



Volunteering for Languages

How sharing a love for languages can enhance the experiences of both students and adults in school

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Introduction

Support has always been available for the sciences in schools, the argument being that practical subjects need support in setting up and using equipment etc. What could be more practical than learning a language?

This document discusses why local volunteer native-speakers are invaluable in language learning and what the implications are for inviting them into school.

For many years, in secondary languages departments in England, extra support for languages has been offered by the Foreign Language Assistant (FLA) programme of the British Council. The young adults who take part are typically undergraduates at university who use the experience to develop their own foreign language proficiency, working with students in schools. They are fantastic, young linguistic role-models employed by schools to support the languages curriculum usually through conversation classes with small groups of students at all levels.

Sadly, this resource has disappeared in many schools due to funding constraints and changing school priorities. The decline of FLAs has coincided with a decline in the number of schools able to offer foreign language exchange programmes to their students. However, the need for contact with native speakers in languages classrooms has certainly not diminished.

Our students need to meet those brought up and schooled in other cultures as we educate them to open their minds and be accepting of other cultures and people.

“Providing additional learning support in the classroom earlier for learners may promote less anxiety for lower attaining learners and more stretch for higher attaining learners.”

These are the words of a teacher working with the Association for Language Learning on a project called [Language Futures](#) in which volunteer native-speaker adults and sixth formers are working with languages teachers in schools. Through this same project, teachers have spoken about the impact other adults can have on learning:

“Community mentors have been particularly useful in pronunciation, modelling language learning skills and clearing up misunderstandings arising in students’ independent work.”

The benefits of volunteers

Well deployed volunteers are a fantastic additional resource in the languages classroom. If valued, they can help create a supportive environment in which languages can flourish. Additionally, research conducted through the [Language Futures](#) initiative, by the Association for Language Learning (ALL), suggests that volunteers can have a positive effect on motivation to learn. They can be a factor in improving attendance and behaviour at school for some students, improving grades and social skills.

It can be beneficial for students to see other adults involved in the learning that takes place in their classrooms - to see them seriously engaged in supporting learning and being respectful and encouraging about the work students are completing in their language.

A native speaker volunteer providing individual support to students as part of the Language Futures initiative



The needs of volunteers

It is a simple thing to clearly define a need for contact with native speakers in languages. But currently much of that contact is through the good will of people in the school community or through the teaching assistants' programme. Whichever, little funding is involved and this situation is likely to continue in most schools for the foreseeable future. Once any system is dependent on the good will of those in the community then the volunteers' needs should be uppermost in your mind if the system is to work well. If it is not, then there is a danger that the school and staff will begin to take volunteers for granted and the individuals will quickly feel exploited. You should always remember that any volunteer in school has taken on the role through commitment and dedication to the school community, interest and, often, philanthropy and a desire to support young people in their education. This is matched with an enthusiasm for their own language which is priceless for a languages department.

Who are the volunteers?

Every community includes speakers of languages other than English. The schools that ALL has worked with in developing the ideas in this document have all recruited from the local community. They have been surprised, for example, by how many languages are spoken by colleagues in the staff room, only discovered by canvassing for volunteers. This is also true of the parent body. In searching for volunteers for languages our schools have discovered a huge amount of untapped expertise. They have worked with parents, grandparents, teachers, teaching assistants, local languages university lecturers committed to outreach and their students, sixth formers, employees in nearby firms and many others.

These are people who want to become involved in school either because they have children in the school, because they work in the vicinity or because they want to work within the community. They may just be eager to help out or they may have particular expertise in the language. There is something in it for them. They may have a limited amount of time to devote to volunteering and they may not be able to commit more than a short period of time but this allegiance is worth cultivating and schools have much to gain from it.

In Welsh universities (Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Swansea), Modern Languages undergraduates are placed as volunteers into local schools as part of the Welsh Government's 'Global Futures' strategy. The project which is called 'Modern Languages Student Mentoring' aims to improve the take-up of languages in secondary schools. They work alongside students in class supporting and getting to know them as language learners.

