**Changing language mindsets about modern languages: a school intervention**

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the UK language learning crisis, several studies have aimed to influence student attitude towards languages via school interventions, with mixed results. A 6-session tacking diverse metalinguistic issues (e.g. cognitive benefits of language learning, world languages) was carried out in three secondary schools in England, using both whole-class and small-group teaching. The study included a hitherto unmet aim, that of changing mindsets in mixed-ability settings, including students with the most negative language mindsets. Pre-post differences reveal that beliefs about language learning improved more than self-efficacy. Inclination to continue modern foreign language (MFL) study improved more in those students initially most disinclined to continue. Given the well-known gender divide in MFL uptake, it was pleasing to note that the intervention showed greater effect on boys than girls. Qualitative and quantitative data suggest that the intervention might have had a small ‘equalising’ effect in gender differences, in that boys’ self-efficacy improved more than girls’. The study concludes that the dual delivery (whole-class teaching and in-school mentoring, delivered by older students in the same school) offers a promising format, but that, in order to achieve greater effects, more contact time and more mentor preparation are needed.

Keywords: Language learning, intervention, language mindsets, gender differences, GCSE option

**Introduction**

In the context of Brexit, language competencies in the UK matter more than ever before (Holmes 2018), as the need increases to communicate with nations for whom English is not an official or recognised language within their country (Lanvers et al. 2018). Currently, the UK is performing, along with the Republic of Ireland, the worst in Europe in terms of language competencies among the general population (European Commission 2012), costing the UK economy the equivalent of 3.5% of Gross Domestic Product (Foreman-Peck and Wang 2014). By common consent, in all aspects of language teaching and learning, (e.g. policy, curriculum, availability of teachers) the UK is underachieving.

In order to contextualise the language crisis within the remit of the UK’s education systems, a brief explanation of the place of modern foreign languages (MFL) within them is necessary. Like all education policies, MFL education is devolved to the four UK nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. England makes up 85% of the UK secondary school population. Currently, in all four UK nations, MFL study is compulsory up to age 14, and students may choose to (dis)continue an MFL beyond this age. Students in England and Wales sit high-stakes exams – theGeneral Certificate of Secondary Educationor GCSE - at the age of 16 in all subjects studied up to this age.

As this study was conducted in England, we will henceforward report on MFL in England only. Individual secondary schools may determine which languages they offer, and generally determine their own language policy beyond the age of 14, including which languages to offer to which students. Despite many governmental attempts to increase MFL uptake at age 14+, the last three years have seen the percentage of students aged 16 with a language qualification stagnating around 42% (British Council 2019), the reasons for this being partly systemic and partly psycho-cultural. As good grades in an MFL are relatively hard to achieve, many schools offer the ‘choice’ of an MFL GCSE to better-performing students only (British Council 2019), in an effort to achieve good pass rates and a good position in the competitive ‘league table’ rankings of school students’ average GCSE achievement. Monolingual mindsets, and the perception that ‘everyone speaks English anyway’ (Hajek and Slaughter 2014), contribute to the low uptake, as does the generally low level of self-efficacy (Schunk and Pajares 2009) among British foreign language students (Graham and Macaro, 2008).

The English government is currently aiming to increase MFL uptake beyond age 14 via two routes: the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) qualification and a pedagogy review (Teaching School Council 2016). Concerning the Ebacc, students aged 16 will gain this qualification automatically if they achieve ‘good grades’ in five GCSE core subjects, including a MFL. The government has stipulated that, by 2022, 75% of 16-year-olds should have achieved the Ebacc qualification – that is to say, continue with their MFL study age 14-16, rising to 90% by 2025.1 However, it remains unclear how individual schools are to operationalise these targets, what (dis)incentives they might experience if they reach the targets (or not), and what the benefits for individual students are of having an Ebacc qualification. So long as schools which decide to permit more students to study languages run the risk of worsening their average GCSE results, many schools will remain disincentivised to increase their MFL uptake, especially as other higher-stakes school performance measures conflict with the Ebacc measure (Lanvers forthcoming). A second governmental pathway to engender MFL change currently focuses on disseminating, via in-service teacher training, enhanced pedagogical expertise in – largely traditional – teaching methods (Teaching Schools Council 2016; NCELP no date). By now, England has an abundance of official reports describing in some detail the problems concerning MFL delivery and recommending a range of measures to remedy poor delivery, for instance the annual British Council or British Academy reports on the state of MFL in England (the latest being British Council 2020), reports by parliamentary pressure groups (APPG on Modern Languages 2019), and a White Paper (Holmes and Myles 2019)(see also Lanvers 2011), but, to date, these have not led to discernible change in MFL uptake.

Despite some evidence that English school students are curious about other nations, their languages and cultures (e.g. Krüsemann 2018; Parrish 2017), there is a large body of literature showing that students dislike the language learning experience at school (Lanvers and Chambers 2019), in particular boys (Courtney et al. 2017). Unstimulating learner experiences, inappropriate levels of challenge, poor transition from primary to secondary school, a lack of a sense of progress and a focus on ‘exam drilling’ (Wingate 2018) all contribute to this experience. Consequently, many students report languages to be irrelevant, boring, and/or ‘for the brainy’ only (see e.g. Board and Tinsley 2014). The severe marking of exam assessments (Myers 2016) contributes to a negative cycle of low self-efficacy, often reinforced by school policies that permit only the academic high-achievers to continue with a language. The – by now well documented – low self-efficacy in UK MFL students is especially concerning, as low self-efficacy is not only associated with generally poor motivation, but also low learning outcomes (Tremblay and Gardner 1995). Furthermore, both gender and socio-economic factors interact with language uptake and motivation, in that more girls, who show higher motivation (Courtney et al. 2017), opt for languages beyond the compulsory phase, as do students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Lanvers 2017). Thus, this study is carried out against the backdrop of two separate but interacting challenges: that of negative language mindsets and low appreciation and low uptake of the study of MFL, and that of a very stark socio-economic divide in the uptake of language study (Lanvers 2017b).

