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Modern languages in England's national curriculum: a call for (r)evolution!

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we offer a personal response to the interim report of the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR: Department forEducation (Dfe). 2025. Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-interim-report). The report pledges to undertake 'deeper analysis to diagnose the specific issues affecting each subject' (9). Our aim is therefore to contribute to this analysis in relation to Modern Languages in particular, and to offer concrete recommendations for the review panel. We argue that, to respond effectively to the challenges facing Modern Languages in schools, some elements of both evolution and revolution will be needed, as well as greater clarity about the aims and purposes of the subject and the nature of learning in its different strands. The article examines the place of Modern Languages at different stages of a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, along with a number of related questions (including statutory requirements, assessment, and the choice of which language). We then discuss the nature of languages as a 'pluricentric' discipline with multiple aims (including Languages as skill development; the development of intercultural understanding; and the development of knowledge about language). We conclude with some proposals for consideration that embrace both evolution and revolution.

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Introduction

The National Curriculum is, etymologically, the course to be run by pupils across the nation as they complete their education. However, against a backdrop of increased awareness of learners' diverse characteristics, the dazzling pace of technological change, and the ubiquity of personalised online content and tailored learning apps, defining a curriculum to be followed by a national cohort of pupils is a significant challenge. It is clearly essential to review this periodically – one such 'refresh' is currently underway – and, in doing so, to draw on a wide range of stakeholder perspectives. In this article, we offer a personal response to the interim report of the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR: DfE 2025a). Their report pledges to undertake 'deeper analysis to diagnose the specific issues affecting each subject' (9). Our aim is therefore to contribute to this analysis in relation to Modern Languages in particular, and to offer concrete recommendations for the review panel.

Our recommendations must strike a balance between the need for meaningful change on the one hand, and realism on the other. The interim report sees many positives in the current arrangements, with the 'architecture' of key stages and national examinations 'broadly working well' (6). The

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commitment to the fundamental principle of a 'knowledge rich curriculum' is reaffirmed. The report therefore makes clear that it wishes to build on these successes and make incremental changes only where needed: 'evolution not revolution' (8). Ideological changes and upheavals are to be eschewed, since these might 'destabilise the system' (9) and place 'undue burdens on education staff' (8).

We welcome this awareness of the significant toll that successive major changes in England's education system have had on teachers and other professionals. On the other hand, the CAR acknowledges that the current system is 'not working well for everyone' (17), with socio-economically disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND faring less well than their peers. We strongly support the Review's application of a 'social justice lens', its commitment to 'high aspirations for all' (18) and its concern with the challenges posed by generative AI.

The report also notes issues in Modern Languages education in particular: concerns have been raised over the efficacy of teaching at primary level and transition to secondary. Indeed, beset by persistent problems of low motivation, low uptake and poor outcomes, the subject has been described as in 'crisis' (Bowler 2020). Teacher recruitment and retention in Languages is an additional problem at both primary and secondary levels (Gough 2024). It is therefore clear that significant changes are needed if Modern Languages is to survive, let alone thrive, as a subject in the National Curriculum. Just as for vertebrates trying to respond to climate change (Quintero and Wiens 2013), evolution may be too slow a process!

In this article we will argue that, to respond effectively to the challenges facing Modern Languages in schools, some elements of both evolution and revolution will be needed. As a foundation for any such changes, we will argue that greater clarity is needed about the aims and purposes of the subject as a 'pluricentric' discipline and about the nature of learning in its different strands. However, we begin by critically examining the place of Modern Languages at different stages of a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum.

Modern languages in a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum

As summarised by Neumann et al. (2020), in England, the idea of a knowledge-rich curriculum became prominent during the previous review of the National Curriculum, conducted under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and then Education Secretary Michael Gove. It can be traced back to the work of E.D. Hirsch, who ties it to a social justice agenda: Hirsch 'links the unequal distribution of "cultural capital" across social classes to differences in language acquisition, arguing that middle-class children arrive at school with an advantage that is further reinforced through schooling' (Neumann et al. 2020: 704). Proponents of a knowledge-rich curriculum therefore argue that the acquisition of valuable cultural capital – what Young and Muller (2013) call 'powerful knowledge' – is essential for addressing socio-educational disadvantage. The rationale is that it can mitigate disparities by granting *all* students – particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds who may lack access to such knowledge at home – the cultural capital necessary to participate fully and equally in society. Conversely, critics have argued that the knowledge-rich agenda may inadvertently reinforce social injustice by privileging the knowledge of white, middle-class groups, whilst marginalising that of disadvantaged communities (e.g. non-white, working class), who are considered in deficit (Cushing 2023). In other words, no knowledge is inherently 'powerful'; its power comes from its association with dominant social groups.

