

Modern Foreign Languages and The United Kingdom: The Case of Wales

Carlos Sanz Mingoⁱ 

Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales

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Abstract

The results of the Brexit referendum that took place in the UK on June 23rd, 2016, have had impacts that go beyond the realm of politics. They have also had educational repercussions on the already problematic situation of the study of Modern Foreign Languages. Furthermore, it could also affect the way that people understand the importance and benefits of studying and speaking other languages. There are several factors that have an influence on the number of people that study foreign languages, and these range from the traditional to the managerial. This article aims at providing some insights and possible solutions to the dire panorama of Modern Foreign Languages within the existing constraints.

Keywords: Brexit. Modern Foreign Languages. Wales. Educational System. Teaching and Learning.

Línguas estrangeiras modernas e o Reino Unido: o caso do País de Gales

Resumo

Os resultados do referendo do Brexit, ocorrido no Reino Unido em 23 de junho de 2016, tiveram impactos que vão além do âmbito político. Também tiveram repercussões pedagógicas na já problemática situação do estudo das línguas estrangeiras modernas. Além disso, também pôde haver afetado a maneira como as pessoas entendem a importância e os benefícios de se estudar e falar outros idiomas. Existem vários fatores que influenciam o número de pessoas que estudam línguas estrangeiras, e estes vão desde o tradicional até o gerencial. Este artigo visa fornecer alguns *insights* e possíveis soluções para o terrível panorama das línguas estrangeiras modernas dentro das limitações existentes.

Palavras-chave: Brexit. Línguas Estrangeiras Modernas. País de Gales. Sistema Educacional. Ensino e Aprendizagem.

1 Introduction

No one doubts about the importance of learning and speaking other languages. It gives people understanding of other cultures, other ways of thinking and it opens their minds. It may even be a door to new job opportunities. In a world that is becoming more



and more global, speaking other languages is becoming a key asset for many people. But it can also be good for someone's health. Many countries around the world have included Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs) as part of their syllabi and they are even compulsory in the International Baccalaureate, with students studying their own language and literature plus another foreign language.

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However, in the United Kingdom, foreign language learning ceased to be compulsory in the GCSE (General certificate of Secondary Education, the compulsory secondary education learning) under Tony Blair's government. After this decision, the number of students doing an MFL has been decreasing year after year, mainly in German and French. Brexit may have added more tribulations to the situation. The *Language Trends 2019* document published by the British Council emphasizes the "impact felt when they choose their options. In their mind Brexit invalidates the need for language learning." (15) Added to this, the new immigration regulations imposed by the British government may have an effect on the attraction of EU nationals to work in the UK, be it in the educational level, such as teachers or lecturers, or in the work market in general, mainly with those businesses relying on their trade with EU countries.

The present article provides some data extracted from surveys conducted by diverse organisations, such as the Welsh Government, the British Council or Routes into Languages, that depict a bleak panorama of the situation of MFL learning, followed by some suggestions that may help in the recruitment of more students.

2 Methodology

The sources used for this article are based on official documents published by organisations such as the British Council, the Welsh Government, or the University Council of Modern Languages amongst others, with the aim to look and answer at three main impending questions: are there any chances to increase interest on languages again despite the grim situation? What measures are being taken by different stakeholders to





rekindle the interest in MFL learning? And, what could be suggested in order to avoid the decrease of language study in the UK?

The data used were originally produced in the form of surveys with different stakeholders, mainly primary and secondary school teachers, managers, parents and students, but also with businesses, as it is the case of the findings by the British Council. Businesses are specifically vocal in the need of multilingual staff if the British companies are not to be left behind in the global market.

The sources used date from 2015 onwards, and they collect the results of a decreasing trend of MFL intake in Secondary Schools since MFL ceased to be a compulsory subject in the GCSE curriculum in September 2004 (OFSTED, 2021). The use of sources published by such organisations based on the findings of their surveys provide a reliable picture of the situation and some bases on which to draw both some suggestions and conclusions.