Despite the considerable systemic obstacles described above, headteachers in many individual schools, including the three participating in this study, are keen to increase their language uptake post-14, without necessarily making it compulsory for all, aiming to ‘nudge’ more students towards MFL study. To date, many schools have participated in enhancement activities aiming for such ‘nudge’ effects, especially activities offered by the Routes into Languages2 consortium (Routes), mostly offering activities designed and implemented by university language students, acting as ambassadors for languages in schools. Many of their innovative interventions use a combination of role models, with older university students enthusing younger learners, aiming to re-introduce fun into language learning, providing real-life communicative events and enhancing students’ sense of the relevance and progress of language study. Lack of funding has led to a decrease in activities over recent years, and a lack of Routes resources has meant that only a few of their activities have been accompanied by empirical research. Nonetheless, existing evaluations (Gallagher-Brett 2016) show that Routes initiatives (a) using slightly older students as role models; (b) advocating the relevance of languages beyond purely instrumental benefits, and (c) stressing the ubiquity of multilingualism globally and in the UK, tend to positively sway at least some students towards MFL. Attempts to foster purely instrumental motivation, however, e.g. by highlighting career prospects (Taylor and Marsden 2014), risk encountering pervasive beliefs that ‘English is enough’. Conversely, the few empirically evaluated interventions aiming to challenge monolingual mindsets, e.g. by highlighting the ubiquity of multilingualism in the UK (e.g. Handley 2011; Lanvers et al., 2019), have yielded promising results.

Generally, there are few empirical studies evaluating how an intervention might have changed more intrinsic dimensions of MFL motivation, such as beliefs students might have about language learning, or monolingual mindsets, but they have the advantage that any such change might influence student thinking at a deeper level, and thus be more resistant to adverse learning contexts. Two successful intervention studies, Lanvers et al. (2019) and Busse et al. (2019), covered content of particular relevance for the UK language learner context, in that they both challenged monolingual mindsets, via emphasising the ubiquity of multilingualism (globally/in the country/in the area/in the classroom), and the importance of world languages other than English. Lanvers et al.’s (2019) intervention also covered the cognitive benefits of language learning; the researchers observed a positive effect in valuing multilingualism, and valuing the cognitive effects of language study. Furthermore, the UK interdisciplinary research project, Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies (MEITS)3, has a promising portfolio of activities aiming to challenge UK multilingual mindsets in particular, such as pop-up language museums (Ayres-Bennet 2019). In the last five years, UK language pedagogy researchers in particular have intensified their interest in how to develop learners’ multilingual identity (Fisher et al. 2018) and thus positively influence language learner beliefs. Both the theoretical underpinning for such a change, and the chosen pedagogical pathway to achieve this, are discussed in the next section.

**Changing language mindsets via mentoring**

The theory of mindset change is based on Dweck’s (1999) and Oyserman’s (Oyserman et al. 2006) concept of growth versus fixed mindset, whereby students with growth mindsets harbour beliefs that their ability, and ultimate success in learning, can change, whereas fixed mindsets tend to view ability as more static. Mindsets are domain-specific: a common fixed mindset about language learning is the belief that language learning aptitude is innate – a belief associated with low self-efficacy and fear of failure. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have more fixed rather than growth mindsets (Claro et al. 2016), thus further negatively affecting achievement in this already underrepresented learner group. Regarding possible effects of interventions to improve mindsets, a recent large-scale meta-analysis (Sisk et al. 2018) reports that, although effects of such interventions tend to have small effect sizes generally, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to benefit most from them. Sisk et al. also report that effects of such interventions tend to be greater in learning contexts where students had a choice as to what to study – an important consideration for the current study since (some) choice regarding language study was offered to students.

Regarding language mindset, Lou and Noels (2019) describe this term as lay *beliefs about language learning*, including, e.g. the question of whether language learning abilities are innate, how and at what age it is best to learn additional languages, the value of language learning, meta-beliefs about one’s own learning, etc. Thus, language mindsets describe beliefs - both conscious and unconscious - *about* languages, at a meta-level. The term self-efficacy describes the beliefs in one’s own ability in a specific domain (such as language learning) (Bandura 1982). Language learning self-efficacy can be conceived and investigated at different fine-grained levels: for instance, UK learners tend to have especially low self-efficacy for French, as opposed to other target languages (Lanvers and Chambers 2019). Moreover, some learners might have low self-efficacy for learning grammar, others for pronunciation, others for speaking etc. (Lanvers and Chambers 2019). This study, however, investigates self-efficacy at a rather high level of granularity: a student’s confidence in their ability to do well generally in any target language. A source of negative self-efficacy among UK MFL learners in particular is their awareness that similar-aged peers in other countries often achieve better L2 proficiency (Lanvers and Chambers 2019): as this unhelpful comparison does not consider the stark differences in education systems, amount of contact hours, curricula etc, the intervention directly tackles this aspect of self-efficacy, by providing research information on the systemic differences between language learning in the UK and other countries.

Language learning self-efficacy tends to be related to learner motivation (Lanvers 2017), as students who consider themselves capable of achieving highly also tend to be more motivated, especially in those who are more intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated (Lanvers and Chambers 2019). Like self-efficacy, the complex phenomenon of language learner motivation can be conceptualised and sub-categorised in many ways (see Lamb et al 2019). For the purpose of this study, we observe that the association between positive self-efficacy and motivation found in the literature might predict that any positive change we can effectuate in self-efficacy also improves motivation; this would be a useful follow-up study to the current one.

