



...CONTENT

ALL encourages members to respond individually to this Consultation, which may have a short turnaround.

In November 2019 the government launched a review of subject content for GCSE Modern Foreign Languages. The process of this review was interrupted by the pandemic, but at the time of writing we anticipate that the review consultation is imminent, and may already be live when you read this.

What content are we talking about? In key stages (KS) 2 and 3 in maintained schools, the only prescription about content is in the National Curriculum (NC) Programme of Study (PoS) which is highly flexible. Schools can select content (themes, for instance) which suits their community best.

After Year 9 a Language is no longer a statutory NC subject and schemes of work tend to focus on the content of their selected GCSE specification; some schools indeed start to do this in KS3. It is the content of this specification that is under review. Here LT presents contributions from partners:

What are your views? What content is appropriate for teaching, and for assessment of your learners?



NALA carried out a survey among language teachers:
The languages curriculum and disadvantaged students from which LT extracts some findings:

The majority of language teaching professionals who responded, feel that the current GCSE content disadvantages:

- socio-economically deprived students
- students with less typical family life, e.g. children in care
- those who are less able
- those with special educational needs

The majority of respondents feel that this disadvantage impacts on pupil motivation, engagement, and performance.

A number of teachers explained that the background of the students often meant (they) had little personal experience on which to base answers to examination questions ... the personal nature of tasks could be distressing ... (and) questions often mistakenly assume that students have 'cultural capital'

'I always need to give the children ideas of what they can say.'

'I ALWAYS find myself telling them that they need to show off their Spanish not tell the truth, which curbs the opportunity for spontaneity.'

Over 95% of respondents said that ... students find it difficult to make up answers when they have no experience or understanding of a context... and felt that they had to cover these contexts, as well as their languages curriculum, thus eating into valuable teaching time.

Teachers commented on the cognitive load of having to imagine something and remember what has been imagined, as well as find the correct language.

'They ... have to remember what they have said ... and then remember the story that they have created.'

Respondents identified some topics as more problematic than others. Family and friends, house and home, holidays, leisure activities, charity and volunteering, lifestyle, social issues and work were rated the most challenging for disadvantaged or vulnerable students.



Colleagues at UCML comment:

The aims expressed in the GCSE specifications, along with learning outcomes such as beginning to acquire 'knowledge about how language works', acquiring 'new knowledge, skills and ways of thinking', developing 'language learning skills' and 'strategies' and becoming autonomous learners, are likely to be applauded by university teachers since they provide a sound foundation for further study at A-Level and beyond.

In terms of progression and motivation, we need to overcome issues of severe grading in MFL and to counter the negative perceptions of its lack of relevance to our young people.

Secondary students should ideally see language learning as something which has personal benefits and can be an enjoyable part of their lives, and not something that they think will never be achievable. Perhaps now is the time to lose the term 'native speaker' in reference to expected language competence at GCSE. This will not lower standards just highlight the point that successful communication depends on mutual understanding.



hosts a recently completed report: *'MFL curriculum, pedagogy and assessment reform at GCSE: an investigation of teachers' views'*

This review invited correspondents from the State and Independent sectors to share their views on (a) the MFL curriculum and (b) the GCSE examination. The whole of this short report is a fascinating read. Here LT selects some of their findings to inform the current debate.

Curriculum content - Teachers were asked to choose their top five from 13 statements of what they would like their students to achieve by the end of KS4 'in an ideal world', then rank these. This shortened ranking shows the top and the bottom five:

I want my students to...

- be able to understand and appreciate other cultures
- be open to and curious about the wider world
- be able to carry out simple transactions in the target language
- be able to have a simple conversation in the target language
- be able to have a conversation about things that interest them
- have a firm grounding in the grammar of the language
- be able to use the language accurately
- be able to read for pleasure in the target language
- be able to understand TV programmes and videos in the target language
- be able to listen to and understand music/songs in the target language

Exam content - A dominant theme is the importance attached to developing students' knowledge of other cultures and a positive, tolerant attitude towards these. This emerges ... as something which they feel should be assessed at GCSE. ICU has not been assessed in examinations to date, and it is perhaps hard to see practical ways of doing so; nonetheless, it is important, in our view, to be aware of the high value which teachers place on this aspect of MFL learning.

Correspondents saw 9 statements describing potential content and were asked to rank them. This shortened and simplified ranking shows the top and the bottom three:

The exam should...

- assess how well the student can use the language to communicate information related to their own life
- include tasks that assess the range of vocabulary learners can use and understand
- assess students' understanding of the cultures of the countries where the target language is spoken
- include exercises that test specific vocabulary knowledge
- include formal grammar exercises
- assess the same kind of things that it assesses now

Other points LT notes include the importance language teachers attach to inspiring students to love languages, and the development of

- the four language skills, with speaking being a particular priority
- understanding of how language works
- students' confidence.



The Independent Schools Modern Languages Association offers these views:

Content matters. It matters because language is always used to communicate about something. A language is emphatically not just a serendipitous, meaningless product at the confluence of grammar, vocabulary and phonics. A language is the image of what and how we think. It is the lens through which we understand and articulate the world.

For too long, GCSE content has been unfair and underwhelming. The bland trinity of hobbies, home life and holidays has under-impressed learners for three decades, with catastrophic consequences. Not only does this neutral, banal content mask the amazingly rich experience of discovery and cultural de-centring that language learning can and should involve, it is also incredibly alienating for learners from less affluent and more deprived backgrounds. Moreover, a focus on plausible, practical uses of the target language makes it very easy for those secondary learners who can't feasibly imagine needing to use their German, Spanish or French in their travel or professional plans to reject language-learning entirely.

Instead, it is through content that we can excite and enthral our learners – just as is the case in every other humanities and liberal arts subject. Content is the means we connect learners to target language communities and their identities. Content drives interest and motivation. This is at the heart of language learning motivational research. Not only that, but what we are learning to understand, say and write is critical to how we understand the purpose of language learning in the first place: through content, we show young people what the value of language learning is. Rather than telling them how great it is, we give them visceral, undeniable experience of it.

The full ORA report is here :

<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:1f797d25-98b4-4b89-863a-779b2348ae20>

The NALA report link is in the President's Blog.

Longer versions of this article and of the contribution from UCML is also in the LT Extra area of the website.

<https://www.all-languages.org.uk/research-practice/languages-today/>