The surveys by Ofsted and the Welsh Government provide information on the situation for primary and secondary schools. Routes into Languages, for instance, explains what the situation is like in secondary schools and how this is fed into universities, whilst the British Council focuses on the benefits of multilingual people for the economy and the world of work. The report by the University Council of Modern Languages focuses more on universities.

3 Results and Discussion

On June 23rd, 2016, the United Kingdom held a referendum on its membership to the European Union. To the question “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”, approximately a bit under 52% of the elective population voted to leave the EU, whilst just over 48% expressed their preference towards remaining a member. The conditions of the exit are still being debated at the time of writing this article.

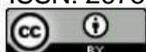




With a clear decline in the number of students studying languages in the United Kingdom, Brexit may seem like another negative impact to be added on. However, are there chances for languages to create more interest again despite the bleak panorama? What measures are being taken by different stakeholders to rekindle the interest in Modern Foreign Language (MFL) learning? What could be the best suggestions in order to avoid the decrease of language study entry in the UK? This article will try to answer those questions and give some indications and suggestions to help in the intake of MFL, with attention to Wales in particular.

In 2012, the conservative government led by David Cameron approved an increase in the university tuition fees across the United Kingdom. Because of this, the universities needed to find ways to engage further with the community and work more closely with other stakeholders in society. One of the outcomes of this was a project called Routes into Languages (henceforth, RiL). This project “supports the civic mission of the universities involved in engaging with their local communities, providing a mechanism whereby teachers and pupils can come into universities, as well as university students going out into schools.” (RiL, 19) This project is funded by five Welsh universities (Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, Cardiff Metropolitan and Swansea), along with the four education consortia in Wales, the British Council Wales and the European Commission Wales, and has two main hubs which are situated in Bangor University in the north and Cardiff university in the south of Wales.

RiL aims at engaging pupils in schools to learn MFL by explaining them their benefits, improving levels of enthusiasm in language learning, and enhancing the students' employability skills through the use and learning of one or more MFL. In order to do so, RiL has prepared a series of activities that aim to foment language learning, such as the A-Level masterclasses, where students of A-levels (the last two years in secondary before university) are taught films and literature by university lecturers on specific events and days through exercises and activities with which the students can practice the languages; through the Student Language ambassador project, where MFL university students are employed and prepared to go to schools and talk about the benefits of learning MFLs;





through the “Spelling Bee” competition, which is an annual competition which provides year 7 students (students who have just entered secondary education) the chance to improve their vocabulary and spelling skills in an MFL; and, finally, though the “Pupil Language Ambassador Training”, where students in year 8 or 9 in secondary schools who are studying an MFL work with younger pupils to inform them of the importance and advantages of learning a language.

Between 2016 and 2018, RiL carried out an evaluation exercise on its achievements and progress. One of the aims of this exercise was to assess the impact that RiL had had on the intake of MFLs at secondary school level. The number of schools taking part in the different activities organised by RiL has increased year on year and this is a good indicator that may mirror a rise in the relevance of learning languages in a post-Brexit Britain and in the interest of the UK not to fall behind in the global trade exercise by losing out in the use of languages, a problem that has been highlighted by the British Council. The schools which took part in the project were both English-medium and Welsh-medium schools, with different numbers of students taking MFL as subject of study. These schools attribute the decrease in numbers of students interested in learning an MFL to different factors, one of which is the introduction of the Welsh Baccaulaureate.

This was designed by the Institute for Welsh Affairs, firstly piloted in 2003 and finally introduced in 2007, with a few changes in 2015. The Welsh Baccaulaureate aims to enhance skills useful for education and employment, and it is studied alongside academic and vocational qualifications. After the inception of the Welsh Baccaulaureate, a number of reviews followed up, and all of them pointed at the poor role that MFLs have in the Welsh educational system.

