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My first memory to do with language learning was my parents explaining to me that although they had learned grammar thoroughly, they had never been taught to speak or say anything useful. They assured me that my modern experience would be much better. In fact I think it was my shock and embarrassment witnessing my parents using Latin to talk to a French car mechanic or their pronunciation of "queso" in Spanish as kweezo, that made me determined to do better. And for a while, speaking was central to language teaching in schools. The appropriate curriculum for Languages for All seemed to be functional, transactional and spoken.

Over the last 20 years the balance towards grammar, writing and translation has swung back. At first, this further developed speaking through the development of a coherent systematisation of the language.

But then disaster struck. Speaking, and in particular the speaking exam, was identified by the Dearing Review as intimidating. The controlled assessment in GCSE was intended to alleviate this, but resulted in speaking being relegated to recitation of pre-learned model answers involving off-putting amounts of often meaningless rote-learning. Interaction in the classroom suffered, pupils' ability to ask and respond to questions became irrelevant, and the focus switched to memorisation.

The new GCSE isn't perfect, but it deliberately tried to redress the balance towards spontaneous speaking. The marking criteria, the need to ask and respond to questions, the move away from a single prepared topic, all give greater scope for teachers to develop pupils' ability to speak fluently. The changes are not yet embedded, with many pupils still attempting to use pre-learned answers. To successfully teach pupils to improvise extended answers in response to questioning which interacts with what they are saying, teachers need to start in KS3 or earlier. Teachers are now more and more building pupils' spoken responses around a coherent grammatical core which they can deploy to express themselves.