



**My UniSpace: applying e-mentoring to language learning**

Journal:	<i>Language Learning Journal</i>
Manuscript ID:	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Original Paper
Keywords:	e-mentoring, languages, mentor, mentee



## ***My UniSpace: applying e-mentoring to language learning***

### **Introduction**

*My UniSpace* is a languages e-mentoring project run by University of Southampton. It is supported by Routes into Languages, a programme funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) which aims at increasing the take-up of language courses in higher education by encouraging more young people to continue studying languages, especially those from social groups currently under-represented in language study. *My UniSpace* matches pupils (mentees) aged 14–18 (Years 10–13) in schools and colleges with university students (mentors) who interact with them through online communication. *My UniSpace* won a European Award for Languages in 2009 for being innovative, effective and replicable. This article describes the project and outlines the lessons learnt from evaluating *My UniSpace* after its second year of operation. Hopefully, it will provide insights that might inform other universities and schools considering developing similar schemes.

### **Advantages of e-mentoring**

Although formal and informal mentoring has been around for a long time in education and the workplace, e-mentoring is a more recent phenomenon. Boyle Single and Muller (2001, 108) provide a useful definition of e-mentoring as:

a relationship that is established between a more senior individual (mentor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (protégé), primarily using electronic communications, and that is intended to develop and grow the skills, knowledge, confidence, and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, while also assisting in the development of the mentor.

1  
2  
3 The National Languages Strategy for England (DfES, 2002, 7) recommended that  
4  
5 Further and Higher Education institutions should work closely with their local schools  
6  
7 and colleges to promote languages. One way of achieving this was by ‘encouraging  
8  
9 students to support language teaching in schools, thus providing opportunities for  
10  
11 them to gain new skills and experience.’ E-mentoring provides a particularly  
12  
13 appealing means of enabling higher education students to support pupils for several  
14  
15 reasons.  
16  
17

18  
19 Unlike face-to-face mentoring, e-mentoring does not require scheduling  
20  
21 regular meetings, thereby eliminating travel costs and reducing the time commitment  
22  
23 required from both mentors and mentees. Its asynchronous nature allows both parties  
24  
25 to post messages to each other at times that suit them. It does not need any concrete  
26  
27 meeting space. These practical advantages open up opportunities to many more  
28  
29 university students to become mentors, whilst making it possible for pupils in schools  
30  
31 that are more remote from a university to have regular contact with a higher education  
32  
33 institution and benefit from a mentoring experience.  
34  
35

36  
37 The profile of current modern language students in British universities is  
38  
39 overwhelmingly white, middle-class and female (Footitt, 2005). What an article in  
40  
41 *The Guardian* (Bawden, 2007) refers to as the ‘middle-class dominance’ of university  
42  
43 language study seems unlikely to change in the short term, as statistics available on  
44  
45 the website of CILT The National Centre for Languages ([www.cilt.org.uk](http://www.cilt.org.uk)) show that  
46  
47 the decline in languages take-up has been more acute in comprehensive schools than  
48  
49 in selective and independent ones since language study become non-compulsory post  
50  
51 age 14. A recent HEFCE commissioned *Review of Modern Languages provision in*  
52  
53 *higher education in England* (Worton, 2009, 33) expressed the view that in terms of  
54  
55 the future of the discipline one broad area of agreement amongst academics was that  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3  
4 'languages would increasingly become the preserve of the middle-class (and privately  
5 educated) student studying at a Russell Group university'. There is clearly a mismatch  
6 between the class and gender profiles of language students in higher education  
7  
8 available to support language teaching in schools and the under-represented groups  
9  
10 that Routes into Languages is targeting.  
11  
12

13  
14  
15 This is where e-mentoring offers significant advantages. Markers of social  
16 status are not as visible in electronic communication as in face-to-face interaction and  
17 this makes them less important in the interaction (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991). E-  
18 mentoring crosses boundaries of race, class, and gender and can be effective in  
19 targeting marginalized groups in society, such as minorities and low-income students  
20 (Bierema and Hill, 2005). As *My UniSpace* aimed at including mentees from lower  
21 and disadvantaged socio-economic groups, 'the attenuation of status differences'  
22 (Boyle Single and Muller, 2001, 107) that e-mentoring allows, made this form of  
23 interaction worth trialling.  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

### 36 **Aims of *My UniSpace*: Reaching out to Mentees**

37  
38 Although organisations like the Brightside Trust ([www.brightsideunaid.org](http://www.brightsideunaid.org)) had  
39 established e-mentoring schemes for other subjects in the UK, there were no existing  
40 models in languages to inform the development of *My UniSpace*. The first issue that  
41 needed consideration was which year groups to target. Years 10–13 (ages 14–18)  
42 were chosen, as pupils would be preparing for an examination in languages, either  
43 GCSE, AS or A2, and potentially making decisions about their future. Therefore, they  
44 were more likely to benefit from the help of a mentor than younger pupils.  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54

55 Secondly, the aims of the programme for both mentors and the mentees needed to  
56 be articulated. As Routes into Languages seeks to increase take-up, the following aim  
57 for mentees seemed self evident:  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

*To support and motivate mentees and to encourage those in years 10–11 to progress to AS/A2 and those in years 12–13 to consider studying a language at University.*

