



International Languages: Are we bothered?

How combining international connections and diversity can help engage students in languages again

In an increasingly globalised and diverse world, the role of languages in supporting open communication, effective collaboration and solving some of the world's greatest shared challenges, seems irrefutable. Indeed, countless organisations have testified to the central role of International Languages to the prosperity of the UK as a whole, economically, socially and culturally¹ and yet, uptake of International Languages at key curriculum stages continues to decline across the UK². With the belief that languages are more important now than they were 20 years ago, why are languages so overlooked by learners? And how can we, as practitioners, support a renewed and revitalised understanding of the critical role of languages?

The UK Context

In the 2022 Language Trends England report, Collen argues that the key EBacc target for International Language at GCSE (in England), is not on track to be met. In Wales, only 12.7% of learners took an International Language GCSE³ and in Northern Ireland, despite evidence that the 'big 3' (French, Spanish and German) are faring better, the overall narrative remains one of decline. The same with Scotland, despite the hopes proffered by the Curriculum for Excellence⁴.

In this broad context of decline, scholars and practitioners have offered many reasons: the rise of 'global English'⁵, difficulty of the examinations⁶, favouring of STEM subjects⁷, the low status of language learning⁸ and financial constraints meaning that small classes aren't allowed to run, being just some. These barriers, it is argued, have most deeply affected aspiration amongst specific groups, including disadvantaged learners and boys.⁹ However, rather than dwell on the state of International Languages, we should instead focus on the role our communities can play, and what we can do to create a motivational approach.

Embrace international connections

International connections are all around us. For example, Wales is a bilingual-multilingual nation, where English and Welsh hold equal status, however the linguistic composition of our country goes far beyond this, with many languages and cultures represented in our schools' communities – some 160 languages.¹⁰ If you look at London, there are over 300 languages spoken in the city¹¹!

In this context, the severe decline in languages uptake seems counter intuitive, and yet, it remains to be the case.

We realised that in order to increase our languages uptake, we needed to make languages real. Together with nine other universities, Cardiff University decided to create an outreach project - MFL Mentoring, connecting university students with secondary school learners who are disengaging from languages. This project is proving to be a great success, creating a motivating environment that supports learners. We commit to four core principles, that you could consider also:

- **Languages are relevant to all and for all:**

There is nothing more powerful to a learner than being able to see themselves in another's experience. To see, in real terms, just what their lives could look like if they seize the opportunities offered by language learning. Whatever their gender, sexuality, or ethnicity, the opportunity to see some part of themselves in another's journey is empowering and role models offer a tangible manifestation of a possible 'future-self'.

- **Languages do not sit in isolation from any other subject**

It's important to remember that languages are not isolated on a 'language learning island,' but rather are the essential tool that allow us to navigate from, to, within and between any and all disciplines. The more we show that language learning is connected to all other areas, the more relevant they become.

- **Languages happen here, not just 'over there'**

The narrative of language learning as a tool for travel is not incorrect, but it is limiting. What about the languages



that exist within our neighbourhoods and communities and the various forms of communication we navigate everyday? The more we talk about and conceptualise languages as part of our everyday world, the more languages can and will resonate with everyone.

- **Interrogate the everyday, every day**
Object-based learning has become a core underpinning approach of our project as it encourages learners to take the time to stop, consider, analyse and reflect on the world around them, looking at everyday objects with a different lens and considering how and why they see something the way they do. For example, a rug or mat, is it a souvenir, something used as décor or a place of prayer? The options with this core principle are endless, but we find it's a great way to spark a powerful conversation about the value of languages.

Taking the next step

Whilst I appreciate you may not have access to a MFL mentoring programme like ours, the underpinning principles and approaches of it are something you could start to explore.

A core success of the work is the near-peer relationships, helping learners to see in real terms what the benefits of languages are and moreover, to consider what benefits this could bring them. Your local colleges and universities are likely to have many students with a passion for languages who would also benefit from the experience of working with your learners. There may also be people in your local community who have a similar passion who are eager to encourage your students. They can all provide the key to students seeing the value and benefit of language learning. As Pearson's recent research highlights, 86% of UK adults have seen a myriad of benefits as a result of knowing a second language, including understanding other cultures better, having the confidence to travel the world, making international friends and increasing self-confidence to name a few! It's important that our young people of today have these opportunities too.