Fixed or growth mindsets, and language mindsets (the latter including self-efficacy for language learning) are subject to change and external influences. For instance, students who receive positive external validations (via grades, exams) tend to develop positive mindsets (Bandura 1982). The theory of change adopted in this study focuses on fostering growth mindsets (Sisk et al 2018) and language mindsets including learner beliefs and self-efficacy.

When learners are offered a choice in their study of MFL, they are influenced by their mindsets, including (a) their implicit beliefs about the relevance and importance of the subject, and (b) their language-specific self-efficacy (Yeager et al. 2016). Learner beliefs about one’s own aptitude, ultimate achievement, and so forth can be described as more or less fixed: some students may view their ability for language learning as stable, whereas others may view both ability and success as more fluid. Empirical studies (reviewed in Lou and Noels 2019) generally find that students who believe that ability and success are malleable, and thus display a growth mindset*,* experience a higher sense of control and autonomy over their learning, better motivation, and generally associate more positive emotion with their learning than learners with fixed mindsets. A smaller number of studies suggest not only that such positive affective attitude can be stimulated via educational interventions, but that this enhanced motivation is associated with enhanced learning outcomes (e.g. Busse et al. 2019; Horowitz et al. 2018; Yeager et al. 2016). Furthermore, activating positive visions of self and visualisation exercises (Oyserman et al. 2006), including visualisation of learners’ trajectories (Fisher et al. 2018), have proven effective in educational contexts.

In the attempt to develop growth mindsets, peer or youth mentoring approaches, whereby slightly older individuals support younger students in order to strengthen their self-efficacy and positive learner beliefs (Baker and Maguire 2005; Passey and Morris 2010), social, emotional and identity development (Rhodes 2002), have proven successful. The method of peer mentoring in small groups has also been applied effectively to change learner mindsets about language learning in particular (Jenkins 2018; Tosola et al. 2015). The largest-scale programme tackling language mindsets is the Welsh Government-funded MFL Student Mentoring programme4, now in its fourth year. Similar to the Routes into Languages programmes engaging university language students to promote language learning, the Welsh mentoring project engages university students to work with school students who are about to decide if they will continue with their MFL study or not, using group mentoring to minimise concerns around safeguarding (Blake and Carrara 2019). The impact in schools has been observed to be beneficial, especially on the value students place on the usefulness of language study. Furthermore, participating schools benefit incrementally over successive years, as the status of MFL within their school increases (Tinsley 2019). One concern about this project is that only a selected group of students, those currently hesitant about language study but favourably inclined nonetheless, are chosen to participate.

In sum, we have evidence that both whole-class interventions (Lanvers et al., 2019), and mentoring approaches (Blake and Carrara 2019; Jenkins 2018), can help to change student language mindsets. Regarding contents, topics such as challenging monolingual mindsets and ‘English is enough’ beliefs, and focusing on the global ubiquity of language learning, are especially relevant for changing mindsets in UK students. Regarding mentoring, peer-mentoring by students only a little older, but with some positive language learning experience, provides accessible role models and permits mentor and mentees to jointly reflect on their language learning journey.

The current study capitalises on the positive results in both whole-class teaching and the mentoring approach, but with a few crucial differences. Unlike the Welsh project, this study did not pre-select participants, but taught whole, mixed-ability classes. Furthermore, the study relied on schools to make some of their precious teaching time available for the intervention. A further unique feature of this study was that mentors were recruited from the schools’ own 6th form (17-19 year old students preparing for their university admission qualification), for three reasons. First, more than university language undergraduates, these mentors were highly accessible as role models for 13-14-year-olds, given the age proximity to their mentees, but especially because they had only completed the GCSE MFL exam and had not yet specialised as linguists. Thirdly, this delivery mode permits schools to recruit mentors themselves, which makes the intervention independent from university support and thus much more scalable. The dual delivery mode, using both whole-class teaching and small-group mentoring, allows the promotion of change through a combination of two routes, one more *affective* and the other more *cognitive*. Delivery mode and contents are described in the next section.

**The study**

A six-session intervention based on the principles of awareness-raising and promotion of a growth mindset was delivered in three state secondary schools in the north of England to students aged 13-14. The intervention was based on a successful smaller study by Lanvers et al (2019) and was extended into six sessions, half delivered to the whole class (Sessions 1-3), half in small mentoring groups with 6th-formers. Sessions 1-3 challenged subject-specific negative beliefs, i.e. monolingual mindsets. All 6th-form students recruited as mentors had completed a GCSE MFL, but only a small minority were studying a MFL beyond this. Mentors benefited from participation in the following ways: the activity would (a) be a recognised form of community engagement; (b) activate mentors' own positive self-visualisation regarding language learning; (c) develop pedagogical skills and research-based knowledge; (d) offer CV enhancement, and (e) provide mentors with academic references suitable for university applications. This study aimed to encourage students preparing to make their choice of GCSE subjects to consider continuing with MFL and change their mindsets, rather than influence learning outcomes directly.

**Research questions**

1. (How) do boys’ and girls’ self-efficacy and language mindsets differ before and after intervention? (How) do they change differentially among those with more positive or negative beliefs?

2. Do students’ inclinations to choose a GCSE MFL change?

2.a Does this differ between boys and girls?

3. What arguments for or against MFL study do students cite before and after the intervention?

3.a Do they differ pre/post intervention, between intervention and control group, and between genders?

4. What elements of the intervention do students remember and/or like most? (How) could they have contributed to any mindset change observed?