Whilst acknowledging this broader debate, our focus here is more specifically on the implications of a knowledge-rich approach for the teaching and learning of Modern Languages. Our first question concerns the extent to which the 'knowledge rich' concept applies to language learning at all.

The *Conceptual Position Paper* (DfE 2025b: 8) accompanying the CAR's interim report argues that there are three components of knowledge-rich curriculum content: (1) substantive knowledge, encompassing 'the established facts, information, and core principles derived from academic disciplines and specialised fields'; (2) disciplinary knowledge, defined as 'subject-specific ways of knowing and reasoning', including an understanding of how different disciplines shape inquiry and construct

knowledge; and (3) knowledge for personal, social, and cultural practices, emphasising the practical application of substantive and disciplinary knowledge to everyday life and real-world challenges.

However, this tripartite classification poses challenges for Modern Languages. First, the notion of 'substantive knowledge' raises some important questions: what constitutes 'established facts'? Are these, for example, vocabulary items or grammar rules? How does pupils' knowledge relate to their ability to *use* a language for communicative purposes? What are the 'core principles' in Modern Languages? (Perhaps these might be accuracy or communicative adequacy.) Further, the substantive knowledge to be taught does not derive from 'academic disciplines and specialised domains': rather, the substantive knowledge underpinning the study of languages is represented by the language competence of those millions of people who use the language every day.

Second, the notion of 'disciplinary knowledge' is also conceptually difficult: it is unclear what it would mean to 'reason' or 'generate knowledge' in Modern Languages in the way that one reasons in, say, History or Science. Indeed, when thinking about the school subject we know as Modern Languages, 'one might even question whether it is a single 'subject' or 'discipline' at all, and where its boundaries lie (or should lie) in relation to other subject areas, such as first language education, citizenship and the study of literature' (Woore et al., forthcoming). These challenges expose the limitations of attempting to impose a uniform conceptual framework across all subjects; in our view, they highlight the need for a more subject-specific consideration of each subject area and its role in the curriculum.

We will return to these questions below when we consider the nature of learning in what we see as three key strands of Modern Languages. However, for present purposes, we certainly believe that Modern Languages can open up 'new ways of thinking about the world' and allows pupils to 'move beyond personal experiences' to 'envisage alternative and new possibilities', which the CAR sees as defining characteristics of 'powerful knowledge' (DfE 2025b, 8). As we will argue below, we believe that language learning can be a transformational experience in which pupils have the opportunity not only to learn *about* the target language and its associated cultures, but to embody and enact them (Woore et al., forthcoming). It offers pupils a unique (and uniquely challenging) opportunity to step outside their own selves, to decentre and relativise their own cultural assumptions and identity. For these reasons, we strongly agree that Modern Languages forms a key component of a 'broad and balanced' curriculum for all (DfE 2025a, 7).

Should languages be statutory? At which ages?

The value of Modern Languages in the curriculum is already recognised at policy level by its inclusion as a statutory subject at key stage 2 (ages 7–11 years) and key stage 3 (11–14 years) (DfE 2013). Further, whilst learning a language is no longer compulsory at key stage 4, uptake at GCSE is incentivised by the 'English Baccalaureate' (EBacc) school performance measure (DfE 2019). On the ground, however, the picture is less rosy. In primary schools, there are various problems with Languages provision, as indicated by successive *Language Trends* surveys (e.g. Board and Tinsley 2015; Tinsley and Doležal 2018; Collen and Duff 2020). These include: highly variable – and generally very low – amounts of teaching time; languages being 'squeezed out' of a crowded curriculum, as other subjects take priority; limited pupil attainment, as perceived by receiving secondary schools; and problems with transition to secondary schools. At key stage 3, *Language Trends* reports also indicate that not all pupils are studying a Modern Language at key stage 3, despite this being statutory. At key stage 4, uptake of Languages at GCSE has plateaued in recent years, with under half of pupils in England entered for the subject every year between 2010 and 2023 (DfE 2025a). For pupils who know they will not be continuing with a language post-14, this is likely to have a knock-on dampening effect on motivation for language learning at key stage 3.

