

# **Promoting Less-Widely-Taught Languages. The Outreach Experience of the Foreign Language Awareness Group for Schools (FLAGS)**

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In the current downward trend in the uptake of languages, and especially of less-widely-taught languages, FLAGS aims at enthusing Sixth-formers with an interest in either Italian, Russian and / or Portuguese through a series of language sessions delivered through the Virtual Learning Environment WebCT. Pupils' progress is aided and monitored by University students, who act as language facilitators on a weekly basis. This paper assesses the outcomes at the end of the first year of FLAGS' life, as well as the challenges met during the project's setting-up period and throughout its duration.

## **Introduction**

This contribution assesses the positive impact that FLAGS, the new outreach project developed by Italian Studies within the School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures (LLC) at the University of Manchester, has had on local school pupils in raising awareness of language learning, with a view to promoting the study of less-widely-taught languages at tertiary level. The outcomes are based on the analysis of both student mentors' and pupils' feedback obtained through evaluation questionnaires completed by pupils at the end of the language sessions and oral interviews conducted with mentors.

## **Background**

Typically, Italian Studies has an intake of 40-50 students per year, the majority of whom have little or no knowledge of the subject when they enrol. These students join a course for complete beginners, which aims to give them language competence comparable to that of an A-level qualification after one year of study. The remaining students have an A-level or equivalent qualification in Italian. Italian Studies is the fourth language studied within LLC (after French, Spanish and German) and its uptake by new students seems to be following a declining trend, which is much more worrying than that experienced by the three major languages, considering the smaller number of students who study it (cf. Kelly, 2002; Marshall, 2003). A similar declining trend is being experienced by other less-widely-taught languages, especially Portuguese and Russian. FLAGS was therefore created with a view to improving the current situation, both in order to address the outreach agenda of LLC and to stimulate a pre-retention issue prior to the students' formal enrolment.

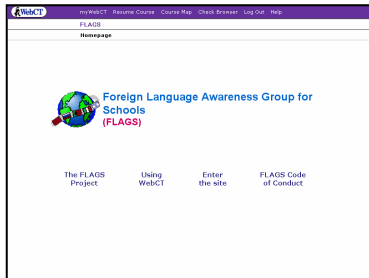
## **FLAGS**

FLAGS was devised with the double purpose of benefiting prospective students of the University and furthering the University's recruitment agenda. Specifically, FLAGS aims to address the following issues: to promote language learning of less-widely-taught languages; to establish and strengthen links with partner schools and colleges in the Manchester/Greater Manchester area; to provide support for the academic orientation of potential students, to develop peer mentoring skills among students at the University of Manchester, to provide university language students with an opportunity to play an active part in the development of their discipline, and to develop/improve participants' ICT skills.

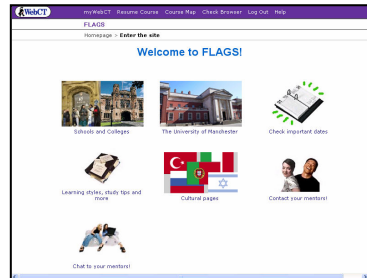
The project was conceived, developed and set up between May-September 2005. It is sponsored by LLC's internal funding and is implemented through the Virtual Learning

Environment WebCT. The use of WebCT supports technology-mediated learning practice, which is believed to enhance learner experience and learner motivation (Shield, 2002). It is organised in the following manner: Small groups of 2<sup>nd</sup> year university students (two or three students per group), studying at least one of the relevant languages, visit partner schools/colleges to deliver short sessions on Italian, Portuguese, and Russian. They offer an initial 45-minute hands-on session, introducing pupils to one of the languages on offer, as well as delivering a short session on careers in order to increase sixth-formers' awareness of potential employment with a degree in Modern Languages. During this meeting sixth-formers will have the chance to familiarize themselves with the purpose-built WebCT website.

After this initial face-to-face mentoring session, university students continue to mentor sixth-formers virtually via the WebCT website, which contains FAQs on Higher Education, and information on various degrees and various languages from a student's perspective. Sixth-formers are expected to complete either four 5-week-long sessions (two languages per semester) or two 9-week-long sessions on two of the languages on offer (one language per semester). The language sessions have been written by University of Manchester staff with the aim of building enthusiasm for the learning of languages among sixth-formers. When carrying out the 9-week-long sessions, the pupils are offered the chance to meet their mentors again midway through Semester 1. With both formats, the mentors also pay a final visit to schools/colleges upon completion of the sessions. Should the mentees embark upon a language-related degree at the University of Manchester, the virtual mentoring would continue into their first year. At the same time, mentees joining the University could consider becoming mentors for FLAGS and, where circumstances allow, go back to their former school/college to promote language learning.



