

Final Report: Post-16 Languages Recovery Project

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Context

The Languages Recovery Project was developed and led by the MFL Student Mentoring Project. The MFL Student Mentoring Project was designed as a response to the decline in the number of students choosing to study a language past the compulsory stage of KS3 in Wales.ⁱ The project has been funded by the Welsh Government's *Global Futures Strategy* since 2015 and is now a core component of the renewed *Global Futures Strategy 2020-22*.ⁱⁱ It focuses on changing attitudes and perceptions of languages by training undergraduate students in four Welsh Universities (Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Swansea) to mentor Year 8 and 9 learners in local secondary schools to appreciate the value and benefits of language learning.ⁱⁱⁱ

The project aligns itself with the holistic approach championed by Curriculum for Wales, in development following Professor Graham Donaldson's 2015 review of the school curriculum and assessment in Wales.^{iv} Concentrating on multilingual methodologies and cross-curricular learning, mentors aim to show learners that languages do not sit in silos but intersect and actively interact with other subject areas. Working closely to support the aims of the Curriculum for Wales, the MFL Student Mentoring Project encourages the development of the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales and the *What Matters*^v statements that subtend one of the six Areas of Learning and Experience: Languages, Literacy and Communication.

Adopting a very similar methodology and near-peer approach to learning, the Languages Recovery Project sought to focus on the *lived* experiences of languages for learners in an older age range (16-18 years of age). Importantly, the project sought to bridge a gap, offering real-time engagement with language learning at a time when learners were experiencing sporadic, largely asynchronous learning, whilst also developing innovative new practices for language and cultural learning. The project was conceived to support the Welsh Government's Continuity of Learning Project^{vi} which aimed to ensure that no pupil was disadvantaged as a result of school closures.

Project Delivery

Each week was structured around a theme that was determined in partnership between the project team and the session leader. Themes that were selected included Brazilian Politics, Language Policy in Wales, Contemporary Women in Europe and City Spaces in Spain. Themes were designed to disorientate learner expectations of languages and demonstrate the political, cultural, psychological, social and linguistic dimensions of languages study.

Each theme was initially developed via a lecture delivered either by a mentor or an academic. Lectures were generally pre-recorded to ensure maximum accessibility to pupils and released at the beginning of the week. Lectures lasted between 20-50 minutes and were structured as university lectures. Whilst watching the lecture learners were asked to complete an independent learning task that would form the foundation of the follow-up 'live' seminar.

These tasks were devised by session leaders and asked learners to identify, analyse and evaluate information provided in the lecture. This ensured that participants were clear about expectations and that the synchronous sessions could be maximized for affirming and extending learning. Session leaders were encouraged to provide reflective pauses in their lectures to actively encourage learners to conduct independent research and learning.

Each lecture was followed later in the week with a synchronous seminar which lasted up to one-hour. Seminars were focused on developing the content of the lecture and giving learners the opportunity to ask questions and interact with the session leader as well as each other. Learners benefited from working synchronously with mentors and academics to build a greater sense of connection and collaboration beyond 'lockdown'. It has been argued that academic success is linked to a sense of belonging and purpose, the possibility to engage with quality materials and the opportunity to build meaningful connections with peers and teachers. As such, personal development and academic growth go hand in hand.^{vii} A student-centered approach was therefore vital for building rapport to achieve positive experiences between learners and educators.

Alongside the theme-based lectures and seminars, learners were able to sign up to language taster sessions, which often linked to the theme of the week. For example, Japanese, Catalan or Nepalese. Each taster class lasted for 45-minute classes and was led by a mentor or academic. These sessions were about introducing learners to a new language and culture. Learners were asked to complete a series of activities to encourage use of the language but also to get a flavour of a new culture.

Finally, the project offered A-Level languages conversation classes. These were delivered purely by mentors. These classes focused on a variety of contemporary issues and aimed to encourage learners to speak spontaneously and develop confidence and competence in the language being studied. They were delivered nearly entirely in the target language. The first part of the session allowed learners to ask questions and find out about each other, whilst the second part focused on the theme and focused discussion around it. A recurring theme that learners wanted to tackle was the impact of Covid-19 on young people in different places around the world.

Summary

To evaluate the impact of the project, the project team used data collated from participating learners as well as feedback received from mentors and teachers. In total, 441 pupils engaged with the project over the 12-week period. Eighty sessions were delivered with 11 asynchronous and 69 synchronous. We received 202 instances of feedback from pupils via structured surveys given at the end of sessions, 12 survey responses from mentors after completion of the project and feedback from 2 teachers.

Sessions delivered

Session type	Number of sessions
Lectures	12
Live seminars	12
Live language taster classes	18

Live A Level/GCSE conversation classes	35
University Q&As	3
Suite of resources	n/a

Total: 80 sessions delivered over a 12-week period.

Pupil Attendance

Over the 12-week period, **441 pupils attended the sessions.**

School Participation

From each consortia, the following number of schools and colleges participated:

Consortia	Number of schools
ERW	13
CSC	8
EAS	6
GwE	8
Outside Wales	25

Key outcomes

Providing language learning opportunities

The language learning sessions proved to be very popular and required additional sessions to be added at the beginning of the project to meet the demand. When learners were asked if they enjoyed participating in the language sessions, 93% of learners stated that they either agreed or strongly agreed. This demonstrates the level of engagement that the sessions commanded.

