

Research working paper

'Remembering Empire': supporting take-up of French through history and culture¹

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Abstract: One of the most pressing challenges facing languages practitioners in Scotland's schools is the difficulty of supporting learner motivation to study languages and maintain uptake in the Senior Phase. This article reviews a research-led project, 'Remembering Empire', and suggests that Interdisciplinary Learning (IDL) may offer a means to generate increased learner interest in language-learning. As one of the four Contexts of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), Interdisciplinary Learning (IDL) is central to the curriculum but has proven difficult to deliver. The 'Remembering Empire' project produced and delivered free French-language digital materials aimed at supporting language acquisition and historical and cultural knowledge and skills amongst S2-S3 learners about to make Senior Phase subject choices. Evidence from four schools demonstrated an average increase in take-up of languages of 22% among participants when compared with control groups in the same schools. The two strands of the project are now available to schools across Scotland in the form of the Languages Explorers Scotland initiative, co-ordinated by SCILT, and the 'Remembering Empire' online resources for teachers: <https://pieds-noirs.stir.ac.uk/remembering-empire/>.

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Secondary teachers of languages face a range of challenges. Foremost amongst these is the long-term decline in learner uptake of languages beyond the Broad General Education (BGE) phase. Without a healthy uptake of languages in the Senior Phase, the sustainability of the language-learning pipeline that produces languages graduates for the workplace and new teachers for the classroom is at risk. Recent research by Lanvers and Graham (2022) highlights the contribution of learner motivation to subject uptake and applies findings from the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) framework, drawn from psychology, to their analysis:

In SDT, the core psychological dimensions are conceptualised as a continuum, specifically one extending from more self-determined (intrinsic) to more controlled (extrinsic) regulation. Five distinct categories along this continuum have been identified: *external regulation* (motivation coming entirely from external sources such as rewards or threats); *introjected regulation* (externally imposed rules that students accept as norms they should follow in order not to

¹ 'Remembering Empire' was developed thanks to a Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement award from the Arts and Humanities Council (AH/W010291/1).

feel guilty); *identified regulation* (engaging in an activity because the individual values it highly and sees its usefulness); *integrated regulation* (involving choiceful behaviour that is fully assimilated with the individual's other values, needs and identity); and pure *intrinsic regulation* (highly autonomous, engaging in behaviour purely out of interest). (Lanvers and Graham, 2022, p. 224).

Intrinsic regulation, marked by learner interest and enjoyment, is associated with better outcomes in terms of educational outcomes and attainment (Parrish and Lanvers 2018). This is a challenge for language practitioners: research by Arfon et al (2025), undertaken with a sample of 5,800 learners in Wales aged 12 to 14, found that of the 52% who indicated that they did not intend to choose a language at GCSE, half gave 'It's boring' as the reason. This is consistent with anecdotal evidence in Scotland suggesting that teachers sometimes struggle to combine the complex ideas of interest to teenage learners within the constraints of second/third language acquisition at Third and Fourth Level. Similar challenges may be encountered when undertaking interdisciplinary learning (IDL) projects involving Languages, despite the fact that Languages involve the study of other cultures and so are intrinsically interdisciplinary, and that IDL, as one of the four contexts, is germane to CfE.

'Remembering Empire' is a research-led project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council that was developed to bring the findings of academic research to secondary-school learners of French.² Through the case-study of France's 132-year colonisation of Algeria, it aimed to transform learner understandings of empire and so develop the attributes of global citizenship that are embedded within the CfE as part of the 'Learning for Sustainability' framework. As such, the project contributed to the Scottish Government's anti-racism strategy and supported efforts to decolonise the curriculum. It also aimed to support uptake of languages, and so was delivered to pupils in the autumn before they made subject choices for S4.³

Method

The project worked with two classes in five secondary schools across central Scotland, with teachers responding to invitations to participate. Catchments were varied, ranging from SIMD deciles 2-8. They covered a mix of urban and rural areas across Central Scotland, and included non-denomination and Catholic schools. In each school both classes completed surveys before and after the programme delivery: one class

² 'Remembering Empire' contained two programmes: one aimed at BGE learners, discussed here, and the other which aimed to support pupils preparing for the French Advanced Higher portfolio. While both sets of resources are freely available on the project website (<https://pieds-noirs.stir.ac.uk/remembering-empire/>), the results of the latter are outside the scope of this article.

³ Although Scottish Government 1+2 languages policy entitles pupils to be taught two languages until the end of BGE, the 2023 survey of Local Authorities found that only 61% of schools were offering languages provision until the end of S3. Accordingly, 'Remembering Empire' was delivered to a mix of S2 and S3 classes, depending on the school's policy.

participated in the programme while the other class acted as a natural control group. This allowed researchers to isolate the impact of the programme.