To help achieve this, mentors would provide a friendly sounding board for pupils considering various options for their future. They could give mentees information about the personal and professional benefits attached to studying languages and provide advice on language courses, universities and careers. For pupils applying to universities, mentors might offer tips on personal statements and interviews. They might re-assure mentees about the transition between language study at GCSE and more advanced study at AS/A2, which often worries young learners. They could support students through A-level, as Graham (1997, 2004) points out that in many cases even those who gain a top grade at age 16 and do embark on advanced language study soon lose confidence and feel they are not good enough. They would be able to re-assure students that the progression between language study at college and university is not too daunting. As mentees would normally be undertaking assessed coursework and preparing for an examination, mentors could help with language learning by answering questions about the target language (TL), providing study skills advice, giving tips and feedback on coursework and sharing examination techniques. Having a mentor might help mentees achieve better examination grades which might encourage them to continue. Indeed, one mentee, when asked at the beginning of the programme whether s/he intended studying languages at college, stated explicitly that it depended on his/her performance in the GCSE exam, thereby revealing the key role that mentors might have in supporting mentees in the lead up to the examination. Dörnyei (2001, 51) explains that ‘the most far-reaching consequences in motivating L2 learners can be achieved by promoting positive

1  
2  
3 language-related values and attitudes.’ It was hoped that language students would  
4  
5 transmit such values to their mentees and that many would become infected by their  
6  
7 mentor’s enthusiasm for languages and aspire to study one at university.  
8  
9

10 *My UniSpace* was delivered collaboratively by the UK Student Recruitment  
11 and Outreach Office and Modern Languages at Southampton. Therefore, the project  
12 did not intend to simply ‘hard sell’ languages but aimed at widening participation  
13 generally. This was reflected in the second aim of *My UniSpace* which was: ‘*To give*  
14 *pupils an insight into life as a (language) student in Higher Education.*’ This could be  
15 achieved by providing the opportunity for mentees to ask their mentors questions  
16 about university. These might relate to the advantages of living in hall or at home,  
17 financial considerations and the social life at university. Here, the project might be  
18 especially valuable in making higher education seem more accessible to mentees in  
19 under-represented groups in languages, whose family members or carers may not  
20 have experienced higher education. Some universities have set up peer mentoring  
21 schemes for their undergraduates to ‘ease the social trauma of moving from the  
22 relatively secure social environment of school to a much larger and unknown  
23 university environment’ (Page and Hanna, 2008, 34). *My UniSpace* hoped to help  
24 prepare future students for the transition from an even earlier age.  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45

46 Both of the above aims can be achieved by interaction in English. However, as  
47 *My UniSpace* was a languages project, it seemed imperative to offer mentees the  
48 opportunity to develop their language skills by interacting with their mentor in the TL.  
49 This was expressed in the project’s third aim:  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54

55 *To develop mentees’ language skills by encouraging them to correspond with*  
56 *their mentor in the TL.*  
57  
58  
59  
60

The emphasis was on ‘encouraging’ rather than ‘requiring’, as many mentees might possess insufficient skills in the language they were studying to articulate their questions relating to study skills, higher education, careers etc.

### **How appropriate were the mentee aims?**

Mentees completed a short, online questionnaire before starting their period of mentoring. The total number of mentees on the system at the end of Year 2 of the project was 96 of which 59 (61%) completed a pre-project questionnaire.

Mentees were asked ‘*Are you considering studying languages at college and/or at University?*’ Six (10%) answered ‘no’; 17 (29%) answered ‘Yes –at college’; 10 (17%) replied ‘Yes - at college and university’. The most significant answer by far was ‘Don’t know’, 28 (47%), showing how important a role e-mentoring might play in helping a large number of pupils decide whether to continue with languages.

Mentees were also asked what they hoped to gain from e-mentoring and were invited to ‘tick’ any applicable boxes. The options and statistics are given below:

Improve my communication skills in the language I'm learning	83%
Extra support with school/college work	63%
Increase my confidence	42%
Chance to find out more about university/studying languages at University	34%
Guidance about what you will do once you leave school/college	25%
A positive role model	17%

Although the majority of mentees wished to make progress in the TL, this was not considered an important outcome by all of them. Indeed, many were interested in

1  
2  
3 aspects of mentoring that might not have been successfully incorporated if *My*  
4  
5  
6 *UniSpace* required all interaction to take place in the TL.

### 8 **Aims of *My UniSpace* : Developing mentors**

9  
10 As Boyle Single and Muller (2001) suggest, e-mentoring should also assist in the  
11  
12 development of the mentor, or to quote Bierema and Merriam (2002, 214), it is ‘a  
13  
14 *computer mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé*  
15  
16 [italics in the original]. Therefore, it was also necessary to articulate how *My*  
17  
18 *UniSpace* could benefit mentors.  
19  
20

21  
22 The first aim was: ‘*To give mentors experience of working with young people*  
23  
24 *in a languages-related field*’. A large proportion of students of modern languages at  
25  
26 British universities spend their third year abroad working as English language  
27  
28 assistants in European schools and the scheme might help them prepare for this. Such  
29  
30 experience would also be valuable if mentors wished to undertake paid or voluntary  
31  
32 work with young people during vacations or after graduating and would be  
33  
34 particularly helpful on applications for teacher training courses.  
35  
36  
37

38  
39 Graduate employability is high on the agendas of British universities and this  
40  
41 is enshrined in a second aim which was ‘*To offer mentors the opportunity to enhance*  
42  
43 *their employability*’. A recent report from The Council for Industry and Higher  
44  
45 Education (Archer and Davison, 2008, 6) states that ‘86% of employers consider good  
46  
47 communication skills to be important, yet many employers are dissatisfied that  
48  
49 graduates can express themselves effectively’. Mentoring of any form allows  
50  
51 participants to improve their communication skills but as e-mail interaction lacks the  
52  
53 visual and auditory cues that people depend upon in face-to-face conversation, it  
54  
55 requires e-mentors to develop different communication strategies and interpersonal  
56  
57 skills. As Bierema and Hill (2005) point out, the written nature of the mentoring  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 enables the further development of writing skills and an increase in overall  
4  
5 communication skills has been reported through virtual mentoring.  
6  
7

