



ReflectED: St Mary's Journal of Education
Volume 8, Number 1, May 2021, p. 1-12.

ISSN 2046-6986

Race and Racism in Secondary Modern Foreign Languages

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Abstract

This article is concerned with bringing attention to the issues of race and racism in Secondary Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and is motivated by my conviction that in continuing to ignore these issues we show a distinct lack of interest in how the subject reflects and compounds 'the racism that is deeply embedded in schooling' (Joseph-Salisbury 2020: 4). Drawing upon findings in the Runnymede Trust Report into Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools (Joseph-Salisbury 2020) and those highlighted in the Black Curriculum Report on Black British History in the National Curriculum (Arday 2021) this article focusses on gaps in data and research, the government policy relating to the study of MFL at Key Stage 4, teacher workforce and curriculum. This article finds that the systemic racism reflected by various policy and curriculum decisions are underpinned and compounded by various data analysis and research gaps and have conspired to provide barriers for black students in the Secondary MFL classroom. This article highlights areas requiring urgent research, policy and pedagogical intervention relating to the issues of race and racism in MFL which is particularly timely in the context of a subject whose GCSE content and qualification are under review at the time of writing.

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Lisa Panford

A note on definitions:

Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) is not a term I ascribe to myself or others but is used in this article when referring to the data in order to reflect current research lexicon accurately.

Black, is a term of political and psychosocial weight and is used here to refer to myself and other people of African and Caribbean heritage, including mixed-race people.

MFL: refers to Modern Foreign Languages (usually one or a combination of the following languages: Spanish, French, German and in a few schools, Italian) and not including the so-called 'Community' or 'Home Languages' which in most secondary schools are not 'taught' areas of the curriculum but rather, consigned to the remit of the English as an Additional Language (EAL) department.

Introduction: What has race got to do with Secondary MFL?

Reeling in the context of restricted time allocations in school timetabling, the lack of continuity in policy implementation (Dobson 2018) over decades and the broader prevalence of Global English and Google translate discourses, there is general consensus that Secondary MFL is in a bad way (see Bauckham 2016; Board and Tinsley 2017; Lanvers and Coleman 2018; Dobson 2018). The issues that have been repeatedly highlighted as areas of concern in our subject include the range of languages studied, the gender bias in the uptake of MFL, the decline in uptake of MFL after Key Stage 3, the role of grammar and the use of target language (Dobson 2018). There has been academic silence on the issues of race and racism in the context of Secondary MFL. This lack of regard for 'race', one of the most important and impactful notions in modern history, not only highlights the bias of MFL researchers (because 'the only people who can find it psychologically possible to deny the centrality of race are those who are racially privileged, for whom race is invisible precisely because the world is structured around them' (Mills 1997: 2) but it is also a matter for urgent intervention because the unexplored areas of research have serious consequences for our students because they distort the findings upon which the educational policies impacting them are based (Perez 2019).

The race/ethnicity research data gap in MFL

The British Council analyses the impact of various policy measures on Secondary MFL through consultation with quantitative data and qualitative evidence provided by teachers. The findings of this research are presented annually in the *Language Trends Survey Reports* which claim to 'chart the state of language teaching and learning in schools' (Gough 2019). Perennial issues of focus in these reports include the attainment gap in MFL between students in contrasting socio-economic contexts which have, for decades highlighted 'increasingly segregated' (Tinsley 2019) patterns in language learning

between and within state and independent schools and are underpinned by socioeconomic disadvantage as well as the attainment gap between boys and girls in the subject, an area that has been repeatedly researched (see Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Clark and Trafford, 1996; Callaghan 1998; Clark 1998; Maubach & Morgan 2001; Barton 2002; Dörnyei & Csizér 2002; Davies 2004; Mills & Tinsley 2020). The Language Trends Surveys reflect and perpetuate the 'colour-blind' approach of the Secondary MFL research community; evidenced by the paucity of academic research which centralises the notion of race in the context of our subject. The reports' failures to collate data relating to race and ethnicity have prevented any deep understanding of the complexities of the multiple interactions of gender, social class and race inequalities which underpin the study of MFL in Secondary school and therefore present an incomplete representation of the inequity which defines the study of our subject.

