

# What Works: Languages Mentoring and Ambassador Programmes

July 2022

## 1.0 The case for language mentoring

To increase the uptake of language learning at upper secondary education at Key Stages 4 and 5 (GCSE and A level) in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, various initiatives focus on decisions of learners in schools, in particular languages mentoring and ambassador schemes. This briefing will provide some case studies, outline the practical aspects, and explore the effectiveness of such schemes.

As noted in *Towards a National Languages Strategy*, languages are strategically vital for the future of the UK. Employers say that they value competence in specific languages, but also the analytical, linguistic, literacy and communication skills acquired through language learning, and the intercultural agility that enables individuals to work across different cultures and countries as vital for the UK's global economic future.<sup>1</sup> This ability to navigate between different languages and cultures is important for life and work inside the UK as well as outside it: 'proficiency in additional languages is a new kind of global literacy'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there is overwhelming evidence – as seen in The British Academy's *Languages in the UK* - of an inadequate, and worsening supply of the language skills needed by the UK to meet the needs of society and the economy. Recent surveys have shown that young people from less affluent backgrounds are the most likely to have limited access to languages, further reducing their chances of social mobility.<sup>3</sup>

*Towards a National Languages Strategy* recommended the expansion of mentoring and ambassador schemes. This briefing note is not a systematic review, but rather aims to show approaches that have been undertaken recently in different jurisdictions; to point to existing evaluations of them (based on different methodologies) and to evidence for their success in increasing uptake; and to provide information for those who would like to initiate further schemes.

## 2.0 Approaches to language mentoring

The approaches taken to languages mentoring differ in a number of ways, e.g., in terms of the specific approach, the level of school students targeted (pre-GCSE versus pre-A level), and the choice of mentors. Some schemes focus on communicating the benefits of languages and their study, both for individuals and for the position of the UK on the global stage. Other schemes concentrate on introducing or increasing language-learning amongst participants.

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<sup>1</sup> For new evidence for the economic case, see Wendy Ayres-Bennett, Marco Hafner, Eliane Dufresne, and Erez Yerushalmi, The economic value to the UK of speaking other languages. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1814-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1814-1.html)

<sup>2</sup> [Salzburg Statement for a Multilingual World \(2017\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> See Department for Education (2017): *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential. A Plan for Improving Social Mobility Through Education* ('Ensure that disadvantaged pupils can access the core academic subjects that unlock opportunity [...] In particular, we will make it our mission to improve access to high quality modern foreign languages subject teaching, particularly for disadvantaged pupils'. See also British Council, *Language Trends 2019: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England* ('The inequalities in access to language learning [...] are mirrored in Key Stages 3 and 4, with huge variations in provision and take-up very strongly associated with socio-economic status', p. 18). For low uptake of GCSE languages among students who qualify for free school meals in England, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupils-and-their-parents-or-carers-omnibus-wave-1-survey>.

### 2.1 Differences in resources required

Different approaches require different levels of resource. The main approach adopted has been for university students (often on language courses) to mentor school students; as indicated below, there exists a considerable body of evidence for its effectiveness. A less common approach has been for sixth formers with a languages GCSE to mentor younger students from the same school. This requires few resources, but there does not yet exist as large a body of evidence for its effectiveness.

### 2.2 Differences in specific programme aims

Additionally, there are differences between the aims that the programmes attempt to achieve. Most programmes have targeted Key Stage 3 students who are about to make a decision as to whether to take a languages GCSE, but one programme focused on increasing the uptake of languages at A level.

## 3.0 Case studies

This section provides case studies of language mentoring programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### 3.1 The MFL Student Mentoring Project

The project is led by Cardiff University and funded by the Welsh Government and continues through its Global Futures Strategy for modern foreign languages (2015-2020, extended to 2022). It currently offers additional support for the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales.

**Participants:** Secondary school students in Years 8-9 (12-14 year olds) in over 140 schools in Wales.

**Mentors:** University students with a background, interest or degree programme linked to languages from the universities of Cardiff, Swansea, Bangor, Aberystwyth, University of Wales Trinity St David.

**Aim of the mentoring:** To increase the number of students choosing to study a language at GCSE. The project targets learners who are unsure and against studying languages at GCSE via a pre-mentoring cohort survey. Using mentoring methodologies, the project aims to improve motivation and develop resilience for language learning at GCSE and beyond. It focuses on developing a multilingual, global mindset that is open to all regardless of a learner's socio-economic background or proficiency in the language classroom. Learners are encouraged to be curious and to challenge their perspectives and assumptions by exploring the world through multiple languages and cultures and by reflecting on their own personal connection with languages. Additionally, it aims to create sustainable links between modern languages departments at universities and their partner secondary schools to raise aspiration for Higher Education.