8 The final aim was to '*To encourage mentors to improve their own language*  
9  
10 *skills through supporting younger learners*'. This might be achieved by mentors  
11  
12 writing to mentees in the TL themselves, answering mentees questions about the  
13  
14 language, checking their mentees' writing for errors and giving them feedback on it.  
15  
16 If mentees asked for advice on study skills, this would also inevitably require mentors  
17  
18 to reflect on their own learning strategies which could only be beneficial in making  
19  
20 them better autonomous learners.  
21  
22

### 23 24 **Setting up My UniSpace**

#### 25 26 *Recruiting and training mentors*

27  
28 Language e-mentors are recruited by the UK Student Recruitment and Outreach  
29  
30 Office in collaboration with Modern Languages. Students apply and they are then  
31  
32 interviewed and undergo a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. Boyle Single and  
33  
34 Muller (2001, 106) explain how  
35  
36

37  
38 the ease with which e-mentoring programs can be developed may belie the  
39  
40 planning, administration, and resources required to make them successful. [...]  
41  
42 the temptation is great to match mentors with protégés but then provide little  
43  
44 in the way of the coaching, training, and follow-up required to obtain a high  
45  
46 rate of successful e-mentoring relationships.  
47  
48  
49

50 To maximise the chances of creating successful relationships, a two hour training  
51  
52 sessions for mentors was incorporated in *My UniSpace* and this was supported by a  
53  
54 written guide to mentoring.  
55  
56

57 When recruiting mentors one issue was whether to restrict applications to  
58  
59 students studying Modern Languages, or to allow native speakers studying other  
60

1  
2  
3 subjects at university to join the scheme. Both types of mentor offer advantages and  
4  
5 drawbacks. Tim Murphey (1998, 201–205) reports on the benefits of using near peer  
6  
7 role models (NPRs) as a means of motivating students, as ‘their excellence seems  
8  
9 more possible and easy to see and replicate because they are in some ways already  
10  
11 very similar to us, or within our zone of proximal development’. Non-native speaker  
12  
13 undergraduates provide such role models. Indeed, there are a large number of native  
14  
15 speaker language teachers in the UK secondary sector and Cook (1999, 200) argues  
16  
17 that ‘students may feel overwhelmed by native-speaker teachers who have achieved a  
18  
19 perfection that is out of the students’ reach’. Non-native mentors might counter-  
20  
21 balance this by providing mentees with successful L2 role models. Non-natives would  
22  
23 normally also have experienced the same examinations and education system as their  
24  
25 mentees and be able to give tips on dealing with them. On the other hand, the  
26  
27 disadvantage of non-native speakers is that their writing in the TL would undoubtedly  
28  
29 contain errors which mentees might reproduce.  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 Dörnyei (2001, 15) points out that ‘most research on L2 motivation between  
37  
38 the 1960s and 1990s focused on how the students’ perceptions of the L2, the L2  
39  
40 speakers and L2 culture affect their desire to learn the language’. He argues that as  
41  
42 ‘languages are socially and culturally bound, their effective study requires a positive  
43  
44 disposition towards everything that the L2 is associated with: its culture, its speakers,  
45  
46 its influence’ (54). This is where native-speaker mentors offer distinct advantages as  
47  
48 they allow mentees to develop a relationship with someone from the TL culture. On  
49  
50 the other hand, natives studying subjects other than languages might be less able to  
51  
52 advise their mentees on language study at a British university or have false  
53  
54 expectations of their level of competence in the TL. Furthermore, they might also not  
55  
56 grasp the difficulties of learning their language.  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3  
4 As natives and non-natives clearly offered different but equally valuable  
5  
6 advantages, it seemed that in selecting mentors it was more relevant to consider their  
7  
8 interpersonal skills and enthusiasm, irrespective of whether they were native speakers  
9  
10 or undergraduates in Modern Languages.  
11

### 12 *Matching Mentors and Mentees*

13  
14  
15 The pupils who participate in *My UniSpace* are selected by participating schools and a  
16  
17 member of staff from the UK Student Recruitment and Outreach Office visits the  
18  
19 schools to undertake a training session with the mentees. In the training session,  
20  
21 mentees receive information about how *My UniSpace* operates and what they can  
22  
23 expect from their mentors. Following training, the mentees are allocated to a mentor.  
24  
25  
26

27 Bierema and Merriam (2002, 213) argue that ‘it appears that mentoring cannot  
28  
29 be forced—like a blind date’ and that ‘merely pairing people up only rarely leads to  
30  
31 the kind of relationship desired in a mentoring situation.’ In order to help match  
32  
33 mentors to mentees, both parties provide details about the languages they are studying,  
34  
35 their level of study and information about their interests. Matching mentors to mentees is  
36  
37 not straightforward, however, as several variables need to be taken into account.  
38  
39  
40

41 Boyle Single and Muller (2002, 113) emphasise how ‘it is important to match  
42  
43 carefully the e-mentoring pairs, since helping participants find common ground is  
44  
45 important to getting the relationship off to a successful start.’ ‘Common ground’ could  
46  
47 take the form of shared interests. However, after the first year of running the scheme it  
48  
49 became apparent when extending the scheme in Year 2 that more emphasis needed to be  
50  
51 placed on achieving better matches in terms of language competence rather than  
52  
53 prioritising similar interests. When a first year undergraduate mentor is allocated to a  
54  
55 college student studying for A-level, for example, although the mentor is be able to  
56  
57 provide information about learning strategies and university etc, their own language skills  
58  
59 are not always sufficient to provide the mentee with useful feedback on their TL language  
60

1  
2  
3 use. Therefore, in matching mentors to mentees, native speakers and final year students  
4 are paired where possible with mentees preparing for AS and A2 level, with the  
5  
6 assumption that more interaction will take place in the TL and at a higher level. First and  
7  
8 second year undergraduates are matched with pupils in Years 10–11 where interactions in  
9  
10 the TL and the questions asked by the mentee are likely to be more elementary.  
11  
12  
13

