

# DIGITAL MEDIATIONS

A report on digital transformations in Modern Languages

Paul Spence and Renata Brandão

April 2022



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# Digital Mediations Report 2022

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# Foreword



*Language Acts and Worldmaking* has six research strands, of which Digital Mediations is one. Reading this report is like taking a trip through the life of the project. I recognise in the responses to the interviews some of the areas of doubt, curiosity and discovery that were integral to our discussions about the multidisciplinary reach of the study of Modern Languages. The interventions of Digital Humanities scholarship soon became central to the ways in which we were conceptualising our understanding of the field and prompted a constantly renewing dialogue. This has been a dialogue about disciplinarity and methodology, about how we engage nationally and internationally and, as this report illustrates so vividly, about perceptions of how languages transit the world.

It is always revealing for us as Humanities scholars to be asked to think about our work in terms of data, and to articulate about how we move from this type of investigation into thinking about and acting on the present and future of the discipline. It is important work at this moment, as a way of engaging actively with the perceived crisis in Modern Language teaching and research. The approach adopted in the work of our Digital Mediations strand demands that we pose questions, not from a narrative of deficit, but from an enquiry into presence. The results of this research are significant in that they disrupt what have become the orthodoxies of the narratives of the place of Modern Languages in the UK, and I welcome the inevitable challenges that arise as I read the report. These include the need to root our dialogue in the complexity and fragmentation of our understanding of how our disciplines can be informed and transformed by new research methods and paradigms of thought.

The research described here on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Modern Language education is an important insight in this respect. The impact of shifts in teaching since March 2020 has propelled us to think about the nature of the online environment, in complex conversations that reveal opportunity and anxiety. One instance is the workshop with secondary school teachers on post-pandemic teaching, which provided powerful insights into the nature of rapid change in teaching methods, the inventiveness in the use of the pedagogical tools introduced in the new environment and the multivarious ways young learners engaged. This workshop prompted in me a new awareness of the type of learning experience and knowledge students bring to the university environment. It also made me think again about the need for sustained and meaningful dialogue between the secondary and higher education sectors to make the transition from school to university more dynamic and we in the universities can truly engage our students' skills and competencies. This is just one striking instance of how Digital Humanities research prompts reflection and action.

I cannot here detail all the ways in which this report prompts new thinking. What I do want to say is that, reading it, I am reminded of how the work of Digital Humanities is about pushing our thinking, challenging our research, making us aware of stasis, providing methods to break out of it. In relation to Modern Languages, I would say one last thing informed by having attended so many of these events: this research proves that the monolingual spirit does not prevail in the UK, and that the research detailed here is a necessary contribution to our understanding of language landscapes. The ways in which this research brought the world to our research doorstep has instructed and inspired as all in *Language Acts and Worldmaking*. I hope it does you too.

Professor Catherine Boyle

# Introduction

In recent years there has been a common sentiment in many anglophone countries that the field of Modern Languages is at a crossroads. Faced with falling student numbers at Higher Education (HE) level language programmes and wider complex challenges facing humanities disciplines as a whole, in countries such as the UK there have been intense debates on how the field should react to new opportunities and risks in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To some, this is a similar predicament to the one which in the 1990s motivated researchers in STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) to start to work together and advocate (with great success) for greater attention to those subjects in schools and HE. In his 2009 review of the state of Modern Languages (ML) at HE level, for example, Worton argues that the ML community should engage in a similar way to convince policy makers of the importance of studying and researching languages.

Modern Languages, and more generally, debates around multilingualism, are increasingly affected by rapid social and cultural changes brought about by a series of widespread digital transformations. These changes are often represented by the somewhat opaque, technocentric and deterministic term 'digital disruption'. They are manifested in a number of ways – from common public perceptions that tools such as Google Translate will obviate the need to learn other languages, or that digital platforms only need to be designed for English and a small well-resourced subset of the world's 7,000 languages, to an overarching assumption that, in the encounter between languages and technology, we only need to study how 'digital practice' transforms and disrupts 'language practice' and never the other way round.

Some areas associated with Modern Languages (notably Language learning, Linguistics and Translation) have been pioneers in developing new digital pedagogies and research methods, but the field as a whole has arguably engaged less with digital transformation than other fields such as English, History or Classics. This report, then, engages with two connected dynamics:

- As the field of Modern Languages searches for a new vision and a new identity in the wake of multiple and complex transformations, how

should it engage with digital methods, literacies and pedagogies?

- As digital studies and practice become increasingly embedded within academic scholarship as a whole, how can we ensure that they are informed by linguistic awareness and sensitivity, and that Modern Languages expertise and perspectives influence digital research design?

We use the term 'Modern Languages' in this report as opposed to overlapping terms such as 'Modern Foreign Languages', 'Second Language Acquisition' or simply 'Languages'. We adhere to the definition of Modern Languages which integrates languages, cultures and societies in line with the UK Subject Benchmark Statement at Higher Education level (Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education 2019) and which, in integrating language and culture, "is grounded in the multilingual and multicultural realities we inhabit" (Burdett and Gorrara, 2021). We focus largely on Higher Education in the UK, while making connections to other national/regional realities and to digital mediations at school level language education. Our study focuses on languages other than English, including community, heritage and non-European languages, and this report covers the Modern Languages, Area Studies and to some extent cognate fields such as Linguistics and Translation. Its scope is language education and research at Higher Education level in the UK (and anglophone contexts) more generally.

This report aims to influence wider debates about future Modern Languages policy and identify ways in which the field can stake a claim to making a key contribution to emerging digital practice and scholarship in a number of unique and exciting ways. Most of the research it analyses predates the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, but the report also makes some preliminary suggestions on how we might engage with the new learning and research landscapes left by the very sudden forced move online, and which we are only just starting to grasp the full significance of.

In the UK, the perceived crisis in Modern Languages

has led to a number of initiatives, including the Open World Research Initiative (OWRI), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) 2016-2021 in order to support projects which could help the field find a common voice and raise its profile through new models and partnerships. This report stems from collaborative research by Paul Spence and Renata Brandao on the [Digital Mediations](#) strand of the OWRI-funded *Language Acts and Worldmaking* project. 'Digital Mediations' aimed to explore interactions between Modern Languages and Digital Culture through a series of landscape surveys and experimental engagements. Its ultimate objective was to pinpoint areas of collaborative potential between the two in shaping future Modern Languages policy and to identify where the field needs greater support in terms of digital theory, strategy and implementation.

In our 2019 [Attitudes towards digital culture and technology in the Modern Languages](#) preliminary study we used an online survey to gauge areas of awareness, potential and concern in relation to digitally mediated research and study in the field. Disseminated among discussion lists and other fora dedicated to the study of Modern Languages and Cultures, the study asked participants to give their views on topics grouped in four areas: the degree and nature of people's digital engagement, digital methods and tools, digital literacies and digital outputs/publication. Our 2019 report summarised findings from the study, which we might briefly summarise as follows:

- There is considerable overlap in how digital mediation affects ML research and education. Digital transformations often lead to increased access to materials, more variety, greater authenticity and significant potential for productively networking with other learners or researchers.
- Many felt that we are now witnessing a potentially profound change to the learning experience of our students, with greater student autonomy, a wider set of media interactions and increased emphasis on project-based and peer-to-peer activities.
- Respondents saw major new opportunities for both research and education in the field, but also expressed concern over the effects of screen dependence, increased automation and

the weakening of critical-cultural faculties in the wider education system.

- The impact of digital transformations on Modern Languages education seemed clear to many, but there was less certainty regarding the impact on Modern Languages research, which is a major focus of this report.

## About this report

This report builds on our 2019 study, drawing on a number of landscape reports and experimental initiatives which we carried out to explore the degree to which digital culture, tools and methods are, or might be, part of debates about the future of Modern Languages. The main events and studies included or mentioned in this report include:

- [Mapping Multilingualism and Digital Culture workshop](#), 2017.
- Modern Languages programme review, 2018.
- [Attitudes towards digital culture and technology in the Modern Languages](#) questionnaire survey, 2019.
- Literature review of Modern Languages policy documents, 2019.
- [Ideating the Modern Languages Curriculum workshop](#), 2019.
- [Digital Modern Languages Tutorial Writing Sprint workshop](#), 2019 and [publication as a Special Collection in Modern Languages Open](#), 2020.
- [Interview study with Modern Languages policy makers and digital practitioners](#), with follow-up interviews to assess post-pandemic impacts, April 2018 to January 2022.
- [Disrupting Digital Monolingualism](#) workshop, 2020 and report, 2021.
- [Digital Modern Languages](#) seminar, 2019 to present.



## The State of Modern Languages

There have been a long series of reports over the last few years cataloguing the challenges facing Modern Languages education in the UK - challenges which symbolise concerns raised throughout the anglophone world more generally about the position of multilingualism and transcultural dynamics in society. Successive reports have emphasised the urgency of attending to challenges for the field and it is now some time since a British Academy report warned that “a whole generation risks being lost to languages”, affecting “the ability of the UK (and its citizens) to respond to many of the major challenges it faces today” (British Academy, 2009b). This twenty-plus year old dialogue has been mirrored in North America, where in 2007 an MLA report spoke of a “sense of crisis around what came to be called the nation’s language deficit” which jeopardised U.S. global relationships, due to its decreased capacity to engage with other cultures and languages (Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007).

At school level in the UK, language has been continuously edged out of the curriculum by other subject demands and unsympathetic government policy, a situation exacerbated by popular perceptions around subject ‘utility’ and language exam difficulty. These factors have led to a consistent downward trend in student enrolment on Modern Languages programmes at both school (leading to GCSE and A level qualifications in the UK) and university levels.

Reports ‘making the case for the future of languages’ have highlighted the growing importance of multilingualism in societies and international relations increasingly dominated by the dynamics of globalisation (Mitchell, 2013). The British Academy ‘State of the Nation’ report of 2013 contrasted the “growing deficit in foreign language skills at a time when globally, the demand for language skills is expanding” (British Academy, 2013). The report stresses the importance of languages at all stages and levels of the workforce, and not just for an “internationally-mobile elite”. The ‘Lost for words’ report in the same year argued for an “integrated government-wide strategy to look at [language] capacity” (British Academy, 2009c), while the ‘Born global’ symposium in 2014 emphasised the attraction to employers of “employees with an

international outlook, a global mind-set and cultural intelligence” (British Academy, 2014). In the post-Brexit UK, the Languages for Future 2017 report contended that “language skills form an integral part of the strategic review of skills that the UK will need post-Brexit” (British Council, 2017).

There have been repeated calls in the UK (and elsewhere) for a “new national conversation about languages” (British Academy, 2016) to discuss the implications of English currently being the pre-eminent language of international communication, to explore the under-realised potential of modern society’s characteristic multilingualism and to better align language education with current popular expectations around media usage and language learning habits. Many commentators of the past two decades have criticised the lack of a unified, joined up strategy which might safeguard the development of language specialists/teachers across a range of languages at all stages and produce clear language learning pathways from early years learning to Higher Education and beyond.

In the UK, we see the same patterns at Higher Education (HE) level, with downward recruitment of students on Modern Languages degrees, the closure or merging of ML departments and the growing concentration in particular regions (especially London and southern England) and among privileged/metropolitan social groups. This has occurred in parallel to a crisis in funding (and in confidence) for Modern Languages research. The so-called Worton report, commissioned to address these concerns, argued in 2009 for “a clear and compelling identity for Modern Foreign Languages” and proposed that the field should claim agency over its future through pro-active “dialogue with Government and major funders and stakeholders about how the study and research of foreign languages can respond to current and future challenges and to the needs of increasingly complex markets”.

## The value of Modern Languages

What is the value of studying languages and their associated cultures? The Born Global report in 2016 identified three categories of benefit: (1) the ability to communicate in a foreign language; (2)

“There are two disadvantages in global language arrangements: one of them is not knowing English; and the other one of them is knowing only English”.

Professor Jo Lo Bianco, quoted in Born Global interim report 2014

intercultural skills allowing the user to navigate between cultures; and (3) wider social and analytical skills which arise from contact with other cultures. Beyond career-oriented gains listed earlier, others have proposed cognitive benefits and a British Academy position paper offers a long list of reasons for learning languages (*Language Matters*, 2009), including mobility, identity and value construction. Some have questioned the assumption that knowing English is ‘enough’: in Lo Bianco’s word, “[t]here are two disadvantages in global language arrangements: one of them is not knowing English; and the other one of them is knowing only English” (British Academy, 2014).

Increased monolingualism in international research is seen by some as a major risk to the strength and depth of global scholarship, and the “future of the UK’s world class research base might be threatened by the decline in modern language learning” (British Academy, 2009a). In the Higher Education sector, language education (broadly conceived) has a vital role to play in fostering the ability of countries like the UK to meet truly global (i.e. transnational, transcultural and translingual) challenges.

## Fragmentation in language fields

Discussion about the future of Modern Languages/ language education is complicated by various degrees of fragmentation:

- The topic involves discussion of education at various levels – primary/secondary school, higher education and beyond. In England, these conform to different branches of government which do not have a history of collaborating on language policy.
- The notion of ‘language learning’ has diffuse meanings – but notably for some it means just learning to understand a language in the narrow technical sense, while for others it involves a more integral engagement with the language and its associated culture(s).
- There is no consensus on a single term for the

field in English – various terms such as, ‘Modern Languages’, ‘Modern Languages and Cultures’, ‘Modern Foreign Languages’, ‘Languages’ or ‘Secondary Language Acquisition’ are used, with different nuances in different regional or educational settings.

- Different languages have different levels of status and identity within education. For example, at Higher Education level in the UK, language-related research and education is distributed among various fields, including the Modern Languages (which in the past had a ‘European language’ bias), Area Studies (sometimes historically associated with non-European languages), Linguistics and Translation studies.
- Community or heritage languages are often under-represented in discussion of Modern Languages.
- At Higher Education level, there are important differences in the role and perception of Language centres and Language departments, and between ‘research’ staff and language teachers in the latter.
- In the UK, there are other forms of fragmentation at play, such as the lack of a national languages policy or the weak connection between Languages and Linguistics.