**Delivery:** Three models have been used, fully online, blended and face-to face. The fully online model involves six sessions delivered online. The blended delivery mode involves the mentor visiting the school for the first and the last mentoring sessions in week 1 and week 6. The face-to-face model includes a mentor who visits a school once a week for six weeks.

**Results:** The programme underwent internal and external evaluations, including one that covered the 5-year cycle from 2015-20. Most schools reported a significant increase in uptake of languages, in some cases doubling the national average uptake for modern foreign languages in Wales above all in schools from disadvantaged areas.

‘In each year of the project there has been a higher than average uptake of MFL GCSEs amongst mentees against a background of declining uptake nationally’<sup>4</sup>

**Resource requirements:** The project, active in on average 60-90 schools annually, requires an Academic Lead based at Cardiff University, a Project Director, 1.5 FTE Project Coordinators and university leads in each of the participating universities. The annual grant is currently between £230,00 and £275,000 p.a. depending on Welsh Government need/consultation. An extensive training programme for mentors has been established to enable mentors to delivery effective mentoring in schools. Training takes a flipped learning approach. Face-to-face training for mentors takes place one weekend further developing their knowledge and skills from the asynchronous training materials. Online training is supported through a combination of asynchronous learning and synchronous workshops over two to three weeks. The resource requirements would be expected to decrease, once a programme was initiated and scaled to a large number of participating schools. As the project is still operational, it is highly scalable which should reduce the resource requirements substantially; the scheme is currently developing a licensing model, consultancy venture and a ‘train the trainers’ programme to support other organisations to deliver the programme. The resource requirement for participating schools would be relatively low. The project was shortlisted for the [Times Higher Education Awards](#) in 2021 under the category of Widening Participation or Outreach project of the year.

### **3.2 Language Horizons**

Language Horizons was a programme funded by the Department for Education 2018-20 and run by Cardiff University, similar to the MFL Mentoring Project, but geared towards schools in England. The university worked in partnership with the University of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University, University of Warwick and Coventry University to increase the uptake on languages GCSE. The programme ended in August 2020.

**Participants:** Secondary school students in Years 8-9 (12-14 year olds) in 40 schools in South Yorkshire and the West Midlands.

**Mentors:** Predominantly modern languages university students from the University of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University, University of Warwick and Coventry University.

**Aim of the mentoring:** To increase the number of students choosing to study a language at GCSE. The project targets learners who were unsure or against studying languages at GCSE via a pre-mentoring cohort survey Using mentoring methodologies, the project aims to improve motivation and develop resilience for language learning at GCSE and beyond. It focuses on developing a multilingual, global mindset that is open to all regardless of a learner’s socio-economic background or proficiency in the language classroom. Learners are encouraged to be curious and to challenge their perspectives and assumptions by exploring the world through multiple languages and cultures and by reflecting on their own personal connection with languages, above all with a regional inflection (ie South Yorkshire and West Midlands). Additionally, it aimed to create sustainable links between modern languages departments at universities and their partner secondary schools in order to raise aspiration for Higher Education.

**Delivery:** Blended mentoring was the key delivery mechanism via a bespoke platform designed by the delivery team but owned by the Department for Education. The mentor visited the school for

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<sup>4</sup> [Review of the MFL Student Mentoring Project 2015-2020](#), p. 3.

the first and the last mentoring sessions in week 1 and week 6 and the interim sessions took place online, supported by a set of pre-designed resources

**Results:** Although the programme was interrupted by the pandemic, the evaluation (published in August 2021 and available on the MFL mentoring website) reported an increase of the stated intention of students to increase languages uptake – whether this intention led to an increased uptake was not part of the evaluation. 56% of the mentees reported that they intended to take a languages GCSE, having previously indicated that they were ‘unsure’, would ‘probably not’ or would ‘definitely not’. This compares favourably to the control group in the same school - who had not been mentored - where 47% of students intended to take a languages GCSE.