**Method**

The study used a quasi-experimental design, and mixed methods to observe pre-post differences. The schedule of the intervention is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Intervention schedule

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Week 1 | Ethics, Induction for teachers and mentors |
| Weeks 2 | Pre-questionnaire |
| Weeks 3,4,5 | Teacher sessions 1,2,3 |
| Weeks 6,7 | Christmas break |
| Weeks 7,8,9 | No intervention activities (mock exams) |
| Weeks 10,11,12 | Mentor sessions 4,5,6 |
| Week 13 | Post-questionnaire |

***Participants***

## The research was undertaken in the north of England, a region with a below national average percentage of MFL GCSE completion. The lead researcher contacted regional schools to identify those aiming to increase MFL uptake. Of those interested in participating, three were chosen on the basis of maximising diversity in schools’ MFL profiles, geographical and socio-economic mix (see Table 2). In all three school, the percentage of pupils with English as additional language was below the national average. The students participating were in Year 9 or 10.

Ethical permission was sought first from the researcher’s institution, the headteachers of all schools, and, in the case of one school in which the headteacher had not secured parental pre-consent for research engagements in school, from all parents of participating students. To avoid school-specific effects, control groups were recruited from the same schools. After completing the intervention, all participating schools approached around 60% of the year’s cohort (and of our participants) to suggest they continue with a MFL.

## Table 2: Participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| School | Locality | Year size | School characteristics\* | | | | Inter-vention  *n* | Control  *n* |
| TakingEbacc  % | Free school meals %\*\* | Taking a MFL GCSE  *n* | Taking 2+ MFL GCSEs  % |
| A | Small city | 141 | 22% | 24% | 34 | 2% | 141 | 24 |
| B | Middle size city | 224 | 54% | 19.5% | 114 | 3% | 48 | 28 |
| C | Rural town | 150 | 67% | 17.8% | 108 | 3% | 31 | 0\*\*\* |

## \* 2018/19 data from <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>.

## \*\* The % of pupils receiving free school meals is taken as an indicator of socio-economic deprivation.

\*\*\* The parents of the suggested control classes declined to participate

***The intervention***

The aims of the intervention were to positively influence motivation, self-efficacy and negative language learner beliefs, including in those students disinclined to continue an MFL or hesitant about doing so. The anticipated changes were to be effectuated via a mixture of direct information (teacher sessions) and small-group support (mentor sessions). Regular MFL teachers delivered Sessions 1-3, and 6th-formers who had completed an MFL GCSE undertook the mentor sessions (see Appendix 1).

Session 1 covered the global spread, and growth trends, of English and other global languages. To tackle monolingual mindsets (e.g. ‘*everyone speaks English anyway’*), students engaged e.g. with growth curves of world languages other than English. Session 2 offered research insights into the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and language learning in order to foster intrinsic motivation and curiosity for languages. To tackle discriminatory learner beliefs (e.g. ‘*you have to be clever to do languages*’), students learned about the ubiquity of multilingualism and language learning, globally and in the UK. Session 3 covered empirical research findings on the poor language provision and learning outcomes in the UK: here, the intention was to challenge negative self-efficacy, and make students aware that their (acutely observed) poor MFL performance compared to peers abroad might relate to educational systemic differences, such as contact hours, curriculum etc. Students engaged with international comparative research on MFL tuition, focusing on systematic differences in education.

The mentor sessions, delivered by older students in the same school, covered the following topics: Session 4 covered lexical items and their origin, including many foreign words for favourite foods, in order to foster self-efficacy, making students aware of their already existing language knowledge. Sessions 5 and 6 consisted of an extended visualisation exercise: the mentor initiated the exercise by describing and drawing their own language learning trajectory as a river journey with obstacles (e.g. dry river, weir) and positive aspects (e.g. tributary, bridge). As students drew and described their own learner journey, they were alerted to the observation that struggles and failures are part of all learners’ trajectories. In this way, the mentor sessions were specifically designed to developed subject-specific growth mindsets, and offered efficacy-enhancing experiences. Per school, between six and ten 6th-formers were recruited as mentors. Mentor sessions, delivered in groups of four to five, focused on multilingualism in the UK and visualisation exercises of personal learner trajectories. Most mentors used their free 6th-form lessons to visit their intervention mentees during regular MFL lessons, but schools also adopted different delivery modes as it suited them. Mock exams led to a drawn-out delivery (rather than over six successive weeks), but researchers’ flexibility in working within the constraints of individual schools is essential if interventions such as this one are to be scaled up and attract larger numbers of schools; furthermore, a drawn-out delivery might permit insight into lasting effects. Teachers in all schools were given the opportunity to critique the materials during and after the induction session, resulting in a small number of adjustments to the teaching materials (PowerPoint presentations, worksheets, videos).

***Instruments***

The effects of the intervention were assessed via a prequestionnaire a week before the intervention started, and a post-questionnaire some two weeks after completion. A delayed post-questionnaire, designed to be administered 6-7 weeks after completion, was sent to schools but was not completed as schools closed shortly after receipt, due to the COVID-19 crisis. The questionnaire (see Appendix 2) asked for gender, name (to match pre- and post-data), responses on a 5-point scale to 5 items eliciting self-efficacy and learner beliefs, and inclination to choose an MFL for GCSE, with an open-ended question inviting respondents to explain their reasons. A pilot conducted outside this study had confirmed the reliability of the instrument.

**Methods of analysis**

Research questions 1 and 2 were answered using quantitative data, and question 3 using qualitative data.

To answer question 1 (language mindset, self-efficacy), separate paired sample *t*-tests (or their non-parametric equivalents where the cohort was too small to allow for *t*-tests)were carried out to test for pre-post differences in both genders, and both intervention and control group (Tables 3 and 4). Pie charts show the breakdown of responses on each item pre- and post-questionnaire in percentages (Figures 1 and 2 report on language mindset, Figures 3-5 on self-efficacy).

