

## **Comments on the proposed new subject content for MFL GCSE**

**Greg Horton**

### **Aspects I particularly welcome**

- An attempt to move away from a topic-based approach to a more transferable use of language.
- Questions in English, including the role-play element of speaking.
- No specific reference to the ability to recognise and use different tenses. This has led to very contrived tasks and performances in the current GCSE.
- No specific reference to giving and justifying opinions, which has historically provoked too many formulaic responses.

### **Comments on current aspects of the proposed subject content and some key omissions.**

#### **1) Using a streamlined vocabulary list of high frequency words**

I am fully supportive of the panel's intent to make the burden of teaching and learning in MFL more manageable. Without doubt, too many students down the years have compared MFL unfavourably against other subjects on account of the higher level of demand. One massive concern has always been the assimilation of so much knowledge.

Having read some expert analysis of how problematic the notion of high frequency is, and the number of seemingly commonplace lexical items that would actually be excluded, I think some rethinking is needed here.

#### **Suggested action:**

Create a vocabulary list for each tier which is rooted in high frequency words but is also relevant to the teenager learning context of candidates.

In addition to this list, there must also be an allowance, particularly at Higher tier, for some non-glossed vocabulary, the meaning of which can be inferred through linguistic strategies. This is essential for encouraging good language learning habits. It also assists exam question writers in creating tasks that are wide enough in scope and ensure a range of marks.

## **2) The continuation of the 'MFL selfie'**

One major weakness of successive GCSE specifications has been an allowance for candidates to tackle much of the thematic content through the first person.

The current GCSE at least demands some variety of pronouns and perspectives; however, the first person still dominates to an unnatural degree.

The proposed subject content does not address this issue at all.

### **Suggested action:**

Stipulate that candidates must show a clear ability to operate outside the first person in the productive skill areas.

## **3) Speaking v Writing – a basic need for demarcation**

Speaking and writing are two distinct skills; however, repeated GCSE specifications have used similar mark schemes to assess both in terms of content and range of language. This has been the direct cause of too much pre-learnt material and contrived expression in the speaking test.

### **Suggested action:**

Address speaking and writing separately within the subject content. The written component should test the ability to develop language in a more formal and structured way. The assessment of spoken language should primarily recognise an ability to communicate clearly through authentic interaction, without the need for complexity.

## **4) Developing authentic interaction in speaking**

The current subject content at all key stages refers to the development of students' ability to communicate spontaneously. This also appeared in the current GCSE speaking test for the first time. Whilst it is true that pre-learnt performances have persisted in the general conversation element, there have also been performances of a more spontaneous nature.

Any new subject content should be looking to build further on this and to signpost a speaking test based around authentic interaction and spontaneity. This is where a form of exam assessment can really impact on classroom practice and high quality learning.

**Suggested action:**

It is not enough to allude to authentic speaking within the general warm-worded aims of the subject content; spontaneity must be specifically referenced within speaking requirements.

The need for an authentic two-way dialogue (conversation) must be included. This is necessary for the candidate to effectively demonstrate some key elements of spontaneous interaction. As mentioned before, if the assessment criteria are appropriate, then this task will not encourage rote learning of responses.

**5) Developing the skill of questioning**

Questioning is a key competence for any language learner. It is referenced in the current subject content for KS2-4 and consequently features, although minimally, in current GCSE specifications.

It is a very retrograde step not to stipulate and increase the importance of questioning in the proposed subject content.

**Suggested action:**

It is not enough to allude to interrogative forms within the grammar section; the ability to formulate questions must be specifically referenced within speaking requirements.

As with spontaneity, there is a need for an authentic two-way dialogue so that questioning can be properly evidenced.

**6) The 'reading aloud' speaking task**

It is highly questionable why GCSE candidates, most of them at least five years into a language learning course, should be discretely tested on phonic awareness and pronunciation in this artificial way. Given that all the words to be read will come from the published high frequency list, it is also unlikely that

candidates will be applying phonic awareness, but rather just repeating familiar words.

Furthermore, this type of task fails to assess intonation in the same way as a natural dialogue.

**Suggested action:**

Room for a dialogue/conversation should be achieved by scrapping the proposal for a 'reading aloud' task.

**7) The listening test**

The listening component of the MFL exam has long been the cause of stress for candidates. One main reason is the sustained audio nature of the experience, which is alien to the more visual way young people tend to access media.

**Suggested action:**

Stipulate that the listening test can take the form of either an audio test or an audio-visual test. This would allow awarding bodies to consider a new way of approaching an outdated form of assessment.

A test in the form of video clips would be a much more stimulating experience for candidates, and reflective of the kind of tasks that teachers often use in lessons.

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