

The DfE/Ofqual consultation on revised GCSE qualifications in Modern Foreign Languages – a view from linguistics

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# Opinion articles

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## The DfE/Ofqual consultation on revised GCSE qualifications in Modern Foreign Languages – a view from linguistics

by Michelle Sheehan, Alice Corr, Anna Havinga, Jonathan Kasstan, Norma Schifano and Sascha Stollhans

*In this article, colleagues from the [Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages Project](#) consider the proposed changes to the GCSE MFL qualifications in England from the perspective of linguistics. They identify several areas where engagement with key aspects of knowledge from the field of linguistics may be useful in taking forward current proposals and in avoiding unintended consequences.*

Like many language enthusiasts in the UK, we were very pleased to hear that there would be a review of the content of GCSE qualifications in French, German and Spanish. It is well-known that, due to multiple contributing factors, there has been a long-term decline in uptake of these qualifications, with negative knock-on effects for A-level and degree-level qualifications (the social and economic implications of which are also much discussed). We agree that updating the GCSE, and making the qualification as appealing as possible to students, is key to tackling this decline. The specific proposals of the review are in many ways very clear, as is the rationale for them, but in this brief statement we would like to raise some concerns about the proposed changes from the disciplinary perspective of linguistics.

### *1. Pre-defined vocabulary lists*

Arguably the biggest proposed change is the move to specific vocabulary lists for the three languages, which are to be drawn mainly from the 2,000 most frequently used words in the target language. Rather than outlining topics around which GCSE teaching will be based, the

idea, as presented in the proposal, is that the topics for the new GCSE will emerge from these vocabulary lists.

It is easy to see where this desire to be maximally transparent comes from, but it is nonetheless potentially very narrowing. First, it is not clear how frequency will be determined. High frequency words can differ substantially across the societies and cultures in which the target languages are spoken: from context to context, place to place, and even person to person. Words which are frequent in a newspaper or in other written media are not necessarily frequent in everyday conversations and vice versa. A great deal of care will need to be taken when deciding on word lists given that they will effectively determine the subject matter of GCSE classes. In particular, the most frequently used words in a language are skewed towards grammatical items (*with, they, this*) rather than lexical items (*garden, dishwasher, juice*), even everyday ones: much as one cannot use (lexical) vocabulary without grammar, one cannot use grammar without vocabulary.

A further issue is that the most frequent vocabulary in a given language can be subject to internal change and external influence. In January 2020, the words *pandemic, lockdown, coronavirus* and *Zoom* were not part of our everyday vocabulary (they would not have constituted high frequency items in any corpus of English). Now they are. How dynamic will the vocabulary lists be? Will they be able to track changes in frequency of this kind? If so, how will textbook creators, publishers, and teachers keep up? Moreover, it's clear that if frequency is based on use in written, rather than spoken, language, then the word lists may unintentionally lead to less authentic language use in the classroom (given, for example, the well-attested differences in the vocabulary used (or needed for) formal and informal speech or writing. In any case, these issues will require careful consideration if the proposal is adopted.

## 2. Which French/German/Spanish?

An apparent assumption behind the new proposal is that French, Spanish and German are stable and invariant objects. This is fundamentally false and altering the GCSE to preserve this myth does a great disservice to the discipline of languages and to growing efforts to diversify the curriculum. There are more French speakers in Africa than in France, more Spanish speakers in South America than in Spain. To what extent will these language varieties be accorded equal representation when vocabulary lists are compiled? It strikes us that “the most widely used standard forms of the language” will only further marginalise uses outside of Europe if “standard” here is a proxy for European nation-state standards. There are, after all, recognised international standards, too.

This problem can be felt even more acutely when it comes to pronunciation. Another proposed change is the central role of phonics in the new GCSE. Students' understanding of phonics will be assessed through reading passages aloud in the speaking exam. We agree that teaching language-specific spelling-pronunciation correspondences is useful. However, here again, there is great potential for unintended consequences if the many different pronunciations of a language are not taken into account. Pronunciation, including the

accepted standard pronunciations, differs greatly both across and within countries. Looking at the list of sound-spelling correspondences that students of French need to learn, for example, it can be immediately observed that many of them (r, silent final e, nasal vowels) are pronounced – following the rule-based options of the language – in multiple different ways. Will this variation be included in teaching materials, or otherwise present in the classroom? Will it be allowed for in mark schemes? Or will it be (implicitly) discouraged in favour of a “standard” spoken French (i.e. a French based on Paris and not elsewhere)? Is this about intelligibility or mimicking a particular kind of native-speaker accent?

