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Modern languages and mentoring: Lessons from digital learning in Wales

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- **This article considers the role that mentoring, and in particular online mentoring, can play in tackling the decline in modern language learning at GCSE level in Wales.**
- **It evaluates Digi-Languages, a blended learning experience that pairs university student linguists with secondary school learners of languages to improve MFL uptake at GCSE.**
- **This article examines the conception, design and early outcomes of Digi-Languages.**
- **The article evaluates the experiential learning of the mentees (Year 9 learners) and explores the ethos underpinning resource development and the project's key messaging around culture and languages.**
- **The article provides recommendations for the expansion of Digi-Languages to support broader language policy objectives in Wales, including the Welsh Government's policy of one million Welsh speakers by 2050.**
- **The article concludes with suggestions for the extension of Digi-Languages to other regions of the UK and overseas and its potential as a model for stimulating inter-cultural conversations on the lifelong value of languages.**

Language learning contexts in Wales

As a bilingual nation, Wales is positioned to exploit the rich linguistic heritage of its people. Since 1999, Welsh language learning has been compulsory for students in Welsh schools up to the age of 16. Like other parts of the UK, however, Wales is a multilingual and multicultural nation that does not

make the most of the language resources it could nurture to support both the skills agenda (building linguistic and intercultural skills) and community cohesion. Modern Foreign Language (MFL) learning in Wales is in long-term decline. This is starkly illustrated by the 48% decrease in the number of students taking an MFL at GCSE between 2002 and 2016 (Tinsley et al. 2017).

The challenges facing MFL in Wales are multiple. An overloaded timetable often sees MFL squeezed to the periphery and allocated minimum teaching time. Option choices at GCSE can favour other subjects perceived to be less difficult, whilst an emphasis on STEM can dissuade pupils from seeing the career benefits in taking an MFL. In addition, taking MFL as an option is often connected to socio-economic factors and an awareness of its value for social mobility. This is highlighted by Gorwel, The Welsh Foundation for Innovation in Public Affairs, a think tank that seeks to encourage innovative thinking and creativity from across the political spectrum. A recent report produced by Gorwel noted that 'an area's economic performance can be an indicator of the rate at which MFL subjects are taken' (Roberts 2018) and illustrated this through the uptake figures for GCSE MFL in Wales in 2017. These ranged from 29% MFL GCSE uptake in maintained schools in the prosperous South Wales area of the Vale of Glamorgan to 6.5% in the de-industrialised area of Blaenau Gwent in South East Wales. The overall average for Welsh students taking MFL at GCSE in 2017 was 18.5%. Such statistics demonstrate that opportunities to support multilingualism, by building on Wales' existing commitment to bilingualism, are being missed.

This long-term decline is visible at a time of radical education reform in Wales. Following Graham Donaldson's review of the Welsh curriculum, published as *Successful Futures* in 2015, Wales is embarking on an ambitious program of curriculum change. One of Donaldson's key recommendations for the new curriculum is that all learners should develop as 'ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world' (Donaldson 2015). This will mean that MFL will be brought together with English and Welsh into a new Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE). Models of language learning are currently being tested amongst teacher leads and expert groups that would see the development of second- or third-language acquisition as part of a language learning continuum. Such a model has the potential to build upon a learner's bilingual Welsh identity to support a multilingual and global outlook.

In this article, we will present the work of a unique school-university outreach project in Wales that aims to arrest and reverse this decline in MFL uptake at GCSE. The MFL Student Mentoring Project creates partnerships between university and school language learners to promote a positive attitude towards learning about other languages and cultures. This article report will focus on its most recent iteration as a blended learning experience, Digi-Languages. We will outline the ethos and development of the Digi-Languages programme and evaluate the challenges and outcomes of its first cycle of school interventions in 2018. We will conclude with a series of recommendations as to how such a programme can aid policy ambitions to support MFL in Wales, the UK and globally.

What is MFL Student Mentoring?

The MFL Student Mentoring Project is funded by the Welsh Government as part of a five-year strategy, *Global Futures, a plan to promote and improve modern foreign languages in Wales, 2015-2020*. This strategy represents a concerted response to the challenges facing MFL in schools in Wales (Welsh Government, 2017). The MFL Student Mentoring Project began in 2015 and trains university undergraduate and postgraduate modern language students in Wales to mentor younger language learners in local secondary schools. Undergraduates are partnered with schools geographically close to their university and spend typically a morning or afternoon a week with a small group of 4–5 mentees. This creates opportunities for a positive and inspiring learning experience and has been proven to increase uptake in MFL at GCSE in the project schools. The project operates via cross-sector partnerships between the four Welsh educational consortia, four Welsh universities (Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Swansea) and a network of secondary schools across Wales.

