

Could Technology Save Language Learning?

There are fears AI could kill off language learning for good, but technology could actually be its saviour, writes Dr Stephen Burley, Head Master of King's High School, Warwick.



I think most people would agree that language learning in secondary schools is in a deeply uncomfortable place. The statistics tell a tale of rapid decline.

In the last twenty years the number of students taking French GCSE has fallen by more than 60 per cent and the number taking German GCSE has fallen by nearly three quarters.

Spanish offers a glimmer of hope with numbers taking the GCSE doubling from 61,232 to 125,000, but the picture for A-level uptake is similar. French A-level entries have halved in the past 20 years and there were just 7,063 entries last year. German A-level candidates are now a rare breed, with just 2,358, although Spanish saw an encouraging rise in entries from 5,781 to 8,110 in the same period.

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The picture in higher education is even worse. Since 2007 eleven UK universities closed their languages departments with others no longer offering single-honours language degrees, instead opting to offer only joint honours courses.

The factors behind these numbers are complex and varied, but the government decision in 2004 to make a language GCSE optional rather than compulsory was inevitably a key moment. Alongside the mono-lingual malaise of English as the most widely spoken world language, it is very clear that many young people simply do not value, or see the relevance of traditional language learning.

So, within this bleak context, what is the future for language learning in schools?

To my mind, the most important response to this question has been provided by John Cloughton, former head and co-founder of The World of Languages and the Languages of the World (WoLLoW).

WoLLoW is a foundational curriculum in languages for KS2 and KS3, designed specifically to address the national decline in language learning. It harnesses and embraces the extraordinary multi-lingualism of so many students, and encourages broader and deeper thinking about how language works and how languages shape our lives.

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Citing fragmented language teaching in schools and a lack of coordination between language departments, Cloughton co-designed WoLLoW to inspire, encourage and excite pupils in junior schools and the first years of secondary school to be curious about languages. As a result, they go on to see the relevance of the further study of languages.

Alongside WoLLoW, there have been other promising developments too. For example, some language departments have moved away from the narrow and Euro-centric definition of modern languages in schools to embrace Mandarin, Arabic and other more widely-spoken modern languages. Furthermore, the rapid rise of popular language learning apps such as Duolingo, Babbel, Write It, Drops, LingoDeer and uTalk suggest that there may be more hope than the bleak statistics indicate.

The AI revolution is fully underway and it has significant implications for the future of languages in schools. For some, it will be the final nail in the coffin as AI technologies replace the need to learn languages through instant translate and other developments: why go to the trouble of learning a language when AI can navigate a conversation for you in any world language?

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My view on this is more optimistic. Far from replacing the need and relevance of language learning, I hope that AI and other technologies will accelerate and open up language learning, making it easier and quicker to develop language skills and fluency. At King's High, we are in the early stages of testing this out.

Our new Language Futures Project is an exciting development which sees a group of avid student linguists come together to work under the supervision of a language teacher who directs, guides and structures their independent work on a

range of apps and online resources to learn an array of world languages. Students have specialised in a language of their choice, sometimes related to familial connections. These include Swedish, Dutch, Farsi, Mandarin, Turkish, Norwegian, Modern Standard Arabic, Italian and Korean.

In class, they share their learning journeys, reflect on their progress, discuss and compare the languages they are learning, and work independently to develop vocabulary knowledge and speaking, listening and writing skills. Most have a designated mentor, fluent in their chosen language, who meets with them regularly to review progress and speak with them in their chosen language.

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They are all working hard to develop competence and understanding in their chosen language and to achieve the ISEB Project Qualification (iPQ) which enables them to complete structured independent research on their language or on a connected cultural and ethical question.

Is this the future of language learning and will this replace traditional GCSEs and other courses? I don't know yet. It certainly offers a new model of language learning inspired by student choice, agency and ownership which promotes independent learning guided by an expert and a mentor.

Currently, many of the online resources are aimed at beginner and intermediate levels but as and when more advanced, AI-driven language learning technology develops for advanced language learning, we will look to move the project from the co-curriculum and into the curriculum, to sit alongside traditional MFL GCSEs.

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To my mind, there will still be an important place for traditional language teaching and learning, though this will inevitably sit alongside a more immersive, technologically-driven form of language learning co-ordinated by an expert.

Schools nationally will need to explore and embrace new methods and new ways to inspire the new generations of young people to see the relevance and importance of learning a language in the twenty-first century. It's certainly interesting to see the early developments flourish.