In 2016 the Teaching Schools Council commissioned the 'Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review' which found that Secondary MFL was in a 'fragile state' (Bauckham 2016: 4). The evidence presented in this report has been highly influential in shaping discourse around current pedagogical approaches to Secondary MFL by professional subject organisations, Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers and OFSTED. The report prompted the establishment of the government-funded National Centre for Excellence for Language Learning (NCELP) in 2018 whose aim is to 'take the recommendations from the report forward' (NCELP website) presently concerning the proposed reforms to the GCSE subject content and qualification (DfE 2019). It is of serious concern that the 2016 report which has been central to current Secondary MFL pedagogical and policy approaches failed to highlight any issues relating to race/racism in its findings. However, this is hardly a surprising revelation considering that not one of the articles or publications referred to in the literature review centralised the issue of race/racism (Baukham 2016: 25-28). In this way the 2016 report reflects and compounds the academic silence on the issues of race in the context of Secondary MFL.

The data gap relating to race/ethnicity and student uptake of GCSE MFL

Research carried out by The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) documents an overall decline in entries to GCSE (or equivalent) level MFL exams (Churchward, 2019). The statistics presented by the Language Trends Surveys have repeatedly shown that the fall in MFL uptake at GCSE is underpinned by inequality because schools with the lowest uptake of a language at Key Stage 4 are statistically more likely to have high levels of Free School Meals (FSM), Pupil Premium (PP), low Attainment 8 scores and are most likely to be Sponsor Led Academies and Foundation Schools and to a widening gap between the uptake of languages in the private and state sector (Tinsley 2019; Collen 2020). The failure to analyse and unpick the data (DfE 2020) relating to

ethnicity and uptake of MFL GCSE must be addressed if we are to gain a proper understanding of the multiple layers of inequality which have come to define the study of our subject.

The data gap relating to race/ethnicity and ‘disapplication’ from Key Stage 4 languages

The official Department for Education (DfE) statement that the EBacc qualification (which includes MFL as one of the five pillars) is ‘not appropriate for a small minority of pupils’ and that schools can decide not to enter a pupil ‘on a case-by-case basis’ (DfE 2013) has resulted in a growing number of pupils being disappplied from languages at KS3 (aged 13-14) to receive extra support in literacy (Tinsley 2019) or because languages are not regarded as a priority for them (Bauckham 2016: 7). Analysis of the data shows that there is a correlation between the schools where there are higher numbers of pupils who do not study a language at Year 9 and those with a higher proportion of students eligible for FSM, PP funding, lower Attainment 8 results and students identified as having English as an Additional Language (Tinsley 2019; Collen 2020). As is the case with uptake at GCSE, data analysis relating to race/ethnicity is needed to understand the nuances of the multiple layers of inequity underpinning the study of our subject and their impact on pupils with protected characteristics.

Moreover, further research is required to interrogate school policies around how and why students are disappplied from languages. The perception and some would say, the reality that MFL is a ‘hard subject’ in the context of accountability and a culture of league tables and targets is a particularly problematic feature of language learning and teaching because of the potential racial bias in teachers’ estimations of their pupils’ academic abilities (see for example Coard 1971; Rampton 1981; Swann 1985; MacPherson 1999; Ferguson 1998; Fryer & Levitt 2006; Harlen 2005; Fajardo 1985; Reeves et al., 2001; Gillborn & Mirza 2001; Dee 2004; Harlen 2005; Runnymede 2020).