The Curriculum Assessment Review's 'social justice lens' becomes important here; the general socio-economic gap in learning, as highlighted in the review, also appears to be reflected in the study of Modern Languages specifically. For example, more disadvantaged schools (those with higher percentages of pupils eligible for free school meals) appear to have more pupils not studying

a language at both key stage 3 and key stage 4 (Board and Tinsley 2015). They are also likely to offer less time for language learning at key stage 3 (Tinsley and Doležal 2018).[1] Anecdotally, we consistently hear from colleagues in schools that, if pupils with SEND or EAL are deemed to need extra support in English or Maths, it is often Languages that they are taken out of by default. This practice is also raised in a recent study of school language policies in England, which found that 117 out of 998 secondary schools analysed (11.7%) had explicit policies to 'disapply' students from language learning in order to provide additional support in areas such as literacy and life skills (Forbes and Morea 2024).

These issues may not be simple ones to solve but we recommend that the Review Panel give serious consideration to ways of incentivising schools to ensure that all students (irrespective of background) have equal opportunities to learn Modern Languages. One way of doing this at key stage 4 would be to re-introduce the requirement for all pupils to learn a language post-14 (although it would of course be preferable for pupils to study Modern Languages because they *want to* rather than because they *have to*).

Assessment

Whilst we support the retention, and perhaps expansion, of the current statutory languages provision within the National Curriculum, we believe that assessment practices must be rethought. We do not agree that, in Modern Languages, 'our national assessments and qualifications are broadly working well' (CAR, 6). According to AQA's (2024) information on grade boundaries, to achieve a 'good pass' in Modern Languages, pupils sitting the examination in 2024 needed to get 121 marks out of 240 in French, 122 in German, 116 in Spanish and 96 in Mandarin – in other words, around half marks or less. It is surely demoralising for so many pupils to lose so many marks after so many years of language study.

Language proficiency is a skill, and many pupils will be familiar with very different ways of assessing their skills in other domains: for example, staged swimming badges or grade examinations in a musical instrument. Pursuing the analogy with learning to swim, the GCSE model is akin to telling a child at the start of their first lesson: in five years' time, I will ask you to swim a mile, and I will give you a score based on how far you have got; you will lose a mark for every length you don't complete. Instead of such an approach, children learning to swim or play the guitar work their way up through the stages or grades, taking each test when ready to do so, then progressing to harder (more technically advanced) performance at the next level. We believe that this is a much more enlightened – and more motivating – model for assessing progression in a skill, whether that be swimming or language learning.

There are existing frameworks that could inform such a system. For example, the *Languages Ladder* – developed as part of the National Languages Strategy (DfES 2002) but discontinued in 2013 – provided a sequence of 'can-do' statements at a range of levels, aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), from 'breakthrough' to 'mastery'. This assessment framework was 'designed to endorse achievement in language skills at all levels of competence for all ages in a wide range of languages' (DCSF 2007: 1), running alongside (rather than as an alternative to) existing national qualifications. In the words of Jones (2007: 21), a key principle was that 'achievements at every step can be interpreted positively, rather than negatively as is effectively the case with entry level, or lower grades achieved at GCSE'. The University of Sydney's current *Language Progressions Project* is attempting to create something similar for learners of Arabic and Mandarin, in the form of eight 'milestones' for listening, speaking, reading and writing (https://sites.google.com/view/languageprogressionsproject/home). In the UK, the Youth Chinese Test (YCT) has already been used in some schools as a way of offering age-appropriate and internationally recognised certification of younger learners' basic competence in Mandarin. Similar assessments exist for the European languages, such as the DELF Prim for French, Fit in Deutsch for German, and DELE Escolar for Spanish.

If Modern Languages is not made compulsory again at key stage 4, this kind of alternative, graded accreditation scheme is arguably even more important. At present, pupils complete three (or more)

years of language study but have nothing to show for it when they drop the subject at age 14. Graded certificates taken up to this point would give pupils some official recognition of their language learning – and would be something concrete to aim for by the end of key stage 3. (Such a scheme need not be tied to particular age groups, as the GCSE is. For example, studying for a certificate in Languages could be made available to sixth formers alongside their A Level studies, or offered at key stage 4 as an alternative for pupils who do not wish to pursue a full GCSE but still wish to gain formal recognition of their language attainment.)