To answer question 2 (change in inclination to choose a MFL), a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was performed, grouping together, respectively, all more likely, and all less likely responses (Table 5). Figure 6 shows the breakdown of responses on the likelihood of choosing a MFL, before and after intervention. As a key aim of this study was to reach those students with most negative language mindsets, and *least* likely to choose a MFL, we report separately on changes in groups declaring different degrees of inclination to choose a MFL. To answer question 2a, paired sample *t*-tests (or their non-parametric equivalents) were carried out for each gender, and both intervention and control groups (Table 6). Figures 7 and 8 show the breakdown of responses on the likelihood of choosing a MFL, broken down by gender.

To answer question 3, the intervention provided the researchers with qualitative data in the form of free comments on a final evaluation sheet, and free comments which students added on both the pre- and post-questionnaire. The pre-questionnaires were filled out before schools had recommended GCSE study subjects to individual students, and post-questionnaires after schools had communicated to students who they wished to continue with an MFL. Both pre- and post- data comments were coded for negative or positive value (the comment: *the school chose for me* was labelled neutral). After this, two coders created, in an iterative process, an inductive coding scheme as shown in Tables 7 and 9.

**Results**

***Research question 1***

This focused on whether boys’ and girls’ self-efficacy and language mindsets differed before and after intervention, and if so, how. It also focused on whether there were different patterns of change between those with more positive or negative beliefs.

The 5-item construct ‘language mindset’ (see Appendix 2) was first checked for reliability and scored a Cronbach Alpha of .77 pre-test, and .82 post-test, indicating a high degree of internal consistency. Appendix 3 gives the results of statistical tests comparing pre- and post-questionnaire responses to the 5 items for the intervention (*t-*tests) and the control group (Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests). In the intervention group overall, only one mindset item (*The language I’m trying to speak is very difficult/difficult/medium/easy/very easy*) changed significantly (*t*(46)=.111, *p*=.912) but with very small effect (*d*=0.02). There were no significant changes in the control group. As the aim of the research was to observe change in students with different (more negative or more positive) mindsets, Figures 1-5 display detailed results per response type (from *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*), pre- and post-intervention, in both intervention and control students. In our analysis below, we group together more positive (*agree/agree strongly*) and more negative (*disagree/disagree strongly*) responses respectively in order to aid comparison..

*Language learning beliefs*

As shown in Figure 1, the intervention group showed an increase of 6 percentage points in the growth mindset belief that everyone can learn a language following intervention: 67% agreed or agreed strongly on the pre-questionnaire, increasing to 73% on the post-questionnaire. This compares with an increase of 3 percentage points in the control group, from 46% to 49%. Among those *disagreeing* with the belief in the intervention group, there was also a 4 point increase from 14% to 18% compared with a 7 point increase from 32% to 39% in the control group.

Figure 2 shows there was an post-intervention increase of 5 percentage points in intervention students holding the growth mindset belief that success is attributable to effort (from 72% to 77%). In contrast, the control group showed a 6 point decrease (from 65% to 59%). In the intervention group, those believing that achievement is attributable to other things than effort decreased from 14% to 10% while the control group saw a 4 point increase from 17% to 21%

*Self-efficacy*

Figure 3 shows the results for the self-efficacy item: *I think ultimately, I might speak the language I’m learning quite well*. In the intervention group, both negative (those disagreeing or disagreeing strongly with the item) and positive self-assessment decreased by 4 points from 34% to 30% after intervention: students became more hesitant, by 8 percent points. In the control group, there was only a 5 percent point percent increase in those hesitant, no change in positive self-assessments (those agreeing or strongly agreeing), and a 4 points increase (55% to 51%) in negative assessment.

Figure 4 shows results relating to students’ evaluation of their language learning ability: *I think I’m OK at learning languages.* In the intervention group, negative beliefs decreased slightly by 2 percentage points from 26% to 24% but remained constant at 42% in the control group. The proportions of positive beliefs (agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement) in both the intervention and the control group also appeared to remain broadly the same from pre- to post-questionnaire with a slight increase from 53% to 54% in the intervention group and a slightly greater decrease from 48% to 42% in the control group.

Figure 5 shows how students judged the target language from ‘very easy’ to ‘very difficult’. In both groups, the number of students describing their target language as ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ increased; in the intervention group, from 28% to 36% and in the control group from 54% to 58%. As for students judging it ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’, we observe a 10 percentage point pre-post decrease in the intervention, and 6 percent point decrease in the control group (8%), suggesting that the intervention did not change self confidence in this respect.

In sum, we observe little in the way of changes in self-efficacy (items 3-5). Concerning growth mindset learner beliefs (items 1 and 2), however, students in the intervention group moved towards more positive beliefs overall, while in the control group, negative beliefs increased (in both item 1 and 2). In order to test for gender differences in language mindsets, independent sample *t*-tests or Mann-Whitney *U* tests (tests where the assumption of normality was violated for either group of scores) were undertaken, both before and after the intervention. The results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

In the intervention group, the pre-test data (Table 3) indicate that girls outscored boys on all items, and that boys showed significantly lower self-efficacy on one item (‘*I think I’m Ok at language learning’*: *z*=-2.891, *p*=.004, two-tailed, small effect (*r*=.21). In the control group, there was a medium effect size difference in one learner belief (*Being good at languages is all about effort)*, with girls agreeing more strongly than boys(Sig Diff. *t*(44)=2.122, *p*=0.040, two-tailed, medium effect (*d*=.67).

Table 4 shows that post-intervention, the significant gender difference in one self-efficacy item (*I think I’m OK at language learning)* disappeared in the intervention group, although overall, girls continue to outscore boys. In the control group, the gender difference on the item ‘*Being good at languages is all about putting the effort’* also disappeared. As changes in the control group are not attributable to the intervention, we assume that this change is either random, or due to some maturation which all students experience. Overall however, we observe that the gender differences in self-efficacy were stronger at the start, and that the intervention seemed to bring about a small gender ‘equalising’ effect in this respect.