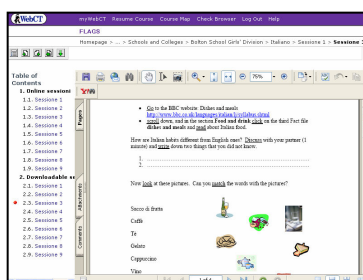
**Picture 1**  
**FLAGS' welcome page**



**Picture 2**  
**FLAGS' contents page**

Initially, the organisation and setting-up of the project was demanding and time-consuming, particularly because it was managed exclusively by one member of staff. Two main organisational problems emerged: the preparation of language sessions and liaison with student mentors. A set of sessions that would integrate basic language acquisition as well as raise cultural awareness in the language studied was envisaged, in line with Calvert's belief that raising cultural awareness and providing students with opportunities to develop cross-cultural understanding represents the "hidden curriculum" of foreign languages (Calvert, 1999). This was achieved by integrating material created by LLC teaching staff with existing material produced by educational institutions, such as the BBC and Oxford Dictionaries. It was envisaged that sessions based on this dual approach would provide seamless integration between the four language skills, as they would offer pupils the possibility of extracting information on the culture of the language of choice as well as doing language exercises using video clips, sound clips, gap-filling exercises, reading, short writing assignments, simple grammar-based exercises, and short speaking tasks. The use of media-rich materials

to practise and develop linguistic skills is regarded as a key component of the language learning experience (Dlaska, 2000; Amores, 2002) and it constitutes the core principle underlying the conception and design of the FLAGS' language sessions. Liaison between colleagues from the various disciplines involved proved crucial to the success of the devising of the sessions, as these were based on the original Italian template and adapted to suit the different languages and cultures. They were divided as follows: 1) Italian language and the alphabet; 2) Introducing people / oneself; 3) At bar. Food and drinks; 4) Numbers, animals, verbs (to be and to have); 5) Colours and clothes; 6) Cities and monuments (revision of verbs and adjectives); 7) Telling the time and everyday actions; 8) My family and my spare time; 9) Famous Italian people, jobs.



**Picture 3: Example of one language session**

Subsequently, sessions had to be uploaded onto the WebCT server and tested. The collaboration with LLC's IT services has been of fundamental importance for the smooth running of the project at every stage of its development.

The second organisational issue was recognised and tackled from the outset. Student mentors had to be recruited and trained in all disciplines. Initially mentors were recruited according to two principles: they were either mentors who had previously done some mentoring work (as was the case in Italian Studies), or they were students of above-average language ability. In the first case, recruitment took place on a voluntary basis; in the second case, tutors approached these students directly. The students who had not done any previous mentoring work had to be trained for this purpose; all students also had to attend an introductory session outlining FLAGS' aims and its remit. In the future it is envisaged that the training phase will take place at the same time and using the same format for all students through the University's Students as Partners division (see link in bibliography). It must be noted that student mentors get paid a fee for undertaking their weekly mentoring work. It was felt that, contrary to other language projects based on a purely voluntary basis (see link on bibliography), the role of language facilitators for FLAGS needed to be formalised in economic terms in order to obtain the highest degree of commitment from the student mentors.

## Outcomes

At the end of one academic year, the results were very encouraging, as three schools took part in the project (Bolton School Girls' Division and Oldham Sixth Form College in both semesters, Stretford Grammar School in semester 2), 51 pupils took part overall, 9 mentors were recruited, and three languages were involved (Italian, Russian and Portuguese) in FLAGS.

In terms of the feedback received from school pupils, it can be concluded that FLAGS fulfilled its aims. However, when comparing the feedback from semesters one and two, issues concerning the interactive side of FLAGS are still emerging, despite the fact that the most recent comments show a lesser concern with the chat room facility and the interaction with mentors overall (this issue will be explored in more detail in the following sections). On the other hand, feedback from student mentors was consistent

over the two semesters in terms of satisfaction with the project and personal achievement.