The project had two strands: firstly, it trialled a form of non-language-specific near-peer mentoring pioneered by the MFL Mentoring project based at Cardiff University and funded since 2015 by the Welsh Government. In the Scottish project six university languages students, with expertise in at least one additional language, were trained to lead six 50-minute sessions in person with groups of up to ten learners. The final session was delivered during a school visit to the university. Mentees were selected from the participating class on the basis of their survey responses, which indicated that they were undecided about choosing a language for S4 study. The mentoring sessions did not include language or grammar-specific content; they focused on a range of topics that supported the development of intercultural understanding and encouraged learners to see the value of languages in everyday life, including sessions on history, music, colour and translation.⁴

After the initial six mentoring sessions, the second strand of six sessions involved the full participating class. The sessions were delivered by team members so that learnings could be incorporated into the design of final online materials. An initial session asked learners to consider why people leave their homes and move elsewhere. Through discussion of different categories of traveller – emigrants, settlers, immigrants, refugees – it introduced learners to the history of France’s presence in Algeria and made connections to Scotland’s history of emigration and colonisation. In doing so, it contributed to the Experiences and Outcomes for Social Subjects.⁵ The five sessions that followed centred on a digital graphic novel, *Entre ici et là-bas*, that told the story of a teenage girl, Jeanne. Her family emigrated from France to Algeria in 1871, settled there and built a farm using the labour of the local Arab people. The graphic novel depicts the systemic injustice of a colonial society in the years leading up to the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). With the war now ending, Jeanne’s family is being forced to leave Algeria on a ship bound for France, and Jeanne reflects on the events that her family has lived through as they face an unknown future. The graphic novel was written in French, with vocabulary panels to support the images in developing understanding. It was accompanied by an introductory video, and a video of a native speaker reading the graphic novel.

Optimised for mobile and desktop, the graphic novel was designed to be studied in four sections. Each section was accompanied by a Powerpoint presentation to be discussed with the full class, and a learner Activity Pack. The class presentation examined the relevant section of the graphic novel and considered the issues of global citizenship that it raised. Learners were encouraged to think about why Jeanne and her family were leaving their home, and how they might feel about it. It then presented language points, such as country names and emotions, that are commonly learned at Level 3 and 4,

⁴ The student language mentor programme has since developed into Languages Explorers Scotland, an online initiative co-ordinated by SCILT and open to schools across Scotland.

framing them within the context of the story. The downloadable learner Activity Pack allowed learners to explore the language-learning points through exercises that explored the emotions of different characters, or asked them which objects they would pack in a suitcase if, like Jeanne, they were leaving home. By framing common grammar and language content within the scope of the graphic novel, the project integrated the achievement of Languages Experiences and Outcomes with learning around global citizenship to produce a fully IDL project that could be delivered by Languages teachers alone. The project delivery concluded with a day-long visit to the University of Stirling, where pupils met university staff and students, participated in seminar workshops, and mentees met their student mentors again.

The project outcomes were captured via mixed methods. All of those who consented to data being recorded – participating (64) and control (26) classes of pupils, student mentors (6), teachers (5) – were surveyed before and after the intervention. Seven focus groups were held with pupils following the activity, and teachers were interviewed. At the end of the process, a series of 2 online and 2 in-person Career-long Professional Learning (CLPL) training sessions for teachers across Scotland were held, and subsequently interviews and focus groups were held with teachers who had used the materials in their schools.

Results and discussion

The project took place in 2022, in a context marked by learning loss resulting from the uneven delivery of online language learning. Among the pupils, 94% of participants and 100% of the control group were of White background. Girls made up 52% of participants and 65% of the control group.

Mentoring responses

There is increasing interest in the potential for mentoring programmes to provide effective support for individual learning (Mackie, 2022; Blake and Gorrara, 2019). In relation to language-learning, the Welsh MFL Mentoring project has been independently assessed as encouraging 50% of mentees to choose a language at GCSE, against a Welsh average of 20% (Blake and Gorrara, 2019, pp. 32-33). In the focus groups held for this project, pupils involved in the mentoring stated that it was ‘really good fun’ and described the mentoring sessions as being a different experience to their normal lessons, with more opportunity for ‘conversation’ and ‘sharing their opinion’. They enjoyed working in smaller, more informal groups and felt the mentor spent time ensuring everyone understood what was going on in the sessions and that they were confident participating in the activities. One teacher noted that ‘[pupils] who did do the mentoring group, are more engaged and clearly have more knowledge now’. Another teacher noted that their less confident pupils developed their social skills and confidence, attributing it to a combination of the mentoring experience and the university visit where they worked with pupils from other schools. Around 75% of the

pupils indicated that they agreed/strongly agreed that they enjoyed the mentoring process and 70% that they made a positive connection with a university student.

Participating class responses

Learners were asked to respond to the statement ‘I like learning about other cultures and languages’. Amongst participants, the proportion who agreed/strongly agreed increased by 3% after the programme from 64% to 67%. This contrasted with the control group, who had not studied the programme and where the number who disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement ‘I like learning about other cultures and languages’ increased by 19%, from 15% to 34%. This suggests a gap in intrinsic motivation of 22% between the participating and control classes.