We need them to see the value of any and exposure to all languages. It's very easy in a pressured curriculum with little to no time to spare, to focus on the next vocabulary or the next grammatical structure to introduce and to turn away from opportunities that might involve a language that you don't teach but what if we took a moment to consider with our learners the thousands of languages that colour our world, and interrogate how these link together? It may not help them in their immediate curriculum tasks, but it will help them develop their decoding and potentially spark creativity. Above all, it might just help them understand why languages are so important and give our learners the opportunity to discover the many languages already spoken in their classroom.

Helping learners see the rich tapestry of languages that comprise our local and global communities is important, particularly for those who may never travel abroad or who are disengaged. Highlighting the huge diversity of people, languages and pathways that can be pursued as part of a multilingual life and likewise, challenging your learners to see the influence and role of languages as a powerful part of their everyday experiences, might just show them that languages are something integral and alive in our ever-evolving multilingual and multicultural world.



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¹ British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK. 2020. *Towards a national languages strategy: education and skills*. Available at: [Towards-a-national-languages-strategy-july-2020_R0FHmzB.pdf](https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Languages-UK-2019-academies-statement.pdf) (thebritishacademy.ac.uk) [Accessed: 23 May 2023].

² Gorrara, C., Jenkins, L., Jepson, E and Machin, T. L. 2020. *Multilingual perspectives: preparing for language learning in the new curriculum for Wales*. The Curriculum Journal 31(2), pp. 244–257. Available at: 10.1002/curj.11 [Accessed: 24 May 2023] / Henderson, L. & Carruthers, J. 2022. Socio-economic factors, school type and the uptake of languages: Northern Ireland in the wider UK context. The Language Learning Journal, 50(6), pp. 712–731. Available at: [10.1080/09571736.2021.1888151](https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2021.1888151) [Accessed: 24 May 2023].

³ Welsh Government. 2022a. GCSE entries and results (pupils in Year 11/pupils aged 15) by subject group and gender. Available at: <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Examinations-and-Assessments/Key-Stage-4/gcseentriesandresultspupilsaged15only-by-subjectgroup-gender> [Accessed: 25 May 2023].

⁴ Lanvers, U. & Graham, S. 2022. *Can we design language education policy and curricula for a motivated learner? Self-Determination Theory and the UK language crisis*. The Language Learning Journal, 50(2), pp. 223–237. Available at: [10.1080/09571736.2022.2046353](https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2022.2046353) [Accessed: 24 May 2023].

⁵ Lanvers, U. 2017. *Contradictory others and the habitus of languages: Surveying the L2 motivation landscape in the United Kingdom*. Modern Language Journal, 101(3), pp. 517–532. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12410> [Accessed: 24 May 2023].

⁶ Tinsley, T. 2019. *Language trends Wales 2019: international languages in primary and secondary schools in Wales*. Available at: <https://wales.britishcouncil.org/en/language-trends-wales#:~:text=Language%20Trends%20Wales%202020,-British%20Council%20Wales&text=While%20numbers%20for%20French%20and,level%20compared%20to%20last%20year.&text=The%20largest%20decrease%20in%20entries,GCSE%20and%20A%2Dlevel%20respectively> [Accessed: 24 May 2023].

⁷ Tinsley, T. 2018. *Language Trends Wales 2018 – the state of language learning in secondary schools in Wales*. Available at: <https://wales.britishcouncil.org/en/language-trends-wales#:~:text=Language%20Trends%20Wales%202020,-British%20Council%20Wales&text=While%20numbers%20for%20French%20and,level%20compared%20to%20last%20year.&text=The%20largest%20decrease%20in%20entries,GCSE%20and%20A%2Dlevel%20respectively> [Accessed: 24 May 2023].

⁸ Board, K. and Tinsley, T. 2015. *Modern Foreign Languages in secondary schools in Wales: findings from the Language Trends survey 2014/15*. Available at: <https://wales.britishcouncil.org/en/language-trends-wales#:~:text=Language%20Trends%20Wales%202020,-British%20Council%20Wales&text=While%20numbers%20for%20French%20and,level%20compared%20to%20last%20year.&text=The%20largest%20decrease%20in%20entries,GCSE%20and%20A%2Dlevel%20respectively> [Accessed: 24 May 2023].

⁹ Mills & Tinsley. 2020. *Boys studying modern foreign languages at GCSE in schools in England*. Education Policy Institute. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/boys-language-gcse> [Accessed: 25 May 2023].

¹⁰ Welsh Government 2022b. School Census. First language of pupils aged 5 and over by language and year. Available at: <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Ethnicity-National-Identity-and-Language/firstlanguageofpupilsaged5andover-by-language-year> [Accessed: 25 May 2023].

¹¹ <https://blog.lingoda.com/en/what-languages-are-spoken-in-the-uk/>

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