14  
15 Many boys hold the view that ‘real boys don’t do languages’ (Carr and  
16  
17 Pauwels, 2006). To counter this view, it would have been desirable to allocate a male  
18  
19 mentor to all male mentees, thereby providing the latter with NPRs to encourage them  
20  
21 to continue with their language study. However, as only five of the 49 mentors  
22  
23 participating in *My UniSpace* were male this was impossible. Although no female  
24  
25 mentees were allocated to male mentors, our experience of running the scheme  
26  
27 suggests that gender does not seem to play a significant role in the mentoring  
28  
29 relationship in the case of female mentor to male mentee pairings of which there were  
30  
31 several. Indeed, some of the most successful relationships fell into this category.  
32  
33 Although it is difficult to draw definite conclusions from such a small sample, our  
34  
35 experience does support the view that ‘The cultural baggage and stereotypes that  
36  
37 accompany race, gender and social class become invisible in a virtual forum, freeing  
38  
39 the mentoring to become the focus’ (Bierema and Merriam, 2002, 221).  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44

### 45 **Evaluating *My UniSpace***

46  
47 When *MyUniSpace* was short-listed for a European Award for Languages the judging  
48  
49 panel requested some feedback from mentees. Therefore, towards the end of the  
50  
51 project mentees were invited to send a short comment on the scheme to the co-  
52  
53 ordinators or their teachers. Some of their observations will be quoted below. At the  
54  
55 end of the project, mentees and mentors were also asked to complete a short, online  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

questionnaire. 28 of the 88 (32%) mentees on the system responded, as did 17 (35%) of the 49 mentors.

Unfortunately the questionnaire response rates were low. However, ‘Given its text-based nature, [e-mentoring] yields a written record of the mentoring process’ (Beriema and Hill, 2005, 559). Therefore, in evaluating *My UniSpace* the mentees’ comments and data from the mentee and mentor questionnaires were considered in conjunction with the fully-documented interactions between the 88 mentees and 49 mentors registered on the system.

### Feedback from Mentees

In the end of scheme questionnaire, mentees responded to the question ‘*How has e-mentoring helped you?*’ by ticking boxes next to any of the following statements that applied to them. The results below are arranged in order of popularity. (Given the small size of the sample, the number of mentees out of 28 who ticked the box is given with the percentage in brackets.)

Helped increase my confidence	13 (46%)
Helped me to improve my communication skills	13 (46%)
I’ve improved my grammatical accuracy	12 (43%)
I’ve become better at reading the language	11 (39%)
I’ve increased my vocabulary	10 (36%)
I’ve improved my spelling in the language I’m learning	9 (32%)
Helped me find out more about university/studying languages at university	8 (29%)
I’ve found out more about the culture in other countries	4 (14%)
I’ve become better at using a dictionary	2 (8%)
It hasn’t helped me at all	1 (4%)

Made me enjoy learning languages more	1 (4%)
Other (please specify in box)	4 (14%)

### *Building Confidence*

42% of mentees who responded to the pre-scheme questionnaire wished to increase their confidence through participating in *My UniSpace*. The interactions show that a large number of mentees voice their lack of confidence when writing in the TL to their mentor at the beginning of the scheme. Initial efforts are frequently accompanied by apologetic remarks in English about potential mistakes. It is here, that most mentors seem very effective at re-assuring their mentees, offering praise and encouragement and stressing that they have understood all or most of what the mentee has written. A few mentors emphasise that they make mistakes themselves and one employed a good strategy by asking the mentee to point out any of his/her mistakes which has the added benefit of making the mentee realise that their mentor's writing in the TL might not be perfect. A teacher at a participating school who wrote a letter of support for the scheme for the European Award for Languages judges highlighted how *My UniSpace* had helped pupils develop confidence:

*the e-mentoring project has allowed the students to develop learning relationships and dialogues in an extremely safe and controlled environment. Our students are often daunted by the prospect of communicating with foreign nationals and this system has allowed them to gradually develop relationships with students so that they now feel able to write with increased confidence and perseverance.*

Another item in the questionnaire, gauged how far the scheme may have impacted on mentees' confidence. In response to the question '*Has participating in the languages*

1  
2  
3 *e-mentoring scheme changed your view of what it's like to study languages at*  
4 *University?* 15 (54%) respondents answered 'Yes – positively I feel like it's  
5  
6 *something I could do*' whilst only one respondent (4%) answered 'No – I don't think I  
7  
8 *could do it*'. All others (13; 46%) answered that their original thoughts had been  
9  
10 confirmed. As confidence building is an intrinsic part of e-mentoring (Boyle Single  
11  
12 and Muller, 2001), it is satisfying to see how *My UniSpace* had been successful in  
13  
14 enabling so many mentees.  
15  
16  
17  
18

### 19 *Progress in the Target Language*

20  
21  
22 83% of respondents to the pre-scheme questionnaire wished to improve their  
23  
24 communication skills in the language they were learning. The fact that '*Helped me to*  
25  
26 *improve my communication skills*' was joint most popular answer in the post-scheme  
27  
28 questionnaire shows that for many participants this outcome had been met.  
29  
30

31  
32 Another question related more explicitly to progress in the TL, which as  
33  
34 Coleman and al (2007, 252) comment is a complex issue, as 'Among the reiterated  
35  
36 findings of UK language learner motivation studies have been learners' frustration  
37  
38 and inability to perceive or articulate their own progress.' It is therefore reassuring  
39  
40 that in response to '*Do you feel that you have made more progress in the language*  
41  
42 *you are learning by having an e-mentor that if you hadn't participated in the*  
43  
44 *scheme?*' 17 (61%) mentees answered 'yes', 6 (21%) answered 'don't know' and only  
45  
46 5 (18%) answered 'no'.  
47  
48  
49

