



Response from the Association for Language Learning to the DfE consultation on subject content for languages with smaller cohorts at A and AS Level

(January 2017)

6. This content is largely identical to the main content for modern foreign languages, published in 2015 (French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Italian and Russian). There are, however, some differences, as described in the consultation document (proposal and rationale). The key difference is that, for language with smaller cohorts, students will be required to apply three skills (listening, reading, and writing) in combination, responding to spoken and written sources addressing common subject matter taken from suitably rigorous sources (paragraph 10 of the draft subject content document). Students will not be required to demonstrate speaking skills, although this is required in the main content requirements for modern foreign languages. Is the requirement to apply three skills in combination suitable, and will that requirement help to secure a level of demand in the content overall which is comparable to that required for French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Italian and Russian? Do you have any comments on the other differences described in the proposal and rationale above?

One of the objects of the Association for Language Learning is to promote the learning of natural languages, and our philosophy is to place equal value on all languages, and on the value of language learning to the widest public.

The Association welcomes the inclusion of languages with smaller cohorts in the provision of public examinations at this level; this will contribute to the diversity of language skills our citizens can develop in their formal education.

While we appreciate the pragmatic issues (described on P7 *Proposal and rationale* of the Consultation) concerning recruitment of examiners etc. the proposal to limit the examination to three skills (listening, reading and writing) does raise a concern among members that these languages included maybe perceived as being somehow not valued in the same way as the list of modern foreign languages, published in 2015 (French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Italian and Russian). Speaking is a major language skill and its omission from the specification may be seen to weaken its importance in the eyes of language learners. Communication (including spoken communication) is one of the cornerstones of language learning.

Our concerns are around:

- Impact on motivation of students opting into sixth form study
- Impact on motivation of younger learners
- Impact on practice in the classroom

Speaking forms a major element of language learning in early stages – e.g. within the National Curriculum requirements, throughout Key Stages 2 and 3, and in the GCSE qualifications; the notion that it not be included in the AS and A-Level specifications may be a demotivating factor for students who have excelled in their oral work in earlier stages and now see that opportunity being removed.

Indeed for some of the languages in the smaller cohorts list, which have different writing systems, the oral route may well have been extremely significant in the initial development of literacy in the language; its removal at this point might again be disadvantageous to some students.

- The Association recommends that public statements be prepared which clarify the status placed on all of these languages by DfE and the importance of speaking as an area of study and a major element of learning. The Consultation includes wording which could be worked up into such a statement: *The requirement to develop language knowledge, understanding and skills through language skills and strategies, including comprehension and communication strategies - which is in the main content for modern foreign languages (2015) - remains part of the course of studies but will not be assessed. (p 7)*

There might also be a negative impact in terms of the attitude of younger learners (those in key stage 3 particularly) who hear about the AS / A-Level examination from older siblings and are given the erroneous message that actually speaking the language is not important; this negative impact could be both on earlier language learning and potentially on cultural / citizenship attitudes.

Motivation is a critical factor in language learning and speaking is a key difference that language lessons/exams have from other subjects; consequently there is a concern that a major focus on writing in the examination may demotivate learners who value that difference.

Likewise there is a risk that teachers preparing students for the proposed examinations may restrict their use of the target language in their teaching simply because it is not to be tested in the examination; oral work at all stages is of course very important for language learning in its own right: e.g. for the development of vocabulary, idiom, listening skills and for grammatical manipulation, and any loss of time given to spoken language could therefore negatively influence the learners' progress and achievements.

The Association recommends that an overview be kept on the potential of new and online technologies to support assessment of speaking from remote points; there may be advice available through, for instance the Chartered Institute of Linguists.

Language learning is a continuum and the Association for Language Learning takes an oversight of provision throughout the school years and into Higher and Further Education and employment, with a special regard to language teacher supply. Some of the questions that members have in this regard are to do with

- the equivalence of the proposed qualifications in smaller cohort languages with those in the MFL list when seen by Higher Education providers
- the impact on future teacher supply, and especially on the oral proficiency of future teachers of these languages
- the impact on future interpreter supply

The consultation states that ‘The main purpose of A Levels is to prepare students for higher education’.

The Association recommends that some public statement from HEIs on how this proposed qualification meets their needs and fits with the programmes of study they will pursue with successful students.

7. The proposed title of the content for this qualification, Modern Foreign Language AS and A Level (alternative content for languages with smaller cohorts), has been drafted to make a clear distinction between students who have completed qualifications based on this content and students who have completed qualifications based on the main content for modern foreign languages (which includes the assessment of speaking skills). Do you have any comments on the proposed title?

One of the objects of the Association for Language Learning is to promote the learning of natural languages, and our philosophy is to place equal value on all languages, and on the value of language learning to the widest public.

The languages in the smaller cohort list continue to be major world languages of value in their own right, and any indication that the naming of this qualification is creating a differential status between languages would be perceived negatively by our members.

The word ‘alternative’ could at first glance be said to be not really accurate, as the challenges proposed to balance the absence of the speaking element are not transparently connected with linguistic skill; these challenges would benefit from being made more visible and being described in terms that would motivate potential students.

8. Do you think that any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionate impact, positive or negative, on specific students, in particular those with 'relevant protected characteristics' (disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief,

sex and sexual orientation)? Please explain, and provide any evidence you may have, to support your response.

The omission of a speaking element might have a negative impact on students who have motor difficulties or cognitive difficulties with their writing skills and who count on their speaking to balance out inaccuracies these may cause in e.g. their spelling, character-forming or other written accuracy.

9. How could any adverse impact be reduced and how could the subject content be altered to better advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share it? Please explain, and provide any evidence you may have, to support your response.

The challenges raised by focus on writing in the proposed examinations could be obviated for some students with specific difficulties by the provision of amanuensis support, although this clearly has a cost and would require specific quality control by the examining bodies.