While important exceptions exist (such as Routes into Languages, or pioneering work at Southampton university), there has historically been relatively little collaboration between different sectors/fields/ languages, although there is now evidence that this situation is changing. In the UK, the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Open World Research Initiative (OWRI) both highlighted and fostered this kind of transdisciplinary and plurilingual approach, which it is hoped will lead to a stronger integrated cross-languages identity for language education. This in turn situates the field to better contribute the intercultural, transnational and translingual skills required to address global challenges.

## Digital engagement in Modern Languages education and research

Digital engagement is not new in Modern Languages education or research. Language educators have been at the forefront in digital/hybrid pedagogical research through Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and other forms of technology-

“Digital technologies have changed the way in which we engage in our research practice right across the full cycle of the research process”

Taylor and Thornton, 2017

enhanced language learning. In Modern Languages research, digitally mediated practice has also enjoyed a long trajectory, through for example [work on databases of medieval Spanish, Catalan, Galician, and Portuguese literature which started in the 1980s](#) but digital engagement has, until recently, tended to be connected to particular research areas (such as digital art or digital editions) or related fields (such as Translation or Linguistics) where digital technology brought tangible transformations. Digital research practice in Modern Languages has been informed by a variety of fields such as Digital Humanities and Digital Cultural Studies, with different theoretical and practical points of emphasis, but has recently seen greater alignment through initiatives such as the [‘Shape of the Discipline’](#) writing sprint/publication, [Modern Languages Association roundtables](#) and the [Digital Modern Languages seminar series](#) in the UK. In 2022 it is impossible to ignore the opportunities and risks posed by networked, data-driven and algorithmically filtered language practice. This has led to broader, cross-language and cross-discipline, debates around how language educators and researchers should engage with new pedagogies, methods and ecologies.

## Our research in ‘Digital Mediations’

The ‘Digital Mediations’ strand on the *Language Acts and Worldmaking* project explored interactions and tensions between digital culture and Modern Languages research. We studied these interactions in both directions - both the role digital culture and technology play in transforming Modern Languages research and learning, and the role Modern Languages has in helping us to better understand digital culture, which is global and multilingual by nature.

How have digital culture and technology been represented in Modern Languages benchmarking, strategy and policy documents? The first stage of our research on Digital Mediations reviewed strategy documents relating to Modern Languages policy, in particular in the UK (although we did draw on other national policy documents for comparison) and analysed the way in which digital mediation was defined and presented. We examined 21

documents relating to language policy in the United Kingdom, from 2004 to 2019, including education council and British Academy reports, publications by professional associations in the ML sector and official standards inspection reviews.

Our analysis showed relatively little critical engagement with digital culture and technology overall. Generally speaking, there was little or no mention of ‘digital literacies’, ‘digital methods’ or ‘digital pedagogies’. Rather, any mention of ‘digital’ tended to be focused on ‘Information and Communication Technologies’, ‘digital technology’, ‘computing’ and other terms which privilege technical aspects over social/cultural ones. The major exception to that was in reference to ‘online learning’, although even here the specific critical, pedagogical and infrastructural challenges were barely addressed.

Equally importantly, where digital mediation was mentioned in any way, the predominant perspective was on how ‘digital’ can transform language education or research, without any sense that both ‘digital’ and ‘languages’ are part of more complex and multi-directional dynamics. There was no sense that Modern Languages and multilingualism can help us to understand or use digital media more effectively, for example by advancing diversity agendas in digital practice, and in doing so, facilitating multilingual and intercultural perspectives in digitally mediated learning and knowledge production.

There does, however, seem to be a growing recognition that it is important to include ‘digital’ perspectives in such documents. “How can we harness the power of new technologies?” asked a participant at the Born Global Symposium in 2014, while [Language Trends surveys](#) have sometimes highlighted the use of online tools for teaching or for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers. In the same period, the Worton report’s afore-mentioned vision for Modern Languages at Higher Education, notably emphasises the use of ‘new technologies’ in a number of ways through digitally mediated curriculum design, assessment, peer-to-peer learning, pedagogical resources and overall learning experience, a focus which has not been widely reflected in Modern Languages policy documents since.

None of the documents studied explicitly addressed digital transformations in Modern Languages in terms of policy or research strategy. It has been

argued that digital media is so ubiquitous now that it does not make sense to separate digital practice from a wider examination of ML research or pedagogy, but we would argue that there is still a significant knowledge deficit in language education as a whole (notwithstanding some areas of excellence) in relation to critical digital engagement which makes some focus on 'digital' necessary. There are some very thoughtful and innovative use of digital culture and technology by teachers at all levels of language education, but whereas non-digital teaching and research methods operate according to common theories, strategies and policies, there is no common consensus or framework to engage with their digital equivalents, and as noted already, digital mediation in Modern Languages research requires particular attention.



# Studying the landscape of Digital Modern Languages

This section presents conclusions from a series of landscaping activities exploring how modern languages and cultures can be studied in hybrid digital/non-digital environments. In doing so, it charts evolving debates about the nature and significance of digital mediations involving Modern Languages and Cultures, and the critical competences required to negotiate them effectively.

## First workshop: Mapping Multilingualism and Digital Culture

“Now we need to be a different kind of researcher”

Workshop participant

The first DM workshop aimed to map ways in which the field of Modern Languages had been affected by digital transformations. It included digital practitioners and Modern Languages across the field, although the focus was more on how research questions relating to the ‘culture’ strand within ML are addressed than on ‘linguistic/language teaching’ topics. The event was divided into two sections, with the first part dedicated to presentations by speakers on a wide range of digital projects and the second given over to discussion groups, which brought together academics, digital practitioners and cultural sector respondents to explore the potential for common digital methods, tools and training for Modern Languages. The outcome of the discussion is examined in greater depth elsewhere (Spence and Brandão, 2022), but to summarise:

- Digital transformations have significantly expanded the scope of Modern Languages research and teaching. This brings new opportunities and perspectives beyond the canon and traditional gatekeepers, but also challenges in prioritisation in a landscape of abundance.
- We are now beyond the early years of digital scholarship, where researchers developed standalone projects which were often exciting and experimental, but whose methods and tools were often not easily transferable to

other research. In today’s resource-restricted environment, Modern Languages researchers seek accessible and extensible approaches to digital research which are embedded within the theory and practice of the wider field.

- There is a need within Modern Languages for better all-round understanding within the field of the full cycle of digital research from digital creation/capture to analysis and from publication to preservation, so that ‘digital’ research becomes integrated more fully – and critically – into Modern Languages research as a whole.
- Greater attention is needed to teaching and training in 21<sup>st</sup> century research skills, including those connected to digital methods and literacies.

## ML programme review

In 2018 we surveyed Modern Languages curricula in the UK for examples of where digital mediation was present and how it was represented. Reviewing 66 ML degrees in the UK at undergraduate, masters’ and doctoral level, we found digital methods and culture were prominent in programmes and modules on topics with traditionally strong engagement in this area such as translation, linguistics or language learning, but they were not generally present in any significant way in culture-focused modules. Where ‘digital’ was mentioned in any way, it tended to be in relation to wider digital literacy or Information Technology and Communication (ITC) skills, rather than as a topic of research focus in its own right. The implied overall emphasis of any digital component to programmes was on ‘digital’ as external ‘technology’ rather than understanding it as part of a wider socio-technical practice transforming culture and society, and therefore requiring critical competence. There were some exceptions such as Kirsty Hooper’s course on [Cultural Connections, Digital Histories: Britain and the 19th-Century Hispanic World](#), which considered the communicative power of digital resources and developed critical collaborative digital skills to

# Digital Modern Languages landscape: Interviews

address Modern Languages research questions.

Building on the 2019 online survey on [Attitudes towards digital culture and technology in the Modern Languages](#), the largest part of our wider landscaping exercise was [an extensive interview study](#) which surveyed the state of digital transformations in the Modern Languages at Higher Education level. We summarise the study cohort and our findings below.

## Interview study cohort

### General information about the cohort

#### *Size of cohort*

A total of 34 people were interviewed for this study.

#### *Age*

Their ages were as follows:

Age group	Percentage
Less than 25	0%
25-34	28%
35-44	28%
45-54	34%
55 or older	10%

#### *Fields*

Most respondents worked in Modern Languages, Areas studies, Linguistics and/or Language education, broadly conceived. There was a bias towards European languages and cultures, but other areas were covered such as Latin American studies, East Asian studies, South Asian languages and Middle Eastern studies. Some respondents worked in cognate fields such as Translation studies, Linguistics, wider Education studies or language policy. Others worked in fields such as History, Classical studies, Politics and international politics, Art and curation, Postcolonial studies and Library and information studies.

#### *Countries*

While many respondents were born outside of the

UK, most are now based in the UK. Not surprisingly, many of our respondents were highly mobile, having lived in several different countries in some cases and a significant number had experience of working in language fields in at least one other country. Everyone spoke English, and many also spoke French, Spanish, Portuguese or German. Smaller numbers spoke Russian and other Eastern European languages, Southeast Asian languages, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic or other languages (including minority languages).

### *Jobs and roles*

One key focus of the interview study was on Modern Languages research, so not surprisingly there was a high concentration in senior academic jobs, but we interviewed people with other career profiles from schools, the arts and the private sector in order to provide a comparative perspective.

Job titles	Percentage
PhD or postgraduate	16%
Lecturer	19%
Senior academic	38%
Commercial language sector/ consultancy	9%
Library sector	6%
School teacher	6%
Other jobs in language policy/strategy	6%

We also asked respondents how they understood their primary working role. Not surprisingly, the highest scoring category was 'both research and teaching' at HE level, representing two key areas of an academic career.

Role	Percentage
Language education at schools	5%
Teaching at HE level (primary focus)	8%
Research at HE level (primary focus)	20%
Both research and teaching at HE level	43%
Language policy	8%
Funding/grants	5%
Library and archives management	5%
Private sector work with languages	5%
Publishing	3%

*[Respondents were able to choose more than one]*

Phrases used by interviewees showed that many

were engaged in: senior management of language education units; language policy and strategy; languages/multilingualism advocacy; teaching/curricular innovation; programme development for online education; teacher training; and international branding. Respondents had commonly worked in roles outside of academia, for example in publishing, translation, interpreting or cultural centres.

## Research focus

Interviewees were asked about the main (research) focus of their work. As is typical in language education, the research areas were very diverse indeed, but there was concentration in established 'language' fields such as:

- Language policy/especially relating to language education
- Language pedagogy, including e-learning
- Modern Languages
- Area studies
- Broader cultural studies – theatre, gender studies, memory studies
- Linguistics, including applied and sociolinguistics
- Translation studies

Other areas included:

- Social sciences, for example migration studies
- Multilingual studies, language documentation and endangered languages
- Multimodality and gesture, visual culture, spatial theory
- Media studies
- Digitally-focused fields such as digital culture, critical digital literacy, educational technology or Digital Humanities

## Languages

Many people worked with multiple languages. Despite our best efforts, a large majority worked with European languages (78%). It was extremely difficult to find respondents to interview for some languages, perhaps in part because many do not

identify themselves under the 'Modern Languages' label.

## Periods and regions

Many worked on more than one period. A few people worked on pre-modern languages or content, but most worked on twentieth century or contemporary topics.

There was a bias towards European coverage in the regions studied, although the research of many we interviewed was transnational, e.g., on the francophone world.

## Methodologies and methods

In the interview we asked people both about the general methodologies and specific digital methods they used in their research. Here we saw immense variety in the methodologies used by respondents in their research. Responses did not always distinguish clearly between methodologies (wider theoretical and practical frameworks for research) and methods (specific research procedures and tools). Terms used in interviewee responses to these questions included:

- Those associated with literary methods (close reading, philological analysis, critical textual analysis, dramaturgical analysis)
- Approaches coming from cultural studies, cultural semiotics, comparative studies and postcolonial studies
- Practices associated with Linguistics (narratology, contact linguistics, corpus work, discourse analysis)
- Methodologies associated with Social sciences, such as (linguistic or multi-sited) ethnography, psychoanalytical criticism, motive analysis or social constructivism
- Empirical or experimental methodologies, including experiential modelling
- Some also mentioned methods which can be used with different methodologies (archival research, interviews, surveys or participant observation)

## Findings

### The state of Modern Languages

Interviewees were asked for their opinions on a series of questions relating to the current state of Modern Languages as a field. These included questions about the main challenges facing the field (at school or HE level), comparisons between the situation in the UK and other countries, and actions required (externally, or by the field itself) to meet these challenges. Responses have been organised thematically for coherence.

### *General context for Modern Languages in the UK*

“I think it is a really difficult moment for Modern Languages. I think it is hard to separate it from the wider context of Brexit and people’s attitudes changing to how we function and interact with people that come here but also how we see ourselves as part of a global community and I think that is causing a lot of tension and it is causing a lot of rushed decisions”

Interviewee

There was strong consensus among the people interviewed in the study that this is a very challenging moment for Modern Languages as a field. Numerous reasons were given for this, including government policies, Brexit and wider attitudes within British society. This topic has been covered in depth elsewhere, but it is worth summarising responses in our interviews regarding the historic reasons for this, and the current conditions for language education, broadly conceived:

- *Government policy* is deemed to be a key factor. Firstly, the decision of the Labour government in 2004 to make Modern Languages a non-essential subject at school level led to the field being seriously “downgraded”, badly damaging perceptions of its status among school decision-makers and the wider public. This gave some schools “an excuse for reducing choice and ultimately closing down languages in school”. Decisions by Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition and Conservative governments since have also served to decrease the appeal of language programmes for students at both school and higher education levels.
- There is a *broader social context*, in part influenced by *Brexit*, but predating this, which has also contributed to a *crisis of perception* regarding

the value of languages in formal education at all levels. This relates to how the UK sees itself and functions within a global community.

- In addition to the *internalised perception of poor language ability in the UK* (which frequently becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy at both national and individual levels), there are challenges around particular areas of language education – for example the perception that A-Levels in languages are less useful/career-friendly than other subjects and that language exams are more difficult than for other subjects. It is a common perception that assessment regimes actively affect the appeal of languages at school level.
- There is still a *strong monolingual and anglophone bias* to discourse around languages in the UK (in common with other English-speaking countries), and this has been exacerbated to some extent by *post-internet cultural dynamics*.
- This *monolingual bias is not exclusive to anglophone countries* and it is difficult to get countries to collaborate on language-based policy initiatives, even in Europe – one respondent working on a European policy experimentation project described how difficult it was to get ministries to fully “understand the relevance of language teaching, and of teaching languages and cultures online across political and geographical boundaries” in a manner which could then be implemented systematically.
- There are *differences in the UK* due to the distinct language education regimes in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but the overall effect of these dynamics is similar.
- More generally, there is currently little evidence that government or influential civil entities have plans to *champion or promote the value of languages* in the foreseeable future.