The 2009 review carried out by Estyn, the independent office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, mainly focused on the teaching of MFL in secondary schools: the results showed a disparity in the number of hours devoted to MFL teaching among schools. It also highlighted the dearth of MFL teaching and learning in vocational courses. The Estyn Report also found that schools were using the Welsh Baccaulaureate language model to develop Welsh rather than MFLs, and, intriguingly, it





emphasised the lack of communication and collaboration between English, Welsh and MFL departments despite their obvious similarities. This is in stark contrast to the so-called English Baccalaureate, which was introduced in 2010 and where the study of a language (modern or classic) is compulsory for the students.

Other reasons collected by the RiL report to explain the fall in the number of students studying MFLs include the addition of more vocational subjects which the students find more attractive than the traditional ones. One key aspect to change this trend should make people aware of the “vocational” side of languages, as they are utterly applicable and complementary to other subjects of study, and this seems to have been taken on by students who understand language skills as important for their lives in general and working in particular.

A point to take into consideration is that the British Council has also highlighted the need for more graduates with languages in the future work force in the United Kingdom, precisely on the basis of the vocational, cultural and practical skills acquired in language learning. Another further reason highlighted is related to organisational constraints, since several schools pointed at their management teams as a reason to explain why languages do not develop further in their institutions.

MFL teachers in this report suggested a change in the way management teams think, in order to further promote MFLs and how they are key to the development of skills for pupils, with some teachers explicitly stating that there is a need for headteachers to understand the importance of MFLs and for them to have a greater priority in the schools’ curriculum. Nonetheless, further to this, it would be advisable to involve other stakeholders, such as employers who attach importance to working with multilingual staff, for schools and headteachers to realise the importance of language learning in a bleak panorama: between 2002 and 2008, the entries for MLF in GCSE, the compulsory exams in secondary school in the British system for students between 11 to 16 years old, decreased by 57%, according to the *Language Trends Wales Report* published in 2018, with German declining by an astonishing 71% in this six-year period.





The low number of students doing MFLs at GCSE means that the potential number of students possibly continuing to study them at A-level will be even smaller. This is especially needed after the poor results that MFL subjects have had in attracting students since they ceased to be compulsory in 2004 under Tony Blair's Labour government. Schools are very aware of exam results. Thus, as MFLs are perceived as difficult subjects, as journalist Anna Bawden highlighted in an article published by *The Guardian* in May 2019, therefore, they keep being consistently moved to the optional section of the curriculum.

Even, more importantly, the role of parents is key for the provision of language learning. The parents of this generation have also had the opportunity of learning an MFL, or more, and of enjoying the advantages of living in a multilingual and multicultural society such as the British in particular and the European in general. However, parents tend to attach more importance to other skills, such as Information and Communication Technology before languages. They think that English is widely spoken in the world and they need no other language to communicate.

However, Nicholas Ostler, in an article published in February 2018 in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, explains: "Transnational lingua francas, once established, always give off an aura of permanence. Yet when circumstances change, they fall. And the change is clearly coming." However, the touristy places they usually travel to on their holidays also employ English speaking staff, so this becomes a catch-22 situation: why should British tourists have to learn a language if they are spoken to in English by staff who needs British tourists for their businesses?

Therefore, the tourist destinations may also have a share of the blame in encouraging the negative perception of the British population to learn a foreign language. Thus, since parents think other subjects may be more practical than MFLs, the schools feel the need to cater for this. Nonetheless, hope for improvement on the state of the MFLs teaching is reflected in the intention of the Welsh Government to introduce MFL learning in primary schools, which is the norm in many of the European countries.

This new curriculum also aims at finding the best way for English, Welsh and the MFLs to collaborate in the teaching process by finding common synergies. The "Language