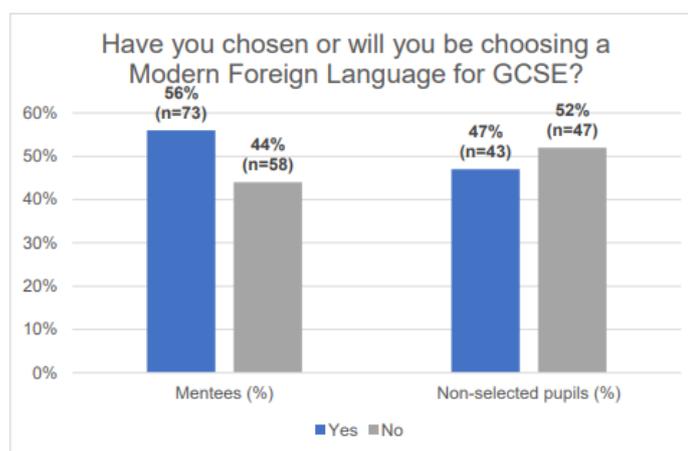


Figure 2. Responses to pupil exit survey question: "Have you chosen or will you be choosing a Modern Foreign Language for GCSE?"<sup>1</sup>

Source: [Language Horizons Year 2 Evaluation Report](#) (p.22)

An additional effect was on the mentors themselves, university modern languages students, as the share of students who are considering a career in teaching rose from 37% before the programme to 46% after participating in it. As recruitment of languages graduates into teaching is regionally highly variable and on a national level a teacher shortage subject, this was a valuable additional effect and is also reflected in MFL Mentoring.

**Resource requirement:** The project was initially funded by a Department for Education grant of £525,000 over two years with additional resource allocated to develop a bespoke mentoring platform. Active in 40 schools, the project required an Academic Lead, based at Cardiff University, a University Lead at each of the universities, a Project Development Manager, an Operations Manager, a Hub Manager and two Regional Coordinators. Training for mentors lasted one weekend. The resource requirements would be expected to decrease, once a programme was initiated and scaled to a large number of participating schools. The resource requirement for participating schools would be low.

### **3.3 OWRI Student Language Ambassador Programme**

This project was part of the Open World Research Initiative (OWRI) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and was operational in 2019-20.<sup>5</sup> The core partner universities were Cambridge, Oxford, Manchester and Queen's University Belfast (in collaboration also with Manchester Metropolitan and Southampton). Each core university worked with 8 classes in 3-5 schools in their region for a total of 15 schools.

**Participants:** Secondary school students in Year 11 in state schools (Year 12 in Northern Ireland).

**Ambassadors:** Modern languages university students, usually final year undergraduates.

**Aim of the mentoring:** To increase the number of pupils progressing from GCSE to A levels in a language. More broadly, to change pupils' aspirations and attitudes towards languages.

**Delivery:** All participating pupils benefited from the 'short programme', i.e. two classroom sessions with ambassadors and a visit to the local university with taster sessions given by staff in languages. Additionally, eight pupils per class benefited from the 'extended programme', which involved an extensive mentoring programme between one ambassador and two school pupils. Mentoring was designed specifically for students who had not committed to taking a language at A level but who had not firmly decided against it. These were students who, in a baseline questionnaire, had answered that they 'probably will' take a language at A level or 'don't know' or 'probably won't'. It focused on supporting confidence-building, particularly with oral skills, and was pupil-led in terms of content and skills development.

**Results:** The [evaluation of the project](#) showed that 14% of the students who had taken part in the programme opted to take a language A level, compared to national progression rates between 6% to 9% for German, French and Spanish. The extended model, which included mentoring, led to 29% of the participants (who by definition had not committed to taking a language) choosing a language A level.

**Resources:** Required coordinators at each of the partner universities, but low resource requirement for individual schools. Per university, 16 ambassadors worked in pairs with 8 GCSE classes. Funding for this scheme was around £ 2,400 per participating class or £1,200 per ambassador (with two ambassadors per class). Each class could have up to 30 pupils, of which 8 would be mentored. The costing includes: an external evaluation fee; £600 per ambassador in administrative costs to the university organising unit, including police checks, £200 per ambassador in the ambassador fees (paid directly to the ambassadors), £200 per ambassador on average for travel costs.

### **3.4 Routes into Languages and Routes into Languages Cymru**

Routes into Languages was formerly funded by HEFCE (2006-2016) to promote the uptake of languages in England. It is now co-ordinated by the University Council of Modern Languages; a number of different mentoring and other activities for schools are being run by Routes university partners in regions across England and there are plans to set up a joint training scheme for ambassadors. Routes into Languages Cymru which is based at the universities of Cardiff and Bangor is funded by five Welsh universities, the Regional Education Consortia, and the British

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<sup>5</sup> A further scheme – Routes into Languages London (Capital L) in collaboration with the AHRC-funded OWRI (Language Acts and Worldmaking) – was interrupted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and thus does not presently have sufficient evaluation for inclusion in this paper. The scheme targeted learners from under-represented backgrounds in language studies and focussed on learners' perceptions of language studies through weekly group mentoring

Council Wales. It operates both a pupil and a student ambassador scheme. Little empirical research was carried out on the impact of early Routes into Languages activities, but a recent study undertaken by the University of York has evaluated the impact of a Routes-type ambassador scheme. Three state secondary schools in the North of England participated.