The initial objective of the project was to increase the number of pupils opting for an MFL GCSE. Given the outcome of the UK's referendum vote to leave the EU in 2016, the project has shifted its focus towards not only improving uptake of MFL at GCSE but also supporting positive attitudes towards other cultures and languages. The project has, therefore, embraced notions of global citizenship and identity. This ethos and approach influenced the development of the online iteration of the MFL Student Mentoring Project: Digi-Languages.

Digi-Languages: The basics

Digi-Languages was developed in 2017 and delivered for the first time in Spring 2018 with 18 pilot schools. It pairs Year 9 learners (13–14 years old) with university students of modern languages to enthuse younger learners about learning languages. The project supports the introduction of the Digital Competency Framework (DCF) in Wales, promoting cross-curricular digital literacy. Combining face-to-face and online mentoring creates a blended learning experience that has enabled the project to reach schools geographically distant from one of the four project hub universities, which are often those facing the greatest challenge in terms of pupils' understanding of the cultural and cognitive benefits of language learning.

Digi-Languages is a programme of six online and face-to-face sessions that take the learner on a journey to discover 'who do you think you are and where do you come from?'. Each week comprises a playlist of videos, quizzes, interviews, real-life career scenarios, word puzzles and images. Each week is also themed around a topic linked to identity: for example, 'The Food You' and 'The Future You'. These prompt learners to consider their relationship with languages and cultures. Each playlist ends on 'Over to You' and proposes optional extension activities that can be completed at school or at home.

University student mentors ('digi-mentors') lead extended face-to-face sessions in weeks 1 and 6, using the online playlist in class. Playlists for weeks 2 to 5 are delivered online through the Welsh Government's learning platform, Hwb. During weeks 2–5, digi-mentors are available online from

their university at the same time as their mentees in school. Digi-mentors offer online interaction and feedback via Office 365 email. These online sessions last approximately 20–30 minutes.

Digi-Languages focuses on extending learners' cultural horizons and starting conversations about the value and role of languages in wider society. For Digi-Languages in Wales, Wales and Welshness is a key theme developed in the online materials. This theme reinforces positive messaging around intercultural negotiations that occur outside the classroom. With this learner-centred approach, Digi-Languages asks learners to reflect on who they are and where they come from. This becomes a means to show them that they already move within a global community – sometimes, unknowingly. Digi-Languages ultimately seeks to connect young people to their Welsh identity, community and landscape, in order to connect them to other communities, languages and peoples. Learners investigate their relationship with their own culture and environment through the activities and ongoing conversations with the mentor.

Digi-Languages: The outcomes

The first 6-week pilot of Digi-Languages took place in 18 schools across Wales and saw 168 learners engaging in the blended learning experience. This involved an intensive 2-hour introduction session where learners were introduced to Digi-Languages and guided through the functionality of Hwb and the online learning materials. In this session, learners also got to know their mentors and spent time creating a 'handprint' tree, mapping their languages journey to date. The final session provided a re-connection with the mentor face-to-face and an assessment of the learning journey undertaken by the mentees. This pilot was subject to external evaluation and the full report is available here.

External evaluation concluded that Digi-Languages had substantially improved uptake for MFL GCSE. 43% of those learners who undertook Digi-Languages chose to take an MFL GCSE against the national average in 2017 of 18.5% in Wales. This represented a conversion rate of 26–28% of those who, in a pre-mentoring survey, said that they were undecided or would not choose an MFL at GCSE. The evaluation also found that over half (58%) of learners said that Digi-Languages had changed the way they think about languages in relation to their future, and a further third of users thought that perhaps it had altered their attitudes towards language learning. For example, one learner commented, 'I'm starting to realise the significance of what learning another language can do for you'.

Overall, pupils enjoyed the experience, with nine out of ten pupils rating their experience in the Digi-Languages project as 'Excellent' (49%) or 'Good' (43%). The quality of the online learning experience was praised by teachers, mentors and mentees alike. Learners appreciated using a responsive platform that worked on a range of digital devices and made use of high quality, relevant images as visual stimuli, with accompanying text to aid learning and grab attention.

The challenges faced by the project were primarily the limitations of Hwb as a digital learning platform. In a policy context where digital literacy is presented as a priority area, it was surprising to find that many schools in Wales did not use Hwb, or that there was limited IT support for setting up

Digi-Languages in the school. This created logistical problems for some learners. Another technical challenge was the communication facility which was carried out via email through Office 365. Mentors felt that this did not encourage a full interaction from mentees, and mentees felt frustrated by the lag in response. Given that young learner-users are accustomed to quick-response chat platforms through their engagement in social media, this was clearly an area for improvement.