**Feedback for pilot project in semester 1 (pupils):**

- I enjoyed the interactive work
  - We enjoyed having mentors
  - I've learnt useful general phrases
  
- I didn't enjoy the chat room, it wasn't working!
- I didn't enjoy that it was on a laptop

**Feedback for project in semester 2 (pupils):**

- I enjoyed the concept in general (being able to take on the basics of a new language)
- I enjoyed the web interaction
- I enjoyed the listening exercises
  
- I didn't enjoy printing off the sheets
- A little difficult in the later stages but manageable

**Feedback for pilot project in semester 1 and semester 2 (mentors):**

- Very rewarding
- It offers the chance to further an interest in foreign languages

In terms of recruitment potential, it can also be claimed that FLAGS fulfilled its aims. As the data below show, potential uptake for languages is increased for all schools/colleges, as is the number of pupils considering studying one of the languages introduced by FLAGS. (It is worth noting that not all students answered the evaluation questionnaires, and not all students who did answered all the questions)

**Bolton School Girls' Division**

Potential uptake of languages rose from <b>7 out of 14 to 11 out of 14</b>	<b>9</b> out of <b>15</b> would now consider studying a university language taster
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**Oldham Sixth Form College**

Potential uptake of languages rose from <b>4 out of 10 to 8 out of 9</b>	<b>6</b> out of <b>10</b> would now consider studying a university language taster
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**Stretford Grammar School**

Potential uptake of languages rose from <b>4 out of 8 to 7 out of 8</b>	<b>4</b> out of <b>8</b> would now consider studying a university language taster
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To sum up, for FLAGS to be successful, three main areas need to be addressed at every stage of the project: good communication and co-operation between all staff involved; support infrastructure; and IT support.

As far as good communication and co-operation between all staff is concerned, it is essential that both staff within the university and school/college staff maintain a good working relationship. Due to the constraints imposed by timetabling issues and the different calendar arrangements at schools and university, the initial stages of the project encountered some communication problems, which resolved themselves after FLAGS had been running for a few weeks and staff became more familiar with the requirements of the project. Secondly, support infrastructure must be guaranteed at all times. Specifically, the WebCT site and content must be ready in advance of the start of the first session; the mentoring support must be in place and available at designated times during the week; the schools' hardware must be set up so that it is working when the sessions take place; and administrative support must be in place in order to secure the smooth running of the project. Finally, IT support must be available throughout the project. Unavailability of IT support would undermine the running of FLAGS, as the project relies heavily on interactive communication.

### **Future developments**

FLAGS is a project with highly transferable potential across new HE institutions and the secondary sector. Once the project template is in place, it can be easily adapted to forge new partnerships. With this purpose in mind, FLAGS aims to increase the number of school/college partnerships in the Greater Manchester area (two new schools have already expressed interest with a view to start in September 2006 and January 2007), as well as involving other HE institutions in the project. In this respect, a partnership with the University of Birmingham is due to start in September 2006, whereby the FLAGS template will be transferred onto the University of Birmingham's WebCT server. It is also planned that FLAGS will become more flexible in terms of sessions offered in order to suit the schools' different timetables: in this respect both lengths of taster sessions (5 or 9 weeks) will be offered at any one time to the schools taking part in the project.

As far as the development of sessions is concerned, several issues are being considered at present. Firstly, the possibility of adding new languages to the existing ones is being pursued. It is felt that some of the Middle Eastern languages (and especially Arabic) would greatly increase the project's potential and make it more attractive to potential students. Secondly, the possibility of increasing Voice Tools integration is also being investigated: software compatible with WebCT (e.g. Wimba Voice Tools) could be added to sections of the language sessions in order to improve the content's versatility and make it more appealing to users.



language taster. It is therefore highly advisable that all hardware and software is checked prior to the start of the first session (guidelines on how to do this have been created by LLC's IT support staff).

### **Concluding remarks**

Undoubtedly, creating and working within FLAGS has been very rewarding indeed for everybody involved. Not only did the University of Manchester establish contacts with new institutions and disciplines, FLAGS gave its staff the possibility to develop new research areas and contribute to the outreach agenda of the School. On the other hand, FLAGS also fostered student development in terms of valuable transferable life skills. As FLAGS continues to develop and more partnerships are created, it is essential that delegation and scalability are taken into account in order to maximise the project's potential and attract interest from as many prospective students as possible.

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### **Related links**

<http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/tlao/studentsaspartners/>

<http://www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/ExternalRelations/CurrentProjects/>