Some key factors which might influence the future direction of the field were also mentioned:

- While interest in languages is not at present adequately reflected institutionally or in education policy, popular uptake of language learning apps such as Duolingo and Memrise (although risking a too narrow focus on language as a ‘technical skill’ which neglects cultural learning) and high levels of registration for language courses at university-based Modern Language Centres prove that “people are actually



very interested in learning languages”.

- Some felt that the effects of Brexit might make more globally facing companies in the UK see greater value in employing people “more open to the rest of the world” and able to speak foreign languages.
- Others felt that some of the technopositivist discourse around technologies such as Google Translate, including the common opinion that digital technology will replace the need to learn languages, would diminish as early cycle technological euphoria dissipated, and as people realised the limitations of machine translation and the importance of the human perspective: “understanding each other or getting along requires way more than just the language”.

Many interviewees commented on the importance of actively engaging with multilingualism in the UK in discussions about language education.

- One policy strategist felt that “community languages, so the languages of the immigrant communities, indigenous languages, Irish, Welsh, Scots, Gaelic, etc, in a lot of institutions are very disconnected. There could be a much better-connected coherent discourse around languages”. Another pointed out the lack of connection between the languages their university teaches (mostly Western European languages) and the linguistic makeup of the linguistically super-diverse neighbourhood 300 metres away from where they work: “so there is this disconnect between what we do in Modern Languages and what is happening in the communities”.
- On the positive side, one respondent argued that “ten years ago we were not even having this conversation”, so we are currently in a transition phase on this topic. They felt that this change “allowed us to get away from the idea that language is what happens elsewhere”, found this engagement with community/heritage languages “extremely liberating intellectually” and argued that this is a “huge opportunity for modern languages” to recognise and engage with multilingual realities in the communities they serve.

The consequences of this situation have been felt at both school and higher education level over the last twenty years. *Student numbers on language courses at school level have been under threat* in the UK as a whole in that period, and while this is not universal

(some non-European languages have seen modest growth for example), in some cases languages are in danger of becoming non-viable at school level and for some areas of Modern Languages it is a “question of basic survival”.

Changes to the current provision for primary school languages in the UK were introduced by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2014, and schools had benefited from a ten-year programme of development and training which the previous government had invested in, but in 2010 most of this *research and development ceased due to a lack of funding*. This was the context for one person’s interpretation of the overall cycle: “Primary schools were suddenly cut loose from all forms of support that they had before but were expected to teach this new subject, which was still being developed and teachers were not sufficiently trained to do it. But now because it is a compulsory part of curriculum it is something that they have to do but it is a sort of tick box in many cases, because the real pressure, it’s on literacy and numeracy in Year 6 SATS [Standard Assessment tests for 10–11-year-olds in England]. And what we saw recently is that schools seem to be introducing pupils to a language in the early years of primary school, then in year six they seem to give it up all together, many times. Because they say, ‘well, we’re going to focus on SATS this year’. Then they get to secondary school and of course they haven’t really got very much to show for what they’ve done, or they have forgotten, or they’ve not had a consistent program. So secondary schools tend to say, ‘well they haven’t really done anything worthwhile, let’s start again’. So, you get an 11-year-old sometimes starting a new language going over the very early stages of a language, which they should have done already and so they’re not working at their cognitive level. They find it difficult but not sort of intellectually stimulating.”

There is a similar picture at secondary level, where *not enough students go on to do GCSEs and A-Levels in languages*. *Severe grading of A-levels* is perceived to be a major factor in decreasing the appeal of language courses.

Some argued that *students do not study languages for enough time each week (quantity of provision) or long enough (duration) at primary school*. *Not enough time is dedicated to languages at schools in general*. In the words of one interviewee, “schools seem to be cutting time available for languages. And cutting the opportunities to use languages outside the classroom, or to take part in cultural activities, meeting native speakers and so on, international opportunities. All those things that seems to make

language worthwhile. And really, anybody who's learned another language would know that that is what gives you a huge step forward towards fluency."

At university level, this in turn has various consequences:

- The *perception of Modern Languages as being less useful* before university, and the effect this has on student numbers at school, leads to *fewer potential students coming through from A-Level education*.
- There is a *mistaken impression that students who do not have language A-Levels cannot go on to study languages* at university.
- *Student numbers are also in serious decline at university level*, and this affects the viability of some languages currently being taught.
- The *funding model is problematic for Modern Languages*, which "require intensive teaching and small groups in a manner that is financially challenging for institutions at any level", and they do not offer a comparable "contribution model" to other subjects such as the Social sciences, which makes them "seem to be a poor economic investment".
- The ongoing effects of Brexit are actively impeding *study abroad and academic exchange programmes* (as we have already seen with the decision to withdraw the UK from the Erasmus+ programme).
- The drop in number of people studying languages at university level also *affects the capacity to produce language teachers* nationally.

In addition, there are a number of other challenges facing the field at Higher Education level:

- It was felt by some that, more generally, many people *do not understand what the field of Modern Languages entails*. In the words of one respondent: "a lot of people, and I would include academics here ... think it's about learning a language and I still have colleagues in my own institution who think that I teach French. Well, I've never taught French in the whole of my academic career. So, I think that the historical, cultural, intercommunication, intercultural exchanges - it is very difficult for people to understand that actually all of that is part of Modern Languages".

- The general feeling was that researchers were carrying out some *vital and high-quality research* in Modern Languages at universities, but some felt that it was "*too compartmentalised*". One interviewee noted that research in Modern Languages is "extremely healthy" with both "breadth and depth" as measured by formal research evaluation exercises in the UK, but that at the same time *awards at doctoral level have dropped "very dramatically"*.

Some respondents discussed past and current strategies taken by institutions to maintain their language offering in adverse conditions:

- In historic terms, some institutions have chosen in recent years to *merge language-based academics or units into other departments* such as Film studies, History or Comparative literature as a "survival tactic", but this has "*paradoxically thrown into question the identity of Modern Languages itself*" and made it harder to articulate what the field offers as a result.
- As language departments have contracted, they have sometimes *become more focused on language skills*, losing their professors and 'content specialists' (i.e., those who teach cultural topics). This has exacerbated divisions between "culture" and "language" streams (with the different academic status they each imply in the current system) and damaged the research profile of language units, leading to a situation where "then the University comes round and says 'you are not maintaining your REF score, therefore we don't really need you' and of course the direction of travel is the one I've described: you become a skills-based teaching centre and obviously when you lose that, you lose a lot of input about culture intercultural awareness, all of those very useful things." [The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a periodic research evaluation exercise undertaken approximately every five years at HE level in Britain].
- One respondent saw *two models* currently being followed for the field in the UK. Firstly, "institutions who have a range of languages, which are now finding ways of working together differently and attempting not to homogenise, but to have some sort of more harmonised languages identity. And I think of world cinema and global history, world literature as sort of emerging methodological paradigms which have allowed people to have much more productive conversations." Secondly, there are institutions with more traditional Modern Languages departments, which teach

Western European languages, but have recently started to offer other languages such as Arabic or Chinese. At the same time, there has been greater interaction between Modern Languages (traditionally Arts and Humanities focus, with a bias towards Western European languages) and Area studies (stronger Social sciences, with strong representation from languages such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Arabic).

### *Responses to the challenges facing the Modern Languages*

We asked interviewees what responses they thought were required to meet these challenges, either from within the field of Modern Languages, or externally. The focus of the interview study was on Higher Education research, but the responses frequently connected to other stages of language education.

One common response to our questions was to advocate for greater connection to multilingual experiences in UK society, and to strengthen the link between language educators/researchers, students and “the multilingual world outside”. In this light, it was deemed to be important to introduce measures to foster recognition of the UK’s immense linguistic diversity in the media and society at large, and in so doing “valorise both those different languages and the people that speak them”, giving them “audibility and visibility”. As part of this, it was judged to be important to recognise the potential in recruiting representatives of community languages as “experts on the daily practices of translating and moving between languages”, and as part of a reconceptualisation of spoken language diversity in the UK which recognises the skills that these “language speakers actually bring and contribute to society more broadly”.

More than one interviewee argued for urgent engagement with language policy from the highest level of government, including ministers for education at all levels. Given the historic dispersion of language policy responsibility in the UK, it was felt that there was a need for a single person dedicated to looking at languages within government. One proposal was to introduce a new figure responsible for languages across different educational levels and government departments – a Chief Linguistic Advisor, similar in profile to the Chief Scientific Advisor at governmental level.

At school level it was felt that a more joined-up approach was needed to a language learner’s overall

journey through the different stages at primary, secondary and beyond, and that the government needed to review which stages are compulsory or not, and to provide appropriate funding to support those choices. In the view of these respondents, careful planning needed to be carried out to ensure recruitment of language teachers (“there needs to be an understanding that there aren’t enough language teachers in the system”) and protect the viability of key languages during this transitional phase. At present, many language teachers are having to pay for their own Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and to attend courses in their free time, and it was proposed that ring-fenced budget for primary languages was needed to support CPD, the hiring of language assistance and other key measures as part of a more coherent primary languages strategy which gives languages the focused attention they deserve.

“... ancient languages, contemporary languages, indigenous languages, we should all come together. Under languages.”  
Interviewee

At Higher Education level, a number of actions were proposed to promote Modern Languages as a field:

- Many respondents underscored the *importance of viewing language holistically*, cutting across disciplinary divides and communities. In doing so, some claimed that the field needed to *learn the lesson of STEM* (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), which “has been very effective in mobilising collectively around its needs”. One person recommended that language advocates needed to similarly mobilise as a group: “ancient languages, contemporary languages, indigenous languages, we should all come together. Under languages.”
- Another interviewee proposed a *co-ordinated campaign* which would draw together government and other policy and decision-making bodies to mobilise around such a theme, supported by high profile “*cultural ambassadors*, former linguists, to educate the broader public about the value and personal/professional benefits of being multilingual”.
- Some argued for *greater articulation of the benefits of, and greater connections to, other subjects*: “we have to show our relevance, the importance of Modern Languages and the vast range of opportunities that learning a language offers, but also the way it accompanies and

enhances other subjects and gives you different perspective”.

- Others proposed *stressing the cognitive benefits*, how second language learning can bolster literacy, in addition to *fostering social cohesion* through better understanding of other linguistic and cultural perspectives.
- It was recognised that Modern Languages is a very diverse and “somewhat incoherent collection of disciplines and methodologies” which makes it difficult to identify its “particular contribution” or to present a “common narrative” about its future, and yet many interviewees wished to foster a *strong disciplinary identity* which recognised these differences, while drawing on the field’s breadth to highlight the fertile range of skills and knowledge the field produced, and the field’s role in generating interdisciplinary and transcultural learning.
- One example of the kind of narrative the field can advance to explain its contribution is around the topic of [‘Translating Cultures’](#), one of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council’s strategic themes 2012-2019. This research theme brought together language work and cultural work, developing theoretical and practical approaches to the study of “the role of translation, understood in its broadest sense, in the transmission, interpretation, transformation and sharing of languages, values, beliefs, histories and narratives,” including the development of a set of recommendations for engaging with multilingual ethnographic research (Wells et al., 2019).
- Some respondents contended that the field was *moving beyond its division into single language areas into a more transnational and multilingual approach* in the UK, partly as a result of these initiatives, and the AHRC’s Open World Research Initiative.

## Attitudes towards/experience of digital

### *First engagement with digital culture and technology*

“what I’m realising more and more is that the way that students learn, has just changed so completely in the last 10 or 15 years.”

Interviewee

Most of our respondents reported that their first engagement with digital culture was through exposure to the internet, World Wide Web, social media, email and other general purpose digital tools and platforms. Even those that became more actively involved in ‘digital research’ often came to it ‘by accident’, and without specific digital research expertise. Many of those with more advanced digital knowledge gained it through hands-on research projects with a significant ‘digital’ component (which in the twenty-year period either side of the start of the millennium often involved digitisation of pre-digital material). They also often had contact with digital media or Digital Humanities centres of excellence at universities such as Glasgow, Oxford or King’s College London in the UK, or others elsewhere such as Toronto. More than one respondent mentioned the now defunct CHUCOL programme at Cambridge University (Cambridge Humanities Computing for Languages) as a relatively rare example of digital competence learning with a Modern Languages focus. The interviews undertaken supported the hypothesis that some language fields are more conducive to digital competences – corpus linguistics respondents unsurprisingly had a far more advanced understanding of digital affordances and limitations than those coming from other fields, for example.

### *General impact on research practices: access, publication and media expectations*

- One of the most common responses was that ‘digital’ had *transformed the way in which they engaged with libraries, source materials and human research subjects*, significantly saving time. One senior researcher claimed that a literature review which, in the 1990s took them three or four months, would now take them three days to complete. In addition to saving time, it has often also *made available resources which otherwise would be difficult to discover*, let alone access. This was also viewed as a “double-edged sword” by some, as the ease of access also often meant that researchers did not engage directly with the original artefacts, which can sometimes be a problem because they miss out on important information (for example about their materiality) which may be difficult or impossible to discover with online surrogates.
- Interviewees welcomed the *ability to access a range of digitised content* at the same time, for comparative purposes – in the case of one researcher studying Arabic, they particularly



valued the ability to visualise historical manuscripts up close, and they felt that this kind of content could have wider social impacts as it is now available to a public which had not traditionally had access to it.