Trends Wales 2018” report (henceforth, LTW2018) also highlighted four factors for the decline of language learning in the United Kingdom. The first one has already been hinted above: the students perceive MFLs as very difficult, and marks tend to be lower than in other subjects, with a harsher marking. The second one, in communion with the RiL report, is that more importance is usually attached to technological and scientific subjects, both by parents and by school management. The third one, only applicable in this case to Wales, is the inception of the Welsh Baccalaureate which has had an impact on the reduction of subject choices for students. The Welsh Baccalaureate gives students a more comprehensive education than the A-levels, which tend to be more specific, and students can take this Welsh Baccalaureate on top to their own A-level subjects. As a fourth consideration, and according to this report, around 37% of schools think that “the Brexit process is having a negative effect on attitudes towards the study of MLF” (9), with this effect being more evident in the area of South-East Wales. This report remarkably finds a correlation between the number of students studying an MFL in Wales and the different economic factors, with the suggestion that the poorer the area the student lives in, the fewer the chances they will study an MFL. Nonetheless, here the school keeps being another important factor: in Welsh medium schools (those where the syllabus is taught in Welsh) fewer than one in ten students study an MFL. LTW2018 also shows that MFLs are still more widely chosen by girls, rather than boys. Regarding whether MFLs are compulsory or optional, a worrying feature is that in 93% of the schools which took part in the study, MFLs are optional subjects and, of these, the report states that in 18% of those schools, pupils “are actively discouraged from taking” MFL subjects (LTW2018, 31).

On top of the reasons offered above, another interesting issue is that schools encouraging students to do MFLs are situated in the countryside, with only 8% of urban schools actively engaging with the students in this matter, which has an impact on the number of students deciding to do a language at university level. Intriguingly, this does not mirror the results of the Brexit vote in Wales: cities, and mainly university cities, such as Cardiff, Bangor and Aberystwyth, voted to remain in the EU, whilst most of the rural areas voted in favour of Brexit. This LTW2018 report also emphasised that those schools that





also provide A-levels tend to be more pro-active in encouraging language study if compared to those where A-levels are not offered. Thus, the main reasons for the decline in MFL learning in the United Kingdom, and especially in the post-16-year-olds, can be surely attributed to several causes.

To sum them up: firstly, the perceived difficulty of MFL at all levels. To the difficulty of learning a new language, other factors must be added: many MFLs are taught by using grammar, whilst English language, as a subject, does not resort to this kind of teaching. Consequently, this has the paradoxical effect that students improve in their comprehension of how English works through the learning of an MFL, but they find learning this MFL difficult. This has another effect since, as there are so few students doing MFL at GCSE, this means that there will be fewer at A-levels, where the number of subjects to be studied decreases to three or four. The situation is even bleaker in vocational courses where languages are hardly taught. Secondly, many participants in the learning process (parents, teachers, headteachers), understand that science and technical subjects are far more important and useful than MFLs and school management may not be acting to prevent this privilege of technical or vocational subjects over languages; when taught, time teaching of a MFL does only account for very few hours across the academic year. Thirdly, in Wales, the Welsh Baccalaureate has also had a negative impact on the MFL learning as foreign languages have been displaced by the vast number of optional subjects and by the low number of subjects that students do in their final years before entering the university. Fourthly, after the Brexit vote, attitudes towards MFL learning have not improved and, according to different reports, around one third of schools which took part in the LTW2018 survey have reported that Brexit has had a negative or very negative impact on how some of the stakeholders think of MFL.

There seems to be a more negative impact on pupils' motivation to study MFL in urban areas, as indicated above, with 56% of the schools in the Southeast area of Wales commenting on this negative impact, as opposed to only 23% in Central South Wales schools. The following table shows the different counties in these areas and how they voted



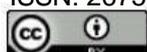


in the Brexit referendum. All data have been rounded up or down, except for Monmouth (to avoid the 50/50 figure resulting after rounding the percentages):

Region	County	Remain Percentage	Leave Percentage
Southeast Wales	Blaenau Gwent	38	62
	Monmouth	50.4	49.6
	Newport	44	56
	Torfaen	40	60
	Caerphilly	42	58
Central South Wales	Rhonda Cynon Taff	46	54
	Bridgend	45	55
	Vale of Glamorgan	51	49
	Cardiff	60	40
	Merthyr Tydfil	44	56

Given this situation, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs, in its English acronym) in the United Kingdom have started a campaign to foment the learning of MFLs: in May 2019, more than 150 academics from 36 universities wrote an open letter published by the British newspaper *The Guardian*, in which they warned “that the exams are graded too severely” and they bring unnecessary stress to students. This is a clear indication that the drop in the number of students learning a language happened after MFL study ceased to be compulsory in 2004. The decrease in the number of students doing an MFL in GCSE and A-levels (33% fewer in French and 45 % fewer in German for the A-levels since 2010) has had a knock-on effect in the recruitment at university levels and in the number of students doing a language degree. Consequently, *The Guardian* informs that this is “causing growing numbers of universities to not back or even scrap languages.”

