

“ Keep Talking”

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“Keep Talking” is a project aimed at motivating KS3 pupils to retain an interest in language learning and to support their teachers. It is divided into three strands:

- a) provision of undergraduates as role model classroom assistants in KS3 language classes in local secondary schools where KS4 language provision is under threat;
- b) organisation and funding of workshops at the University for KS3 pupils and teachers from a wider range of local state secondary schools (excluding Language Colleges), including use of open access facilities, opportunities to talk to native speaker undergraduates and a focus on careers and transferable skills from language learning;
- c) organisation and full funding of symposia for KS3 and KS4 language teachers to share experiences, encourage cooperation and boost morale and motivation.

The paper will describe the rationale for the project, how it is organised and funded and will report on evaluation of the impact of the project in local schools in Manchester.

Background

The background to the project was our anticipation of further challenges to numbers of GCSE entries in languages once they were optional at Key Stage 4. This was due to come into force in October 2004 and we were aware from our contacts with local school teachers that in some schools the change in requirement had been anticipated. We were being asked for support. We were also informed by the annual publication of Language Trends data about KS4 languages by CLT/ALL (e.g. the 2005 Trends - see related links) in the past few years, data which has gradually demonstrated particularly worrying trends in the North West region. From these surveys we have also been concerned about increased social divisiveness which could emerge from language take-up remaining strongest in independent schools and the motivation for the project was therefore also from a widening participation perspective. We were also informed by the work by the Regional Languages Networks and the need for language skills in the workforce to attract inward investment in the North West region. Finally, the publication of *A New Landscape for Modern Languages* (Kelly & Jones, 2003) further raised awareness of the impact of trends in school language learning on the future of University provision. All of these factors combined, in spring 2004 to inform the bid made by the University of Manchester to the North West Development Agency and HEFCE through its HEIF(2) initiative for the “Keep Talking” Project.

The University of Manchester’s School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures already had¹ and continues to have, a strong track record in working with schools and colleges in its region. Its project work includes initiatives aimed at widening participation in language study; general recruitment and motivation activities with KS4 and Sixth form students; provision of taster classes in less taught languages; workshops on campus and in the language centre open learning facilities; the provision of classroom assistants into secondary schools and sixth form colleges drawn from our Erasmus

¹ The then School of Modern Languages in the Victoria University of Manchester had a strong track record and put the bid forward; the new expanded School was formed at the time of the establishment of the new University of Manchester following the merger with UMIST in October 2004.

students²; e-mentoring of sixth formers by undergraduates with accompanied use of materials delivered through our Virtual Learning Environment; and a consultation forum for language teachers across the sectors.

The “Keep Talking” project

The “Keep Talking” project was designed to draw on the experience and strengths of the School by replicating some of the activity types and offering them to KS3 pupils. The overall aim was to support school teachers by assisting with the motivation of KS3 pupils to want to continue taking a language in KS4. The schools originally selected as project participants were, particularly, those in the Manchester LEA who were struggling most with their language results at GCSE and where it was most likely that the optionality at KS4 would hit hardest.

The funding obtained for “Keep Talking” from NWDA and HEFCE was for a 2 year project in the first instance, spanning the academic years 04-05 and 05-06. Some continuation funding has since been secured, which will be described below in light of evaluation and continuation strategies. This paper focuses on the first two years of the project specifically. The project was organised into 3 strands:

- a) University students into KS3 classrooms
- b) Workshops for KS3 pupils on campus
- c) Symposia/mini-conferences/away-days

With additional elements of evaluation & feedback, surveys, mapping the local context and encouraging of teachers to share strategies to counter trends. Each of the strands is described in more detail below with feedback received on them, followed by a summary of the trend mapping exercises which accompanied the project.

a) Strand a: sending University students into KS3 classrooms

We used experience from the *Sharing Words* project run with GCSE groups and sixth formers previously, deploying visiting Erasmus students. For “Keep Talking” we recruited and selected Year 2 and Year 4 (i.e. returnees from the year abroad) undergraduates. In 04-05, 20 undergraduates worked with 150 pupils across 4 schools; in 05-06 23 undergraduates worked with 267 pupils across 5 schools.

The schools viewed their involvement very positively as can be seen by the responses from Teachers in Table 1 and in the written feedback supplied:

	YES
Do you think the project has been useful to your KS3 pupils?	100%
Has the project succeeded in promoting language learning to KS3 pupils?	90%
Has the project encouraged the take-up of languages at KS4 level?	80%
Has having a classroom assistant benefited your pupils?	100%
Would you be interested in having a classroom assistant again?	100%

Table 1 teacher feedback on strand a

- *“Student related to the pupils very well – gave language learning more credibility.”*
- *“KS4 language learning has increased.”*
- *“Gives them oral practice they wouldn’t ordinarily get due to time constraints.”*

² The Sharing Words project which piloted this was awarded a European Award for Languages in 2005.