In response to the question 'how useful do you find these sessions for your language learning?', **98% responded with useful or very useful.**

Learners commented:

- "It has made me so much more independent - so I am so thankful for these sessions to make it easier for me since school support has vastly dropped."
- "The experience of lectures, tasks and seminars was really useful as it gave a sense of what university courses might entail as well as being a really friendly and enjoyable experience."
- "I believe all of the elements are useful towards preparing me for university, especially the lectures and seminars they give me an idea of what uni will be like."
- "Very good for critical thinking skills and is a good way to talk about current issues in the world in the target language."
- "Because I have realised that after all of this, the world will need people who can speak languages to help with international relations and help with boosting the world economy by helping relations between countries."

Increased learner confidence

It was anticipated that confidence would drop due to a lack of language exposure during lockdown. 89% of respondents indicated that participating in the language sessions offered by the project was either 'effective' or 'very effective' in improving their confidence in their language skills. Having the opportunity to discuss and use language skills with peers has supported learners to grow their confidence at a time when opportunity to use languages has been reduced. However, for some learners, the issue of confidence and motivation extended beyond language learning with one pupil stating that: "It's [lockdown] made me lose the motivation to do anything in general". The impact on pupil wellbeing and its effect on the ability to learn, needs to be more thoroughly understood, particularly if future instances of lockdown arise.

The diversity of the themes offered was also well received by learners and indicates the benefits to be derived from offering learners the opportunity to go beyond the curriculum.

Learners commented:

- "Hearing other people talk comfortably and give their opinions has improved my confidence to contribute in future discussions."
- "It's given me more confidence to speak in front of others as I'm quite shy and it's motivated me to do more independent language learning while I'm off school."
- "They're really improving my confidence as I find it really difficult to talk in front of others."
- "I wouldn't normally like to speak to new people in another language but I did which improved my confidence."

Increased learner motivation and curiosity

The project was successful in developing learners' intrinsic motivation **with over 90% of survey responses indicating that participation in the project was effective in increasing their curiosity to explore other languages and cultures outside of their areas of study.** This is invaluable at a time when the language community is continuing to suffer falling learner numbers, a situation which could be further exacerbated over the coming years as a result of Covid-19.

Furthermore, when asked how Covid-19 had impacted on their motivation for language learning **44% of learners said that their motivation had actually increased** and noted that **they had benefited from more time to explore the subject.**

Learners commented:

- "It's given me more confidence to speak in front of others as I'm quite shy and it's motivated me to do more independent language learning while I'm off school."

- “Because the project has offered so many different subjects, my curiosity has grown a lot after taking part in various lectures, seminars and language classes.”
- “It broadens knowledge, and it’s really fun to learn about a new language/culture.”
- “Because I’ve had the chance to learn the basics of new languages and cultures, I have realised that I want to learn more about cultures and the world has grown a lot during the project.”
- “It has given me time to study at my own pace and in my own interest areas.”
- “I have become more independent and actually find the things I am interested in and therefore are researching/pursuing are more interesting than the CBAC syllabus.”

Conclusion

The project has demonstrated that it is possible to deliver high quality, mentor-led language learning experiences online in a way that is both engaging and thought-provoking for learners. The project successfully brought together learners and linguists from across Wales, the UK and beyond. Importantly, it has illustrated the positive impact of near-peer relationships for supporting learning in emergency contexts. The flipped learning approach and curiosity-driven agenda of the project sparked interest and motivated young people to attend sessions repeatedly, developing confidence for learning, and supporting wider well-being. The need for scaffolded learning, structured experiences and real-time interactions reinforces the importance of developing online learning models that are responsive and student-centric. By working collaboratively, secondary school learners and university students have bridged the gap between otherwise distinct and separate communities, proving that more substantial and impactful links can be forged between the two sectors to support the transition and continuity of language learning.

ⁱ Lucy Jenkins, *Engaging Welsh Modern Language Learners in Secondary Schools: Mentoring as a Proven Practice* (2018), *Scottish Languages Review* <https://www.scilt.org.uk/Portals/24/Library/slr/issues/34/34-02%20Jenkins_V2.pdf [accessed 08 August 2020]

ⁱⁱ Welsh Government. *Global futures: a plan to improve and promote modern foreign languages in Wales 2020-2022* (2020), *Welsh Government* <<https://gov.wales/global-futures-plan-improve-and-promote-modern-foreign-languages-wales-2020-2022>> [accessed 02 September 2020].

ⁱⁱⁱ See www.mflmentoring.co.uk.

^{iv} Graham Donaldson, *Successful futures: independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales* (2015), *Welsh Government* <<https://gov.wales/successful-futures-review-curriculum-and-assessment-arrangements> [accessed 20 August 2020].

^v The four ‘What Matters’ statements for Languages, Literacy and Communication are: Languages Connect Us; Understanding languages is key to understanding the world around us; Expressing ourselves through language is key to communication; and Literature fire imagination and inspires creativity. See the following Welsh Government. *Global futures: a plan to improve and promote modern foreign languages in Wales 2015–2020* (2020), *Welsh Government*

^{vi} <https://gov.wales/stay-safe-stay-learning>

^{vii} Ashoka, *Will Covid Be the Opportunity We Need to Reimagine Learning* (2020), *Forbes* <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashoka/2020/08/07/will-covid-be-the-opportunity-we-need-to-reimagine-learning/#b8aa9e87ef04>> [accessed 19 August 2020].