

NPP Case Study: Etherow Language Network

Innovating the Language Curriculum to Boost Engagement and Motivation

Summary

Modern Foreign Language (MFL) uptake at GCSE remains challenging in many schools, particularly those with limited curriculum time and resources. This National Priority Project, led by teachers from a regional Language Network based in Greater Manchester, focused on enhancing existing curricula rather than redesigning them entirely — embedding rich cultural content (Byram, 1997), authentic resources (Hacking and Wyse, 2024), and AI tools to foster pupil relatedness, engagement, and motivation.

Webinars focused on curriculum innovation and target language were delivered to engage network teachers, and school visits supported targeted collaborations with local schools. A case study with a school in a challenging context (e.g. low uptake at GCSE and limited curriculum time) using knowledge organisers demonstrated practical innovations like cultural matchups, real videos, and bespoke AI-generated content. Findings highlighted common gaps in cultural elements and target language use, with teachers reporting enthusiasm for quick-win resources.

Language leaders can adapt these approaches, outputs, and strategies to invigorate their own schemes of work, ultimately supporting higher GCSE retention through motivated learners.

1. Context and Rationale

Recent research (e.g. Language Trends, 2025) has revealed that many schools in England face ongoing challenges, including difficulties with recruitment, reduced Key Stage 3 curriculum time, and a shift towards single-language models (e.g. French or Spanish only). The network lead school, situated in the north of England in an area with higher-than-average proportions of pupil premium pupils, has been successfully targeting these persistent issues for several years and is ideally placed to lead the work in this region. As the network lead is the Trust Director of Languages and Specialist Leader in Education, the project lead collaborated with teachers from more than 8 external departments via visits, hosting CPD, and email communication.

Moves towards standardised curriculum models and, in places, gaps in subject knowledge may lead teachers to rely heavily on knowledge organiser booklets and sentence builders, which can lack cultural depth. As emphasised in the 2016 MFL Pedagogy Review (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) and subsequently highlighted in Ofsted's review into languages in 2021 (Ofsted, 2021), the potential of integrating

engaging cultural content to enrich language learning and boost pupil motivation is great (see Graham & Santos, 2018) and to some extent untapped in current practice.

With recent GCSE curriculum developments including promising new topics such as topics like “Celebrity Culture”, the network intended to support teachers to inject teaching at Key Stage 4 with a creative and rich cultural approach.

Grounded in motivation theory, particularly the concept of *relatedness* within Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasises the importance of meaningful social connection, this project drew on networked expertise to support flexible innovation within existing curricula. It built on work on language motivation (Graham, 2022), highlighting the value of structured peer interaction, engagement with authentic materials, and the emerging role of AI-mediated learning.

Project Aims

- Enhance pupil engagement and motivation via cultural embedding and relatedness.
- Upskill teachers in AI/EdTech for the creation of bespoke, authentic resources.
- Foster a community of practice across networks through sharing multimodal outputs.

2. Methodology

In order to measure the success of the project activities, the following evaluation was carried out:

- 1) Collection of feedback from participants of the webinars in October and December

[Webinar 1, “Innovating the Language Curriculum”](#), focused on NPP themes like AI for audiovisual content, authentic resources, stories/songs, and “Celebrity Culture” ideas.

[Webinar 2, “Focus on Speaking”](#), addressed spontaneous speaking aligned with new GCSE needs. This webinar included a collaboration with other Language Network project leads, for instance the Lakes’ Language Network, whose focus on speaking in the Target Language.

- 2) Feedback from teachers trialling the enhanced cultural activities for the ‘half-termly culture focus’ across the 8+ schools in the Multi-Academy Trust, within which the lead school was positioned.
- 3) Field notes from lesson observations by the network lead across schools within the trust were used to evaluate the impact on pupils in terms of engagement.

Key features of enhanced resources included:

- Introducing a cultural focus for each half-term to strengthen intercultural understanding.
- Incorporating authentic French and Spanish visuals and videos to increase exposure to real-world language use.
- Using AI-supported tools to enrich learning materials and accessibility, including:
 - Vidnoz for creating avatar-based presentations.
 - TurboScribe for generating transcripts of audio/video content.
 - Narakeet to create audio clips from target language text.
 - Adobe Animate Express to use audio clips to create animated videos.
- Developing additional target language scaffolds to support comprehension and participation in the classroom.
- Opportunities for authentic communication with native speakers were also developed through partner school pen pal links via the [British Council](#) and [UK-German Connection](#).

3. Findings – Teacher Engagement and Network Activities

Teacher engagement in the project was positive, with strong attendance across both webinars: 20 participants in Webinar 1 (“Innovating the Language Curriculum”) and 18 in Webinar 2 (“A Focus on Speaking”). Although access to feedback forms was limited, attendees provided positive feedback via email, particularly highlighting the usefulness of AI tools and cultural content ideas. Teachers also shared examples of how they had implemented these approaches in practice, including the use of AI to generate descriptions of Joan Miró’s artwork and the design of a celebrity-themed “Traitors” context within a curriculum sequence.

School visits, including both hosting and outreach, identified several common trends. Knowledge organisers were often found to prioritise vocabulary and scaffolding over cultural content, which can result in more abstract use of language. In addition, lessons were reported to feature limited use of the target language, alongside a shift towards single-language provision driven by staffing constraints.