In our experience, through our most recent Language Futures initiative, adult community volunteers sometimes come into lessons once a week to classes of Year 7 and Year 8 students. In one school there are adult learners in lessons. Adults join a GCSE class and learn alongside students, indirectly modelling mature learning behaviours and linguistic thinking.

One-to-one support for learning in a Language Futures classroom



Recruiting sixth form volunteers

In some schools sixth formers who are native speakers of languages other than English are recruited as languages volunteers. This has worked well, particularly in schools which provide the opportunity for students to gain a qualification in their Home Language. For example, native-speaker sixth formers of Polish mentoring new arrivals from Poland as they study for a GCSE in Polish.

'The support of additional adults or older learners in the classroom, as role models, conduits of culture, one-to-one explainers of structures or vocabulary, is invaluable. All teachers know students whose understanding is suddenly accelerated when they spend a few minutes after-school with them individually. This is often done as an intervention in response to an identified lack of progress. We might usefully consider the benefits of recruiting community volunteer mentors or sixth-form mentors to support classes from the start of Y7. Providing additional learning support in the classroom earlier for learners may promote less anxiety for lower attaining learners and more stretch for higher attaining learners.' (Hawkes, R., 2018)

Have you ever listened to students support each other in their language learning? They cut straight to the chase - they often understand the problem. They don't worry about ambiguity because they assume that if something is unclear the student they are talking to will interrupt. This is not often the case when they talk to teachers who **do** worry about ambiguity and who are aware of rules and exceptions to rules which inhibit simplicity!

Sixth-formers, being very close in age to younger students, remember what it's like not to understand simple concepts and they have experience of working through difficulties. They also have some standing in the eyes of younger students. Sixth formers who are native speakers of other languages are therefore good potential languages volunteers.

What is in it for a sixth former? In terms of their future plans for university applications or job applications they have much to learn through such a role.

They could become involved through, for example:

- Sixth form enrichment, in which students use Wednesday afternoons to support in lower school classes
- A sixth form after-school lesson programme, in which students take responsibility for planning and delivering additional support lessons to Year 7 students.

Support for volunteers

Taking on volunteers is not to be entered into lightly and, in our experience, is most successful where you have the support of the Senior Leadership Team of the school. Consider how inviting in volunteers fits with the school development plan and strategic vision. There are safeguarding processes which you will need to follow meticulously. For this reason, the system works best when someone is given responsibility for oversight of languages volunteers. This will mean that volunteers are taken care of, trained and valued and not seen as just cheap labour. It could be a responsibility given to a member of staff looking to develop his/her career towards Head of Department level. The important thing here is that they recognise fully the input of the volunteers and value their input. This person should be good at training adults and understanding their needs. This could potentially be an interesting area of responsibility.

A step by step guide to establishing mentoring in your school has been written for the Association for Language Learning in collaboration with The Mercers' Company and is referenced at the end of this document.

Planning for volunteer recruitment

There are some key aspects which you will need to consider when you are planning to work with volunteers. Teachers we have worked with suggest beginning at least a term before you plan to launch your project. There are some useful organisations which can help - some of which you will find at the end of this document. A very useful place to start is to look at the Toolkit created by the University of the First Age (UFA) in collaboration with the Cabinet Office and NESTA for '[Volunteer-Led Learning](#)'. This is a concisely written, easily accessible guide for schools embarking on taking on volunteers. It clearly describes the key aspects of planning including:

- selection criteria for both students and volunteers
- how to structure volunteer sessions with students
- interviewing, training and supporting volunteers
- possible target groups in school who may need support
- how to advertise for volunteers.

When you have decided to set up your Languages Volunteer programme, be systematic.

Step 1

Think carefully about what it is you need from your volunteers. Why you need them. What their role will be. What your expectations of them are. How you will make the role rewarding. How much contact they will have with individual students.

