ISMLA Sponsorship and the Power of Student Voices in Language Learning

Can learning a language shape the future? That question lay at the heart of two ISMLA-sponsored events during North London Collegiate School's recent Modern Languages Week. The week opened with a reflection on Goethe's image of *das graugestrickte Netz*—"the grey-knitted net"—his metaphor for being trapped in the fleeting and superficial. It set the tone for a programme that did the very opposite: celebrating the enduring human power of language to connect, challenge and create. Throughout the week, students stepped beyond the "net" of instant, fleeting images to rediscover the slower, deeper work of speaking, performing and thinking in another language — a living answer to why language learning matters more than ever.

A highlight was the Modern Languages Student Conference, hosted by the NLCS's senior languages society and attended by students from state and independent schools across London. The evening brought together young linguists from Years 10-13 under the theme *"Human Voices in a Brave New World."* Old North Londoner Isabelle Lever opened the event with a compelling talk on why studying languages at A-level and university remains vital. Hearing this from a young person at the start of her career really resonated with the students – she spoke their language, as it were. Students formed smaller working groups to dive into creative challenges against ChatGPT, and proceeded to compete against each other in an MFL poetry slam competition, each showcasing how words forge real human connection.

The week also featured the XIII Hispanic Theatre Festival, where Year 12 students from twelve schools took to the stage in a stunning display of linguistic skill and dramatic energy. The performances demonstrated not just linguistic proficiency but a shared joy in cultural encounter — a reminder that language learning flourishes when students work together across schools and communities.

ISMLA's sponsorship of initiatives like these exemplifies our wider mission: to enliven the national conversation around language learning, to forge partnerships across schools, and to provide creative opportunities for students to express themselves and shape their own futures. By supporting inter-school conferences, theatre festivals, debating competitions and collaborative projects, ISMLA helps ensure that language learning remains not only intellectually rigorous but culturally alive.

Just recently, we were delighted to receive a letter of thanks from Dr. Charlotte Ryland for our continued sponsorship of the Anthea Bell Translation Competition. It enables the Queens College Translation Exchange to deliver workshops and outreach, and last year over 22 000 students participated nationwide. ISMLA remains committed to fostering such initiatives. The association believes that by empowering students to speak, perform and debate in other languages, we can transform the national narrative around language learning — from a story of decline to one of creativity and renewal.

We are keen to hear feedback from these initiatives in order to share good practice and promote awareness of these activities.

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