The case study school highlighted a positive response to low-effort adaptations to knowledge organisers. Examples included French cuisine matching activities and boulangerie photo tasks, both of which prompted increased discussion and engagement among pupils.

A contribution to a [British Council webinar](#), ‘Culture in the Languages Classroom’ in November 2025 also helped to reinforce network reach.

4. Findings

CPD engagement and feedback

Webinar engagement was strong due to the strong partnerships in the region. In addition, the network's contribution to the even larger British Council webinar helped them reach an even wider audience.

Face-to-face events, although more costly to attend, resulted in stronger engagement when compared to online events. The teachers involved in delivering the two types of CPD commented that in-person visits were effective in building relationships and engaging teachers in materials, whereas shared platforms such as OneDrive and Padlet were less frequently used, even when they attempted to make webinars interactive.

Engagement with cultural resources

Teachers from across the network reported strong pupil engagement with authentic materials and 'real' content (e.g. fast speech building relatedness). They also anticipated that using this approach consistently at Key Stage 3 would contribute to increased GCSE uptake. Teachers also appreciated that the content shared, such as sequences based on *Les Choristes* and city-focused units, were found to be readily adaptable across different school contexts.

Impact on learners

Data collection in this round focused on teacher engagement and reports of the use of the resources. Hearing from pupils directly, although beyond the scope of this project, would have provided useful triangulation and may be possible in future. For example, questionnaires could be used to track the engagement of one class at Key Stage 3, with the possibility of comparing them to another class who would receive a later intervention of cultural teaching sequences.

6. Discussion and Implications

Addressing curriculum gaps

Knowledge organisers support efficiency but can risk promoting decontextualised language. This can be mitigated by embedding cultural content (e.g. half-termly foci) alongside target language scaffolds, without requiring full curriculum redesign. Incorporating elements of relatedness—such as exposure to real speakers, video

content, and AI—can further enhance pupil motivation (Diamantidaki, 2025), particularly in contexts where access to international partners is limited.

Practical strategies for teachers

- Trial the use of AI to create bespoke resources, such as generating transcripts (e.g. via TurboScribe) or using avatars and cartoon-style outputs to avoid copyright issues.
- Sequence cultural content, for example through recurring features (e.g. weekly “banishments” in a celebrity Traitors context) or the use of film clips as a stimulus for description and sharing opinions.
- Amplify target language use through knowledge organisers, for example by incorporating sentence builders and structured pair-work activities.
- Sustain practice through professional networks by prioritising in-person teach-meets, maintaining active email communication, and strengthening links with trainee teachers.
- School leaders should allocate dedicated time for subject leads, aligning this work with the Gatsby Benchmarks.

Embedding cultural content "Celebrity culture"

Relevant content

Linking to new GCSE topic – celebrity culture

Introduce French celebrities

Le prochain bannissement:

ou

In our first Webinar on developing the Language Curriculum, a colleague from one of our network schools explained how they had designed a Celebrity traitors context as one of their Curriculum sequences. We thought this could be a good approach to covering the new GCSE topic on celebrity culture.

It enabled them to pick a cast of French speaking celebrities – who became the protagonists for modelling language. Students could learn about some of these characters, as well as voting to banish them at the end of each week.

An example of activities incorporated into Knowledge Organisers focused on the topic of 'Celebrity Culture'

The outcomes of this project support a learner-focused approach to curriculum design, with scope to place greater emphasis on the development of case studies to evidence measurable impact.

7. Outputs

- **Webinar Recordings/Slides:** 2x events with AI/cultural examples (you can find links to these recordings below)
- **AI-Generated Resources:** Bespoke videos (e.g., animated artists/celebrities), transcripts, "Celebrity Traitors" adaptations.
- **Knowledge Organiser Templates:** Enhanced with culture, TL scaffolds, speaking activities (finalising for summer trials).
- **CPD Frameworks:** Strategies for single-language contexts, shared via network emails/visits.

8. Further Reading and Inspiration

Teachers are encouraged to explore [Language Educators Online \(LEO\)](#) – a free, flexible online platform dedicated exclusively to the professional development of languages teachers. LEO provides research-informed, evidence-based content, which is grounded in real classroom experience, alongside insights into using the latest ideas in technology and AI to support languages learning

Details on how to connect with other Language Networks focused on speaking and curriculum design, including the [Etherow Language Network](#), can be found on the [NCLE website](#).

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Additional resource links:

AI /Tech used for resource generation:

- [Vidnoz](#)
- [Turboscribe](#)
- [Narakeet](#)
- [Adobe Animate Express](#)

Network Webinars:

- [Etherow CPD webinar - 16.10.25.pdf](#)
- Webinar 1: [Innovating the Language Curriculum | Etherow Language Network CPD Webinar](#)
- Webinar 2: [Speaking Skill Focus | Etherow Language Network CPD Webinar](#)

British Council Culture Webinar

- <https://vimeo.com/1140361307?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Partner Finders:

- [British Council Schools Partner Finder](#)

- [UK-German Connection](#)
- **NCLE resources:**[NCLE language networks- using culturally rich and authentic storybooks in primary language lessons.pptx](#)