### 50 *Target Language Use*

51  
52  
53 When looking at the exchanges, how far the scheme may have helped mentees make  
54  
55 progress in the TL can be evaluated in several ways. The most obvious is to consider  
56  
57 the amount of interaction in the TL. Measuring this is difficult, however. Some  
58  
59 relationships, especially with mentors studying for AS/A level, are conducted almost  
60

1  
2  
3 exclusively in the TL, whilst others have some parts of the emails in English and  
4  
5 others in the TL. In terms of the exchanges with mentees studying for GCSE, some  
6  
7 mentors clearly separate the two languages with a part in English and then another in  
8  
9 the TL (or vice versa) and mentees often respond by adopting a similar format. Indeed,  
10  
11 as one mentee commented, 'we agreed to email half and half in respective languages'.  
12  
13 Such division between languages in the exchanges is not always so clear-cut, however,  
14  
15 with some mentees deciding that they will code-switch even within the same sentence.  
16  
17 One mentee, for example, agreed that s/he would write what s/he could in the TL and  
18  
19 leave words in English that s/he did not know in the TL with the request that the  
20  
21 mentor should then tell him/her how to express these things. Conversely, some  
22  
23 mentors write in the TL and put translations of words they anticipate their mentees  
24  
25 might not understand in brackets. The amount of TL produced by the mentees varies  
26  
27 enormously too, with some reading lengthy emails in the TL from their mentor but  
28  
29 only writing short responses in the TL. What is clear, however, is that in the majority  
30  
31 of pairings, the amount of TL used was sufficient to suggest that the majority of  
32  
33 mentees on the scheme would have made some progress in the TL, even if progress  
34  
35 related to having developed their reading skills.

#### 43 *Helping with Specific Language Areas*

44  
45 Many mentees may also perceive that they have made progress in the language as a  
46  
47 result of receiving help with specific language difficulties. The mentee questionnaires  
48  
49 show that 12 mentees answered that e-mentoring had helped them improve their  
50  
51 grammatical accuracy. The exchanges reveal that many mentees ask for help,  
52  
53 normally in English, with particular grammar problems, and the mentor responses  
54  
55 receive range from the provision of a short explanation to entire exercises which the  
56  
57 mentor will then check and correct. Several mentees commented specifically on areas  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 in which they had received help. One mentee comments, for example, on how e-  
4 mentoring 'helped with my understanding of tenses' whilst another appreciated the  
5 help with 'grammatical queries on word order'.  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 The questionnaire also reveals that several mentees found that they had  
11 increased their vocabulary. The teacher who provided a letter of support for the  
12 European Award for Languages also commented how in terms of his pupils: 'Not  
13 only have the email interchanges improved the quality of their writing, the students  
14 are also developing a wider bank of vocabulary by reading the emails of their  
15 mentors'. As reported above, 11 (39%) perceived that they felt the scheme had  
16 improved their skills in reading the TL. One mentee highlighted in particular how e-  
17 mentoring 'has helped with confidence in receiving large and challenging pieces of  
18 writing and then setting about trying to understand them.'  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30

31 There are also several examples of exchanges where mentees ask for specific  
32 help with vocabulary in relation to coursework. Responses from mentors range from  
33 supplying a few key words and expressions to providing whole lists of terminology.  
34 Again, one mentee commented specifically on how 'I have learned some new  
35 vocabulary which I have been able to put into coursework and therefore improve it.'  
36 Indeed, as might be expected from the pre-scheme questionnaire, which stated that  
37 63% of mentees anticipated that they would want 'extra support with school/college  
38 work', requests for help and advice with coursework figure in several exchanges.  
39 Some mentees not only ask for help with grammar and vocabulary but send drafts of  
40 coursework to their mentors for comment. As one mentee writes: 'my mentor has  
41 helped me with my target of using more complex sentences and has provided support  
42 with coursework.'  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Although *My UniSpace* is based on written interaction, the scheme's potential  
4 to contribute to participants' progress in other areas was also commented on by one  
5  
6  
7  
8 mentee:

9  
10 *It has given me more confidence and funnily enough helped my speaking*  
11  
12 *because when I am emailing quickly in Spanish I have to think spontaneously*  
13  
14 *as though I was saying it out loud.*

### 17 Correcting Mistakes

18  
19 When requesting feedback on the scheme, one mentee linked an improvement in their  
20  
21 language skills to having had mistakes corrected by his/her mentor:

22  
23  
24 *I'm finding the e-mentoring extremely helpful. My mentor, [...] , is really nice*  
25  
26 *and is always willing to help me correct my mistakes. It has helped improve*  
27  
28 *my German a lot and I know what some of my common mistakes are now,*  
29  
30 *when before it was not so easy to tell.*  
31  
32  
33

34  
35 An examination of the exchanges shows, however, a variety of approaches in the way  
36  
37 mentors deal with errors in the TL. Some mentors automatically offer corrections,  
38  
39 whilst others never refer to mistakes in what their mentees have written. Some  
40  
41 mentees clearly see it as their mentor's role to correct them and ask for this. What is  
42  
43 satisfying is that in cases where mentors provide feedback, it is normally done with  
44  
45 clarity and sensitivity.  
46  
47  
48  
49

50  
51 The issue of whether and how much mentors should correct mentees' TL  
52  
53 writing is particularly thorny for a scheme like *My UniSpace* and it is difficult to be  
54  
55 categorical in terms of advising mentors. By automatically or frequently correcting  
56  
57 mistakes, the mentor risks resembling a teacher in the mentee's eyes and this may be  
58  
59 off-putting to pupils who do not want the scheme to become a virtual classroom. On  
60

1  
2  
3 the other hand, some mentees may wish to be corrected but may not dare ask for fear  
4 of appearing over-demanding. The conclusion to be drawn is that mentors should  
5 negotiate with their mentee to what extent they wish to be corrected, or at least to let  
6 mentees know they would be willing to point out mistakes if asked. What is clear,  
7 however, from the exchanges where mentors do correct is that their mentees have  
8 undoubtedly made great progress in their language skills as a result and mentors  
9 found this satisfying. As one mentor wrote on his/her evaluation questionnaire, 'I felt  
10 that I made a positive impact when I saw the improvements my mentees were making  
11 and I received their positive feedback.'