Recommendations for other language-learning communities in Wales, the UK and beyond

Evidence shows that Digi-Languages offers an effective means of increasing learner engagement with languages. With each learner spending approximately 6 hours with Digi-Languages over the 6-week period, the project proves that short, targeted interventions can have a significant impact on perceptions of language learning and motivation. The establishment of a rapport between school mentees and university mentors helped induct mentees into different ways of seeing themselves and their futures as learners of multiple languages, modelling themselves on their university 'friend' and near peer language learner.

Digi-Languages has the capacity to be rolled out to more MFL learners in schools in Wales. However, Hwb as the digital platform needs enhanced functionality. Indeed, there is a case for investing in a bespoke platform. With or beyond Hwb, schools and their IT expertise require scoping to support learners, teachers and mentors for digital projects of this nature.

Equally, Digi-Languages could be used to support aspiration in more disadvantaged areas of Wales. Low rates of uptake at MFL at GCSE are indicative of low social mobility and poor regional economic development. Supporting engagement with MFL in such areas via online mentoring could foster further university-school partnership and encourage a global mindset.

As a model for re-invigorating language learning, Digi-Languages could support the Welsh Government's policy of one million Welsh speakers by 2050. Second-language Welsh learners could benefit from a repurposed model that responds to current policy concerns on the teaching of Welsh in English-medium schools. Digi-Languages offers an opportunity for the promotion of Welsh language and culture in creative ways that are attractive to young people. Digi-Languages might also be a viable channel to support European languages with particular challenges in the UK, such as German. A specific language iteration of Digi-Languages could help deliver coordinated messages designed to support uptake in languages in critical decline.

These benefits need not only be limited to Wales. Digi-Languages is a flexible model that can be 'regionalised' to suit the specific requirements of different communities in the UK. With universities putting increasing emphasis on civic mission and community engagement, Digi-Languages offers a way for universities to bridge the gap with the secondary education sector in a mutually beneficial mode, while drawing on their most useful resource: the student body.

Other parts of the UK could use such a programme to support wider policy aims and existing initiatives. Given the creation of a National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy and a network of nine hub schools, there is clear interest in supporting MFL in schools in England. Like Wales, England suffers from inequitable language provision, socially and regionally (Tinsley 2018). Digi-Languages has evidenced the value of raising awareness of languages in schools and engaging groups outside the classroom, such as parents. This represents added value by improving the profile of language learning in the partner school and encouraging parents to recognize the professional and personal benefits of language learning. With increased digital provision and input into developing networks, a Digi-Languages model could work well to support language initiatives in England. A pilot project is currently completing trials in the East Yorkshire region of England in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield, led by the core MFL Student Mentoring Project team based at Cardiff University. An external evaluation of this project, called Language Horizons, will be published in the summer of 2019.

Finally, Digi-Languages could be up-scaled to support language learning and partnerships beyond the UK. The project team secured funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council Open World Research Initiative OWRI project, *Language Acts and Worldmaking,* to explore connections with other EU and global institutions. With cognate digital projects such as the EU-funded EVALUATE considering the benefits of telecollaboration as a method to improve teacher education, there is potential to share best practice in digital learning across global communities. Potential modes of collaboration could include training mentors from other EU and global HE institutions to mentor young people in the UK via digital programmes and vice versa. With all global communities needing to develop interculturally curious and sensitive citizens, Digi-Languages offers one way to go about this. To evidence the value of such intra-European partnerships, Cardiff University has just completed a trial partnership with the regional government of Castilla y Leon in which Modern Language final-year students mentored primary school students from a school in the Valladolid area. Such partnerships have the potential to be deepened and extended to support bilateral university and regional exchanges.

Ultimately, Digi-Languages offers an online learning experience that could be tailored to suit different communities of learners, whilst maintaining at its heart the value of language experiences as a linguistic and cultural journey of discovery and personal fulfilment. At a time when the UK seems to be retracting from global partnerships, Digi-Languages creates a flexible space for universities to engage with secondary schools on issues of global citizenship, creating interpersonal relationships that foster an ongoing love for languages and valuing other cultures.

Resources

Global Futures – a plan to improve and promote modern foreign languages in Wales (Welsh Government, 2017)

Further reading

Donaldson. G. (2015). *Successful Futures*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Roberts, D. (2018). *Mind Your Language: A Short Report into Wales, Brexit and the Study of Modern Foreign Languages*. Cardiff: Gorwel.

Tinsley, T. & Dolezal, N. (2018). *Language Trends 2018: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England, Survey Report*. London: British Council.

Tinsley, T. & Board, K. (2017). *Language Trends Wales 2016/17: The State of Language Learning in Secondary Schools in Wales*. Cardiff: British Council Wales.

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