

Modern Languages and Mentoring: Supporting Digital Learning across Language Communities in Wales



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Executive Summary

This report considers the role that mentoring, and in particular online mentoring, can play in tackling the decline in modern foreign languages learning at GCSE level in Wales. It evaluates the experiences of a pilot project, Digi-Languages, and how this project might be extended to other language learning communities in Wales. It concludes by proposing ways for Digi-Languages to meet the demands of different language communities within the UK and potentially beyond.

The report assesses the successes and challenges of Digi-Languages, which completed its first 6-week pilot in March 2018. Following external evaluation of the project's impact, the report reflects on specific design elements of the online mentoring experience and how they created a rapport between University student mentors and Year 9 school mentees, thereby engendering enthusiasm for language learning. It provides data on how such enthusiasm translated into mentees choosing an MFL at GCSE and rethinking their attitudes to language learning. The report provides recommendations for the development of Digi-Languages and its capacity to support broader language policy objectives within Wales. It concludes with suggestions for the extension of Digi-Languages to other parts of the UK and overseas.

1. Language Learning Contexts in Wales and the Role of Mentoring

1.1 As a bilingual nation, Wales is positioned to capitalise on the rich linguistic heritage of its inhabitants/people. Since 1999, Welsh language learning has been compulsory for students in Welsh schools until the age of 16.¹ All pupils studying in Wales have capacity in Welsh by the time they leave compulsory education. The range of other languages found in many Welsh communities, above all heritage and community languages, means that Wales has untapped multilingual resources that it could nurture to support both the skills agenda (building both linguistic and intercultural skills) and community cohesion.²

1.2 Modern foreign language (MFL) learning in Wales is in long-term decline. There was a 48% decrease in the number of students taking an MFL at GCSE between 2002 and 2016.³ This picture is regionally specific and connected to socio-economic factors. According to a recent report produced by Gorwel, The Welsh Foundation for Innovation in Public Affairs, 'an area's economic performance can be an indicator of the rate at which MFL subjects are taken'.⁴ This is starkly illustrated by the uptake figures for GCSE MFL in 2017. These ranged from 29% of all maintained school learners in the prosperous area of Vale of Glamorgan to 6.5% of maintained school learners in Blaenau Gwent. The overall average for Welsh students taking MFL at GCSE in 2017 was 18.5%. Such statistics demonstrate that opportunities are being missed to build on Wales' existing commitment to bilingualism to support multilingualism.

1.3 The Welsh Government has committed to a programme of radical education reform. Following Professor Graham Donaldson's review of the Welsh curriculum published in 2015, Wales is embarked on an ambitious programme of curriculum change. One of Professor Donaldson's key recommendations for the new curriculum is that all learners should develop as 'ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world'.⁵ With modern foreign languages being brought together with English and Welsh into a new Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE), models of language learning are being tested 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.

1.4 The Welsh Government has a five-year strategy *Global Futures, a plan to promote and improve modern foreign languages in Wales, 2015-2020* for modern foreign languages. This strategy represents a concerted response to the challenges facing modern foreign languages in schools in Wales.⁶ Funded by the *Global Futures* programme, the MFL Student Mentoring

¹ The Education (National Curriculum) (Attainment Targets and Programmes of Study in Welsh) Order (1990). UK: HMSO.

² Ayres-Bennett W. and Carruthers J., *Policy Briefing on Community Languages and Social Cohesion*, AHRC, Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies (2018)

³ Tinsley, T. & Board, K., *Language Trends Wales 2016/17: The State of Language Learning in Secondary Schools in Wales* (Cardiff: British Council Wales, 2017)

⁴ Roberts, D. *Mind Your Language: a Short Report into Wales, Brexit and the Study of Modern Foreign Languages*, (Cardiff: Gorwal, 2018): 10.

⁵ Donaldson G., *Successful Futures*. Welsh Government (2015)

⁶ Welsh Government, *Global Futures – a plan to improve and promote modern foreign languages in Wales* (Cardiff: Welsh Government, 2017)

project targets began in 2015 and aims to improve uptake of MFL at GCSE level by training University undergraduate and postgraduate modern language students to mentor younger language learners in secondary schools across Wales. University students partner 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 environment and has been proven to increase uptake in MFL at GCSE in the project schools.⁷ 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.

1.5 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 reorientated its ambitions towards not only improving uptake of MFL at GCSE but also towards supporting positive attitudes towards other cultures and languages. The project has, therefore, embraced engagement with notions of global citizenship. This ethos and approach influenced the development of the new online mentoring and learning programme that has evolved from MFL Student Mentoring: Digi-Languages.

2. Development of Digi-Languages and its Ethos

2.1 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 in order to enthuse the younger learners about learning languages and encourage them to choose an MFL at GCSE. The project supports the introduction of the Digital Competency Framework in Wales, promoting cross-curricular digital literacy. Combining face-to-face and online mentoring creates a blended learning experience which has enabled the project to reach schools geographically distant from one of the four project hub universities.

2.2 Digi-Languages is a programme of 6 online sessions that takes the learner on a journey to discover 'who do you think you are and where do you come from?'. Each week has a playlist of videos, quizzes, interviews, real-life career scenarios and word puzzles and images. Each week is themed around a topic linked to identity, for example, 'The Food You' and 'The Future You'. These prompt the learner to consider their relationship to language learning. Each playlist week ends on 'Over to You' and proposes optional extension activities that can be completed at school or at home.

2.3 University 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.

2.4 Digi-Languages focuses on extending learners' cultural horizons and starting conversations about the value and role of languages in wider society. Digi-Languages seeks to connect young

⁷ See the external project evaluation at <http://mflmentoring.co.uk/our-results/>. An evaluation of the first 2 years of the project found that in Phase 1 of the project 57% of the total number of pupils mentored chose to take MFL in Key Stage 4 and in Phase 2, 50% did so.