Which languages?

Having made a case for the importance of Modern Languages in the curriculum, we must also ask: which languages? Currently, the 'big three' of French, Spanish and German dominate provision in schools. Whilst this is partly the result of historical legacy (particularly in the case of French), there are clearly many good reasons for learning these languages (which we do not have time to rehearse here). On the other hand, they represent a narrow, Eurocentric selection amongst the languages of the world – echoing Cushing's (2023) critique of the 'knowledge-rich' agenda on the basis that it privileges certain historically dominant forms of cultural capital while marginalising others.

This Eurocentric focus is despite calls to diversify Languages provision in the UK, particularly post-Brexit (Lanvers 2021). The British Council's top ten list of the most important languages strategically for the UK's future does include Spanish, French and German, but also Chinese, Arabic, Russian and Japanese. Of course, there are practical obstacles to expanding provision in these languages (not least teacher supply), but we recommend that the Review considers language diversification as a key ambition when thinking about Modern Languages provision within the curriculum. As steps towards this goal, we note the success of existing schemes designed to promote the teaching of Chinese, including the government's Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP). However, other languages are conspicuous by their absence. Further, as noted on the government's MEP website (DfE 2023), the scheme explicitly targets 'highly able and motivated key stage 3 pupils' in schools with 'good' or 'outstanding' Ofsted ratings. This, in our view, runs counter to the CAR's stated ambitions for inclusion and excellence for all. If Chinese, or indeed any language, is to be promoted as part of a broader national strategy, it must be open to all learners, not just an elite few.

Valuing community languages

When thinking about valuing different languages beyond the traditional 'big three', we should not forget the many pupils who are already, to varying degrees, multilingual – and possibly multiliterate. The percentage of pupils classified as 'EAL' has grown steadily and in 2023 stood at around one fifth of the school population (Lindorff, Strand and Au 2024). Whilst some schools enter these pupils for GCSEs in their heritage languages, many do not, and this is certainly not done systematically. In terms of national languages capacity, there is a vast under-recognised resource here.

To illustrate, imagine the fictitious case of Hassan, a Year 10 pupil who struggles through his French lessons, told by his teacher that he is aiming for Grade 3. Yet, at home he speaks only Tunisian Arabic, and for the last two years has been learning to decode Classical Arabic at his local mosque. His school does not mention the possibility of completing a GCSE in Arabic; indeed, he does not like his teacher to mention his knowledge of Arabic in class, as he finds it embarrassing. If he follows his 'flight path', he will graduate from Year 11 with a standard pass in French along with his friends, who speak only English. There will be no official recognition of his Arabic proficiency. Is this a fair reflection of his linguistic and cultural competence? How far could his proficiency in spoken and written Arabic have developed, had this linguistic potential been nurtured and supported?

Hassan's situation brings to mind Cummins' (2005) depiction of language education in the US: 'we are faced with the bizarre scenario of schools successfully transforming fluent speakers of foreign languages into monolingual English speakers, at the same time as they struggle, largely

unsuccessfully, to transform English monolingual students into foreign language speakers' (586). If we really value pupils' language proficiency, we should celebrate and develop their existing multilingualism. We therefore recommend that schools should be encouraged to support the development of home and community languages, perhaps working in collaboration with complementary schools (such as Saturday language schools and mosques). Pupils should be entitled to complete GCSEs or other qualifications in any languages they use at home or in the community, if they so wish. This possibility should be actively promoted, rather than it depending on individual schools, teachers or parental involvement.

A further question which follows from the above is whether multilingual pupils should *also* be required to learn an additional language as part of the National Curriculum. In other words, is it simply proficiency in more than one language that is the goal? Or is there something inherently valuable about the process of learning a 'foreign' language as an object of study, which – by requiring us to enact the 'other' and see things from a new linguistic-cultural perspective – develops our understanding of ourselves, others, and what it is to be human?

