



Coming Out of the Linguistic Shell

Lauren Houldridge, Leader of ALL York Network, set up a Linguistics co-curricular club in her school where pupils try practice challenges before attempting the United Kingdom Linguistics Olympiad (UKLO).

The problems often begin as opaque and intimidating: a language the students have never seen, a script they can't decode, a structure that defies their expectations. At first everything feels impenetrable, like any new academic challenge. But then something shifts. A pattern emerges. A hypothesis forms. Confidence grows. The puzzle opens up and so does the student. For me, that moment, when the shell cracks, is what the UKLO is all about.

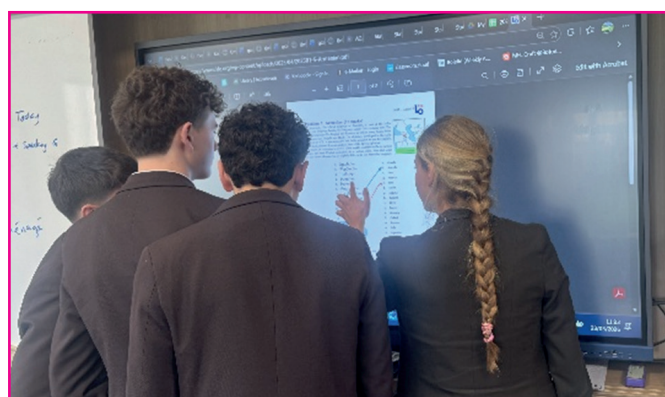
One of the unexpected joys of running this club in my school has been discovering who is drawn to it. It's rarely the loudly confident students who thrive on quick-fire classroom exchanges. Instead, the room fills with thoughtful observers, the students who like to mull things over. The lunchtime format suits them beautifully: no timer, no pressure, just a group of curious like-minded people poring over ideas together. Linguistics puzzles reward patience and deep thinking, and I've watched many quieter students slowly unfurl as they realise they can excel here. They gently come out of their shells in a way that feels safe and natural.

The club is also a fascinating melting pot of students from different academic corners. The most pleasing surprise to me was that budding linguists sit alongside mathematicians and physicists, all equally engrossed in data from an unfamiliar language. Part of the magic is the languages themselves: systems that use symbols or runes, delightfully flexible word orders, or grammatical structures so surprising that students laugh in disbelief before rolling up their sleeves and figuring them out. Many of the so called 'non linguists' are surprised to find they absolutely love it because, at its heart, linguistic problem solving is pattern spotting, logic and inference, all skills they already use every day. It breaks down those imagined boundaries between subjects and encourages students to step out of their comfortable academic identities. It's wonderful watching a student who arrived *just to try it* suddenly realise: *Oh... I can do this*. Nothing is better than seeing a group of pupils who are normally collecting maths and science accolades in assembly collect their certificates in the UK Linguistics Olympiad.

When I first set up the club, with a handful of KS3 students, I kept it intentionally light: quick puzzles, word games, challenges you can try even if you've never heard words like *morphology*, *diacritics* or *nominaliser* before. There's something liberating about starting from zero and realising you can deduce an entire grammatical system simply by thought and observing the data already in front of you.

Very quickly it became more than a weekly session. It developed its own culture where it is perfectly acceptable to be fascinated by obscure languages or tricky linguistic data sets. Students share ideas freely and puzzle things out collaboratively. Getting things wrong is all part of the process, and mistakes are often where the best discussions begin. That safety net allows students, especially the more reserved ones, to experiment with ideas and gain the confidence to voice them. It's a little community that normalises curiosity and celebrates the joy of intellectual play.

Setting it up was far simpler than I expected, starting with a few introductory puzzles, all provided by UKLO. As word spread that these linguistic challenges were fun, different and strangely addictive, I began slipping small problem-solving activities into lessons with lower years and sharing puzzles for use during tutor time. More students became curious. By the time the UKLO registration opened, I had a lovely mix of linguists, mathematicians and the occasional scientist ready to give it a go.



Name:

2023-Round 1 

Problem 4. Swedish Runes (10 marks)

The Vikings spoke Old Norse, and wrote it using runes. There are several different versions of the Nordic runes; this problem uses the so-called Younger Futhark, which consists of 16 different runes. Unfortunately, the Old Norse had more sounds than that, which means that many of the runes were used for several different (although similar) sounds.

The Vikings are best known for their travels, and many rune inscriptions tell of their adventurous journeys to different places. The words (a)-(e) below are Old Norse place names taken from runestones in Sweden, and (i)-(v) are their modern English names in a random order.

Note that the names may not be exactly the same in Old Norse as in modern English – for example, the Vikings called Greece *Grikland*.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| ☐ a) ᚢᚱᚱᚰᚱ | i) England |
| ☐ b) ᚢᚱᚱᚰᚱᚰᚱ | ii) Greece |
| ☐ c) ᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱ | iii) London |
| ☐ d) ᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱ | iv) Uppsala |
| ☐ e) ᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱ | v) Saxony |

Each year, new students join - some quietly, some with great enthusiasm - but they leave with a broader sense of what language is and what they are capable of. We've even had pupils go on to study linguistics at university, which feels like the most wonderful testament to what the Olympiad can spark.

I wholeheartedly recommend signing up with UKLO: their communication is brilliant, everything you need is clearly laid out, and it is so easy to download papers (and upload them during test week) on their website: www.uklo.org

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