- Respondents generally *did not engage in great detail on the consequences of new forms of producing, mediating or filtering content*, but one researcher of Asian film-based materials commented on the *distorting effects* produced by their having to access much content through a commercial digital platform (Netflix) and in having to use VPN (Virtual Private Network) technologies to access content in other commercial domains. This area is ripe for ML-based theoretical reflections on the filtering effects of digitised ML content, in the spirit of Tim Hitchcock's observations for the field of History (Hitchcock, 2013).
- Others cited the *ease and speed of publication online* as a key form of impact. One respondent noted the potential benefits in teaching as well, where students can take part in *an exercise in collaborative writing* which "incentivises public engagement and a commitment to networking".
- *Different generational media expectations* were also mentioned in the study. One respondent noted "what I'm realising more and more is that the way that students learn, has just changed so completely in the last 10 or 15 years." They reported that students are often not interested in content or activities unless they are able to access them online (usually on a smartphone), and that they do not engage with the traditional textbook model for their learning.
- In contrast, one Library and information science professional involved in the study stated that the *strong push for a shift to digital content* coming from senior management (partially for space reasons) was not matched by transformations in researcher habits, where there is still reticence in some cases to provide or access content digitally (whether for academic cultural reasons or simply because digital research is less effective in some cases), and that expensive pricing plans from publishers sometimes made it difficult to acquire digital content.
- More generally, various participants in the study referred to the ability to use digital media for *broadening the scope and understanding of the field*, engaging more people and for "making the case for languages more generally" in an effective

manner.

## *Collaboration, open content and popular culture*

"Digital is opening more objects of study, more cultural objects, new methodological thinking about narrative as not just published narrative and text but also as online digital text"

Interviewee

- Interviewees described the *potential for collaboration with fellow researchers (or students) across the world* and the perception that 'digital' is '*democratising*' knowledge, making it more accessible to more people in theory. But others viewed greater digital penetration in our lives as a two-sided coin, where digital technology can also function as a *powerful colonial instrument*, in that access to knowledge on the internet is currently mediated by English, or a handful of other languages such as Spanish or Chinese. Others were more optimistic on this last point, giving as examples the increased *research into multilingual digital spaces* and *major programmes in language preservation and language revitalisation*.
- One respondent was enthusiastic about the *impact on the field's relationship to popular culture*. They said that digital is "opening more objects of study, more cultural objects, new methodological thinking about narrative as not just published narrative and text but also as online digital text. So, I think it's definitely opening up more forms of popular culture which is really what I am interested in". They stressed that this should not replace existing objects of study – "I don't say we shouldn't be teaching Balzac anymore" (in relation to the French nineteenth century writer) – but many interviewees noted that the cultural research focus in Modern Languages had expanded significantly, with digital culture sometimes facilitating this process. Another researcher studying film noted how the proliferation of film-based blogs and other forms of digital content made available a much wider range of (non-elite) responses than they had previously been able to access, transforming their engagement with research areas such as audience response theory.
- Some mentioned new interactive digital projects such as [The Quipu Project](#), which captured testimonies of those who had been sterilised in

1990's Peru without their consent, as examples of *collaborations with groups of people who are marginalised* and not usually represented in academic research.

### Content/data at scale

- Unsurprisingly, the *ability to quickly access huge volumes of data* was mentioned by a number of people. Respondents noted both positive and negative consequences to this. One researcher studying linguistic constructions across the history of French found big databases such as FRANTEXT to be transformative. Whereas before they would have accessed a small quantity of texts to check such constructions, they can now generate millions of examples with ease, and these are often statistically significant. Researchers can now generate associative connections by tracing names of people cited, texts cited or constructing thesauri, which in turn become resources others can use later.
- At present, this kind of approach may work better for Linguistics than for the literary end of Modern Languages, where there is more “reluctance” and less capacity to engage with quantitative methods. This *suspicion towards quantitative research* was deemed by one respondent to colour the attitudes of some ML researchers towards digital research more generally. One respondent was particularly wary of the ongoing interest in big data and “the kind of knowledge that big data analysis generates”. They said that they were “open to be persuaded” but that we are in danger of letting it dominate research, at least in media studies and other social sciences-oriented studies.
- A researcher studying world literature and translingual writing explained that they had not personally engaged much with data-driven methods in this way, but they saw many *possibilities in a ‘big data’ approach*. Another mentioned a conversation they had had with a Spanish historian who spoke of a study involving digital methods at scale which had disproven some conclusions of earlier research they had done simply because they were able to work with a much higher quantity of material.

One important new area of research mentioned in the interviews was the *study of Web archives*, where [recent research has demonstrated the value of using Web-based methods to study migrant communities](#).

### Different degrees/types of engagement

Some respondents judged that digital engagement was much higher in areas such as Language education or Linguistics than in culture-focused Modern Languages research, although areas such as world literature are starting to bring “a sociological approach to literature” which is more amenable to data-driven research methods such as distant reading. Digital methods have “completely transformed” Linguistics, it was claimed, through open access to content (data) at scale, which have transformed some areas of Linguistics “into an empirical, testable and reproducible science”. This has allowed researchers to study large volumes of evidence in relation to how people speak, to follow the research trail of our predecessors, to check the source data (for gender bias, for example) and to actually be able to listen to the interviews from which it originated, in some cases. This makes it possible now to perform large scale comparative studies, for instance studying the evolution of migration, where researchers sample different data, and then to correlate it with genetic data in order to explore family relationships. This is not to ignore the important contributions to qualitative digital research in areas such as digital discourse analysis or ethnographic approaches in Applied linguistics and Sociolinguistics.

One respondent argued that Digital Humanities has been relatively marginal to Modern Languages (and vice versa) compared to other disciplines, except in language teaching where there has been an above average level of critical engagement with digital affordances, but that the situation is now changing. Events on digital art, machine translation, artificial intelligence and digital translation by crowdsourcing have started to transform the relationship somewhat, but one interviewee felt that debate about the significance of digital engagement was still “very segmented”, with very uneven understanding of its impact on research.

Respondents also named particular sub-sectors such as Hispanic studies as having a particularly strong tradition with digital research (starting with renaissance or historical work but continuing now to work on trans-border dynamics, or social media representation of marginalised groups), and the mode of digital engagement varies quite significantly depending on the contours of the language area – as seen in the strong focus on digital social sciences in Chinese studies, or the emphasis on book history, text reuse and language evolution in Arabic studies.

## Barriers to digital engagement in research

“a lot of people either don’t know what’s out there or don’t have the confidence to find it”

Interviewee

After exploring how digital culture and technology had transformed Modern Languages research, we asked interview participants about incentives and barriers which currently affected digital engagement in the field, in their view. Their responses in this section so far give a good sense of some of the overall incentives, which we will not repeat here, but they also listed a number of barriers:

- One key barrier is *confidence in their own knowledge or ability to gain the necessary skills*: “a lot of people either don’t know what’s out there or don’t have the confidence to find it” or “lack of awareness of the tools that I could use”.
- Some were concerned about the *amount of time required to gain the necessary skills/critical competence*: “how to make time for learning a tool that I know might be useful, but it requires a learning process that I don’t have time to engage with.” In this scenario, one person reasoned that the only solution would be to “create a research project that gives me time and money to research the tools that I think that might be useful”, which is not realistic for everyone.
- *Lack of information about how to go about supporting and sustaining a digital project* was viewed as another barrier. One example given was where someone wishes to create a crowdsourcing project – in that scenario, the researcher needs to seek the collaboration of local or external digital practitioners (often limited to ‘local IT’ who may not have requisite research understanding), understand how to fund and build the project, and then how to preserve it. Some expressed a lack of understanding in *how to locate the requisite support* in a process which may involve various stakeholders and stages.
- It was felt that there was still a *considerable lack of digital literacy* in Modern Languages research and that focused training was required to use computers effectively for some tasks.
- *Digital tools and ecosystems work differently in different institutions and in different locales*. At institutional level, university firewalls or regulations can inhibit teaching or research

collaboration due to access problems for ‘external’ participants, while censorship (e.g., in China) or regional customs and policies around technology use can influence which tools are available or in common use.

- *The abundance of information was again cited*, here as a disadvantage in that it could be “overwhelming” and therefore hard to situate in a critical study. Related to this was the idea that, although now well-rehearsed methods exist for doing so, many do not know how to verify digital sources and to reference them in a stable way.
- *Disciplinary tradition* was mentioned as one possible barrier – “the sense that it’s not what we do in the Modern Languages” – and the perception that *digital outputs carry less value* – the field favours “great literature” and “the written word”.
- *Copyright and permissions* are another hurdle, with different conditions limiting the re-use of content across research projects, or between research and teaching.
- In more digitally active research, *interoperability between research projects* can be an obstacle: “getting the data store resources or the digital systems put in place by different projects to actually talk together”. This is often not just about sharing datasets but also about *making the digital techniques available for others to re-use* in a transparent and sustainable manner.
- Digital research can sometimes pioneer new methods and theoretical approaches, but its very novelty can also make researchers “wonder if you’re doing it right, if you are doing it properly”. For an early career researcher, this involves *taking more risks, often not having access to wider research conversations with appropriate peers or experts for support/guidance* and *uncertainty around related areas such as research ethics*.
- One professor in a research-intensive institution argued that one of the big issues is that currently there is “concentration of the subject area in research intensive institutions”, which tend to demonstrate a “degree of conservatism”. They felt that, in the field of Modern Languages in the UK, historically post-92 universities (broadly speaking, what used to be called ‘polytechnics’) have often been the “drivers for innovation” in such areas as gender studies or film studies, but as a result of the “collapse of Modern Languages

as research units” in those institutions in recent years, *an important space for energetic innovation had been reduced*. To add to this, the pressures of the Research Excellence Framework had introduced a level of “risk aversion” to the strategic calculations of ML research units, which leads to “a certain type of work in a certain type of place”.

- One barrier was the *lack of infrastructure to support digital collaborations in Modern Languages*, through Digital Humanities units or media labs, and it was felt that this created a sense of inertia, which funding agencies such as the AHRC could support.

### Teaching about culture

- Some participants in our study felt that those teaching cultural modules in Modern Languages programmes at HE level needed to be “much braver” in engaging with digital technologies, following the example of language teachers who “engaged with technology from a very early point”.
- Others were supportive of the use of digital technology in teaching, but they warned that, historically, in digital learning design it is often the case that the IT technology “has driven the argument” and they emphasised that the “educational purpose” should shape learning design criteria, not the technology.
- One respondent argued that digital pedagogy was part of a much wider issue in the field, namely that teachers were more inclined to think about their own skillset, but that they need to *engage with student needs more actively*, and that we need to think about what sort of students we want to create so that we can “create global citizens with a language portfolio” who can engage fully with contemporary media dynamics.

### Impact on language learning

Language teaching was not the primary focus of our study, but it came up a lot in responses during the interviews.

- Interviewees generally recognised the huge *potential of digital for language education* but had *mixed feelings* – contrasting the benefits for connectivity or new forms of input/exchange with the possible loss of personal contact and concerns over the effects of screens on reading/

literacy.

- Others acknowledged the changes to the (now *‘flipped’*) classroom, where the “classroom has become more a place where you bring what you studied at home to discuss”, and “more a place where you wrap up” doubts after students have engaged with pre-class readings and activities. This is accompanied by greater peer-to-peer and out-of-class interaction with the teacher in many cases.
- With the new *abundance of information*, students need to learn to manage their time and to prioritise which content they will access, but it is also possible to give learners more *autonomy* in which content they engage with, and in the case of language modules “they are exposed to different kinds of genres and text, and the oral spoken word of different people - how people are speaking in different parts of Portugal or Brazil”.
- A language educator valued their experience in working on a MOOC (Massive open online course), which had changed the way they and their colleagues taught, in a process which they felt had forced them to review their teaching: “one of the reasons I love being involved with them is that you have to think very carefully about how you engage learners, especially in free open online courses, because people can just leave at any time. So, you have to think carefully about how you present your information, the kind of information you select, the manner you deliver it, how you engage and interact with learners”.
- Another acknowledged the *potential for diversity in evaluation* which digital pedagogy brought to assessment genres, modes of student response and feedback channels (including audio or video). They also praised the *degree of anonymity* it brought to some exercises, where in groups or individually students could take part and give their views without worrying how the teacher might view them.
- Access to *authentic materials for language learning* is a commonly mentioned benefit of digital culture, and the existence of open access content and television station content from countries where the target language is spoken has allowed teachers to “bring the culture of the country of the language they are teaching into the classroom”. Moreover, one respondent argued, it enables teachers to take interesting pedagogical approaches, such as setting students tasks where



they independently go and carry out meaningful research - for example researching aspects of Italian life, in a manner which would have been much more difficult in the pre-internet age.

- Some people consulted in our study viewed huge *potential in the growing area of telecollaboration (or virtual exchange)*, through projects which get “groups of language learners in different countries to collaborate on projects virtually”. This involves creating digital artefacts such as portfolios together as part of meaningful engagement with the target cultures, and the matching of native speakers in different languages in order to facilitate language learning through meaningful and authentic intercultural interaction.
- One interesting use case for collaborative online distance learning is provided by *minority or endangered languages*, which are increasingly under pressure due to budget limitations and concerns about the viability of teaching some languages in the UK long term. A researcher working with low resourced languages reasoned that international online collaboration between institutions might enable universities to pool limited resources in order to create financially viable and pedagogically rich learning experiences in those languages.
- Finally, one digital learning consultant spotlighted the potential for teachers at all levels of language education in taking digitally based work and producing either quantitative data (statistically derived digital analytics) about levels of student engagement or qualitative evidence (screenshots and digital presentations) of student work with relative ease, for inclusion in *teaching evaluation and reporting exercises*.

### *Incentives and barriers in language learning*

Respondents outlined numerous incentives for engaging with digital pedagogies in language learning:

- The *adaptive nature* of some digital tools (such as Memrise or Duolingo), which algorithmically adapt to user response, allows the learner to focus on areas they find difficult, with the added benefit of analytics which demonstrate progress and areas of difficulty.
- It is easier to design and manage *personalised learning*: “within a classroom situation not everyone needs to be doing the same thing at the

same time”.

- Engaging with digital learning often *promotes awareness of wider culture around a language* in ways that would be difficult to achieve in a book unless a student had the opportunity to travel.
- The *ability for students to contact the teacher and each other more easily between lessons* – while a mixed blessing – was viewed as an incentive in the sense that it gives students much greater support between lessons and encourages peer-to-peer collaboration and collaborative group work.
- One respondent felt that it was important to *use contemporary tools which students are familiar with* to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the course.
- Finally, it was argued that digital methods in learning could be *more inclusive*. By combining book-based content with audiovisual materials and interactive tools, teaching could cater for people with different learning styles.

