How to successfully increase MFL uptake

GCSE options decision day, a day where children make decisions that can have an important impact on the rest of their lives. A day where we as a department, wait to see how many students have chosen to study a language.

Up until recently, opting to study a foreign language wasn't at the top of our students list but I can proudly say, however; that this has changed and with little use of budget, we have doubled the number of students opting to take MFL in our school! So, what's changed?

Similarly, to other schools, Castle View's students perceived learning a language as 'very hard,' so we contextualised why learning a language might be considered in this way and why students weren't confident enough in their own abilities to select a language as a GCSE option.

With planning (and I will be honest, this was significant at times), good communication between the languages department, students and SLT, we were able to do more than simply 'sell' our subjects to our students, we were able to tackle misconceptions, generate excitement and make languages an appealing option again.

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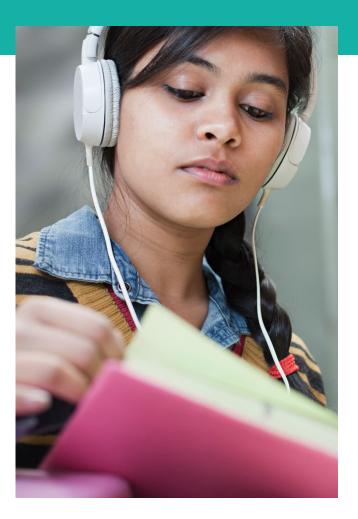
Exposure is key

It is vital that we don't minimise the fact that learning a language at KS4 can be challenging, and students should be aware of this. However, it is just as important that they are informed of the benefits and how studying a language can positively impact their lives way beyond the school gates. In recent research by Pearson, UK adults were asked what would most encourage young people to study a language today and the top five responses were: showcasing the benefits to their future lives, making the subject more interesting, learning about different cultures and lifestyles as well as vocabulary, making content more relevant to young people's lives and making it more accessible.

We couldn't agree more. We realised we needed to expose the subject to improve take up, and grasp any opportunity where the students were in contact with the Target Language (TL) and promote language learning in more ways than one.

One way to do this is to go big with a foreign school trip, for example, providing students with a great opportunity to practice their listening and speaking skills in real life situations, but organising these trips can be time consuming and require budget, something that not all schools have. The good news is that exposure can be played out in many other forms.

Celebrate languages
Whilst there are numerous online resources to support the European Day of Languages (26th September), there are other days that can be used to help celebrate languages. For example, look at different national days of the country of the language you are teaching. This has proved a huge success in our school where we have held baking competitions, invited guest speakers and held presentations in assemblies. Of course, you will need to check the dates fit with your school calendar.

Involve other subjects
From my experience, cross-curricular activities are always well received, and not just from the students but from the wider school as well. Consider pairing up with other departments and dedicate a lesson where students can explore the language through a different lens. For example, I have previously paired Spanish with food technology. Students created a simple dish and were exposed to Spanish by listening to the teacher narrate a lesson, by reading the Spanish cooking instructions, and by writing down recipes.

Involve other teachers

Students love to see staff members from other departments (especially SLT) participate in their lessons. For instance, I previously asked my Headteacher and three other members of SLT to participate in an activity with my class. Staff had a sticker with a word written in the TL on their lanyards. Students in KS3 were tasked (in Spanish) and during their break/lunch, with finding out what the words were. The staff members (in Spanish) would then provide the answer. This small activity proved to be a huge success and created a real buzz around the school. You could see the students competing to fill in and spell what they thought they heard. Creating positive experiences of languages is really important if we want to increase the uptake of languages, especially for those students who had previously had a negative experience with language learning.

Look outside the classroom

Whilst it might not be possible to plan a trip to Barcelona, there may be plenty of opportunities in your local community/area which will not only expose students to languages, but help them realise the importance of languages. For instance, try asking a local international restaurant for a lunch deal where you can bring your students. We are working with restaurants who are designing a small taster menu at a reasonable price. We are practicing dialogue with our students so they can order their food. Here in Portsmouth, we also utilise our location. We are planning to visit the local port where ferries often depart to Spain and France. By liaising with the port, we will be able to offer our students new opportunities to explore French and Spanish in a different setting. This has proven to be popular and memorable for the students in this school and in my previous settings.

Be transparent with pupils and parents

Inform with clarity. I believe that the key to good communication is being transparent with the information you provide to students and their parents. For example, at your next parents evening and 'Options Evenings' (if you are lucky enough to have these) explain to parents, ideally in front of their children, how relevant language learning is and the benefits of selecting languages in the long-term. In Pearson's research, nearly nine in ten adults (86%) said speaking another language has supported them in a multitude of ways, including understanding other cultures better (47%) and having the confidence to travel the world (36%) to making international friends (34%), increasing self-confidence (31%) and living abroad (30%).

Create excitement

Another opportunity where you can share important information is assemblies. If possible, ask for a morning assembly for Year 9 and share information about the GCSE course and its more important

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components. Be honest with the requirements and the expectations you have but at the same time generate excitement. Network with universities and language experts and invite them in as guest speakers to help support your message.

Sell it well

In addition to all of the above, create some fancy posters and place them in classrooms and corridors around the school. Students forget dates, deadlines and the relevance of certain actions, but we can always help remind them about how amazing learning a language is.

Be yourself

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is all about being honest and real. If you have experienced funny stories using languages, share those with your classes! Or if you are a native from a different country, share your lifestyle with your students! Tell them about the different festivities or just any anecdote you think could be relevant for the content being taught.

There are plenty of opportunities to develop a better understanding of languages and the amazing benefits it can bring to our students' lives. Sometimes this can be hard as we know that there is a curriculum to cover and several responsibilities that we as teachers need to assume. However, I firmly believe that a passion for languages can only be developed by exposing our students as much as possible to the real impact of languages. It's about making it real from the moment your students step in your classroom.

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