Languages as a pluricentric discipline

A further complication when considering the place of Languages in the curriculum is the fact that the subject encompasses multiple, very different aims. The National Curriculum (DfE 2013) outlines the purposes of Modern Languages learning in England as follows; we quote this in full to capture what we see as the essential pluricentricity of the subject.

> Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world. The teaching should enable pupils to express their ideas and thoughts in another language and to understand and respond to its speakers, both in speech and in writing. It should also provide opportunities for them to communicate for practical purposes, learn new ways of thinking and read great literature in the original language. Language teaching should provide the foundation for learning further languages, equipping pupils to study and work in other countries. (DfE 2013: 1)

The above statement outlines three key areas:

(1) The development of language skill, that is, the ability to produce and understand both spoken and written forms of the language to 'communicate for practical purposes', for example if one wished 'to study and work in other countries'.
(2) The development of learners' cultural competence and intercultural understanding (Byram and Wagner 2018; Byram 2021) with a strong emphasis on the way in which this might lead to personal transformation (a 'liberation from insularity'; 'learning new ways of thinking'; 'fostering curiosity'; 'deepening understanding of the world').
(3) Laying 'the foundation for learning further languages', potentially encompassing both language learning strategies and metalinguistic knowledge (Roehr-Brackin 2018) or critical awareness of how languages work (Fairclough 2014) and the ways in which they differ.

These triple aims broadly align with Pountain's (2017) conceptualisation of the essential components of the 'academic discipline' of Languages within higher education provision (253). He argues that Language study should comprise 'the three Ls'': Language (i.e. linguistic competence); Linguistics (an understanding of the language, including its grammar, and associated 'specialist terminology': 260); and creative Literature as an instantiation of 'language-dependent culture' (262). We would endorse the view that these are all important components of the 'subject' or 'discipline' of Languages, not just at university level but also at school level, and that they are closely interrelated. We believe that this should be recognised more explicitly and clearly by policymakers, curriculum designers, school leaders, and practitioners working in the field of Languages education.

Such recognition brings significant challenges, however – not least because of the demands of accommodating these multiple aims within a single school subject which is typically allocated only two hours per week at secondary level (and far less time than this at primary). Whilst many teachers in England see the development of intercultural understanding as a key aim of their teaching (Woore et al. 2020), the overriding focus is on linguistic skill development to meet the requirements of high-stakes public examinations, at the expense of the other aims listed in the National Curriculum's 'purpose of study'.

While it seems unlikely that more school curriculum time will be dedicated to Languages to accommodate the subject's multiple aims, there might be some value in revisiting Hawkins (1981) idea of a Language Apprenticeship model. Here, the different aims of language learning might be distributed over time, with different emphases at different phases of education. Hawkins suggested that the focus at primary level might be on languages discovery, followed by an 'apprenticeship' in language learning at early secondary level (including all three of the key areas outlined above). There would then be opportunities to develop greater levels of competence (with greater insight and choice on the part of the learners) during the later years of secondary school education and beyond.

In the following section, we will explore the nature of learning in each of the three components within the pluricentric discipline of Modern Languages, and what this might mean for curriculum design.

Languages as skill development

Languages viewed as skill development is currently at the forefront of the National Curriculum Programme of Study (DfE 2013). At key stage 2 it is expected that there will be 'substantial progress in one language' (n.p.) while at key stage 3 learners 'should build on the foundations of language learning laid at key stage 2' and '(t)eaching should focus on developing the breadth and depth of pupils' competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing, based on a sound foundation of core grammar and vocabulary' (n.p.).

Earlier in this article, we discussed the problematic nature of positioning Languages within a knowledge-rich paradigm. Building on that critique, we would also argue than an over-emphasis on 'knowledge' in the Languages curriculum can be misleading. There is a risk that this could lead to an over-emphasis on readily measurable knowledge of forms – such as Ofsted's (2021) 'three pillars' of grammar, vocabulary and phonics – at the expense of developing skill in using the language to communicate. Whilst there may be a role for explicit knowledge in the development of language skill (e.g. DeKeyser 2020), such knowledge is clearly not a sufficient basis for skilled performance. For example, there is a difference between (1) knowing that the German word '*weil*' ('*because*') requires the finite verb to be placed at the end of the clause, and (2) producing such a clause with the verb at the end – and ultimately, doing so fluently, without conscious attention.