There were also some significant barriers:

- Here again, the *sheer volume of options can be disorienting* both for teacher and learner. Which content or tools should students use? How can we effectively guide students through the options when the curriculum already has so many demands on it?
- There are also numerous *misconceptions about technology*, which can impede its critical application. “Some people think the main thing is to give everybody an iPad, and then that’s it”.
- There are also questions around *which technologies, platforms or devices* institutions (or students) should invest in for language learning. In the past there have been high levels of investment in high-tech equipment which has been under-used or has quickly become outdated without a clear sustainability plan.
- While many language teachers are already invested in experimental use of new technologies, there are *no clear benefits in terms of remuneration or career development* for their personal (time, and sometimes financial) investment.

### *Future projections*

We asked interviewees to consider how they

“digital has been seen as a vehicle for dissemination rather than an objective study in its own right in Modern Languages. We ignore the creative potential of the digital at our peril.”

Interviewee

believed digital engagement might transform Modern Languages in future, and there were a number of different responses.

- Some believed that, as digital methods and pedagogy become more integrated into the fabric of language education, “no-one will be talking about digital culture” as a separate entity. According to this argument, “we’re still in the moment where people are trying to understand where we’re going and what it’s doing to us and what its potentials are, and its dangers”, but in ten or twenty years “it will be invisible”, which one person also found “slightly worrying”.
- In a similar vein, one interviewee contended that we need to “stop seeing the digital as a kind of isolated separate area” which means that some instantly switch off when they hear the word ‘digital’, because “that’s very interesting, but it’s nothing to do with what I do”.
- One respondent felt that Digital Cultural Studies are one of the major challenges for Modern Languages as a discipline at the moment, in getting to grips with the impact of digital technologies on contemporary culture, in transnational terms. They were concerned that, generally speaking, “digital has been seen as a vehicle for dissemination rather than an objective study in its own right in Modern Languages” and reasoned that “we ignore the creative potential of the digital at our peril”.

### *Final thoughts/Five words*

We closed this section by asking each person for five words to describe the nature of their field’s engagement with digital. This was intended both to gauge the general sentiment towards digital engagement and to elicit further reflections not captured by previous questions. We were not strict in limiting responses to five words, or even to single words as the idea was to uncover new ideas rather than to carry out statistical analysis. A few of the respondents appeared to offer strongly positive (‘essential’, ‘fast as possible’, ‘well thought out’, ‘necessary for society’) or negative (‘obsessive’,

‘uncritical’, ‘instrumentalised’) word groupings, but the majority showed balance (‘minimal’, ‘potential’, ‘resistance’) or used neutral words (‘material culture’, ‘quantitative methods’, ‘manuscript digitisation’, ‘heritage’, ‘text’).

Some terms provided emphasised potential, engagement or the ability to expand in future (‘emergent’, ‘underexploited but growing’). Others expressed doubts about digital impacts, whether positive/neutral (‘intriguing relationship that isn’t defined’) or negative (‘wary’, ‘threat’), while others were ‘enthusiastic’ or saw the outcomes as ‘transformational’, ‘innovative’, ‘empowering’, ‘motivating’ or ‘inspiring’.

Culture and communication featured strongly in the responses, along with expressions such as ‘multimodal’, ‘mixed media’, ‘popular culture’, ‘material culture’, ‘diversity’, ‘agency’, ‘democratizing’, ‘facilitating connections’ or ‘heritage’. Some focused on geolinguistic or spatial concepts such as ‘translation’, ‘internationalism’, ‘multilingual’, ‘global’, ‘network’. Others concentrated on digital processes, methods or outcomes such as ‘manuscript digitisation’, ‘visualisation mapping’ or ‘new forms of academic writing’.

In the wider discussion accompanying this question, one person expressed concern that technology could replace researchers/teachers one day, while another relayed an experience where they were talking about their own research into post-internet language teaching at a conference at which a Microsoft employee expressed the opinion that online automatic translation would mean people no longer needed to learn languages. On a more positive note, one respondent talked about the “more sophisticated objects of study” which were produced, while another argued that language learning could be a “role model for other disciplines” for how it engaged with technologies in various ways.

## Digital literacies

As in our online survey, the acquisition of digital literacies was raised as a major issue and it is one we examined in some depth.

### *Previous experience/opportunities*

We started by asking people whether they had had any formal education in Digital Humanities or other forms of digital studies. The majority had little or no such formal education, and most of those

with experience of digital research had done their learning through work on projects. In a few cases, respondents had had formal training in digital tools such as the R programming language, commonly used in data mining and visualisation. Those that had received digital education had usually acquired it as particular needs arose, rather than as part of a planned learning programme.

Some had received informal training through Digital Humanities hubs and centres at places such as Glasgow University, the Oxford Text Archive or King's College London. As mentioned before, the now defunct CHUCOL programme at Cambridge University was a key reference here too. One respondent claimed that we have a "train the trainer problem" in that there were not enough staff qualified to support Modern Languages researchers for their digital learning needs, while another stated that it was much harder for post-early career researchers to get support in this area.

### *What kind of digital competences are needed in ML?*

On a personal level, respondents expressed interest in a wide range of digital competences. At a higher level, some wanted a much better understanding of how digital methods and tools work so that they would have the confidence and independence to make their own critical technology choices. Some felt they would benefit from access to resources such as a directory of useful tools or a discussion forum where they could consult others for advice. For others, this went beyond simply understanding how particular digital tools worked, to include "a whole area around pedagogy" which encompasses how teachers and learners might change in digital environments, "the affordances, the outcomes", how you can achieve these outcomes meaningfully and "how they fit your practice" as an educator.

Some wanted to acquire basic digital competences in the following areas:

- General digital communication
- Search/discovery – better skills in sophisticated search and retrieval of online materials, critical evaluation of online databases and the results they provide, and filtering of information and verification of digital sources
- Research management – understanding how to store, curate and manage digital sources or assets

- Digitisation – digital image or text processing from planning and initial capture through to analysis, publication and preservation
- Dissemination and presentation – using digital methods to give your work visibility or exploring new forms of data analysis and visualisation
- Ethics of digital research – carrying out digital research involving people in an ethical manner

Others sought digital competences in more advanced areas such as:

- Social network analysis
- Programming (in languages such as Python or R)
- Text markup/text analysis
- Database design/queries
- Data visualisation
- Text re-use analysis (e.g., for tracing Arabic intellectual culture through numerous texts and sources)

### *What are digital literacies?*

*"If digital literacies don't give a voice to those who otherwise wouldn't have a voice, if digital literacy means widening the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. then I am out"*

*Interviewee*

We asked interviewees what they understood by the term 'digital literacies'. Some acknowledged the difficulty in coming up with a common definition in an area with "broad and ambiguous literature" behind it. Many highlighted the need to not only be able to use digital tools, but to have some understanding of the process behind the results they produce, to be able to interpret results appropriately, to use them critically and to "being analytical when it comes to the meanings that are produced and reinforced through digital." Another researcher with long-standing experience with digital pedagogies judged that while there had been attempts to formalise understanding in Higher Education around the concept, this is still an area which needs much greater understanding "because even the professional bodies, who are trying to come

to terms with this, have not cracked it.” [Reference was made to JISC’s [Digital Capability Framework](#) and the New Media Consortium’s [Digital Literacy in Higher Education, Part II: An NMC Horizon Project Strategic Brief](#)].

Other responses focused their understanding on the idea of *digital meaning making*: “a person’s capacity to understand and function in a digital world, to be able to critically evaluate the world around them, to be able to engage with it in a meaningful and purposeful way”. Another referenced Mark Brown’s critique of existing digital literacy frameworks (Brown, 2017) and suggested that the term needed to address social justice, democratic principles and engaged global citizenship: “If digital literacies don’t give a voice to those who otherwise wouldn’t have a voice, if digital literacy means widening the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’, then I am out”.

### How to acquire digital literacies

We had previously explored the question of how to acquire digital literacies in our 2019 questionnaire survey, and here we returned to questions about the best way to achieve critical digital engagement through both quantitative and qualitative questions. Due to the small and targeted sample size we do not make wider claims about the results, but they can be taken to be indicative of thinking among Modern Languages researchers engaged in strategy/policy formation in the UK during the period studied, and the resulting discussion was illuminating in some areas.

Firstly, we asked respondents to rate a series of statements, for which we provide the response and summary of resulting discussion below:

#### 1. People need to acquire digital competence on their own

Totally agree	7%
Partially agree	43%
Feel neutral	7%
Partially disagree	14%
Totally disagree	29%

#### 2. People need to acquire digital competence on formally taught ML modules for credit (at BA or MA level)?

Totally agree	38%
Partially agree	38%
Feel neutral	15%
Partially disagree	8%

Totally disagree	0%
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#### 3. People need to acquire digital competence on formally taught digital modules for credit (at BA or MA level)

Totally agree	31%
Partially agree	54%
Feel neutral	15%
Partially disagree	0%
Totally disagree	0%

#### 4. People need to acquire digital competence as part of formally credited/managed research programmes or training

Totally agree	44%
Partially agree	56%
Feel neutral	0%
Partially disagree	0%
Totally disagree	0%

#### 5. People need to go on special training programmes in order to acquire digital competence

Totally agree	45%
Partially agree	45%
Feel neutral	0%
Partially disagree	9%
Totally disagree	0%

### Discussion

As can be seen, the first statement [1] displayed the most variation in response (and was the only statement where some expressed strong disagreement). Results were evenly spread between agreement (50%) and disagreement (43%) with the idea that people need to acquire digital competence on their own, but the figure for strong disagreement was much higher (29%) than that for strong agreement (7%). There was some debate about whether or not this was a generational issue, with younger researchers more attuned to self-study through YouTube videos and Reddit groups and there was also debate about whether or not tech-focused tutorials and groups provide the necessary critical-linguistic-cultural focus required for Modern Languages research.

The second and third statements received broad agreement. 76% agreed that [2] people need to acquire digital competence on formally taught *ML modules* for credit (at BA or MA level), while 85% agreed that [3] people need to acquire digital competence on formally taught *digital modules* for credit (at BA or MA level). More than one person

pointed out that it depends very much on research needs and institutional context, and there was some debate about how this would be integrated into someone's wider research (or study) programme.

As can be seen above, the last two statements achieve the highest level of approval, with total acceptance (100%) in the case of [4] the idea of acquiring digital competence as part of formally credited/managed research programmes or training, and some arguing that these needed to be formal professional development courses arranged by staff institutions. There was almost total agreement (91%) with the idea that [5] people need to go on special training programmes in order to acquire digital competence, and while there was recognition that this depends on learner needs, some felt that week-long or summer courses would be most effective in addressing digital literacy requirements.

A number of more general points were made:

**“We need to avoid the instrumentalisation of the digital and its reduction to a practical skillset”**

Interviewee

- A significant number of responses made the point that “there is *not a ‘one-fits-all’ solution*”, and that we need to address different audiences from different generations/backgrounds and with different skills and requirements.
  - *Shared peer experiences* were seen as an effective vehicle for digital literacy training, across different groups. A number of researchers made reference to Vygotsky's concept of *zones of proximal development* and *peer-to-peer learning*.
  - There may be a *generational challenge* at the moment, in that staff need better digital training in order to be able to meet the needs of their students and to “make connections” with their current teaching modules, but this is sometimes exaggerated – younger generations increasingly have a more passive consumer-driven relationship to digital which also requires unpacking.
  - One interviewee made a distinction (without expressing a preference for either) between a digital module on a degree programme, which would include both theory and practice, and a short course, more focused on practical skills.
- Numerous responses emphasised the importance of including *hands-on practical elements* in digital skills acquisition, with samples, case studies and follow-up materials. Reference was made to the very active community at school level around such online fora as [#MFLTwitterati](#) and the [TiLT webinars](#). Linked to this was the idea that teachers need to find opportunities to actively apply techniques learnt at an early stage so that knowledge is not forgotten: “more than attending a course it's then [about] being enabled to use it”.
  - One challenge is in getting *formal assessment/recognition for digital competence acquisition* – one person thought that their university would be reluctant to allow freestanding courses count as credit. If a course counts for credit, then there is a problem of where to fit it within an already crowded curriculum, and if it does not get formal recognition, then student/researcher uptake and motivation are likely to be a problem. An example given of the latter was Cambridge University's CHUCOL, an optional course which was well regarded but, according to one respondent, “poorly subscribed to” because it was under-resourced and insufficiently integrated into the wider academic fabric in their view.
  - Some respondents argued that *more advanced Digital Humanities methods* should be part of the wider Modern Languages curriculum in one way or another, and that we should avoid the “instrumentalisation of the digital and its reduction to a practical skillset”.



# Experiments in Digital Modern Languages

Once we had completed mapping the rich and complex topography of interactions and tensions between digital culture and Modern Languages research across numerous disciplinary and methodological perspectives, we turned our attention to practical engagements between the two. This section describes a series of experimental events focusing on the potential of critical digital perspectives and creative digital methods to reshape how we engage in Modern Languages research, and questions of digital multilingualism more broadly.

## Digital Modern Languages Tutorial Writing Sprint

Help us create an open educational resource for digital modern languages!

Digital Modern Languages tutorial writing sprint.

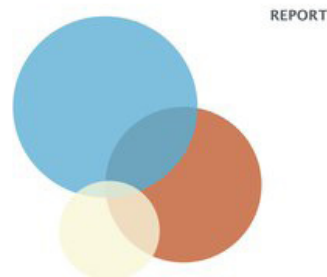


In July 2019 we hosted an event called the 'Digital Modern Languages Tutorial Writing Sprint', a physical and virtual event designed to create a variety of open educational resources demonstrating the critical use of digital tools and methods for teachers, learners and researchers interested in Modern Languages and Cultures. The initiative was designed to respond to the concern expressed in our earlier survey that Modern Languages researchers do not receive enough support in engaging with digital literacies and methods in their teaching and research practices. It consisted of both an experimental event (where tutorial authors discussed and developed their tutorials with external support) and an open access publication of self-study tutorials (which demonstrated the potential of digital pedagogies in ML, using an array of digital methods from basic to advanced). The event raised a number of questions about how to design and present learning materials of this nature – how text and video modes work together, how this kind of work fits into academic pathways and how this relates to learner expectations. The writing sprint is analysed more

fully in our introduction to the [special collection in Modern Languages Open](#), which was its final output.