#### 25 *Exam Success*

26  
27  
28  
29 The post-scheme questionnaire asked mentees: *Do you think that participating in the*  
30 *e-mentoring scheme may help you get a better grade in your language exams?* Of the  
31 28 respondents, 3 replied 'definitely', 20 'probably' and 5 'no'. The optimism  
32 expressed here by most respondents might be attributed not only to the help mentees  
33 received relating to the TL but also to the tips regarding study skills and examination  
34 techniques.

35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43 The exchanges contain many requests for advice on how to learn vocabulary,  
44 spelling and coursework. The most common question, however, related to how to  
45 prepare for the oral exam, which as Dearing and King (2007, 12) point out has always  
46 been and still is considered a 'stressful experience'. The help that dialogues with an  
47 adult other than the teacher can provide in reassuring mentees regarding exams is  
48 indeed highlighted by one mentee who wrote to his/her mentor that it was good to  
49 hear receive advice from someone who had done the exam quite recently, and  
50 someone other than his/her teacher.  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

### *Other benefits*

Although most mentees were optimistic about how the scheme may have helped with the TL, there are several factors, however, that may explain why not all respondents shared this view. First, some mentees did not start *My UniSpace* until very late in the academic year, meaning that they had little time to benefit from the scheme before their examinations. Second, not all respondents to the pre-scheme questionnaire stated that they wanted to use the scheme to improve their communication skills in the TL. Indeed, some exchanges show that in many cases mentees are just as interested in finding out about university life and their mentor's experiences as focusing on the TL. Indeed, several comments by mentees emphasise the value of this. One mentee wrote that *My UniSpace* 'also has given me really useful information on university'; another commented 'I've found it interesting finding out about the different things my mentor has done with languages.'

### **Feedback from Mentors**

Feedback from mentors was in the form of a questionnaire which comprised mainly statements gauging levels of agreement and disagreement. This was completed by 17 mentors who participated in the scheme.

The scheme aimed at enhancing mentors' employability and giving them experience and new skills, therefore a number of questions on the questionnaire sought to evaluate how far *My UniSpace* had achieved this. In response to the statement: '*I joined the My UniSpace project because I thought it would be helpful on my cv*' 15 of the 17 respondents agreed. 16 also agreed that '*Working on My UniSpace is something I might mention in a job interview*' and that '*The mentor training I received for My UniSpace allowed me to develop new skills*'. (The same number disagreed with the control statement: '*I haven't learnt anything or acquired any new*

1  
2  
3 skills by taking part in My UniSpace'.) 15 of the 17 respondents agreed that '*Having*  
4 *participated in My UniSpace may make me more attractive to an employer.*'  
5  
6  
7

8 Mentors were also asked to respond to the open question: '*What skills (if any)*  
9 *do you think you may have acquired from participating in this project that add to*  
10 *those incorporated in your degree programme?*' Reference to communication skills  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

*my writing skills have improved in the sense that I was able to adapt the*  
*language to suit the needs of my mentee. It is important to know your*  
*audience before writing. This skill could be useful if I intend to work in the*  
*education sector in the future.*

*I have learnt how to communicate effectively by using only email and how to*  
*use my knowledge to assist others.*

*I have learnt to communicate with various age ranges and abilities.*

*I think I developed an understanding of talking and communicating with*  
*young people in a manner that would appeal to them but also maintain a*  
*professional tone.*

Archer and Davison (2008, 14) explain that employers who responded to the International Employer Barometer (IEB) study which provides insights into the needs and perceptions of graduate recruiters indicated that communication skills were amongst the top three most important skills and qualities they seek. 'Graduates therefore must find ways to demonstrate these skills on their CVs and at job

1  
2  
3 interviews'. There is no doubt that many mentors have identified the skills they have  
4 developed by participating in *My UniSpace* and will refer to them in their search for  
5 employment.  
6  
7  
8  
9

10  
11 *My UniSpace* also aimed at encouraging mentors to improve their own  
12 language skills by helping younger learners. Therefore, the questionnaire sought to  
13 gauge how far this may have occurred. 12 of the 17 respondents disagreed with the  
14 statement '*I don't think that my own language skills have benefited at all from taking*  
15 *part in My UniSpace*', whilst 11 mentors agreed that '*I sometimes (or often) used*  
16 *reference tools (dictionaries, grammars etc) when writing to my mentee(s)*'. The  
17 exchanges show that there is no doubt that most mentors would have needed to use  
18 reference tools either to write to their mentees in the TL, check their mentees' work,  
19 or provide them with answers to their queries on grammar and vocabulary. Indeed, as  
20 one mentor wrote, 'Checking for mistakes in their work helps my own awareness of  
21 my common errors.' Many language tutors frequently express dismay at the number  
22 of times they write on their undergraduate students' work that they should check it  
23 more thoroughly before handing it in. It was pleasing, therefore, that 16 of the 17  
24 mentors agreed that '*I tried hard to avoid making mistakes when writing in the target*  
25 *language to my mentee(s)*'. If *My UniSpace* is encouraging mentors to look closely at  
26 their own writing in the TL the project is clearly beneficial in terms of developing  
27 more learner autonomy.  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49

#### 50 *Lessons to be Learnt*

51  
52 Although the majority of mentors and mentees benefited from participating in *My*  
53 *UniSpace*, not all pairings were productive. This might have been expected, for as  
54 Boyle Single and Single (2005, 316) warn 'even with the best support in place, not all  
55 e-mentoring relationships will be successful.' Indeed, they explain that 'E-mentoring  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 and electronic communications have fewer reinforcement cues that encourage the  
4 maintenance of a relationship' and quote research that confirms that it is relatively  
5 easy for participants to sign up for an e-mentoring program and to fail to follow  
6 through. (306). It is worth looking, however, at why some relationships may have  
7 failed in the hope of increasing the success rate in future.