This last stage, we would argue, represents true 'mastery' in Languages. It results from huge amounts of practice (akin to other kinds of skill development, such as swimming or playing a musical instrument, mentioned above). Thus, the time required to develop fluent communicative skill is an important factor to consider in Modern Languages education (even setting aside the additional time required to address the subject's other aims). The amount of time typically allocated to Modern Languages in schools is almost certainly insufficient for many learners. Following Macaro (2008), we would advocate a significant increase in curriculum time, particularly in Year 7, to allow for more rapid and substantial progress. Alternatively, in the absence of increased lesson time, shorter but more frequent Languages lessons, lasting say 20–30 minutes each, might represent a significant improvement, although we recognise that this would present considerable logistical challenges.

Beyond timetabling, there are significant other considerations relating to language skill development, particularly in terms of provision in primary schools, as noted in the Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025) interim report. Whilst the primary languages policy is well-intentioned and holds promise, there are severe practical problems of implementation, including (as mentioned

above) competing curriculum demands, teacher recruitment and expertise, and transition to secondary. This can result in provision being ineffective or even counterproductive.

In our view, a clear solution suggests itself here: we recommend dropping the requirement for pupils to make 'substantial progress in one language' at key stage 2. Instead, the focus of the primary school Languages curriculum could be on developing an understanding of Language more broadly, igniting pupils' curiosity about world languages and cultures, and building transferrable skills to support the learning of individual languages later in their school career (an approach explored in more detail in the section below discussing knowledge about language). A recent, concrete example of this approach is the 'World of Languages, Languages of the World' (WoLLoW) initiative (https://theworldoflanguages.co.uk/). Such an approach does not rely on teacher expertise in a specific language. It would enable classrooms to draw on the diverse linguistic expertise of their members (for example, heritage and home languages); and it would open up possibilities for community investment (e.g. links with parents and complementary schools). The approach would also significantly reduce the issues currently encumbering primary-to-secondary transition. For example, there would be no need to worry about continuity of language between those taught in feeder primary and receiving secondary schools, and concerns over disparate levels of pupils' prior attainment when starting language lessons in Year 7 (Collen and Duff 2025) would be attenuated.

Finally, we feel it is important to address the question of artificial intelligence. The Curriculum Review says that it wants to take account of the rise of generative AI, but practical language skill is perhaps the strand of Modern Languages that is most vulnerable to its advances. A recent ChatGPT4o demonstration, for example, shows astonishing capabilities in live interpreting (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2DFg53Zhvw). Language teaching and learning will not be the same going forward and rationales will need to change. How long can the GCSE continue to focus on assessing pupils' competence in using a language in straightforward communicative contexts, when anybody with a smartphone can immediately understand language they encounter in the target language country (be it spoken or written language) and provide AI-mediated responses?

Of course, we do not think that AI makes language learning redundant; far from it! In some ways, we would argue that it makes human-to-human communication and connection all the more important. In considering other rationales for language study, which can be harnessed by teachers to secure learner motivation and engagement, developing an understanding of the target language cultures has a significant part to play. We turn now to consider this in greater depth.

Developing intercultural understanding

As we have seen, the development of pupils' intercultural understanding is a central aim of Modern Languages teaching enshrined in the National Curriculum, (DfE 2013). It is also an aim strongly endorsed by teachers (Woore et al. 2020). At its best, this aspect of language learning goes far beyond a shallow, knowledge-focussed approach to learning *about* other cultures – an approach summarised by Kramsch's (1991) four Fs of food, fairs, folklore & facts. Rather, language learning can offer opportunities for learners to develop intercultural communicative competencies (Byram 2021), including:

> relating one's own culture(s) to the foreign culture(s); cultural sensitivity and the use of various strategies for engaging with people from different cultures; the capacity to act as a cultural intermediary – bridging one's own and others' cultures, and effectively managing misunderstandings or conflicts; and the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships. (Council of Europe 2001: 104f)

The potential benefits of this type of learning are clear for learners who are expected to emerge from school with the skills to navigate a globalised social and economic world.