- *“90% of the year 9 group will continue with French at KS4.”*
- *“It is very depressing that in spite of all the efforts we all put in pupils don’t want to learn a language.”*

Feedback from the undergraduates was very positive as regards the experiences they gained, but somewhat more mixed as regards the effectiveness of their roles in the schools as can be seen from the following examples:

- *“Many pupils used it as an excuse to be out of the classroom and were not interested in improving their French”*
- *“I am seriously considering a career in teaching...this job has given me the work experience that I needed”*
- *“the contact teachers need to be more informed about the project, so they can make use of our presence”*

From the point of view of the University, administratively it involved many of the same challenges with which we were familiar from *Sharing Words*, the problems associated with communicating with teachers in shared staff rooms and often with little direct access to email; the complexities of school timetables to be matched against those of the undergraduates including processes for criminal record checks. There were also variable levels of commitment from schools to supporting the process. Some teachers were more engaged in exploring the value added which could be gained from the presence of the undergraduates than others. We have, however, recognised this as a very valuable experience for our students.

b) Strand b: workshops for KS3 pupils on the University campus

We drew on the experience of running workshops as part of our KS4-focused widening participation project *UMILAP* in designing these workshop visits, which were held in non-teaching weeks of the University calendar in January and June so as not to clash with heavy levels of undergraduate use of the open access facilities. The format of the visits included a campus tour with current undergraduates; use of video material to challenge perceptions about the point of language learning with an activity related to languages and employability; question/answer sessions with French/German/Spanish native speaker students, in which the pupils initially asked pre-prepared questions; hands-on workshop activities in the Language Centre using satellite TV, internet and CALL software activities.

In 04-05 14 Manchester LEA schools brought a total of 420 pupils, while in 05-06 this was expanded in 05-06 to 41 schools from across the Greater Manchester region who brought a total of 1100 pupils to the University. These visits have been deemed a massive success, very well received by teachers and pupils as can be seen from the feedback below, which came from the January 2006 visitors.

I now have a more positive opinion about University	89%
I found out something about language learning at university that I did not know before	79%
% rating activities as Excellent/Good	
Language Centre Activities	98%
Campus Tour	88%
Video/employability activity	78%
Native Speaker Question & Answer Session	93%

Table 2: pupil feedback on strand b

Q: What have you learnt about studying languages at university after today's visit?

- *Learnt about opportunities languages create*
- *There are different ways of learning languages*
- *There are more languages offered than I knew*

Q: What will you do now as a result of your visit today?

- *Will continue to study languages*
- *Work harder at languages*
- *Think about my future career involving a language*

I think they now have a more positive opinion about University	91%
% rating activities as Excellent/Good	
Language Centre Activities	100%
Campus Tour	83%
Video/employability activity	100%
Native Speaker Question & Answer Session	79%

Table 3: teacher feedback on strand b

- *it has given them a positive view of languages, by showing that languages are real, to be used by people to communicate*
- *Pupils enjoyed the day and are discussing the value of choosing a language option*
- *Pupils responded positively to all the activities and by the end of the sessions had gained a lot both socially and linguistically.*

c) Strand c: symposia for teachers

A symposium was held in June 05 and another in June 06. Each was attended by some 50 people drawn from schools who had participated in strands a and b, from LEAs and other related bodies. The first one included a presentation from Kate Green of the DfES on the Languages Ladder, followed in 06 by Vivienne May from ASSET Languages on how the ladder can be used as a motivator for KS3 pupils, and to provide alternative assessment to GCSE for KS4 pupils. The 05 symposium included a presentation from the Language Advisor for Wirral LEA about cooperation within an LEA to support language learning take-up. There was also a focus on the Languages Work materials from CiLT. The 06 symposium included a presentation from Susan Wareing of OFSTED on 'Making Entitlement a Reality' following the ministerial announcement of January 06 about expectations of language take-up at KS4. The Regional Language Network NW also presented a range of materials and case studies, particularly from employment, which can be used to motivate language learning in schools. Results from surveys in the City/Region were also presented.

Feedback from the teachers who attended was very heartening, given that the aims were to encourage sharing of ideas and cooperation, rather than to provide an opportunity to bemoan the state of languages in their schools. We were also concerned to empower teachers about what they could do for themselves and not just stimulate ever greater demands on the University to intervene. Some of the comments are reproduced below.