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.

2.5 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 walls. With this learner-centered 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.

2.6 The design and development principles behind Digi-Languages were focused on generating enthusiasm and motivation for language learning. Critical to achieving this was the design of an online learning and mentoring experience that engaged learners and was both easy to use and enjoyable. The Hwb platform was used exclusively to deliver Digi-Languages as it met key baseline requirements and there were no superior alternatives. As a safe and secure digital platform, predicated on use by school learners for online learning, it offered ease of access and familiarity. As a responsive platform, it offered schools flexibility as to which digital device could be used to access Digi-Languages and it also provided a means of digital communication between mentor and mentee.

2.7 Following the choice of digital platform, subsequent learning and experience design decisions were constrained by the available tools and functionality within Hwb. The team sought to make the best use of the affordances of the platform. One direct consequence of this was the use of high quality, relevant images to aid learning and affective appeal. Quizzes were used throughout as a means of creating interactive learning experiences. All quizzes were designed as a learning aid to leverage curiosity, with well designed answer feedback.

2.8 The combination of online learning and mentoring is a strength of Digi-Languages but is also problematic in the digital domain. Hwb, like many digital learning platforms, does not support online conversation and discussion as a parallel, synchronous part of the online learning experience. The technology that could enable this as a discrete component is facilitated elsewhere. For Digi-Languages, this meant that communication between mentor and mentee was prompted at particular points in the experience rather than throughout. This was problematic because dialogue between several mentees and one mentor had to take place at a specific point, meaning it was sometimes difficult for one mentor to manage. It also meant that the only option for digital communication was email within Hwb. This was neither dynamic nor instant and diminished the user experience by taking learners away from the online experience.

3. Outcomes of the Digi-Languages Pilot Project

3.1 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. The full report has now been published and is available at: www.mflmentoring.co.uk

3.2 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.

3.3 External evaluation found that over half (58%) of learners said that Digi-Languages had changed the way they think about languages in relation to their futures and a further third of users thought that perhaps it had altered their attitudes towards language learning. One learner commented, for example, 'I'm starting to realise the significance of what learning another language can do for you'.

3.4 External evaluation found that the learners surveyed were pleased with the overall 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 stimulus, with accompanying text to aid learning and grab attention.

3.5 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 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.

3.6 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 the young learner-user is accustomed to quick response chat platforms through their engagement in social media, it is clear that this is an area where the experience could be improved.

4. Lessons Learnt and Applicability for Other Language Learning Communities in Wales

4.1 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, it is evident 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.

4.2 Digi-Languages has capacity to be rolled out to more modern foreign language learners in schools in Wales. However, Hwb as the digital platform would need 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.

4.3 Digi-Languages could be used to support aspiration and ambition in more disadvantaged areas of Wales. Low rates of uptake at MFL at GCSE are indicative of low social mobility and poor regional economic value. Supporting engagement with modern foreign languages in such areas via online mentoring would foster further University-school partnership and encourage a global mindset in partner schools.

4.4 Digi-Languages as a model 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.⁸ Digi-Languages offers an opportunity for the promotion of Welsh language and culture in non-traditional and creative ways that are attractive and relevant to young people. As recent Welsh Government-commissioned research suggests, projects that are related to the interests and realities of language use and culture outside school have the most potential to engage younger learners.⁹

5. Potential for Expansion beyond Wales

5.1 Digi-Languages offers a model of language support which could be expanded to other parts of the UK, above all England. Emergent initiatives, such as the creation of a National Centre of Excellence and a network of nine hub schools, are aiming to provide new support for modern foreign language teaching in schools.¹⁰ Like Wales, England suffers from inequitable language provision, socially and regionally.¹¹ Digi-Languages has evidenced capacity to tackle this by 'raising awareness of languages in the schools taking part, and among parents'.¹² This represents added value by improving the profile of language learning in the partner school and encouraging parents to recognise the professional and personal benefits of language learning.

5.2 Digi-Languages and face-to-face mentoring have been identified as a model which could be rolled out to support languages with specific challenges in the UK. A recent report funded by the German Embassy recommends the adoption of a mentoring scheme modelled on MFL Student Mentoring to tackle the decline of German in British schools.¹³ A specific language or regional iteration of Digi-Languages could help deliver coordinated messages designed to support language uptake.

⁸ Fitzpatrick T., Morris S., Clark T., Mitchell, R. Needs J., Tanguay, E., Tovey B., *Rapid Evidence Assessment: Effective Second-Language Teaching Approaches and Methods* (Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 31/2018: 2018).

⁹ Tavakoli, P. and Jones R. *An Overview of Approaches to Second Language Acquisition and Instructional Practices* (Cardiff: Welsh Government report number 12/2018: 2018): 36

¹⁰ See announcement of funding boost to language learning in England at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/languages-boost-to-deliver-skilled-workforce-for-uks-businesses>

¹¹ Tinsley T. & Dolezal N., *Language Trends 2018: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England, Survey Report* (London: British Council, 2018)

¹² See the external evaluation of the Digi-Languages pilot project at <http://mflmentoring.co.uk/digi-languages/>

¹³ See Charlotte Ryland's report, 'Undergraduate Participation in German-Language Outreach Activities' at <http://charlotteryland.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Undergraduate-Participation-in-German-Outreach-Charlotte-Ryland.pdf>

5.3 Digi-Languages could be upscaled to support language learning beyond the UK. The project team has 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.¹⁴ Digi-Languages offers an online learning experience which could be tailored to suit different communities of learners, whilst maintaining at its heart the value of language learning as journey of discovery and personal fulfilment.

¹⁴ Find more information on project EVALUATE at <http://www.evaluateproject.eu/>

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