BAME MFL teacher gap

The shortage of BAME teachers across the whole teaching workforce in the UK is a matter of public record (DfE 2018) and the statistics for London illuminate an acute disparity in schools where there are high numbers of BAME students (Rhodes 2017). While there has been a small increase in BAME teacher trainees since 2012 (Graduate Teacher Training Registry 2012), in MFL the number remains disproportionately low (UCAS 2019). The lack of diversity among MFL teachers is of course, inextricably linked to the paucity of BAME students studying languages at undergraduate level and points to the need to review universities’ ability to attract, select and retain people of colour in their undergraduate languages programmes. Efforts to ‘diversify the (MFL) teacher workforce’ (DfE

2018a) are imperative due to the key role teachers have in 'shaping narrative and knowledge that is legitimised, proffered and prioritised' (Arday 2021:19) but they depend upon the rigorous inspection of data, policies and practices regarding admissions, acceptance and retention on undergraduate languages and postgraduate/teacher training programmes as well as recruitment and retention practices in schools (Joseph-Salisbury 2020; Arday 2021).

The MFL Curriculum

A renewed momentum to a campaign to 'decolonise the curriculum' (see Alexander et al 2015; Doharty 2019; Arday 2021) reflects the recent shifts in attitudes towards addressing aspects of race and racism (Arday 2021) and research carried out by the Open University ranks it as one of their top 10 most important global innovations for the future of education (Ferguson et al 2019).

Decolonisation of the curriculum is a process which aims to bring about epistemic justice and involves the centring of knowledges that have been marginalised through understanding the period of European colonisation and how it structures the contemporary world order. In relation to Secondary MFL, this broadly relates to two key areas: the languages taught and the subject content which will be discussed briefly below.

Languages taught in MFL Secondary classroom

Most secondary schools teach one, in some instances a combination of, Spanish, French, German and in a few schools, Italian (Collen 2020). While sociolinguists generally agree that no one language is inherently better than another, Western societies have a tradition of affording prestige to a few classical languages (e.g. Classical Greek and Latin) and languages of so called 'high culture' (e.g. English, French, German, Spanish) (Wardhaugh 2010). And while a school's language provision may, to a certain extent, be governed by a number of practical resource issues, namely the availability of teachers, it is impossible to deny that the mainstream provision in most schools still position certain (European) languages ahead of others. While many schools overtly celebrate their multilingual contexts and their diverse student populations, their dichotomisation of MFL and so-called 'Community Languages' is stark and can be seen to indulge a system that implicitly endorses a Eurocentric agenda. Discussions around decolonising the curriculum should involve engaging with how and why certain languages have come to be centred in our secondary curriculum and an exploration of the underlying power dynamics which have supported their dominance (Phipps 2021).

MFL GCSE Subject Content

A central aspect of decolonising the curriculum in Secondary MFL also clearly involves engaging with the subject content. At the time of writing, the MFL GCSE subject content is a site of tension and much debate following the publication of the consultation around a new proposal (DfE 2021). The significance of the MFL GCSE subject content must not be downplayed because this document sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills on which awarding bodies base the detail of their specifications and upon which publishers create teaching materials for the classroom. This has direct implications for precisely what and how MFL teachers teach not just in the GCSE years but also in the years preceding them.

The current GCSE subject content fails to make explicit the requirement to reflect the multi-ethnic and broadly diverse societies of our Target Language countries and so the outcomes presented in the GCSE specifications fail to explore the rich socio-cultural, historical and political dimensions of our subject and neglect to engage with the colonial underpinnings and legacies of our Target Language countries. As a result, Eurocentric cultural examples are favoured, European literary texts are centred and black narratives are virtually non-existent in textbooks, and where they are present, largely consigned to the topic area of festivals. These omissions mirror the mistakes identified in the History National Curriculum which have been criticised for favouring a dominant white, Eurocentric curriculum (Arday 2021: 3).

The prevalent discourses around ‘decolonise the curriculum’ and a growing body of research (see Bird & Pitman 2019; Charles 2019) identifying the poor representations reflecting bias in educational material (Pearson 2021) have not gone unnoticed by a number of secondary MFL teachers. The MFL social media community is awash with #promoting diversity and inclusion in MFL #celebrating diversity in languages and colleagues far and wide have been calling out through various platforms for resources that promote diverse communities in the Spanish/French/German speaking world. While undoubtedly well-intentioned, the advancements in decolonising the curriculum have been undermined by the notion of ‘diversity’ because it is a notion which conceals an assumed ‘neutral/normalised’ point (the white, the European) relative to which all ‘others’ become diverse and which fails to address race explicitly. The result has been a tendency towards an overreliance on simplistic and tokenistic depictions, mockingly referred to here as the 3Ds of MFL (Drogba, Djibouti and Day of the Dead), which are compounded by inadequate representations in textbooks and assessment materials. While preparedness to teach a diverse range of pupils from ethnic groups is not doubted, in order to competently be able to teach about diverse colonial legacies and incorporate authentic black narratives (Mandler 2014) in Secondary MFL, support and training is required for teachers to access (and contribute to) a growing body of work in Higher Education in this area (see