- *It was very useful to discuss these issues with teachers from a variety of schools.*

- *Just what we needed, it is vital to target years 8/9 otherwise there won't be KS4 MFL in some schools.*
- *It's great to see that other schools are in the same situation but also how much we can do all together.*
- *I've got lots of plans and new ideas to help drive languages forward.*
- *You realise that other schools have similar problems and therefore you feel less isolated.*
- *I will use contacts made on the day to try to work together to improve uptake of languages at KS4.*
- *I found the talks informative and relevant.*

The symposia produced recommendations of ways forward to support schools in the challenge of motivating KS4 language take-up. Teachers asked for a powerpoint presentation or a leaflet which they can use in their own schools to detail the benefits of studying languages. We recommended use of the Languages Work materials particularly. We are, however, taking this on board to an extent through the North West Universities Language Alliance of which more below. They also asked for more workshops run in schools by businesses related to languages, and were referred to the Regional Language Network for suggestions of companies. There is a constant need for celebrity role models for young people which is recognised as a challenge for all of us involved in promoting language learning. There were requests particularly for campus-based workshops reflecting the perception of the motivational qualities associated with bringing pupils out of school as well as strongly worded requests for more lobbying of government to change regulations about language learning compulsion in schools.

Some of the suggested practical solutions which schools could implement themselves included using ASSET languages in year 9 to show achievement; using ASSET in KS4 as an alternative to GCSE or to accredit *ab initio* learning of a new language, while contributing to the entitlement measures as well as to league table scores; doing practice GCSE foundation papers in year 9 to demonstrate accessibility of GCSE; exploring with head teachers more flexible GCSE option choices; keeping a high profile for languages including notifying headteachers of the innovative work being done and entering those who speak community languages for GCSE and/or ASSET to raise the profile of language achievements in the school.

Surveys of trends

We felt that it was important to survey the reality of KS4 language teaching and learning in the schools involved with “Keep Talking” rather than to make assumptions about take-up based on anecdotal evidence. Surveys were therefore conducted in both years of the project.

In the first year (04-05), only Manchester LEA state schools (excluding Language Colleges) were surveyed and 12 responded. All but one had already made languages optional at KS4, starting in some cases as early as 1999 (i.e. well in advance of the 2004 'official' date).

In the second year (05-06), the survey was expanded across more schools in Greater Manchester with a total of 46 respondents. These were as follows:

- 5 Language Colleges; 1 Independent Muslim High School for Girls; 1 City Academy;

- LEAs: Manchester (4); Tameside (10); Trafford (7); Bolton (4); Oldham (4); Stockport (4); Warrington (3); Wigan (3); Cheshire (2); Salford (2); Bury (1); Rochdale (1)

Apart from the 5 Language Colleges, a further 7 of the responding schools had kept languages compulsory at KS4, a further 2 had compulsory languages in 05-06 but were making them non-compulsory from Sept 2006. This left 32 responding schools with non-compulsory languages at KS4 in 05-06. T

The results presented below are from these 46 schools, but presented so as to distinguish between the whole cohort (a), the cohort excluding language colleges (b), those where languages are optional at KS4 (c), and a small group where languages were compulsory for the first time in that academic year (d), in order to see what immediate effect optionality had had.

	% of Yr 10 taking MFL in 0506	% of Yr 11 taking MFL in 0506
a) All respondents (46)	49%	53%
b) Excluding 5 Language Colleges (41)	43%	48%
c) All schools where MFL is optional 0506 (32)	30%	36%
d) Schools where optional from 05-06 for first time (7)	39%	65%

Table 4: KS4 language take-up – Year 10 and Year 11

The figures show a continued gradual decline in language take-up between the year 11s and year 10s; with the most dramatic decline showing where the year 11s were progressing from compulsion in year 10 but the year 10s had optional languages for the first time (d). In category (c), the percentages in individual schools ranged from 100%-3% of Year 11s and from 66% to 0% of Year 10s. In fact only 6 out of the 32 schools had 50% or above taking a language in Year 10 in 05-06.

The 04-05 survey of just 12 Manchester schools (with only one school with languages compulsory) showed an average in each of the years of 27%, therefore much lower than the 'equivalent' category for 05-06 (b).