The participants were asked about their understanding of key concepts such as colonialism. Asked to respond to the statement, “I understand what is meant by colonisation and the impact it can have on people”, those answering strongly agree and agree in the post-participation survey dropped by around 8% in the control group compared with an increase of around 19% amongst the participating pupils. The increase in understanding amongst participating pupils is further evidenced in the post-participation survey where over 60% of pupils responded agree or strongly agree with the statement “I understand it better now”. When asked about their understanding of immigration, over 50% of participating pupils indicated they had a better understanding in the post-participation survey and 30% indicated they were now more sympathetic to immigrants. Similarly, when asked after the programme about their attitudes towards refugees, over 30% of participating pupils indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more sympathetic to refugees than before and around 50% of participating pupils indicated that they understand the topic better now. Pupils indicated that they had not had the opportunity to discuss these ideas elsewhere in the curriculum, and they enjoyed the opportunity to make connections between historical events and their own family histories, and with current news stories. This demonstrated a degree of ‘integrated regulation’ that is associated with higher levels of motivation.

Similarly, when reporting on their experience of the project, over 75% of the participating pupils indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they learnt new things; over 50% of the pupils indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the importance of languages more; and around 50% agreed or strongly agreed that they were interested in learning more about languages.

In focus groups, the participating pupils were asked about the experience of studying the graphic novel and described it as being “really good”. They reported that the images allowed them to follow the story, and that this supported their linguistic understanding. Pupils also felt their vocabulary improved because they came across lots of new words as part of the translation. They enjoyed the discussion element of the project, the variety of the activities and the fact that the sessions were led by a visitor from the university. The project provided pupils with a chance to “experience a different side of languages” and “The project helped me to understand more about immigration and

refugees”, and they welcomed the variety that the project brought to their classes and learning.

Research into language-learning has found that learner motivation declines between ages 11–14 (Coleman, Galaczi and Astruc, 2007; Williams, Burden and Lanvers, 2002). In terms of intention to choose a language for S4, there was a notable difference in responses between participating and control group pupils. Among participating pupils there was an increase of 3%, from 26% to 29%, in those stating that it was likely/very likely that they would choose a language following the programme. This modest increase should be seen in the context of the control group, where those stating that it was likely/very likely that they would choose a language fell by 12% from 31% to 19% following the programme. This gives an overall gap in intentions to choose a language between the participating and control classes of 15%. Amongst the mentored group subset, there was an increase of 9%, from 19% before the mentoring to 26% afterwards.

The intentions to choose a language for S4 were compared with the learners’ actual choices and distinct differences were noted. When the choices made by the control group were compared with the participating groups, there was a net increase in decisions to study a language of 22% amongst the participating groups. This was higher than the 15% gap in intentions to study a language. While there was considerable variation in the increase in uptake across the four schools where languages were optional for S4, all saw an increased uptake amongst participants, with the highest increase being 51%. One school saw a minimal increase (4%); mentors and project staff attributed this to behavioural issues that disrupted classroom and mentoring delivery.

The project offered a number of CLPL events to introduce teachers to the online materials. Based on surveys before and after the CLPL, there was an increase of 56% in those feeling confident/very confident in delivering lessons on global citizenship, and 44% in confidence in delivering IDL. In interviews and focus groups with teachers who went on to use the materials, teachers commented that their pupils were “very engaged” with the lessons and that it was “quite different from the usual language learning” (Teacher, School A). The contemporary relevance of issues of colonialism and migration meant that teachers and pupils were able to make connections between historical and current events, including those studied in History and Modern Studies, and with pupils’ own family histories. This enabled teachers to explain the relevance and importance of studying languages: “This was a really good opportunity just to show that, you know, it's not this is how language applies in real life, but how you can use another language to explore other people's experiences, and broaden your horizons” (Teacher 3, School C). The resources are now in their second year of use, with teachers at schools not involved in the original project reporting that they will continue to use them annually.

In conclusion, ‘Remembering Empire’ offers one possible model for integrating the delivery of language acquisition with global citizenship content around questions of colonialism and migration. By focusing on the French empire learners are supported to

think critically and without defensiveness about the colonial past, and can be encouraged to make connections with Scotland's history and with contemporary events. Bringing questions of culture and history into language-learning increases learner interest, resulting in higher intentions and actual uptake of languages for national qualifications. Given the breadth of cultural research being conducted by schools of Languages across Scotland's universities, there is undoubtedly scope to support schools more widely by translating research findings into resources aimed at school learners. Such a move would also benefit universities by delivering on their research impact agenda. Finally, as the discussion around the Curriculum Improvement Cycle moves in the direction of so-called 'Big Ideas', 'Remembering Empire' suggests that integrating culture may offer a means of increasing learner motivation and so supporting uptake of languages.

The 'Remembering Empire' resources for S2/S3 and Advanced Higher French can be found online at <https://pieds-noirs.stir.ac.uk/remembering-empire/>.

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