**Research question 2**

Research question 2 focused on changes in students’ inclinations to choose to study an MFL at GCSE. Figure 6 shows the overall descriptive statistics. All participating schools had communicated their preferred GCSE pathway to students, including a language choice, by the time the post-questionnaire was distributed, and many students who ticked *certainly/certainly not* didso because they were certain that they would follow the pathway suggested by the school, although other students used this opportunity to express their own preferences. Therefore, both intervention and control students were somewhat more certain about their choice on the post-questionnaire than on the pre-questionnaire.

In the intervention group, the post-questionnaire shows an increase from 21 to 49 percentage points in the proportion of students declaring themselves likely (*certain* or *possibly yes*) to study an MFL, and a reduction of 7 points, from 43% to 36%, in those unlikely to (*I think not* and *certainly not*). As noted above, all students (intervention and control) had received their recommended pathway by the time of the post-test, which probably explains the observed changes. In the control group, noticeably more inclined to study an MFL at the start than the intervention group, those disinclined decreased, from 57 to 37 percent points, but within that figure, those *certain* *not* to study MFL increased from 20% to 33%. Those who were *certain* or *quite certain* to continue a MFL increased by 25 percentage points, only slightly less than in the intervention group. The proportion of ‘hedged’ students (responding *maybe*)in the intervention group decreased by 21 points from 36% to 15%, in contrast to 6 points (from 24% to 18%) in the control group.

In order to test for pre-post differences, responses were allocated to two groups, those more disinclined *(I think not, certainly not*) versus those more inclined or hesitant (*maybe, possibly yes, certainly*), permitting sufficient numbers for a *t*-test to check for significant differences. Results are shown in Table 5. The *t*-tests/Wilcoxon confirmed that those in the intervention group who were more inclined at pre-test, showed themselves only *slightly* more inclined at post-test (*\*Sig Diff. t*(107)=3.999, *p*=<.001, medium effect (*d*=.47). Those who were more disinclined at the start showed greater change towards a more positive response, with a large effect size (*\*Sig Diff. t*(83)=6.424, *p*<.001, large effect (*d*=.87).The disinclined students in the control group also showed more positive responses on the post-questionnaire, albeit with a very small effect size (WRS \*Sig Diff *T*=128.00, *z*=-2.487 (corrected for ties), *N-Ties*=17, *p*=.013, two-tailed, very small effect (*r*=.04). This suggests that whatever overall improvement we observe, it may, to a smaller degree, be attributable to things other than the intervention, but to a larger degree to the intervention.

**Research question 2.a**

Are there differences between boys vs. girls in uptake of GCSE MFL pre- and post- intervention? As shown in Figure 7, in the intervention group, we see a 35 percentage point increase in the proportion of girls inclined towards taking a MFL GCSE (from 20% to 55%), and a 7 point decrease in those disinclined (from 40% to 33%).The proportion of boys inclined towards MFL increased by 22 points (from 21% to 43%), and those disinclined decreased by 8 (from 48% to 40%). These changes, more pronounced in girls than in boys, are undoubtedly influenced by the fact that schools had communicated their chosen pathways including/not including a MFL.

In the control group (Figure 8), girls’ inclination to continue an MFL increased by 28 percentage points (from 28% to 56%), while those disinclined decreased by 33 points (from 56% to 23%). The proportion of boys inclined towards continuing an MFL increased by 23 points from 14% to 37%, and those disinclined decreased by 9 from 57% to 48%. The proportion of girls certain *not* to take a language remained almost unchanged, both for the intervention (14% and 13% at pre- and post-questionnaire respectively) and the control groups (17% at both pre- and post-questionnaire).The proportion of boys in the intervention group answering ‘*certainly not*’ increased only slightly (by 2 percentage points from 21% to 23%), but by 23 percentage points in the control group (from 21% to 44%). However, overall, pre-post changes were similar in trend in the intervention and control groups, suggesting that the observed changes here are likely to be attributable to the school’s communications about students’ chosen pathway.

The observed gender differences, however, warrant further investigation. As shown in Table 6, *t*-tests confirm that the increase in girls’ inclination to take a MFL GCSE post-intervention was about double that of the control group girls (Intervention: \*Sig Diff*.,t*(102)=5.300, *p<.001,* medium effect (*d*=.63); Control: \*Sig Diff., *t*(17)=2.675, *p*=.016, medium effect (*d*=.69). For boys in the intervention group, there was a large improvement too, with large effect size (WRS\*Sig Diff, *T*=1241.50, *z*=-4.436 (corrected for ties), *N-Ties*=54, *p<*.001, two-tailed, large effect (*r*=1.13). However, there was no significant improvement in the control group.

**Research question 3 and 3a**

What arguments for or against MFL study do students cite before and after the intervention? Do they differ pre/post intervention, between intervention and control group, and between genders?

Table 7 shows the different reasons for or against studying an MFL at GCSE given by the intervention group on the pre- and post-questionnaires. Table 8 shows examples of particular patterns of response, while Table 9 lists the different reasons given by the control group pre- and post-questionnaire.

Among the positive arguments given by the intervention group before the intervention were intrinsic reasons and instrumental benefits, for travel, educational and professional career plans. Overall, students mentioned slightly more positive arguments after the intervention (139) than before (126), but the most notable differences between pre- and post-questionnaire lay in the nature of the comments. Negative arguments, on the other hand, decreased (from 166 to 132). There was little difference in the numbers of boys vs. girls expressing dislike for MFL or finding it hard, both pre- and post-intervention, and both boys and girls similarly showed changes in arguments *against* languages.

Looking at changes in arguments *for* languages, we observe that more girls professed enjoying the subject post-questionnaire (25 vs. 12 on the pre-questionnaire), and also mentioned more intrinsic reasons for studying languages. Travel opportunities, however, were mentioned less often post-questionnaire. We recall the gender differences already observed and note that girls’ somewhat more positive language mindsets seem to be accompanied by deeper reflections on possible uses for languages beyond the functional, although the fact that more girls than boys added any qualitative comments here calls for a cautious interpretation.