These are all important questions which will need to be thought about carefully if we want to avoid unintended and unnecessary discrimination. This problem is all the more acute because of the sizable number of heritage speakers of Spanish (35,755), French (31,256), and to a lesser extent German (7939) in UK state schools and nurseries (Schools Census, 2020).

### 3. *Themes and resources*

One potential positive outcome of the revised GCSE is that the proposed changes could give teachers greater freedom to use the materials they prefer in delivering the programme of study, making the study of languages at GCSE less tied to textbook topics. However, this will not only depend on how examination boards and textbook creators interpret the changes, but also on the flexibility any set vocabulary lists do or do not offer. Currently, there is a requirement to use some authentic materials in the GCSE and to make students able to understand different kinds of speech, which to some extent exposes students to different varieties of the languages of study. These requirements are being dropped in the proposed changes, presumably because it is not possible to control what vocabulary is used in authentic materials. This may inadvertently lead to a *greater* reliance of textbook style materials which are tailored to the prescribed vocabulary lists.

It is true that the content of the GCSE, even now, is the language itself rather than the thematic topics. Marks are awarded only for the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), rather than for cultural/linguistic understanding or critical engagement. But this skills-based emphasis seems, to us, like something that should be questioned rather than further reified. Its exclusive focus on skills makes the MFL GCSE different from all other GCSEs, as well as from A-level and degree level language qualifications. For Music GCSE, students must perform and compose but they must also appraise, using their musical knowledge to make evaluative and critical judgements about music. Chemistry GCSE tests practical lab skills alongside theoretical understanding. The GCSE in Physical Education requires students to know, understand, apply and analyse the factors that underpin performance and involvement in physical activity and sport as well as demonstrating and applying physical skills and techniques. Why should languages be any different? At A-level and university level, they are not. The A-levels in French, German and Spanish teach and assess understanding of literary/film-based and cultural content. Language degrees at university generally include content on literature, politics, film and/or linguistics.

The proposed changes fail to address this gap. In focusing exclusively on skills, the new GCSE remains different from other GCSE subjects and from the academic study of languages more broadly. There are no cultural topics, no interdisciplinary links. There is no literature, linguistics, or intercultural learning. The focus is entirely on predetermined vocabulary lists and grammar. We believe that a better way to inspire young people to take up languages would be to offer them a richer, eye-opening, interculturally oriented curriculum focused on understanding and critiquing language and culture.

### **About the Linguistics in MFL Project:**

This project (2017-) assesses the potential for the inclusion of linguistic topics in the Key Stage 5 MFL curriculum. At present, the A-level syllabi make a sharp distinction between language and content, the latter referring to literature, film, history and culture. This differs from many university courses in which linguistic content is fundamental. Our project engages students with linguistics and aims to deepen their interests in language, including its historical, cultural and social reflexes. We are interested not only in how stimulating and relevant the pupils find these topics, but also in what effect this exposure has on their language attitudes and their confidence levels with speaking/writing another language. After a successful pilot study, the project is currently recruiting for teachers to test new co-created materials this academic year. Details can be found at <http://www.linguisticsinmfl.co.uk>. Recent project results are forthcoming in an open-access paper to be published in Modern Languages Open.

### **Cite this article**

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Michelle Sheehan (Anglia Ruskin University), Alice Corr (University of Birmingham), Anna Havinga (Bristol), Jonathan Kasstan (Westminster), Norma Schifano (Birmingham) and Sascha Stollhans (Lancaster) are the co-ordinators of the Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) Project, an initiative which combines research and advocacy, collaborating with teachers across the UK to investigate the viability of including linguistics in the MFL curriculum in schools. The project has run a number of successful pilots, and its members have been invited to speak at numerous conferences, initial teacher training and CPD events. Recent project results are forthcoming in an open-access paper to be published in Modern Languages Open. Details of the project, including how to sign-up to participate and receive

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teaching materials, can be found at <http://www.linguisticsinmfl.co.uk>. The project tweets [@inmfl](https://twitter.com/inmfl).