**Participants:** Secondary school students in Year 9-10 (13-15 year olds).

**Mentors:** Sixth form students from the same school. The mentors were recruited independently of whether they are taking a languages A level.

**Aim of the mentoring:** Increase the uptake of GCSE languages by focussing on intrinsic factors, eg beliefs learners hold on languages, motivation, mindset change (combatting a monolingual mindset/fixed mindset on languages, perceived low self-efficacy in the language domain). The programme uses both affective and cognitive routes to change mindsets.

**Delivery:** This programme involved six sessions, half of which were delivered to the whole class (Sessions 1–3), half in small mentoring groups with sixth form students. Sessions 1–3 specifically challenged subject-specific negative beliefs about languages learning, i.e. monolingual mindsets.

**Results:** Small positive effect on growth mindset, almost no effect on self-efficacy beliefs. The evaluation noted that longer intervention appeared to have significantly higher success rates. In the intervention group the share of students declaring themselves likely to study a modern language at GCSE level increased from 21% to 49%; the evaluation concluded that most, but not all of that increase is attributable to the mentoring and that, to achieve greater effects, more contact time and more mentor preparation would be needed.

**Resources:** As this is a mentoring scheme that involved mentors from the same school as mentees, the resources needed are relatively low. The participating schools had a sixth form, providing mentors within the school. This scheme could be set up by a school individually as it requires fewer external resources. As of February 2022, the University Council of Modern Languages has appointed a new UK Coordinator role for the wider Routes into Languages programme.

#### 4.0 Lessons Learned

**Entirely in-school approach:** The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has [reviewed peer tutoring approaches](#) in which learners in schools work in small groups with same or cross-age tutors. These approaches do not relate to language learning motivation but to maths and literacy skills and cannot be directly compared to the approaches presented in this briefing. They might, however, provide some guidance on the overall viability and effectivity of the method of peer tutoring per se, without taking into account the content of tutoring.

This entirely in-school approach has shown to have ‘moderate’ (i.e. medium) impact akin to five months of pupils’ progress in literacy and maths, and the evidence for this impact is extensive. The costs associated with peer tutoring are very low – this however relies on peer tutors being recruited from the same school. As there is a high variance of impacts between different studies, EEF suggest monitoring of the implementation to ensure the success of peer mentoring schemes.

**Overall, comparing approaches:** The evaluations of the programmes show that mentoring and ambassador initiatives can be effective in increasing the share of students taking languages GCSE and A levels. While the recorded results vary somewhat between different programmes, since the different methodologies of the evaluations render them difficult to compare, some lessons can be

learned, nevertheless. It appears that more intensive programmes, that offer limited small group mentoring, with university students as mentors, seem to have a greater effect on student choices. Inspirational role modelling from a near-peer learner is the common factor in all models outlined above.

Programme	Aims	Mentees	Mentors	Delivery	Results	Evidence base	Resources
MFL Student Mentoring Project	Develop global mindset, raising expectations, improve motivation and strengthen the persistence and resilience of learners studying languages	Students in Years 8-9	University students of all subjects	The face-to-face model includes a mentor who visits a school once a week for six weeks.	Most schools reported an increased uptake of languages amongst the mentored group compared to non-mentored students.	Extensive	Medium to high overall, low per school
Language Horizons	Develop global mindset, raising expectations, improve motivation and strengthen the persistence and resilience of learners studying languages	Students in Years 8-9	Modern languages university students	The face-to-face model includes a mentor who visits a school once a week for six weeks.	A moderate increase in intention of students to take languages: 56% compared to 47% of those not mentored.	Moderate	Medium to high overall, low per individual school
OWRI Student Language Ambassador Programme	Changing pupils' attitudes towards languages and their aspirations. Increasing A level uptake.	Students in Year 11 / Year 12 in NI	Modern languages university students	Two classroom sessions where ambassadors worked with pupils, followed by a university visit. Extended mode with 1 on 2 mentoring.	14% of participants opted to take a language A level, compared to national progression rates of 6% - 9%.	Moderate	Medium to high overall, low per school
Routes into Languages	Change beliefs learners hold on languages, motivation, mindset change (combatting a monolingual mindset, perceived low self-efficacy)	Students in Years 9-10	Sixth form students from the same school	Six sessions, half of which were delivered to the whole class, half in small mentoring groups	Small positive effect on growth mindset; students taking languages at GCSE increased from 21% to 49% (largely but not entirely attributable to intervention).	Limited	Relatively low