Post-intervention, when individual students knew what pathway the school recommended, many expressed their language ‘option’ as ‘no choice’ *(‘school told me’, ‘it is compulsory for me*’), often giving no further arguments for language study, nor any indication as to whether there was (dis)agreement with the school decision even when they had judged MFLs to be hard, as in the comments shown in Table 8a. It is perhaps therefore all the more surprising to observe a pre-post increase in the number of students professing to enjoying MFL, and reporting increased self-efficacy, as shown in the comments in Table 8b

Only five of the many students chosen by schools to continue their MFL learning declared themselves unhappy with this choice. Many students who hesitated or were negative about their choice at pre-questionnaire not only accepted the school’s choice post-questionnaire, but extended the range of arguments in favour of languages, as exemplified by the comments in Table 8c. At first sight, this shift in mindset suggests some form of pragmatic post-hoc rationalisation, enabling students to accept more comfortably a decision taken for them by schools. While this factor may be in play, pragmatically orientated arguments in favour of languages (such as ‘*I have a chance to get a good grade/ they are useful’*) might have sufficed to accept more easily the choice made by schools. Instead, what we observe on the post-questionnaire is that students selected to continue an MFL give a wider range of intrinsic arguments in favour of MFL. More of these students also profess to enjoy MFL. This suggests that, for students initially strongly disinclined (very few) or hesitant ( a larger percentage) about continuing with an MFL but chosen by schools to do so, the intervention provided a range of stimuli that fostered positive mindsets about language learning and which, moreover, relied on internally rather than externally controlled validations. Only very occasionally does a student express discontent with their school’s decision as in the comments shown in Table 8d.

As for reasons for *not* choosing MFL, we note a decline in overall comments between pre- and post-questionnaire. Poor self-efficacy stemming from external evaluation only *(‘I am getting bad grades’*) – which tended to dominate in arguments against MFL – decreased the most, followed by expressions of monolingual mindsets and not seeing any value in the subject (‘*languages are not needed anyway’*). The comment ‘*I am in bottom set’* exemplifies the extent to which students logically associate their own self-efficacy for MFL with the common school policy of selecting higher-ability students to continue with MFL. Students with low self-efficacy also sometimes combined negative external evaluations with monolingual mindsets as shown in Table 8e.

To investigate for possible effects of post-hoc rationalisation among students who were *de*selected for language study, we looked at changes in thinking about MFL in this student group. With only six exceptions found in the whole dataset, all students chosen by their school to discontinue their MFL had been disinclined to do so anyway in the pre-questionnaire (having ticked *certainly not* or *I think not*), and did not change their initial disinclination in the post-questionnaire. On the contrary, some reinforced their disinclination for MFL study – possibly to adjust to the fate chosen for them, including six students moving from *maybe* to a stronger disinclination. Thus, in a post-hoc rationalisation, students may also change from citing arguments for to arguments against MFL, as in the examples shown in Table 8f

The low number of responses in the control group, shown in Table 9, calls for cautious interpretation. Unlike in the intervention group, we observe no increase in arguments *for* languages, but nor did students mention more arguments *against* languages. This could suggest increased disengagement at post-questionnaire, which was not observed in the intervention group.

## Table 9: Control group: comments on pre- and post questionnaire

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Pre** | **Post** |
| **Arguments in favour of languages** | | |
| **Easy** for me/good at it/ good grades | 5 (2m/3f) |  |
| **Enjoying** subject | 1f | 1m |
| Good for **future**/jobs/study | 5 (2m/3f) | 5 (2m/3f) |
| **Intrinsic** reasons (cognitive benefits/curiosity/broad education..) | 2 (1m/1f) | 1f |
| For **travel** & talk with foreigners | 1m |  |
| **Family** links/multilingual already | 4 (2m/2f) | 3 (1m/2f) |
| I want a **specific L2** (unsure if school offers it) |  | 1m |
| **School** chose for me (Ebacc pathway). | 1m | 9 (4m/5f) |
| Out of these: declared that they doing a MFL against their will |  | 1m |
| **Arguments against languages** | | |
| **Hard**/not good at it/getting poor grades (predicted or actual) | 23 (13m/10f) | 14(11m/3f) |
| **Dislike**/boring | 4 (2m/2f) | 6 (4m/2f) |
| I prefer **another subject** | 1f | 1f |
| Languages are **not needed**/I don’t need them | 7 (5m/2f) | 2 (1m,1f) |
| I want a **specific L2** (not offered by school) |  | 1m |
| Uncertain/don’t know if I need/want them/keep as reserve | 1m |  |

We observe some similar gender patterns to the intervention group, in that there is little difference on the pre-questionnaire between control boys and girls in reporting languages hard, and/or disliking them. However, at post-questionnaire, after students had received their school’s MFL option recommendation, we observe that fewer students, girls in particular, described the subject as ‘hard’. None went so far as to describe MFL as ‘easy’, or gave any other additional arguments in favour of MFL. It turned out that these particular students had been chosen by their school despite their initial disinclination. They simply remarked that the school had decided for them, or referred to the academic pathway offered, as the example in Table 10a shows.

Thus, as in the intervention group, some students (and perhaps girls more readily) may resort to post-hoc rationalisation, in an effort to accept more readily the academic pathway the school has chosen for them. Furthermore, just as in the intervention group, those *not* chosen for MFL increasingly report low self-efficacy, sometimes combined with the attitude that ‘languages are not needed’, while those selected for MFL refer to external rewards, rather than more internally-controlled rationalisation of their future MFL study, as exemplified by the comments in Table 10b.