15 Beriema and Merriam (2002, 213) argue that for e-mentoring to be successful  
16 'both parties must be committed to the relationship, and expectations must be  
17 articulated'. However, an examination of some of the exchanges suggest that not all  
18 mentees had such commitment. In some cases, mentors' emails simply received no  
19 reply from the mentees, even though the mentor appeared helpful, approachable and  
20 unthreatening. *My UniSpace* included mentees in Year 10. Some were in 'express'  
21 sets and taking their GCSE at the end of the year, whilst others were taking GCSE at  
22 the end of the following year. There were some very successful relationships in the  
23 former group but a number of 'failed' ones in the latter group. As one mentor wrote

34  
35  
36 *I do not feel that my mentees benefited fully from my experience or knowledge*  
37 *of either university or the language as they were not fully engaged in the*  
38 *project and took a lot of encouragement to send back the one or two replies*  
39 *that I received.*

44  
45 Perhaps this might be explained by the fact that Year 10 mentees for whom the GCSE  
46 examination was not imminent felt less need for a mentor, as they were neither  
47 preoccupied by exams, nor had pressing questions about future studies because AS  
48 level and university still seemed in the distant future. Another mentor commented:

53  
54  
55 *Although I tried to encourage the mentees, they weren't motivated to respond,*  
56 *and their language skills were just too poor for me to be any use to them by*  
57 *email.*

1  
2  
3 Again, this comment seems to relate to Year 10 students in their first year of  
4 preparation for GCSE. Although our experience is limited, it suggests that to increase  
5 the percentage of successful pairings it would be advisable in future to offer the  
6 scheme only to those pupils who would be sitting an examination in their year of  
7 mentoring. Teachers also need to be encouraged to be more selective in choosing  
8 pupils for the scheme, for as O'Neill and Harris (2000) argue 'Relying almost  
9 exclusively on trial-and-error learning may result in a large number of "failed"  
10 relationships, which may lead in turn to significant frustration among students, and  
11 significant attrition of volunteers'. There is no doubt from comments on their  
12 questionnaires that some mentors felt disappointed when despite their best efforts  
13 their mentees failed to engage with them.  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

29 Although some relationships failed to take off or develop due to a lack of  
30 engagement on the part of the mentee, some exchanges suggest conversely that the  
31 mentor's approach may have not been conducive to establishing a successful e-  
32 mentoring relationship. Bierema and Merriam (2002, 214) argue that 'successful  
33 mentoring involves frequent and regular interaction' and Bierema and Hill (2005, 558)  
34 suggest that to be successful 'mentoring needs priority treatment in spite of time  
35 constraints'. In a few cases a mentor did not give e-mentoring such treatment and  
36 enthusiastic messages from the mentee were left without a response for a lengthy  
37 period of time. This may have diminished the mentee's enthusiasm for the scheme. It  
38 cannot be emphasised enough in training how important it is for mentors to reply  
39 promptly to messages, even if it is only to tell the mentee that they will send a fuller  
40 response a few days later if they are busy.  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57

58 There were also cases where relationships may have failed to develop because  
59 the mentor had not understood that the scheme had three aims and had focussed on  
60



1  
2  
3 only. For example, the introductory messages sent by one or two mentors suggested  
4 that they thought that their role was simply to interact with their mentee in the TL.  
5  
6 Their immediate emphasis on this may have ‘scared off’ mentees who had signed up  
7  
8 to the scheme because they wished to be given help with grammar, study skills or  
9  
10 coursework in English, or were interested in finding out more about student life.  
11  
12 Conversely, another mentor suggested to their mentee that their role was to talk about  
13  
14 university. This may have disengaged the mentee who was hoping to use the scheme  
15  
16 to practice the TL. Although the aims and objectives of *My UniSpace* are articulated  
17  
18 to the mentors and mentees in their training, the flexibility of the scheme needs to be  
19  
20 made even more explicit to both parties.  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

26  
27 O’Neill and Harris (2000) distinguish between tutoring and mentoring by  
28  
29 saying that for the former the tutor assigns a task which the tutee carries out under  
30  
31 their supervision, whilst for the latter ‘*the student brings the problems to the table. [...]*  
32  
33 The mentor offers advice, guidance and support; but it is up to the student (or students)  
34  
35 to take it and carry it out’ [italics in the original]. Although many mentors do find  
36  
37 themselves performing the role of online tutors when their mentees seem to require  
38  
39 this type of support, some relationships may not have taken off because the mentor  
40  
41 tried to assume this role without the mentee having suggested that this would be  
42  
43 helpful. One mentor, for example, sent the mentee an introductory message with the  
44  
45 request that the mentee should send back a paragraph in the TL on a particular subject.  
46  
47 Although this approach may have worked with some mentees, perhaps this particular  
48  
49 one failed to reply because s/he perceived that the relationship would simply result in  
50  
51 extra homework or was unable to undertake the required task. Training of both mentor  
52  
53 and mentees needs to stress heavily the recommendation by Beriema and Hill (2005,  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 564) that ‘the mentor and protégé should discuss roles and expectations for the  
4  
5  
6 relationship’. Indeed, this needs to take place at the outset.  
7