## Disrupting Digital Monolingualism workshop

Attitudes towards digital culture and technology in the Modern Languages



Debate around digital transformations in language-related fields almost always focuses on how 'digital' disrupts the language fields. We designed an event which did the opposite – examining how language education and multilingual practice disrupt conventional approaches to digital practice. The *Disrupting Digital Monolingualism* workshop aimed to map the current state of multilingualism in digital theory and practice through, and across, languages and cultures. This virtual workshop brought together leading researchers, educators, digital practitioners, language-focused professionals, policy-makers and other interested parties to address the challenges of multilingualism in digital spaces and to collectively present new models and solutions.

In the first part of the workshop, a series of contributions in different formats aimed to capture the breadth of responses to digital monolingualism on topics such as:

- Linguistic diversity in digital knowledge production

- Scripts, and in particular non-Latin scripts
- Multilingual language resources
- Multilingualism in media, platform, and software studies
- Language technologies, including Natural Language Processing (NLP)
- Low-resourced languages
- Transcultural and translingual dynamics
- Language pedagogies
- Multilingualism in practice

In the second part of the workshop, four 'Theme groups' were formed, which examined the following themes:

1. Linguistic and geocultural diversity in digital knowledge infrastructures
2. Working with multilingual methods and data
3. Transcultural and translingual approaches to digital study
4. Artificial intelligence, machine learning and NLP in language worlds

The key conclusions from the workshop were as follows:

- The workshop demonstrated both the benefits and challenges in bringing together different academic and professional fields to attend to digital multilingual issues, while also proving the value of providing holistic responses which draw on the perspectives of researchers, industry and language communities alike.
- Discussion around digital multilingualism is still fragmented (and sometimes marginalised), but momentum is growing across different fields to disrupt monolingual/Anglocentric or linguistically/geoculturally exclusionary approaches to language technology.
- Access to open and multidisciplinary data, services and tools needs to be made easier and expanded to cover a wider range of languages. Training is also needed to lower the barrier to entry for those wishing to work with new digital

tools in less technically-oriented fields of study.

- Digital multilingualism is not just about linguistics, or language. It has a cultural and socio-political dimension which is crucial in studying increasingly transcultural and translingual dynamics and in helping us to understand what are ultimately human-designed and complex (digital) cultural artefacts.
- Languages are not clearly bounded objects, and tools and technologies risk being based on an overly narrow conceptualisation of languages if they are not connected to people's actual multilingual practices.
- People interested in digital multilingualism need more opportunities to engage with each other in exploring these questions, and to promote alliances between academic, commercial, third sector and language community respondents.

The full report is available online at <https://zenodo.org/record/5743283>.

## Digital Modern Languages seminar



Our landscaping surveys demonstrated a significant demand for networks and information hubs to present digitally mediated research in the Modern Languages, and in 2019 Paul Spence (King's College London) and Naomi Wells (Institute of Modern Languages Research) launched the [Digital Modern Languages \(DML\) seminar](#) series "to bring together and raise the visibility of Modern Languages research which engages with digital culture, media and technologies". This initiative was supported by the [Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community](#) and [Language Acts and Worldmaking](#) projects, funded by the AHRC as part of their [Open World Research Initiative](#) and is now co-convened with Saskia Huc-Hepher (University of Westminster) and Xuan Wang (Cardiff University), Joe Dale

(independent languages consultant) and Orhan Elmaz (University of St Andrews).

The Digital Modern Languages seminar series has now hosted over ten seminars covering topics as diverse as 'Two Sides of the Same Coin: Why the Digital is Blessing and Curse for Endangered Languages', 'Addressing linguistic, cultural, and digital hegemonies in Virtual Exchange', 'Current Trends in Digital East Asian Studies', 'Digital Humanities for Arabic Book History', 'Tibet, Economic Development and the Affective Politics of Online State Media in the PRC' and 'Modern Languages and Student Mentoring: Digital Innovation and Raising Motivation for Languages in England and Wales', in addition to seminars specifically dedicated to early career research. The seminar series has also featured events focusing on critical digital pedagogies at Primary school ([Help! Sharing Good Primary Practice for Remote Learning: Ideas in Modern Languages](#)) and Secondary school ([Post-Pandemic Reflections and Future Directions for Language Learning in Secondary Schools in the UK](#)) level, recordings and materials for which are publicly available.

The mailing list associated with the seminar now has over 400 members and Spence/Wells co-edit a 'Digital Modern Languages' section in the open access platform *Modern Languages Open* ('Modern Languages Open', 2019).

# Ideating the Modern Languages curriculum

## Introduction

In June 2019, the Digital Mediations strand of the *Language Acts & Worldmaking* project organised a workshop titled [Ideating the Modern Languages Curriculum](#) in collaboration with [Thoughtworks](#), a global consultancy which works with private and third sector partners on technological strategy in the face of digital transformations. The event brought together a wide range of stakeholders to discuss and design principles (and where appropriate, prototypical elements) of a Modern Languages curriculum which would include the critical application of digital methods, digital/hybrid literacies and languages-driven responses to digital transformation. Hosted by Thoughtworks at their London office, the workshop used the concept of 'ideation', a process for brainstorming new ideas often associated with design thinking and software development (Jonson, 2005), in order to generate ideas and contribute to re-envisioning the Modern Languages curriculum of the future.

The idea for this event originated from various discussions about the intersection between Modern Languages, pedagogy and Digital Humanities led by the Digital Mediations strand in discussion with other members of the *Language Acts & Worldmaking* project. It was based on the premise that, while some areas of the ML field – notably language learning – have already engaged significantly with the opportunities and limitations of the digital, there is still a need to consider how digital engagement operates across the ML curriculum, covering both 'language' and 'cultural' elements. The design of the event arose from conversations with Charlotte Fereday (then at Thoughtworks), who in addition to arranging hosting, co-led the workshop, and identified panellists and facilitators. The workshop was an unusual opportunity to think outside of the classroom, beyond current institutional realities and across different sectors, between people and organisations who do not necessarily have many opportunities to collaborate.

This study consisted of a workshop with a range of participants involved in Modern Languages and/or digital practice and had two broad aims:

1. To set up an engagement between different stakeholders interested in re-thinking ML curriculum design in light of increasingly hybrid and complex digital-analogue habits and the new expectations regarding media and pedagogy created as a result
2. To extract some wider insights into the conditions in which engagement between ML practitioners and creative technologists/digital practitioners can flourish more generally

The first aim was to be met by considering new opportunities and risks for language education in a constantly evolving digital media landscape, exploring how ML could most effectively integrate new digital methods and evaluating how ML could become more active in driving translingual/transcultural perspectives within digital culture. The second aim would look at current interactions between language education and digital practice, exploring new opportunities for collaboration and identifying enablers and obstacles to closer engagement between the two. The event aimed to capture the potential for greater collaboration between technologists and linguists as a key to designing and navigating new pedagogies and approaches to language learning.

It was aimed at various groups working at the interface between digital practice and language education, including: Modern Languages educators and researchers (at all levels of education); Modern Languages policy makers; academic researchers in Digital Humanities, those involved in digital arts and other forms of digital study; digital practitioners and creative technologists; and cultural sector organisations. On a pedagogical level, its geographic scope was language education in the UK, although it drew on experiences in other locales (in particular Modern Languages study in other anglophone countries) and its subject coverage was global in outlook. It aimed to include doctoral and early career researcher voices in discussions, to cover a range of historical periods including the contemporary, and to involve a range of languages, including non-European languages.

## Methodology and structure

“I think the whole point of this exercise was to think outside the box. The fact we went to a different place outside of university – that was really helpful. Doing things in a non-academic way was really helpful in this case. And equally conversing with a Modern Languages teacher from a secondary school perspective, a Modern Languages centre and hearing the PhD students. So, yeah, that was incredibly helpful. It would’ve been ‘same old same old’ if I had just been talking to other people like myself.”

Workshop participant

The workshop as a whole was divided up into two main parts. In the first part, panelists were asked to introduce concepts and provoke ideas around topics such as translation, artificial intelligence/machine learning, human/computer languages and the impact of technology on language learners. In the second, participants were split into four groups to address one theme each, using a range of methodological approaches. Participants were pre-selected to match a range of language profiles (language tutor, ML researcher, ML director, ML school consultant, translator) and career stages from PhD to full professor, with widely varying experiences/levels of confidence with digital media. Facilitators were asked to propose their own designs for the topics they led but were provided with suggestions on possible methods for carrying out their group’s work, including collaborative sketching, problem statements, empathy maps, and futurespectives.

The workshop was led by Paul Spence (King’s College London) and Charlotte Fereday (Thoughtworks), with support from Renata Brandão (then at King’s College London). Participants were asked to evaluate the event afterwards, and five were interviewed about the experience (with all four discussion groups represented and covering both early career and senior perspectives). This workshop report is based on that feedback, in addition to analysis of the group summaries and written materials produced.

## About the participants

There were 28 participants, including representatives from Higher Education institutions (language departments and Modern Language centres) and school-level Modern Languages. Those connected to language departments included PhD students, post-doctoral researchers and lecturers. Languages of expertise (in teaching or research) included Arabic,

Hebrew, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French and German. Areas of professional interest varied from: studying the evolution of literary texts and ideas across time and space; understanding how translating and performing a play from a different cultural context creates a dynamic relationship between source and target cultures; investigating key aspects of teachers’ personal and professional identities in an institutional context; researching the collective process of theatre translation; evaluating key transition points in the life cycle of a language learner; and examining the role of translation in post-colonial multicultural societies.

## Initial panel

The panel aimed to set the scene for the workshop and to provoke some ideas about the future of learning languages, the opportunities and dangers provided by digital mediation and the way in which key learning skills are changing for students. Rosalind Harvey, translator and co-founder of the Emerging Translators Network, asked how literature and translation can be used constructively in the teaching of modern languages, and analysed how the future of the translator will be affected by advances in artificial intelligence. Marion LV, developer at 8<sup>th</sup> light, examined differences and similarities between human and programming languages. Yin Yin Lu, advocate of computational approaches to the social sciences and humanities, investigated how changes to Natural Language Processing (NLP) may transform how we learn in the future. Finally, Anna Comas-Quinn, researcher in open education, language learning and translation, challenged workshop participants to contemplate how technology had impacted on their own study, and to consider how learners approach languages differently today, compared to previous years. James Emmott of Thoughtworks (ex ML academic, now developer) acted as additional facilitator to one of the theme groups, and the event as a whole.

## Breakouts

Through hands-on breakout sessions, digital practitioners and ML attendees were asked to ideate solutions to problem statements relating to the future of studying Modern Languages as a subject at Higher Education level (which includes studying both languages themselves and their associated cultures). There was inevitably some overlap between groups, but the problem statements and methodologies are described separately for each group below.



# Themes

## Research and pedagogy

One breakout group explored the theme of ‘research and pedagogy’ through a series of discussion points:

- How are digital culture and technology changing ML learning?

“We should use technology when we need it, as a tool. There are dangers in becoming over-dependent on technology.”

Workshop participant

- How might we make greater connections between language learning and modern language-related cultural studies? Does ‘digital’ have a part to play here?
- How can we ensure new digital methods are driven by ML criteria?
- How do we integrate teaching/research about non-Modern Languages (e.g., medieval Portuguese) in our thinking about this?
- How might ML perspectives inform digital studies and practice?
- How should ML respond to emerging digital tools such as Google Translate?
- What opportunities/risks are there when we consider curriculum design in ML modules from the perspectives of digital culture and technology?

Three themes traversed these questions: the enduring influence of a ‘cultural studies’ approach in Modern Languages, which brings an important critical focus sometimes lacking from notions of ‘digital disruption’ in public discourse; the importance of studying the past, through ‘enlivening the archive’ and new pedagogical tools; and the often-overlooked role of translation in these discussions.

One major debate in the group was about whether technology has become an integral part of Modern Languages research or, rather, research on language and linguistics is still the main focus (and content) and technologies is just a tool. There were also discussions about different levels of digital literacy/confidence, and whether it was possible to use digital approaches to carry out research effectively if “you’re not technologically oriented and skilful”.

The group discussed generational differences (real or perceived) in digital engagement, and whether less digitally confident teachers could enable more active participation by students in this arena in order to engender greater learner autonomy. It was agreed that technology can open boundaries, particularly through social media, but that there are also challenges in maintaining positive/necessary boundaries and targeting key communities in an attention economy of abundance.

The debate on ‘critical’ digital engagement in Modern Languages research led to discussion in particular on the dangers of researchers becoming “overly dependent on technology” when using it as a research tool, and how to monitor/set the limits of its use appropriately. One group member noted that there was a danger in presenting too many (digital) tools to students, which might lead to marginalisation of the core content. They made a contrast between researchers who started with content and then applied digital methods as appropriate, and researchers who started with digital tools and content, and then saw which research questions emerged. The group also explored the role of digital in new forms of writing, the constraints and opportunities of digital spaces, and the new kinds of research input and output which can emerge.

## Learning environments

The ‘learning environments’ breakout group was tasked with addressing the following questions:

- How would the ML curriculum be if we designed it from zero?

“I suppose the learning environment would be one that students took responsibility for. It would be digital and offline as opposed to being wholly focused in the classroom.”

Workshop participant

- How do we integrate digital multimodality in the ML curriculum?
- How can digital transformation support accessibility to the ML curriculum?
- How can digital transformation support widening participation in ML?
- How can we connect students’ formal, informal and non-formal digital learning using new



communication ecologies? This includes thinking about how to keep students engaged outside of the module, over summer breaks and during year abroad programmes.

- ML in its language learning and cultural studies settings has tended to react differently to digital mediation. How can closer connections be made between research and pedagogical practice in these two areas?

The group started by defining essential components of a learning environment to support a ML curriculum at HE level, and considering which digital tools or modalities are relevant, then separating into smaller groups to pitch ideas for language learning apps, before reuniting to collectively devise a language app for classroom use.