Step 2

Find a champion on the School Leadership Team. Without such support you will have problems with sustainability. But also you will want to do a thorough search for languages volunteers and so SLT support is essential - you will want to know about the languages spoken in the school community and the skills and experience of staff, non-teaching and teaching, parents, other adults as well as older students. Has anyone done a skills audit of staff? Does anyone speak a foreign language though teaching other subjects? You may be surprised what you find when you ask.

Step 3

Search for volunteers. Teachers working with ALL have advertised in local libraries, on the notice boards of shops and businesses, on local noticeboards and in local newsletters. There is more guidance about this on the UFA Toolkit referenced at the end of this document.

Step 4

Invite prospective volunteers into school for an informal 'interview'. You are not looking for a teacher. You are looking for someone who will be approachable and who will be able to act as an informal linguistic support for students and who is a native (or near-native) speaker. They will have enthusiasm for their language and culture and have personality traits likely to be engaging for your students. They will need to bring documentation for a DBS check which the school will need to co-ordinate - another reason for SLT involvement.

Step 5

Plan some training for the volunteers you recruit. You might want them to see a good lesson, to get the feel of the department or school. Define the role of the volunteer and allow them to meet some students. See the UFA Toolkit for training ideas.

The role of the volunteer

In a recent initiative ([Language Futures](#)) ALL has developed the role of the volunteer. In Language Futures students choose the language they wish to learn – as part of the curriculum or in an after-school class. The project depends on native speaker volunteers (called Mentors) to be the linguistic support for students. If a small group of students has put a reasonable case forward for learning Japanese (as an example), the school will attempt to find a volunteer to act as linguistic ‘guru’ who commits to come to lessons once a week or once a fortnight.

The Mentor is a support, not a teacher. The teacher’s role completely changes and becomes one of linguistic guide- setting up projects with the students and loosely structuring the lesson and giving advice on how to learn and research. The teacher rarely has expertise in all of the languages chosen by students. The students learn through support from the native speaker Mentor, the Teacher and online resources. You can read more about Language Futures on the [Association for Language Learning website](#).

In this situation the volunteer’s role is to provide answers to students’ questions about culture and language, provide materials and guidance with online resources and to support the students as they gradually make progress. They help construct projects around which the learning is focused.

Other roles a languages volunteer might play

Giving targeted support to students who are good linguists or enthusiastic about languages, to further their knowledge beyond the languages classroom;

Modelling conversations and pronunciation in class where the teacher is not a specialist and supporting particular students with written work during the lesson;

Searching for online resources for use with different classes - for example searching for songs, poems, videos to support the schemes of work;

Demonstrating how to make things such as typical dishes, skills such as Chinese paper cutting - bringing the culture of the language into the classroom.

Once a link with a school abroad is set up by the languages department the volunteer could help maintain momentum by thinking of creative ideas for students to engage in and exchange. This could be an online rather than physical link.

Conclusion

The value of other adult linguists in the classroom cannot be overestimated for languages. The process of finding them and introducing them to school can be complex given such issues as safeguarding. However, in our experience students and staff have profited immensely from contact with local people with expertise in languages. There are likely to be many of them around but you may have to look.

We need students to understand that you can't learn a language in two lessons a week. Languages needs to be part of your life outside school too. We call this seeing the school as 'base camp' in Language Futures. School is where you get your basic knowledge but in order to become a good linguist you need to take it into the rest of your life at home and beyond. This is what languages volunteers are good at demonstrating. Language as a living entity; used and loved by adults all over this country. The research we have undertaken for the Languages Futures initiative suggests that:

The support of additional adults or older learners in the classroom, as role models, conduits of culture, one-to-one explainers of structures or vocabulary, is invaluable. Promoting additional learning support in the classroom earlier for learners may promote less anxiety for low attaining learners and more stretch for higher attaining learners. (Hawkes, R., 2018).

There may be an untapped foreign languages resource on your doorstep. This may be the time to go in search of it!

Links and references

[Language Futures website](#)

[Language Futures Research Report](#)

[Step by step guide to establishing mentoring](#)

