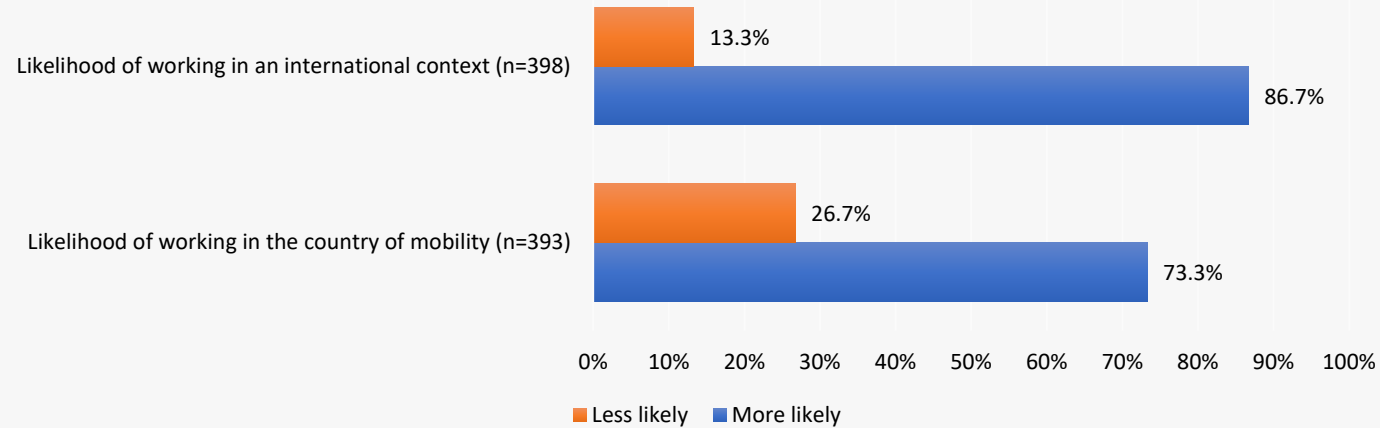
- ✓ In the HE sector, existing language competences and the familiarity with certain languages and cultures are largely reflected in the outward mobilities of undergraduate students, favouring Spain, France, Germany, and Italy. Eastern and Central-Eastern European countries receive proportionally more Erasmus+ participants from AE, school education, VET, and youth than from HE.

- ✓ A lack of foreign language competences, particularly in the FET sector, and the overreliance on English, not only affect personal interactions and potentially result in missed opportunities on a personal and institutional level, but can also have broader consequences for the Irish knowledge society by preventing Irish learners from participating in specialised programmes that are unavailable in Ireland.

Key Findings

Broader implications of Erasmus+

- ✓ Participants are asked to overcome what is referred to as the Irish “island mentality” and engage more consciously with the world around them
- ✓ Mobilities increase the likelihood of working in an international context or seeking opportunities abroad or in an international context



- ✓ Mobilities have a lasting impact not only on those going on a mobility themselves, but also those staying behind
- ✓ Mobilities can have a fundamental impact with regard to the social and cultural integration of minority groups, including the Traveller community