Numerous ideas underpinned this group's thinking. We need to make learning more social, making more learning opportunities and resources available to students. Innovation is good but needs to be evaluated carefully each time – are we really creating something new, or simply re-creating traditional pedagogical constructs in digital format? In the age of Duolingo, we need to re-evaluate the role of the teacher – still important but altered by new media realities and expectations. Some also highlighted the potential for addressing the digital divides, making issues such as race and gender more prominent or noted the potential for keeping endangered languages learning alive.

The group aimed to create “joined up thinking between different years and different aspects of the curriculum” and to map out the “vast spread” of what today's learning environment includes, encompassing people involved in teaching/learning, devices (including mobile phones), the internet, books, radio and television. It created a rough division of digital and pre-digital elements in that landscape, and then categorised the relationships between them, ending this definition-setting exercise by sharing personal experiences with digital learning environments. The group identified the following kinds of digital resources present in this ecosystem, including social media, podcasts, videos on YouTube, gaming, apps, multimedia and Kindle ebooks. It then outlined the following features contained within these resources: instant feedback (e.g., language learning apps), gamification (apps), progress enabling/tracking features (including reward, instant gratification and other game-based dynamics), accountability issues (social media), friends/connections/support (social media) and reading groups (social media).

The group took a highly student-centred approach. Firstly, it aimed to look at what students were engaging with outside of the classroom which motivated them, and how this could be replicated in-class. It explored how students can become active and effective participants in co-creating materials and taking responsibility for their own learning, and how those materials can be re-used.

The group concept coalesced around two themes: learning about idioms and the year abroad. The focus on idioms came from a desire to engage students with “language in the wild” and get them thinking about their sociocultural setting. As part of their preparation for a year abroad, students would draw on content modules in their first two years of learning, but also be charged with thinking about the country they were going to and researching cultural differences through idioms. Many in the group felt that the year abroad had an under-realised potential – as the period when a significant proportion of a student's language learning happens – in using digital methods to connect students more closely with each other and with the curriculum in creating digital ‘interventions’ which were critically (auto) reflective. Once on the year abroad, students would be tasked with interviewing people to find examples of idioms from which they would then have to create a podcast, video or written output to submit as part of their year abroad experience (possibly as part of a wider portfolio on their course), which future cohorts might also have access to, thereby building connections between years. Challenges identified included the confidence, training and infrastructure teachers required to support this, as well as ethical concerns, the initial effort required to set such a framework up and other institutional constraints. From a student's perspective, this would require preparation in ethical skills, data handling, digital dissemination and translation which might add to an already demanding curriculum, but which might also facilitate new personal and career opportunities.

## A 21<sup>st</sup> century student

This group explored the reality that the majority of our students have now been born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and considered the following general questions:

- What kind of critical digital literacies do ML students need, and how can they best acquire them?

“Digital = cool is patronising”

Workshop participant

- How are student and teacher expectations different in general, and specifically with regard to possibilities (and challenges) offered by digital?
- What part might peer-to-peer and other active learning dynamics play?

The focus of the group was to consider these questions from a student perspective, thinking about student journeys and pathways. In general, the group did not believe that digital approaches to pedagogy had had a major impact on the student experience, which is perhaps surprising thirty years after the World Wide Web was invented. Some participants in this group were disappointed to see how little had changed in the way that languages were being learned, in general terms. Language learning apps have had an impact on grammar and vocabulary learning to some extent, but it was felt that other areas such as communicative grammar and “language skills in context” had not seen the same level of engagement with 21<sup>st</sup> century tools and methods. This was situated within a wider discussion about ‘unlearning’ and decolonising the curriculum.

The group discussed a wide range of resources such as Google Scholar, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), general purpose web resources such as Wikipedia or Google Translate, online journals and databases, online dictionaries, digitised primary resources such as Gallica, digital editions, language apps, general educational apps such as Kahoot or Quizlet, podcasts, eportfolio programs, Virtual/Augmented Reality (VR and AR) and audio/video editing software. It explored the pedagogical implications of elements such as the ‘flipped classroom’, media curation/creation, networked learning, ‘open culture’ and perceptions around ‘free’ content, sociality, interactivity and personalisation. The group considered what a “curriculum of meaningful experiences” would consist of, by brainstorming the meaning of words such as ‘authentic’, ‘meaningful’, ‘experience’, ‘engaging’, ‘situated’, ‘creative’ and ‘social’. It examined what these experiences might look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and whether this effectively translates to ‘project-based’ learning. A number of challenges were discussed, from avoiding dangerous assumptions around the idea that ‘digital is cool’ to bridging the gap between digital and non-digital content, and from the logistics of virtual exchange to being aware of cultural bias in language teaching.

In comparing how people carried out learning in the past to how they did their learning now, student ‘profiles’ were created where the group put themselves in the shoes of a student to evaluate what learning methods would best work for them, and what digital methods would help facilitate this learning. One example centred on the application of ‘telecollaboration’, which brings student cohorts in different countries together for focused learning collaborations. Profiles highlighted the different needs of today’s learners (whether operating within formal ML learning programmes or not), and the immense opportunity for personalisation if students have the right learning resources available to them.

## The Modern Languages Textbook/ Learning resources

In the preparation for this event, one of the people we consulted asked: “What should a textbook in Modern Languages look like today?”. This group attempted to answer this, by discussing what digital and print-based features a ‘textbook’ should aim to include, how they would be integrated, and how they would be produced (what content it would include, and who the ‘producer’ is in this case).

“What should a textbook in Modern Languages look like today?”

Workshop participant

The group loosely followed an ‘agile’ methodology, an adaptive, people-centric and iterative problem-solving focused approach developed in the software development world to produce results in a rapidly changing world. It specifically used the ‘futurespective’ method, where participants start from the intended goal and then work backwards to find routes to achieve it. The team placed themselves in an imagined future where the chosen goal had been met: they answered questions such as “What did the institution do to create this ideal textbook/learning resource?” and “What were the problems along the way?”. There then followed some collaborative sketching of what a Modern Languages textbook/learning resource should look like now, and what it should look like in ten years’ time.

The fact that this group’s title, and some of the discussion, offer alternative phrases ‘textbook’ and ‘learning resources’ highlights a central dilemma for the group: should the textbook be preserved, albeit with some transformation, or should it be fundamentally re-conceived? There were different



views on this, with some arguing that these are culturally created objects, and that the term 'resources' makes the outcome sound too much like a random collection of objects, whereas others contended that 'book' and 'text' were constructs from the pre-digital era which needed rethinking in light of multimodal and modular/interactive learning approaches. There was some consensus that terms needed re-defining and that they currently mean different things at different learning levels. Is there something inherently 'interactive' about digital, for example (a common claim made about digital), and aren't print-based resources also sometimes 'interactive' at a deeper level? The platform and design also greatly influence whether an outcome is classed as a textbook or learning resource, so these also need to be taken into account in a wider pedagogical context. Some argued that 'textbook' is a sub-category of 'learning resource', while others used the term 'open educational resource' to emphasise the value of open/shareable content. Participants highlighted the importance that, whatever their configuration, learning resources needed to be informed by pedagogical experts rather than driven purely by the affordances of the delivery platform selected and that institutions needed to create the time and supporting frameworks required to develop such resources. Finally, it is also important to think carefully about how students react differently to the two ideas, and how this influences the learning approach.

In sketching the ML textbook/learning resource of the future, participants listed features it might include, such as AI-driven components, texts, graphs, interactive elements (loosely defined), Virtual Reality and audio-visual content including films/documentaries. They stated that it needed to be user-friendly, encourage learners to work in autonomous ways, but in ways which connect to the classroom at the same time. They proposed a blend of digital and digitised primary and secondary sources, in print and online, with modularity, flexibility and an open range of topics built in. Some advocated for learning design based on "real world tasks" and current/recently developed content and tools.

Given the range of responses to how this learning resource might look, there were several ideas on how to deliver it. Some talked of IT practitioners "being contracted" by language teachers, while others talked of "co-creation" between teachers, digital experts and students. Challenges people encountered included bridging different aspects of the ML curriculum from linguistic to cultural

aspects, designing AI integration in ways driven by ML needs, constructing viable business models, guiding teachers/learners in how to engage with new learning resources, building inclusion/usability into design and marrying the wide range of possibilities defined here.

## Conclusions

The workshop generated ideas around a range of different themes, including general pedagogical topics, such as how to engage with a new *pedagogy of abundance* or *how to integrate physical and digital worlds*. Participants emphasised the importance of giving *due attention to digital pedagogies* at a time of significant variation in levels of understanding of their potential/risks, but also, ultimately, of combining digital and non-digital ways of working within an integrated pedagogy. People joined the workshop with a diverse set of expectations in part born of *different systems of professional credit/validation* and a fair amount of time was taken up at the start of the workshop in *defining terms*, working out what the 'problem statements' were for each group, and learning 'the language' (epistemological viewpoint) of others in their group. This was seen in particular when discussing what the word 'culture' means, and what role it plays in our work. A series of apparently different perspectives needed to be connected: academic vs non-academic, digital vs non-digital, ML language vs culture and solutions-based vs problematising, but groups were ultimately successful in working through these contradictions and producing thoughtful statements about different aspects of the future ML curriculum.

Those involved in the workshop emphasised the need to take *evidence/research-based decisions* centred around the current social realities of both learners and educators, and taking into account wider hybrid digital/non-digital media expectations and ecologies in society as a whole. They also highlighted the importance of recognising and acting upon the *actual motivations of students (and other actors)* and of *student diversity in learning*. Participants talked of '*messy learning*', which escapes attempts by both educational institutions and digital media providers alike to restrict learning to top-down 'walled garden' learning environments, and in fact happens on different platforms, in hybrid digital/print-based media and is frequently co-curated between learners, educators and other actors external to the formal education system. A distinction was also made between '*personal*' and '*personalisation*', the latter being a term used in 'tech' to cater for different users, but which often

over-simplifies user needs and their ways of learning or ways of creating knowledge.

*Critical digital literacies* emerged as a key theme at the workshop. It was felt that, in the Modern Languages at HE level, digital media were still under-used in learning about cultural topics, and that when they were, learners often were not given the necessary skills to engage with them critically. Digital tools were often assumed to be culturally neutral, when they are far from being so, with immense cultural challenges which a critical ML perspective can make important contributions to – by analysing how digital platforms such as Google Translate and Duolingo are linguistically and culturally situated, for example. Rather than the all-too-frequent maximalist positions of outright rejecting their usage or of adopting them without context, it was felt that ML educators needed to have a more general and proactive discussion about how and when they are integrated into the curriculum.

There was both excitement and trepidation around the *increased use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning in the Modern Languages*, and how you apply AI-driven methods to the field in all its breadth, from learning language, to learning about their cultures, histories and socio-political context. There are structural realities in the way that Natural Language Processing (NLP) is researched which are biased towards research on English and other well-resourced languages, and one digital practitioner who took part in the workshop highlighted the need for greater connections between Modern Languages/non-English language focused linguistics and the field of computing science. In their view, NLP research would benefit from much greater multilingual insight and engagement with cultural studies, and more generally, there is significant value in setting up channels of collaboration across fields which hardly engage with each other at present.

All four discussion groups demonstrated the benefit of open-ended two-way discussions at the intersection between Modern Languages and creative digital practice. It presented a transferable model for working through the theoretical and applied implications of digital transformations in language education and demonstrated the under-realised potential for ML advocacy and expertise within digital studies and practice. It showed the huge value of finding space outside of traditional working environments and frameworks to discuss new innovations in Modern Languages education. The workshop functioned according to principles which we felt favoured positive outcomes: the agile principles used by group facilitators; the

will to experiment (and at times to ‘fail’ in the service of learning); the firm prioritisation of ML pedagogical requirements when looking at digital affordances; working with (or treating relevant participants as) creative digital practitioners (as opposed to ‘IT technicians’); and the genuinely two-way collaboration between Modern Languages researchers and digital practitioners. It is a model which would also work well with the next stage, which we did not follow in this instance, of building prototypes.

Institutional structures do not currently make it easy to hold these kinds of *inter-sectoral or interdisciplinary* collaborations. The workshop brought together different stakeholders to brainstorm ideas relating to the Modern Languages curriculum of the future, drawing on digitally mediated opportunities and risks. Participants interviewed after the event felt that the opportunity to talk in a space outside of usual university/education environments helped to generate creative responses to the workshop challenges. They also valued working with others across different languages, role profiles and the language-culture divide at Higher Education level.



# Post-pandemic reflections

## About the survey

The COVID-19 pandemic broke, a global event which has transformed our lives in ways which we are all still coming to terms with, completing our initial interview survey. A full study on its impact on Modern Languages education is likely premature, and in any case, beyond the scope of this report. We did, however, wish to capture early reflections from those taking part in our initial interview study to gauge the extent and nature of these transformations, and their effect on digital engagement in the field. With this in mind, we contacted all 34 interviewees to ask them about five main areas:

1. How far the pandemic had transformed ML education in the short term
2. How far the pandemic would transform ML education in the long term
3. How far the pandemic would transform digital engagement in ML education in the long term
4. What the main impacts of the pandemic had been on this digital engagement
5. To what extent the pandemic would change the responses they gave in their initial interview to questions about digital literacies/pedagogies, digital methods and digital tools in Modern Languages study and research

We gave interviewees the option to respond by online questionnaire or virtual interview. Four completed the questionnaire and five agreed to be interviewed again in January 2022 (almost two years after the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe).

## Quantitative responses

We asked three quantitative questions to start with to get a sense of people's general evaluation of the impact of Covid on ML in general, and its engagement with digital specifically. The questions aimed to assess:

- The impact of the pandemic on ML education in

general

- **In the short term**
- **In the long term**
- The impact of the pandemic on digital engagement in the field

Our sample size for this follow-on survey was small, so we should be cautious about coming to general conclusions about the field as a whole, but they may give an indication of attitudes among those shaping Modern Languages policy in the UK, and at the least point to possible future lines of enquiry. In overall terms, it is interesting to note that respondents believed that the pandemic had changed ML education very much in the short term. They also believed that the pandemic has changed ML education engagement with digital in the long term but were less supportive of the idea that ML education in general would be very much impacted long term (although the majority still supported this idea).