An interesting fact related to this are the findings of the survey carried out by the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) and the Association of University Language Communities (AULC) and published in 2018 regarding MFL teaching and learning at university level; the authors conclude: “The survey tracked the history of MFL teaching in HEIs in the UK. All but two of the participating universities (Greenwich, Oxford Brookes) were founded before 1992 and had established MFL at their institution as a formal discipline before that key year when many so-called new universities (formerly polytechnics) were introduced. Of the two exceptions, only one institution started offering





MFL after 2008, that is, after the global financial crisis that brought significant funding cuts to all sectors, including higher education. All 24 universities in the Russell Group¹ include MFL in their academic offerings. The evidence suggests that the MFL discipline has fared less well in new universities (if programmes were opened they are all but closed) and only one MFL department has opened in the last ten years.” (UCML, 2018: 11) This attitude towards (mainly) European languages may have another unnecessary effect: once the UK leaves the EU, the opportunity to recruit further specialists in languages might become increasingly difficult (Ward in *TES*, November, 2018).

In 2012 the Review of Qualifications published by the Welsh government offered a detailed list of thematic recommendations on secondary school teaching, one of which was that the “language requirement should be replaced, and a more substantial language option be offered” (Welsh Assembly Government, 2012: 37). This clearly suggested that there are needs for more contact hours in Modern Foreign Language learning which would help to stop the decline in student numbers.

However, it is clear that the Welsh government has not acted upon this recommendation. This report was followed by the so-called “Successful Futures” by Professor Graham Donaldson. He argues for a whole renovation of the educational system in Wales and adds that “the role of the multiple language learning is particularly important in Wales” (Donaldson, 2015: 48). He also points out several issues, such as the lack of investment and time constraints in the timetable as being two important factors in the lack of MFL provision in Wales and advocates for starting MFL learning in primary.

The Welsh government, after the Donaldson’s review, published a document called “Global Futures”, which stated that the learning of MFLs should indeed now start in primary school. This report states that the purpose of this change is to “promote and raise the profile” of MFLs from an early age (2015: 7). The Welsh Government also made clear they want to highlight the benefits of studying MFLs and, in order to do that, it started a

¹ “The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector.” Available at: <https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/about/>. Accessed on: 05-17-2022.





collaboration with universities through the “Route into Languages” initiative, as explained above.

Some suggestions to increase the uptake of students doing MFL would be:

1. The LTW 2018 highlighted that the introduction of MFL learning at primary school was to become important for Wales in the future, although this is against a background of time pressure and economic hardship. A closer collaboration between primary and secondary schools with the support, if and when needed, from universities may help to lessen this issue.
2. The development of MFL teaching, mainly with the focus on the languages that the British Council’s report *Languages for the Future* highlights as key for the international opportunities of the UK. Thus, there should not be any correlation between the Brexit vote and the need of European languages. On the contrary, the need for the UK to keep close ties (economically, culturally and in trade) with the EU, but also with other countries, should clearly translate into the promotion of learning languages, and this should be reflected in their ability to be taught at all levels in the education system. This should also be done in a climate where teachers from the EU are leaving the United Kingdom, which is another spanner in the works of language learning.
3. MFL learning should be prioritised in schools and not placed as optional modules to favour other subjects. The teaching of MFL should not only be compulsory in the syllabus of any secondary school, as it is in many educational syllabi around the world, but it should also start earlier, at primary school level. Research shows that the earlier a language is taught and learnt, the more the students will learn and achieve proficiency in the foreign language.
4. There should be more emphasis on the teaching of MFL in vocational courses (for instance, Tourism Studies or Business Studies), in view of the fact that languages will be key in the development of these sectors for a post-Brexit Britain. Learning an MFL could be an ideal complement to any kind of degree or course, as it will give the students a set of skills needed for the UK workforce in the future. In fact, some universities in the United Kingdom are currently offering a programme by which students can learn a language added to their undergraduate or postgraduate degree, to improve their CV and get better prepared for the employability market. These programmes usually follow the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

