



## **ALL summary response to GCSE MFL subject content proposals**

The Association for Language Learning (ALL) has as its *raison d'être* the encouragement and promotion of learning languages, and the development in those learning a language of a broader world view embracing an understanding of and respect for other cultures.

As such, our members welcome proposals or initiatives to increase the take-up of numbers learning languages. However, in the context of the current review of GCSE content many members are concerned that the proposals, although well-intentioned, will have the opposite effect and lead to a lowering of standards and fewer pupils choosing to study GCSE MFL.

ALL is a broad church and our language teacher members have a spectrum of views and approaches. ALL has worked hard to raise awareness and understanding of the Content Review process and recommendations in the context of what would be the most radical change to MFL teaching and assessment since the introduction of GCSEs back in 1988.

Because language teachers in schools are currently under exceptional pressure of work, due not least to this year's examination arrangements, there was a risk that many would not have been alerted to the extent of the proposed changes. We therefore took the step of holding a well-attended public webinar on 29<sup>th</sup> March to outline the proposals in detail, and to examine and explore their implications. We collated and published online the key points raised in writing in the Chat.

Once schools had returned from the Spring Break, and in order to gauge views on the Subject Content review and its outcomes, we held a second webinar, for ALL members, where those attending were able to submit responses electronically in real-time to questions formulated in line with the key points raised previously, and the response number totals were displayed for all to see. Views and questions contributed via the Chat were again collated and published, and all the information relating to the webinars is freely available on the ALL London website:

<http://www.all-london.org.uk/site/index.php/webinars/all-gcse-content-review-2021-webinar-1/>

<http://www.all-london.org.uk/site/index.php/all-gcse-content-review-2021-webinar-2/>

### **Consultation process**

There is concern around timing of this consultation process; we fear that many teachers were, and still are, unaware of the extent of these major proposed changes. Ironically, the consultation ends on May 19<sup>th</sup>, around the time when teachers complete their work on the exams process, when they would have some time to consider wider issues.

There is also concern that many of the questions are predicated on the introduction of a defined list which is the same for productive and receptive skills, and that the questions are limiting and leading. The DfE consultation does not have any questions regarding equalities impact (unlike OFQUAL) so there is no opportunity to highlight the restrictive and potentially discriminatory nature of the proposals.

### **Overall approach**

A very high proportion of those polled at our webinar rejected the core proposal which is to replace a context / topic / theme-based communicative approach with a vocabulary list constructed in a tightly defined way from general purpose corpora.

This rejection was for many reasons, including:

### **Communication is a core reason for learning a language**

Communication is of course central to the principles of the National Curriculum for MFL, and to reflect that, from the outset of the GCSE MFL in 1988, there has been a focus on communication as a key purpose and access to a wide-ranging, relevant vocabulary; that communication takes place in a context where it makes sense, and encompasses work in the areas of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. All of this, it is suggested, would be replaced by a focus on phonics, a restrictive vocabulary list and an extensive list of grammar.

### **Cultural context is important**

Although culture is mentioned in the aims of the new subject content, in practice, the removal of the requirement to have a theme of culture, and of the requirement to have authentic resources in the exam, means that there is no imperative for teachers to cover this vital area. An important point is that currently there is a requirement to have a cultural **context**, while the cultural **content** itself is not examined; in our webinar there was support for maintaining the principle of not testing cultural **content**, whilst there was strong rejection of removing the requirement to have a cultural **context**. Unfortunately, the DfE question on this (Q.22) conflates these two completely separate points.

Moreover, at this crucial time in our history, post-Brexit and in a period of unprecedented global migration, language learning has a significant role to play in the apprenticeship of our young people as global citizens. Fostering the practices of understanding and appreciating differences, and of developing intercultural competence, is at the heart of language teaching. We are concerned that this seems to have been omitted from the proposals.

### **Investment in current approach both in resources and teacher time**

The current GCSE has only been examined twice in 2018 and 2019 with the disruption caused by the pandemic preventing this in both 2020 and 2021. Much has been invested by teachers in preparing resources and schemes of work, and by schools in purchasing textbooks and digital resources, and in training for teachers. Unlike other previous changes where there may have been significant overlap, the proposed switch to a totally different approach would mean jettisoning all of this effort and quality material.

### **Restrictive and anomalous word list arising from inappropriate corpora**

The permissible corpora are general purpose compilations including financial, political and industrial contexts which are not appropriate for a language examination intended for all 16-year-olds. The key issue we return to is that of motivation and recruitment of students into KS4 language study and the EBacc route; members have alerted us to anomalies in the proposed word-lists which would limit the potential of planning student-focussed content, e.g. in the theme of sport where, in French, only *wrestling* and *fishing* are included. The omission of aspects of communication, as well as of culture in its broadest sense, again reduce scope for generating the extrinsic interest of teenagers.

With reference to the Equalities issue mentioned above, it is very concerning that the corpora are very Western-centric, so that *French* and *Christian* are included but *African* and *Muslim* are not. This is especially serious in the light of current political developments in the field of social justice.

### **Aspects of the proposals welcomed**

Some aspects, particularly to the assessments, were widely welcomed: the rubrics and comprehension questions in English and the slowing to a moderate pace proposed for the listening test.

### **Summary**

The widely held view was that these proposals would have a very negative impact in many ways and would be damaging to the take-up of GCSE MFL. As a result, we strongly recommend that the consultation should be halted, and wider discussions held to find a way forward which commands the confidence of the MFL community and will benefit the students taking GCSE MFL.

Association for Language Learning, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2021

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