## Main impacts on digital engagement

### Scale of change

**“We can't underestimate the impact of X,000 people effectively going in for digital training over 18 months”**

Interviewee

Interviewees were then asked to outline the main impacts that the pandemic had had on digital engagement within the field. Due to the timing of this second stage in the study, when many were still having to sacrifice their research time to keep up with heightened teaching demands, the focus naturally tended to be more on teaching than on research. Initial responses centred on the most obvious immediate impact: the very sudden, and forced move to teaching online for all, which had led to “more material” becoming available for digital learning and which had allowed us “to reach students that perhaps we couldn't reach before”.

Some felt that there was “a lot of engagement from Modern Languages, teachers and researchers already with the digital” and so the field was well-placed to respond to new challenges, whereas others felt that universities were “a bit behind” in their engagement with digital pedagogies (although they were now catching up).

One respondent described the transition to digital learning as a result of the pandemic as a “game changer” in that universities had had to invest in *mass training in basic digital literacy* for their teaching staff as a whole. Speaking about their context in a Welsh university, this person said that “we can’t underestimate the impact of X,000 people effectively going in for digital training over 18 months”. Without the pandemic, the university would never have invested in the training on this scale and “you would never have got the buy-in” from staff, they argued. Future studies might explore in more depth what kinds of digital literacy were being taught in the early stages of the pandemic, on what platforms, using which tools, and how these may influence pedagogical choices in the long term, but the sudden transformation in general digital engagement in teaching and learning is clear to all.

One interviewee, who works at the Open University (OU), signalled the sudden increase in requests for advice on online pedagogies due to the OU’s pioneering role in engaging with flexible/distance learning mediated by technology in the UK. In their words, “there was a huge push to create new content on OpenLearn [the OU’s Open Education offering] very quickly” as a result of the surge in demand for expertise in online teaching. This also led to the creation of the ‘Open Centre for Languages and Cultures’ hub in 2021, which provides free taster courses in languages and “communication-related subjects”.

## Changes in the language classroom

One important general impact of the pandemic has been the widespread implementation of teaching models loosely following the ‘flipped classroom’ approach: a learner-centred model where students are introduced to topics before in-class contact time, which then becomes a space for discussion, extension, collaboration and problem-solving activities. In the language classroom, this has led to greater emphasis on communication – one interviewee, who works in a Modern Language Centre in England, listed a number of benefits, including the development of a large body of new online materials, a spike in the level of peer-to-peer

collaboration between classes and an increasing focus on oral skills in-class. This new landscape has made teachers and learners alike realise that it is “perfectly possible” to do oral communication synchronously online and has to a large extent reduced perceptions that learners need to travel to the countries of the language that they are studying or that they need to be in the presence of a ‘native’ speaker in order to engage in effective learning. The reliance on video cameras for visual interaction has had a mixed effect, with inhibitions for some students in “showing their face” limiting classroom interactions, while for others not being forced to present on screen has been a “confidence booster” for their speaking.

## Expanded demand for languages during pandemic

As the pandemic hit daily routines and some people found themselves with opportunities to take on new challenges, learning a language became a popular choice for many, quite probably connected to the reduced opportunities for travel. More than one of our respondents reported an increased interest in language learning in their own working domains, although this often manifested itself as informal or short-term demand, for now at least. One respondent described expanded PhD language study provision at their institution, which had started with an online language learning course for language-based research students, but which has since led to new doctoral training partnership opportunities, bringing together PhD students from (in their case 27) different institutions drawn to new opportunities for learning languages together online.

## Engaging with a new landscape for learning

The manner in which students engage with teachers, learning platforms and each other has altered dramatically as a result of the pandemic. Teachers have had to work out how to replace a two-hour seminar in a classroom with a meaningful online equivalent, how to set up effective breakout rooms to facilitate small group activity, how to offer variety in learning experience, how to evaluate which tools most effectively enable learning outcomes, how to deal with screen fatigue and how to keep students engaged in a new communication environment which fosters some forms of interaction but limits others.

## Shared experiences in online pedagogy

Responses to our survey highlighted numerous examples of new pedagogical toolkits and fora for sharing best practice. Crucial to their uptake has been the communities of practice which they have facilitated, and the confidence teachers have gained through extended hands-on experience with online tools and platforms. One respondent highlighted the “generous impulse” which had emerged due to the challenges of the pandemic, with teachers and institutions sharing content, training materials and experiences.

## New reflections and experimentation

“It is highly likely that early career or mid-career colleagues who are creative or critical in spirit have been given permission to use more creative research methods and to think outside a very, very transactional box for education and language teaching”.

Interviewee

Some felt that the move (at least temporarily) to a new online teaching landscape had brought greater reflection on how we teach languages, while others felt that the pandemic has “forced people to explore”, expanding their digital skills and making them consider “innovative ways” to incorporate digital materials in their teaching. One respondent argued that it is “highly likely that early career or mid-career colleagues who are creative or critical in spirit have been given permission to use more creative research methods and to think outside a very, very transactional box for education and language teaching”.

## Opportunities for less well-resourced languages

It was noted that people’s choice of which language to learn is increasingly driven, not by what is traditionally available within formal learning structures, but through people’s interest in the languages behind the games they play, the music they listen to or the TV programmes they watch. This move to less well-resourced languages has been facilitated by apps like Duolingo, a trend reinforced during the pandemic when cultural phenomena such as the Squid Game TV drama (and

longer-standing phenomena such as Manga graphic novels), bolstered by the high uptake of digital media in some countries, have opened interest among young people in languages such as Korean or Japanese.

According to one minority language specialist, while there is relatively little (much-needed) government support for ‘smaller’ languages, there are some new opportunities. With distributed learning models gaining traction, it becomes easier to support the teaching of smaller languages, to “enhance the language learning experience”, to make it more financially sustainable, to produce more advanced learning materials and to connect to target cultures virtually.

## Study abroad and virtual exchange

Study abroad was impossible during the early stages of the pandemic and has led to language educators seeking alternatives through virtual exchange. It is too early to assess how much of an impact this will have on long-term policy towards study abroad and other forms of language-based intercultural exchange, but it seems likely that universities will seek more opportunities for virtual interaction with target language cohorts going forward, whether that be in replacement for study abroad, or in addition. Respondents by no means undermined the unique value of in-person study abroad experiences, but some of our respondents saw great promise in the virtual exchange model in a financially challenging environment, although they also saw “significant barriers” in setting up such frameworks initially, due to university regulations and differing calendars, financial models, educational cultures and validation systems. Another respondent described a major new initiative that their institution was involved in to explore a wider collaboration bringing together language students from different countries in order to pool online teaching resources and skills for language learning and inter-cultural competency.

## Contours of digital pedagogical infrastructure

Comparatively little was said about the nature of emerging pedagogical tools and infrastructure – what the growth of phenomena such as Duolingo, Zoom, smart phones and the Educational Technology business – means for language education, but there was some discussion around the value of open educational tools. One person, in noting the meteoric rise of one commercial tool for their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), remarked that they wished the VLE had instead been based on an open platform, driven purely by educational needs.

## Global dynamics, soft power

“What knowledge is taught and learned online? What are the dominating epistemologies?”

Interviewee

How would interviewees respond differently to the questions we asked them in the initial interviews? Respondents noted that the pandemic had underlined the value of learning languages for wider social skills, global communication and intercultural understanding. One pointed out that the pandemic has helped to focus attention on digital divides, while at the same time exacerbating some areas of social injustice and they argued that critical digital literacy therefore needed to include awareness around people’s ability to access and participate in online learning. They asked: “What knowledge is taught and learned online? What are the dominating epistemologies?”.

“Meaningful pedagogical work can be done in low bandwidth contexts”

Interviewee

## Post-pandemic conclusions

*Would the kinds of change we have seen in language education have happened anyway, without the pandemic?* Respondents did not agree on this point – one felt that it had simply “fast forwarded” an inevitable transformation, whereas another argued that the change would have been far less profound because people “wouldn’t have had the time” and the sudden shift has moved digital engagement “to the forefront” of people’s awareness in a concentrated manner. One interviewee felt that “we’re probably still making it up a little bit as we go along”.

Some mentioned *ongoing fears about the impact of technology*, which in some ways have been heightened by the pandemic, the ongoing concern that “technology is going to take over my job”. One person recognised these anxieties but felt that they were somewhat overblown: “I look back at history and different forms of technology have been coming into our lives now for a really long time and yet, humanity has not become jobless. The technology often allows us to think and to do things differently, but it always needs us in certain ways”.

Most comments focused on teaching, but it was felt by some that *digital culture would continue to*

*transform research on contemporary subject matter and in areas where records have been digitised.* One person also predicted that people who were aware of the creative and collaborative potential of digital technology were much more likely to *access research funding* in the future. Another respondent felt that big data, data mining and adaptive technologies are likely to play more significant roles in language education in future, but that, conversely, *digital practitioners were more likely to need to engage with language practice* in the future due to the current levels of monolingual and anglophone bias.

One interviewee recognised the progress made in online learning but felt that there was still *much progress to be made with online assessment*. “The way we teach students in classes has completely changed”, they argued, “but the way we assess them has not, and that’s where we’re going to need more support from technology and to improve how we use the technology that exists”.

Finally, in ensuring widespread access and inclusion, a respondent advocated for a “minimal” digital approach to cater for “the lowest common denominator” in terms of technological access and knowledge. They argued that “meaningful pedagogical work can be done in low bandwidth contexts”, and that inclusion must involve “taking everyone with us” rather than excluding them.



# Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has presented the conclusions of research on the 'Digital Mediations' strand of the *Language Acts and Worldmaking* project. The research has included several landscape reports and experimental initiatives carried out to explore how digital pedagogies, tools and research methods are (or should be) embedded in current Modern Languages practice, and what implications this has for future policy in the field. It has aimed to contribute to wider debates about the nature and significance of digital mediations involving Modern Languages and Cultures, and to assess the critical competences required to negotiate them effectively. We have studied the interactions between digital culture and language education in both directions – both the role digital culture and technology play in transforming Modern Languages research and learning, and the role the Modern Languages has in helping us to better understand digital culture, whose global and multilingual nature is often marginalised and under-researched.

As noted in the introduction, this report focuses largely on Higher Education in the UK, while making connections to other national/regional realities and to digital mediations at school level language education. It understands 'Modern Languages' in the broadest possible sense, including community, heritage and non-European languages, and connected closely to cognate fields such as Area studies, Linguistics and Translation studies. We now conclude with some general recommendations, which are based on a UK perspective but many of which are likely to be applicable to other anglophone contexts.

## Recommendations

We make the following main recommendations to Modern Languages departments, policy-making organisations, funders and professional associations based on the research described in this report:

1. Historically, digital engagement across languages has been dispersed and there are few opportunities to share expertise in this area across languages. **We recommend that the field develops channels to share knowledge regarding digital methods, literacies and pedagogies in currently existing**

**shared platforms and networks, or develops new initiatives for that purpose.** The experience of initiatives such as the Digital Modern Languages seminar, platforms such as MLA Commons (now part of Humanities Commons) and networks such as #MFLTwitterati in the school sector may be instructive here.

2. **A wider debate about the value and location of digital scholarship within wider Modern Languages scholarship is needed** in order to ensure that new research methods and paradigms are adequately integrated into academic credit, validation and promotion exercises. Greater attention to emerging research and pedagogical practices in formal evaluation criteria will help to generate strong, innovative and interdisciplinary digital scholarship and teaching practices in the field.

3. **Modern Languages would benefit from a thorough audit of the key ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed research and teaching practices, and a debate about the likely longer term implications.** This will help to draw a coherent picture of changes in the language classroom and the new pedagogical and research landscapes which are emerging from new online/hybrid communication and informal/formal learning habits. The field can also do more to promote its own contributions to research/pedagogical innovation which has taken place during the pandemic, in particular in relation to language learning.

4. **The field should encourage and develop studies and policy initiatives to address the affordances and limitations of digital engagement in the teaching of community, low-resourced or endangered languages.** Many of these languages have been marginalised in the current funding context, and virtual pedagogies and collaborations provide opportunities to pool resources within individual languages/language groups, and to provide transferable models, which when openly documented, can be adapted across different languages.

5. **The field would benefit from an evaluation of**



**the digital infrastructure it uses for teaching and analysis of what learning outcomes are favoured (or limited) by its design.** Major decisions had to be taken in adverse conditions during the pandemic about digital communication and virtual learning systems and these should now be reviewed to ensure that they foster open pedagogy or scholarship, and that they help to erase rather than perpetuate existing digital divides.

We also make the following specific recommendations in relation to digital research and Modern Languages:

6. Modern Languages research would have much to gain from **a disciplinary review of some key digital methods likely to underpin its scholarship going forward**, from which targeted action can be taken to develop critical digital/hybrid literacies which would benefit Modern Languages researchers.
7. **It is highly desirable that Modern Languages representatives are more active in decision-making processes** regarding the increasingly **digitally mediated research infrastructure** at institutional level and concerning increasingly **data-driven and digital methods-driven funding strategies**.
8. **Modern Languages should be more proactive in debates around the design and evaluation of Artificial Intelligence, Machine Translation, and other current trends in digital transformation.** The field of Modern Languages can, and should, stake a claim to making a key contribution to digital practice and scholarship in several unique and exciting ways.
9. **Modern Languages and other language fields have a lot to gain – and much to contribute – in debates about multilingual digital theory and practice.** Digital studies in general currently have a strong bias towards English and a small selection of well-resourced languages, and would benefit from the kind of plurilingual, inter-cultural and transnational perspective the Modern

Languages has long-established expertise in. Modern Languages should actively advocate for the visibility of languages and multilingualism in digital studies and practice. This will also help to compensate for the tendency in digital studies and practice to focus on narrowly linguistic and ‘technical’ issues around multilingualism to the detriment of equally important ‘cultural’ aspects.

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# Appendices



## About this report

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Additional resources relating to this report may be found on the project website at:

<https://languageacts.org/digital-mediations/digital-mediations-publications/digital-mediations-final-report/>



This report forms part of a series of reports produced by the Digital Mediations strand of the Language Acts & Worldmaking project, in this case in collaboration with the translingual strand of the Cross-Language Dynamics project (based at the Institute of Modern Languages Research), both funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council's Open World Research Initiative. Digital Mediations explores interactions and tensions between digital culture, multilingualism and language fields including the Modern Languages.