4 Conclusion





Despite the efforts made by universities interacting with secondary schools and the work done after the “Global Futures” report, there is still a worrying trend of MFL decreasing in the UK in general, but more ominously in Wales in particular, in part due to the introduction of the Welsh Baccalaureate, which has triggered the reduction of MFL as a choice of study. Likewise, the new syllabus exams for both GCSE and the A-Levels are deemed very difficult by students, parents, and teachers in general. Another factor that has had a negative impact on the uptake of languages is the economic hardship and the cuts to budgets after the global recession in 2008.

Whilst the Brexit referendum took place when the decrease had already happened, it has had an impact on the way people perceive languages, despite the fact that the British Council report has underlined that “Languages will continue to be important for successful international relationships at all levels.” (BC, 4). The same report suggested that a “lack of language skills and the consequent limited cultural knowledge and international awareness, remain a threat to the UK’s economic success.” (BC, 32). This is paired up with the fact that “there has not been universal progress in the learning of English as a foreign language.” (BC, 32).

The British Council concludes that the five more important languages for the UK in the future are, in this order: Spanish, Mandarin, French, Arabic and German, with Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Japanese and Russian completing the top ten. The British Council has used several indicators to reach to this conclusion, namely: UK exports, language needs of UK businesses, trade priorities, high growth markets, diplomatic and security priorities, the language interests of the British, the visits from tourists from other countries into the UK, the government’s international education strategy priorities, the levels of English proficiency in other countries and the prevalence of different languages on internet (see pages 54 and 55 of the report).

This report is clear in highlighting that the UK “has now reached a critical juncture where investment in upgrading the nation’s language skills is critical” (BC, 32) and puts the responsibility of the learning process not only on the education departments of Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, but also on businesses and citizens, and it is





mainly, in our opinion, that a critical change of mind must be achieved in this last group, as exemplified with parent's thoughts on the vocational side of subjects.

The introduction of the English Baccalaureate, with the compulsory learning of a modern or a classical language, is a point of hope, since the percentage of students that study a language has risen six points, to 46%, between 2010 and 2018. Still, however, more must be done, and some academics have asked for changes in the grading system of languages, something that it is being investigated at the time of writing this article.

Some projects (such as RiL Cymru and a similar project that has been carried out in Sheffield, England) where undergraduate students mentor pupils in secondary schools have had excellent results. For instance, in Wales, the percentage of students who decided to study an MFL after the RiL project increased from 18.6% to 43%, a hopeful note bearing in mind that MFL are not compulsory in Wales (unlike the English Baccalaureate).

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ⁱ **Carlos Sanz Mingo**, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9614-6693>

Cardiff University

Carlos A. Sanz Mingo is a Senior Lecturer in Hispanic Studies and Translation Studies in the University of Cardiff, Wales. In 2008 he defended his PhD thesis on the trilogy "The Warlord Chronicles" by Bernard Cornwell. His research interests are the Arthurian Legend, pedagogy of MFL and translation practice.

Contribuição de autoria: 100%.

E-mail: mingocs@cardiff.ac.uk

Editora responsável: Cristine Brandenburg

Especialista *ad hoc*: José Rogério Santana

Como citar este artigo (ABNT):

SANZ MINGO, Carlos. Modern Foreign Languages and The United Kingdom: The Case of Wales. **Rev. Pemo**, Fortaleza, v. 4, e48404, 2022. Disponível em:

<https://doi.org/10.47149/pemo.v4.8404>

Recebido em 07 de junho de 2022.

Aceito em 16 de julho de 2022.

Publicado em 16 de julho de 2022.

