

Speaking from Wales: Building a Modern Languages Community in the Era of Brexit

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In Wales, entries to GCSE and A level modern languages are at a historic low. In 2015, just 22% of Welsh pupils sat a GCSE in a modern language, compared to 48% in England. Wales, together with Northern Ireland, has the shortest period of compulsory modern languages education in the European Union, with only three years required at secondary school level. Yet today in Wales, there is considerable momentum to arrest and reverse this decline. Since 2014, the Welsh government, universities, schools, cultural institutes and third-sector organisations have been working in partnership to deliver initiatives at local, regional and national levels. These initiatives aim at increasing the uptake of modern languages and at inspiring young people in Wales to develop a more global mind set. The chapter will outline the current context for modern languages in Wales. It will profile one case study project that uses mentoring to promote modern languages study to secondary school pupils. The chapter will end by assessing the likely impact of Brexit for modern languages policy and education in Wales.

Speaking from Wales

Modern languages in Wales have been in decline for over a decade. Between 2002 and 2015, entries to GCSE modern languages fell by 44%. Welsh pupils perform well at GCSE, with 77% of pupils attaining grades A* to C in 2015, yet attainment at Key Stage 3 (ages 11 to 14) in modern languages is the lowest of all non-core subjects, with the exception of second-language Welsh. This is largely because teaching modern languages only begins in Year 7 (age 11). The picture is similar at A level. Between 2005 and 2014, entries to A level modern languages halved. The biggest declines were in French and German, the staple languages of Welsh secondary education, with French A level registering a drop of 41% and German a drop of 54%. In contrast, the situation for Spanish is one of uneven but modest growth, although figures for 2016 entries show that entries for A level Spanish

dropped by an alarming 26%. These dispiriting trends emerge despite the fact that 82% of all Welsh A level modern language students achieve grades A* to C. Such statistics also mask significant regional and cultural variations. Schools in areas of higher socio-economic disadvantage face the biggest challenges in terms of take-up and attainment. For example, in 2013, the percentage of pupils opting for a modern language GCSE in the Blaenau Gwent region dropped as low as 12%.

The extensive Welsh-medium schooling system is also an important factor in the modern languages landscape in Wales. Welsh medium schools – where Welsh is the medium of instruction – account for nearly one quarter of all schools in Wales. In more suburban areas where English is the dominant language, Welsh-medium schools are often associated with higher educational achievement and become one means for English-speaking parents to make a selective choice in the state-funded schooling system. In many Welsh-medium schools, the majority of pupils speak English at home and are immersed in Welsh at school. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the situation for modern languages in such schools is less bleak overall than for their English-medium counterparts. This may be due to greater awareness of the support needed for language learning in Welsh-medium schools and an accompanying sense of the benefits of bilingualism throughout the curriculum.

This situation is, therefore, something of a conundrum. Why are modern languages so weak in a nation with a strong cultural attachment to bilingualism? Indeed, looking at other Anglophone countries around the world, the picture for modern languages there is similar to Wales. In the US, for example, recent research by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences shows that modern languages education is dwindling at a dramatic rate. Only 22% of elementary and secondary schools students enrol on language classes or programmes. In Australia, the state of modern language learning in schools has been described as ‘dire’ with just 10% of High School Certificate students in New South Wales (Years 11 and 12 or ages 15 and 16) believed to be studying a language other than English. In Wales, we have been able to gain valuable insights into why modern languages are in

decline thanks to two recent reports into language trends in Wales. Commissioned by the British Council from external evaluators, the annual *Language Trends Wales* reports provide a detailed evaluation of the place of modern languages in the primary and secondary sectors in Wales. These reports have highlighted two areas for concern: curriculum squeeze and pupil attitudes towards modern languages and language learning.

Firstly, modern languages occupy a precarious place in the secondary school curriculum in Wales. Unlike Welsh, which is taught from the Foundation phase (from ages 3 to 7) onwards, modern languages are not compulsory at GCSE and begin in year 7 (age 11). Alongside their GCSE and A levels, Welsh pupils can study for the Welsh Baccalaureate, a broad based qualification offering transferable skills alongside traditional learning. When first launched across Wales in 2007, the Welsh Baccalaureate incorporated twenty hours of modern language learning. However, following a Review of Qualifications for 14-19 year olds in Wales in 2012, the language requirement of the Welsh Baccalaureate was discontinued to be replaced by a component devoted to global citizenship skills. There is currently no programme for primary languages in Wales, although the *Language Trends Wales* reports do show that nearly 50% of primary schools surveyed offered modern languages classroom activities. This is often in the form of short taster sessions. However, the secondary school teachers surveyed questioned the value of such sessions as a meaningful engagement with modern languages. The time allocated to modern languages is equally under threat, with 40% of modern languages teachers surveyed reporting that their school does not observe the two hours per week of modern languages teaching recommended by Estyn, HM Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales. Pupils with Special Educational Needs are routinely disallowed from studying a modern language at Key Stage 3 (ages 11 to 14), whilst small groups choosing to study modern languages at GCSE have undermined the viability of modern languages in some schools where financial constraints dictate minimum group sizes for subjects to run. More generally, teachers report that the Welsh Government's new Literacy and Numeracy Framework has

had unintended consequences for modern languages as some School Leadership Teams have not connected modern languages to support for broader school attainment targets for literacy above all. With the further integration of the Welsh Baccalaureate into the secondary school curriculum from 2017, option choices at GCSE in many schools have dropped from four to three (and in a small number of schools to two). Teachers surveyed fear that competition from other subjects in this context will affect modern languages disproportionately.