A further question looked at the proportion of Year 11s entering GCSE to look at the impact over 2 years in terms of school exams (Table 5):

	% of Yr 11 entering at least 1 GCSE MFL in 2004	% of Yr 11 entering at least 1 GCSE MFL in 2006
a) All respondents (46)	69%	49%
b) Excluding 5 Language Colleges (41)	67%	44%
c) All schools where MFL is optional 0506 (32)	61%	35%
d) Schools where optional from 05-06 for first time (7)	80%	55%

Table 5: average of Year 11s entering GCSE

Bringing the two tables together to look at year 11s (Table 6), there is still some further drop-off between those who continue with a language in KS4 and those who actually enter the GCSE.

	% of Yr 11 taking MFL in 0506	% of Yr 11 entering at least 1 GCSE MFL in 2006
a) All respondents (46)	53%	49%
b) Excluding 5 Language Colleges (41)	48%	44%
c) All schools where MFL is optional 0506 (32)	36%	35%
d) Schools where optional from 05-06 for first time (7)	65%	55%

Table 6: comparison of MFL take up with GCSE entries (data from Tables 4 and 5)

However it is good to note that the margin is lowest in the category (c) with pupils who have all chosen to take a language, than it is in the categories which include some schools where languages are compulsory. In other words, there is a better conversion rate from taking the language course to entering the GCSE where pupils have actually chosen KS4 languages.

The survey also sought feedback from teachers as to the measures they felt were required to inspire more take-up of KS4 languages and GCSE language entries. The responses fell broadly into 4 categories, which echoed many of the issues raised in the Strand C symposium discussions:

- Role models: the need for positive role models to present to pupils, including celebrities, those having success in careers where languages have been helpful etc;
- Events/workshops in/organised by universities: reiteration of the positive benefits to be derived from our activities, particularly if pupils can be taken out of school and brought to universities for hands-on workshops (not just tours and talks);
- External engagement in schools: speakers from universities and employers going into schools;
- School-/curriculum-related issues: these centred on everything from the need for a major change in GCSE syllabuses to resource issues including needs for language assistants, more access to IT labs for language lessons and more account taken of appropriate timetabling of language classes, as well as campaigns to make head-teachers more supportive of languages;
- Public awareness/engagement/policy: these included calls for languages to be made compulsory again, to the need for government ministers and broadcasters to be more language aware and to provide positive messages.

Where to next?

We would assess the “Keep Talking” project to have had a very positive impact in many ways on a large number of pupils and schools. It is difficult at this stage to measure what impact our intervention may have had on subsequent take-up of languages at KS4 but we shall be surveying the same schools in 06-07 to find out how they are doing. In the meantime, we have managed to demonstrate through our surveys that our ‘gut’ instincts of a problem which might need tackling are more than borne out by the figures.

It is important to note that, during the second year of the “Keep Talking” project, there have been ministerial announcements, including the ‘Jacqui Smith’ letter to

headteachers in early 2006 underlining the expectations of a minimum of 50% of KS4 pupils taking a language and of school action plans to raise this figure further. In light of the statistics in the Greater Manchester region presented above, there is some considerable work to be done to reach these figures but we welcome the DfES intervention. In addition, we welcome the introduction of ASSET languages to provide an alternative way of meeting these targets in KS4 and to motivate more KS3 pupils to look on languages more positively.

Meanwhile, we have secured continuation funding for a scaled down version of the “Keep Talking” project from HEFCE via HEIF (3). We shall be focussing more of our efforts on Strand (b) than the other strands in light of feedback and evaluation of impact. We have also joined forces with 9 other universities in the North West region to form the North West University Language Alliance, which is organising larger scale events for KS3 pupils.

We therefore realise that any hoped for upturn in KS4 figures in our region might be due to a range of interventions, not just “Keep Talking”, but that this will have made contributions in terms of direct motivation of pupils, but also of awareness, understanding and empowerment of teachers to work more cooperatively in the face of common challenges.

Bibliography

Kelly, M & Jones, D (2003) *A new landscape for languages* The Nuffield Foundation.

Related links

A new landscape for languages (Nuffield):

http://languages.nuffieldfoundation.org/filelibrary/pdf/languages_report_48pp_hires.pdf

Asset languages: <http://www.assetlanguages.org.uk/>

Language Trends in KS4 2005 and 2005 North West summary at:
http://www.cilt.org.uk/comenius/ks4_survey_2005/ks4_survey_2005_nw.doc and
http://www.cilt.org.uk/comenius/ks4_survey_2005/ks4_survey_2005_nw.doc

Languages Work: <http://www.languageswork.org.uk/>

North West University Language Alliance: <http://www.rln-northwest.com/nwula/>

Outreach projects run by the School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures, University of Manchester: More information on all projects is available from:
<http://www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/ExternalRelations/CurrentProjects/>

Regional Language Network North-West: <http://www.rln-northwest.com/>