Institute of Modern Languages Research 2020 & 2021) in order to develop pedagogical advancements for practical application in the classroom.

While it is optimistic to hope that the proposed removal of prescriptive topics in the new GCSE subject content may provide opportunity to move away from content which has consigned black narratives to the topic area of festivals (and update course and assessment materials accordingly) towards more 'interwoven and meaningful representations and narratives which reflect the multi-cultural diversity' (Arday 2021:21) of our target language countries more accurately, it is perhaps naïve optimism that this will be a priority for stakeholders in light of the fact that this is not made an explicit requirement. The aim that students should 'step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world...and become familiar with aspects of the contexts of the countries and communities in which the language is spoken' (DfE 2021) does not go far enough to redress the gross Eurocentric imbalance underpinning our subject content. Moreover, it is disappointing to see the opportunity to incorporate texts by black authors from the Target Language countries that reflect black experiences, perspectives and accomplishments (Arday 2021: 21) may be missed by the proposal to remove the requirement to engage with literary/authentic texts for this qualification. Furthermore, careful consideration must be paid to the prescribed list of high frequency vocabulary to ensure that it is inclusive and does not ostracise students on the basis of any protected characteristic.

Conclusion

The gaping absence of analysis of data and academic silence about race in the context of Secondary MFL compound the racism which has been found to be embedded in our schools (Joseph-Salisbury 2020). While the scope of this article does not lend itself to definitive conclusions about the wide-ranging experiences of students and teachers of colour in Secondary MFL, I hope to have illuminated some gaps in our knowledge and understanding and by so doing, in a small way to have contributed to what I hope will become a broader debate on counteracting racially discriminatory practices in the Secondary MFL classroom.

Suggested areas of intervention:

The race/ethnicity research data gap in MFL

- The British Council Language Trends Survey should collate, analyse and monitor data relating to ethnicity and GCSE uptake and disapplication.

The data gap relating to race/ethnicity and 'disapplication' from Key Stage 4 languages

- Policy makers must review the implications of 'disapplication' on students with protected characteristics, including students of colour.

Lisa Panford

- Schools to be given support to ensure that their policies surrounding disapplication are transparent and robust.

BAME MFL teacher data gap

- ITT providers, Universities and schools should be supported to address any implicit or explicit racisms in recruitment, hiring and retention processes.

Languages taught

- Government policies regarding which languages constitute ‘Modern Foreign Languages’ should be reviewed in order to identify and address any implicit or normalised racism underpinning these decisions.
- Schools should be given support to facilitate collaboration between all languages teachers and move away from the artificial distinction between so called ‘community’ and MFL languages.

Curriculum

- Government should make it an explicit requirement in the subject content document to incorporate the histories, culture and language of the target language countries (including those beyond Europe) with proper consideration of their colonial legacies, and ethnic, cultural and religious diversity.
- Professional development should be offered to teachers to support them in becoming proficient, knowledgeable and confident in teaching black target language narratives.
- Educational resource companies and awarding bodies should review their materials in consultation with anti-racist organisations and include meaningful representations which challenge racial stereotypes (see Pearson 2021).
- Research carried out in universities by a new generation of linguists and educators who are experts in black target language narratives, colonial legacies and multi-ethnic contexts (see Institute for Modern Languages Research 2020 & 2021) should have their research/findings highlighted and shared as an area of particular interest to Secondary MFL teachers and promoted through our subject association (Association for Language Learning) and the NCELP resources and associated resources portals (NCELP website).

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Lisa Panford

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