Secondly, teachers surveyed returned repeatedly to negative attitudes towards modern languages amongst pupils, their parents and the wider public. These concerns are probably shared with teachers in other parts of the UK. Teachers commented on the wide-spread perception that modern languages were 'difficult' and that grading for modern languages qualifications was unpredictable, putting off more able pupils from choosing languages. With new specifications for GCSE, AS and A level modern languages qualifications introduced in Wales in September 2016, these concerns were particularly evident in the *Language Trends Wales* report 2015-16. There was also a strong sense that School Leadership Teams privileged performance in STEM subjects and that this prioritisation was reflected in the reporting structures for schools devised by Welsh Government. More generally, teachers and other modern language stakeholders lamented a narrow perception of what modern languages study entailed. Pupils and parents tended to focus on transactional language skills and had poor awareness of the intercultural benefits of studying modern languages. This then led to misunderstandings about the professional opportunities modern languages could open up for pupils – beyond specialist jobs such as teaching and interpreting. Such negative messaging from parents (and sometimes careers advisors) then influenced how pupils saw the 'usefulness' of modern languages. More positively, a recent surveys of 3,567 Year 9 (age 13-14) students in Wales indicates that 64% of those surveyed 'thoroughly enjoyed' or 'generally enjoyed' their modern languages classes.

Making a case for languages in Wales and taking action

Since 2014, however, many in Wales have recognised the sustained efforts needed to reverse the decline in the uptake of modern languages. This renewed focus on modern languages is due, firstly, to an evolving educational context in Wales, following the recommendations for change made by Professor Graham Donaldson in his independent review of the Welsh curriculum, *Successful Futures* (2015). It is also due to an acknowledgement, on the part of Welsh Government, that the previously centralised model of support for modern languages in Wales was not delivering the expected benefits. From the mid-1990s to 2015, modern languages in Wales was supported by a national organisation, CILT Cymru, the National Centre for Languages in Wales, funded by the Welsh Government and with an annual budget, in its final years, of £600,000. In 2013-2014, the Welsh Government took the decision to cut CILT Cymru's funding by two thirds and, in July 2015, the Centre was wound up. In the wake of CILT Cymru's demise, pressure increased to find alternative means for supporting modern languages in schools in Wales. Modern language communities made their voices heard, above all via the British Council in Wales and the University Council for Modern Languages. At the university level, activism centred on the Routes into Languages Cymru network, a group of modern language stakeholders in existence since 2008 and, from 2014, funded by Welsh universities with additional support from the British Council in Wales, the European Commission in Wales and two of Wales's four regional education consortia. Distinctive and different from Routes into Languages in England, Routes into Languages Cymru provided a good example of the benefits of multi-sectorial partnership working.

A major outcome of rethinking modern languages in schools in Wales has been the Welsh Government's five-year *Global Futures* programme, 2015-2020. This programme responds to one of the four curriculum objectives set out by Professor Donaldson; that learners in Wales be equipped to compete in the new global economy. The programme has three key strategic actions: to promote and raise the profile of modern languages as an important subject at Level 2 (ages 7-11) and as a

longer-term choice for career opportunities; to build capacity and support the professional development of the modern languages teaching profession; and to provide enhanced learning opportunities to engage learners. Each of the four Welsh regional education consortia has ring-fenced funding to support modern languages in their area and each has appointed a modern languages lead responsible for disseminating effective teaching practice and developing training, networking and enrichment activities for teachers and learners. The *Global Futures* programme does not have targets for uptake and attainment at GCSE and A level, a choice debated by some stakeholders initially as diminishing its potential impact. The real strength of the strategy has been its impact in building a community of modern linguist advocates in, and for, Wales. The *Global Futures* Steering Group brings together representatives from the four regional education consortia, the Welsh university sector, the British Council, the Alliance française, the Goethe Institute, the Spanish Embassy Education Office, the Italian Consulate, Confucius Institutes in Wales, BBC Wales, the Open University Wales and Estyn. This partnership approach has reaped rewards in building trust and common purpose, with all stakeholders aware of where we are now, where we need to be in five years and how we might invest in long-term change and innovation. One case study of the benefits of looking afresh at supporting modern languages in Wales has been the success of a modern languages mentoring project in secondary schools, funded as part of the *Global Futures* programme.