8 Likewise, a few relationships may have come to a halt as the mentors may  
9  
10 have overestimated their mentee’s command of the TL and written parts of their  
11  
12 introductory messages in language that the mentee would struggle to understand. The  
13  
14 lesson to be learnt is that initially mentors should only write a few very simple  
15  
16 sentences in the TL in order to gauge the level of competence of their mentee. Again  
17  
18 this needs to be stressed in training and might benefit from being backed up by  
19  
20 showing mentors some concrete examples of strategies that led to sustained  
21  
22 relationships.  
23  
24  
25

## 26 27 **Conclusion**

28  
29 Although a small number of the e-mentoring relationships set up for *My UniSpace*  
30  
31 failed, they should not overshadow the vast majority which were highly successful.  
32  
33 Furthermore, lessons learnt from evaluating the project will undoubtedly lead to an  
34  
35 even higher success rate in the future. E-mentoring clearly has an important role to  
36  
37 play in motivating and helping pupils with their language learning, whilst allowing  
38  
39 their university mentors to develop skills and experience that will help them in their  
40  
41 personal and professional lives. Hopefully the success of *My UniSpace* will encourage  
42  
43 other university language departments to set up similar virtual bridges between their  
44  
45 students and their local schools, as to quote the National Centre for Languages (CILT,  
46  
47 2009, 12) that gave *My UniSpace* a European Award for Languages, ‘In this project,  
48  
49 everyone’s a winner’.  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## **References**

1  
2  
3 Archer, W., and J. Davison. 2008. *Graduate Employability: What do employers think*  
4 *and want?*, (CIHE).

5  
6  
7  
8 Bawden, A. 2007. Chattering Classes, *The Guardian*, 13 March 2007.

9  
10 [www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/mar/13/highereducation.cutsandclosures](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/mar/13/highereducation.cutsandclosures)

11  
12  
13 Bierema, L.L., and J. R. Hill. 2005. Virtual mentoring and HRD, *Advances in*  
14 *Developing Human Resources* 7, no.4: 556–568.

15  
16  
17 Bierema, L. L., and S. B. Merriam. 2002. E-mentoring: Using Computer Mediated  
18 Communication to Enhance the Mentoring Process', *Innovative Higher Education* 26,  
19 no.3: 211–227.

20  
21  
22  
23  
24 Boyle Single, P., and C. B.Muller. 2001. When Email and Mentoring Unite: The  
25 Implementation of a Nationwide Electronic Mentoring Program. In: *Creating*  
26 *Mentoring and Coaching Programs*, ed. L. K. Stromei, 107–22. Alexandria, VA:  
27 American Society for Training and Development *In Action Series*.

28  
29  
30  
31  
32 Boyle Single, P., R. Single. 2005. E-mentoring for social equity: review of  
33 research to inform program development, *Mentoring and Tutoring* 13, no.2: 301–320.

34  
35  
36 Carr, J., and A. Pauwels. 2006. *Boys and Foreign Language Learning: Real Boys*  
37 *Don't Do Languages*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

38  
39  
40  
41  
42 Cook, V. 1999. Going Beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching, *Tesol*  
43 *Quarterly* 33, no. 2: 185–209.

44  
45  
46  
47  
48 Coleman, J., A. Galaczi, and L. Astruc. 2007. Motivation of UK school pupils  
49 towards foreign languages: a large-scale survey at Key Stage 3, *Language Learning*  
50 *Journal* 35, no.2: 245–281.

51  
52  
53  
54  
55 Dearing, R. and L. King. 2007. *Languages Review*, London: Department for  
56 Education and Skills. [www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications).

- 1  
2  
3 DfES . 2002. *Languages for All, Languages for Life. A Strategy for England*, London:  
4 Department for Education and Skills. [www.dfes.gov.uk/languagesstrategy](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languagesstrategy)  
5  
6  
7  
8 Dörnyei , Z. 2001. *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*, Cambridge,  
9 UK: Cambridge University Press.  
10  
11  
12 Footitt, H. 2005. *The National Languages Strategy in Higher Education*, London:  
13 DfES. [www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/rr625.pdf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/rr625.pdf)  
14  
15  
16  
17 Graham, S. J. 1997. *Effective language learning. Positive strategies for advanced*  
18 *level language learning*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.  
19  
20  
21  
22 Graham, S. J. 2004. Giving up on Modern Foreign Languages? Students' Perceptions  
23 of Learning French, *The Modern Language Journal* 88, no. 2: 171–191.  
24  
25  
26  
27 Murphey, T. 1998. Motivating with near peer role models. In *On JALT97: Trends and*  
28 *Transitions*, ed. B. Visgatis, 201–205. Tokyo: JALT.  
29  
30  
31  
32 O'Neill, D. Kevin, and J. Harris. 2000. 'Is everybody happy? Bridging the  
33 perspectives and developmental needs of participants in telementoring programs'  
34 Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research  
35 Association New Orleans, Louisiana, April 24-28.  
36  
37  
38  
39 [http://emissary.wm.edu/templates/content/publications/DKO-JBH\\_AERA2000.pdf](http://emissary.wm.edu/templates/content/publications/DKO-JBH_AERA2000.pdf)  
40  
41  
42  
43 Page, D, and D. Hanna. 2008. Peer-mentoring: The Students' Perspective, *Psychology*  
44 *Learning and Teaching* 7, no.2: 34–37.  
45  
46  
47  
48 Sproull, L., and S. Kiesler. 1991. *Connections: New Ways of Working in the*  
49 *Networked Organization*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.  
50  
51  
52  
53 Worton, M. 2009. *Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher*  
54 *education in England*, (HEFCE). [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09\\_41/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_41/)  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60