All student groups (selected for MFL or not, intervention and control) do demonstrate some post-hoc rationalisation -girls slightly more than boys. However, there is an important difference between the intervention and control groups in *how* they do so. Intervention students cited a different range of beliefs concerning language learning and the value of languages when pre- and post-questionnaire comments are compared, in contrast to the control group students who referred to externally controlled arguments only. This would tentatively suggest that, while all students can pragmatically adjust to pathways the school has chosen for them, only those in the intervention group showed any evidence of doing this by changing some of their language mindset.

As noted above, there was a (somewhat surprisingly) small number of students declaring themselves unhappy with the choice offered by their school. Once informed of their pathway, they tended to expand the justification of this outcome in a post-hoc rationalisation. Among students from the intervention group chosen to continue with a MFL, we observe an increased range of more internally controlled arguments (e.g. enjoyment and intrinsic reasons such as curiosity) in favour of languages given on the post-questionnaire, especially if the students had been initially disinclined to continue with their MFL. We observed no such effect in control group students chosen to continue MFL (whether reluctantly or not), suggesting that the intervention may have positively influenced language mindsets in some students.

**Research question 4**

What elements of the intervention do students remember and/or like most? (How) could they have contributed to any mindset change observed? Intervention students were invited to leave feedback on their weekly worksheets, as well as the final worksheet, administered some 14 weeks after the start of the intervention. However, only around 30% of the intervention group students did so. There was also considerable variation in the amount of feedback provided between sessions, between schools and between boys and girls. Thus these data, shown in Table 11, need to be interpreted with caution. Overall, the final feedback suggests that, of the topics covered in the intervention, students remembered, and liked learning about, world languages most. They also liked learning about the English language; as one student commented, ‘*It was interesting to learn how not as many people spoke English as I thought.’*

Feedback given on weekly worksheets corroborates this. In the session devoted to learning about world languages, students said they especially liked learning about the global diversity of languages (‘*I never knew there were so many languages’*), about geographical areas where English is not spoken (‘*I thought English is spoken everywhere’*), and about the proportion of the world’s population that is multilingual. Students also gave particularly positive feedback on the session covering the cognitive benefits of language learning. Very few students left negative comments on any sessions. This suggests that all teacher-led sessions, and in particular learning about global linguistics and the importance of world languages other than English, may have contributed to the change in learner beliefs observed in the intervention group, and that learning about the ubiquity of language learning globally may have contributed to the observed increase in self-efficacy. Girls tended to comment more favourably on the intervention than boys.

Comments on the student mentor-led sessions, while on the whole positive, did not feature as saliently as those on teacher-led ones. Recalling that visualisation activities undertaken with mentors were designed to engender change via a more *affective*, rather than solely *cognitive* route, a number of interpretations are possible here. First, it is plausible that sessions did contribute to the changes observed, especially in language learning beliefs, but that, given their affective nature (change in self-efficacy and self-image as a language learner), they were harder to articulate for students of this age than, for instance, changes occurring via a more cognitive route. It is also possible that these sessions, often undertaken in schools in less than ideal circumstances (lunch hours, three small groups of students shoehorned into one free mentor lesson, etc.), were too limited in number and duration, and/or that mentees would benefit from more induction. This needs to be taken into consideration in future iterations of this intervention, and more uniformly administered mentor sessions may need to be incorporated into the intervention design.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Any attempt to change students’ negative language mindsets might be described as an ambitious undertaking, especially in the UK where monolingual mindsets are prominent. Given that this intervention was limited in time available, the aim was to engender modest change, but to do so in *all* students, with a particular focus on those with more negative mindsets and least inclination to continue with a MFL. We observed that changes in learner beliefs were more pronounced than changes in self-efficacy. In view of the fact that language learning self-efficacy among UK students is reported to be low generally (Lanvers 2017), and likely to be fuelled by negative external evaluation (comparison to achievement of peers abroad, lack of sense of progress, see Lanvers, 2017), it is perhaps understandable that this small study could not bring about large changes. However, boys’ self-efficacy improved more than girls’ did, indicating that, in this respect at least, the intervention had a gender-neutralising effect. Regarding language mindsets in general, we observed some change, even in those with the most fixed mindsets, and with the most negative learner beliefs. With regard to influencing study choice, an intervention effect in the majority of students was observed, but not in those most disinclined to study an MFL: here, the objective of reaching the most disaffected was not achieved.

Gender differences regarding language mindsets, if observed at all, confirm the divide reported in the literature, but were less pronounced overall than might have been anticipated. We observed stronger changes in inclination to continue with an MFL in girls, who also gave more positive qualitative feedback on the intervention, but we recall that more girls than boys contributed to the qualitative data overall.

Overall qualitative feedback for the whole intervention also suggests that students remembered the teacher-led sessions better, and were more impressed by this content than by the mentor sessions. The content regarding world languages and the ubiquity of language learning (Session 1), cognitive benefits about language learning (Session 2), and other metalinguistic topics, proved both stimulating and interesting for students, indicating that this content is both essential and expandable for future interventions. It seems likely that, in order to engender change via *affective* pathways, students may need more time (as was the case, for instance, in the Welsh MFL Student Mentoring intervention, and will need to develop a deeper relationship of trust with their mentors. One recommendation to improve the intervention might be to offer mentors both more intensive training, and to make more time available for mentoring sessions. Given the many advantages of this format of delivery (scalability across schools, closeness of age between mentor and mentee), the in-school mentoring format seems worthwhile pursuing.

**Notes**

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc>
2. Routes into Languages is a university-led consortium promoting language uptake and student mobility in the UK, see <https://www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk/cy>
3. <http://www.meits.org/>
4. <http://mflmentoring.co.uk/>. Although supported by the Welsh Government, this project also undertook intervention in several areas of England.

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