Case study: student mentoring and creating partnership

In November 2015, four Welsh universities began training modern languages undergraduates to act as mentors to pupils in Years 8 and 9 (ages 13 and 14) in partner secondary schools within the radius of their university. The eighteen-month project aimed to raise the profile of modern languages in schools and to increase the number of pupils taking one or more modern languages at GCSE. The project targeted pupils less likely to opt for a modern language GCSE, for example male pupils or those eligible for free school meals, with the hope of broadening pupil horizons and showing them

the career opportunities available to those with language skills. In its first year, the project placed 32 modern linguist undergraduates from Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, and Swansea universities in 28 schools across Wales to deliver a six-week programme of mentoring. Working predominantly with small groups of three to six mentees, the mentors spoke about their language journeys; why choose a language a GCSE; the career opportunities that come with languages; and busted myths about the ubiquity of English. In so doing, they highlighted the value of languages for personal and professional development and stressed the importance of intercultural awareness for the world of work. In its second year, the project has recruited and placed 52 university mentors in 47 schools. This equates to a modern linguist undergraduate mentor in nearly a quarter of secondary schools in Wales.

External evaluation of the scheme has stressed the positive impact of the project to date. At the level of take-up, 13 of 21 schools surveyed in the first year of the project reported an increase in numbers choosing to study GCSE modern languages in a context of continuing national decline. In one partner school in an area of significant socio-economic disadvantage, following mentoring intervention, modern languages are running at GCSE for the first time in three years. On a more general level, schools have reported an impact on whole cohorts of pupils in a kind of 'pyramid effect' as word of mouth about the project has generated interest in modern languages. The evaluation report highlights three particular areas where individual pupils have benefited: mentors have provided inspiring role models and demonstrated the excitement of interacting with other European cultures; mentors have grown pupil confidence in themselves as language learners and helped to build resilience; and mentors have raised pupil aspirations and prompted pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to consider going to university. This has been transformative for some for, as one teacher commented, what one mentor inspired in her mentees was the idea that you can 'have your dream' and that going to university is an achievable ambition.

Modern languages in Wales in the era of Brexit

If the *Global Futures* programme and the modern languages mentoring project demonstrate the benefits of partnership working, what could happen now in the era of Brexit? Firstly, developments in Wales predating Brexit will bring further changes for modern languages. Professor Graham Donaldson's *Successful Futures* report will have far-reaching consequences for the school curriculum in Wales. This new framework will see modern languages brought together with English and Welsh to form a Languages, Literacy and Communication cluster, one of six new Areas of Learning and Experience. This could provide a real opportunity to harmonise language teaching and pedagogy, developing 'triple literacy'. This approach has a track record of success in Wales following schemes piloted in the early 2000s through CILT Cymru. Secondly, the now likely outcome from Brexit on loss of membership of the European Single Market will focus minds in Wales on how best to develop and safeguard European and international trade partnerships. Renewed attention to languages skills, training and intercultural competency looks set to reap dividends if Wales decides to invest further in the skills needed to work for multinational (and multilingual) corporations based both inside and outside Wales. Thirdly, it seems likely that we will see greater differentiation in modern languages education and policy amongst the four UK nations. This was always a longer-term trend given devolved education policy. We can already see differences between the four UK nations. Scotland has invested £18 million to date in training and resources for a 'mother tongue plus two' policy that reaches into primary schools. England has set aside more than £35 million for teacher training and workforce development for primary languages, with modern languages one of the core academic subjects now required for the English Baccalaureate. In Northern Ireland, in the absence of a formal modern languages strategy, the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate Northern Ireland has recently expressed her 'serious concern' at the fall in provision and the state of modern languages in Northern Irish schools. In Wales, the *Global Futures* pledge of 'bilingualism plus one', announced in 2015 by the then Education Minister Huw Lewis, suggests that Wales as a nation is aspiring to best practice models being developed in Scotland. Currently, there are no details of the funding required to deliver on such a pledge. It is, therefore, difficult to predict what this will look

like in the future. However, it could be that Wales and Scotland have much to gain from partnership working.

Going forward, therefore, there will be interest within Wales and beyond in its evolving strategy for modern languages. There is impetus within the modern languages community in Wales to develop an integrated programme for modern languages, that begins in primary school and continues to university, and which offers a broad suite of qualifications, including vocational ones such as the Global Business Communication qualification currently offered by Welsh examination board WJEC. With devolved education policy, Wales has the capacity to be a laboratory for new ideas and to be sector-leading in its practice for modern languages. Yet this strategy will need to take account of how Wales voted in the EU Referendum. With the exception of Monmouthshire, Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan in the South, Ceredigion in mid-Wales and Gwynedd in the North, Wales voted to leave the European Union by 52.5% to 47.5%. Repeatedly poor results for Wales in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) league tables demonstrate the real need to combat a culture of educational underachievement in Wales. Both these contextual factors show that we cannot assume messages about the value of a more global mind set have purchase in large swathes of Wales. The modern languages community needs to work with pupils in Welsh schools to challenge a deeply ingrained monolingual mind set – even in a bilingual nation. As one teacher noted in the *Languages Trends Wales Report 2015-16*, we are in ‘a battle against insularity’. This battle against insularity goes to the heart of the challenges not only for modern languages in Wales but across the whole of the UK. As Simon Kuper commented recently in the *Financial Times*, we have a paucity of language skills in the UK compared to other European nations. This means that ‘other Europeans know us better than we know them’. This language deficit risks both future Brexit negotiations and our engagement with a brave new world outside the European Union.

Further Reading

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