According to Moeller and Nugent (2014), transformational intercultural learning occurs when learners are positioned as *inquirers,* actively discovering, analysing, and evaluating cultural content. In this model, the teacher acts less as an instructor and more as a facilitator, curating

meaningful learning opportunities rather than setting rigid, uniform objectives (cf. Allwright 2005). Teachers also play a vital role in encouraging a playful open-mindedness and guiding learners through critical reflection on their own cultural norms and assumptions, encouraging them to view things from multiple viewpoints (Little 2003, p.5). It is immediately clear how different this model of learning is from that associated with linguistic skill development!

Of course, many subjects within the National Curriculum offer learners an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate their own beliefs and values (e.g. the examination of different worldviews in Religious Education, or the reading of first-person narratives in English). However, language learning offers something distinct in that it *requires* the learner to grapple with cultural and linguistic differences at a fundamental level. For instance, learners of French, Spanish or Mandarin must choose between formal and informal ways of saying 'you' (*tu* vs. *vous*; *tú* vs. *usted*; 你 vs. 您) depending on their relationship with their speaking partner and social context. Thus, when learners produce the sounds, words, and structures of another language, they are not just acquiring knowledge, they are *embodying* a different cultural identity. As Byram (2021) puts it, this process involves a relativisation of what learners previously (and largely subconsciously) considered their natural language and identity. Through language learning they may begin to become aware that identities are culturally and socially constructed. This can be a deeply transformative personal journey – indeed, potentially a challenging and uncomfortable one. Language is a powerful marker of who we are and where we belong: changing how we speak can feel like changing who we are.

There is growing evidence that intercultural learning is highly valued by learners (e.g. Graham et al. 2016) but teachers report that they do not have the time required for the deep critical reflection that is characteristic of transformative cultural learning (Méndez García et al. 2004). In schools, there is a well-established tendency for teaching priorities to follow assessment pressures; if something is not assessed, it is unlikely to receive sustained attention in the classroom (West 2010). This presents a particular challenge for intercultural learning, which is inherently complex, nuanced, and difficult to reduce to measurable outcomes (Schulz 2007; Sercu 2010). While some have proposed using portfolio-based approaches to assess cultural understanding (Allen 2004; Su 2011) and the British Academy (2021) suggests a portfolio assessment at GCSE, such methods can be time-consuming and difficult to manage at scale, particularly in high-pressure curriculum environments. As a result, meaningful engagement with intercultural learning – despite its importance – risks being marginalised, unless thoughtful, practical approaches to assessment can be developed.

One possible way forward would be to adopt a portfolio approach not at GCSE, but at key stage 3. Over the first three years of secondary school, learners could gradually add to their portfolio of evidence of intercultural learning, which could then be certified in some way to give it weight. Sercu and Paran (2010) suggest combining portfolio-style reflective work with a variety of other assessment techniques including 'cultural minidramas, critical incidents […and] simulation games' (p.18). Another form of assessment suggested by Barnes (2021) focuses on pedagogical or 'dynamic' translation tasks. These enable learners to work together collaboratively and creatively in a two-step process: they first negotiate how to transpose the literal meaning of the original words, and they then consider the culturally embedded elements of the text. This involves deep critical thinking and understanding, promotes collaboration, reflects real-life language use and can provide a motivating sense of purpose.

Knowledge About Language (KAL) – metalinguistic awareness

We now turn to the third strand within the pluricentric subject of Languages. Developing pupils' metalinguistic awareness – the ability to reflect consciously on and manipulate language – may bring cognitive and motivational benefits for young language learners. The National Curriculum in England emphasises the development of explicit linguistic competence across the curriculum (DfE 2013), and there is both a growing need and an opportunity here for stronger links to be built between English language teaching and the teaching of Modern Languages (Forbes and

Morea 2024, 17). As mentioned previously, in a context of increasing linguistic (super)diversity, there are currently missed opportunities to acknowledge and draw on pupils' wider linguistic repertoires in the form of home and heritage languages, and thus to promote cross-linguistic awareness (cf. Jessner et al. 2016).

Evidence suggests that learning a new language can improve literacy skills and metalinguistic awareness in other languages (cf. Murphy et al. 2015; Forbes 2021). A European programme, *Éveil aux Langues* (Candelier 1999), found that when primary school-aged students actively compare languages, they develop deeper insights into linguistic structures and improve their ability to generalise rules across languages. Teachers across Europe more generally are actively encouraged to support learners in recognising patterns, similarities and differences across languages (Council of Europe 2020). Tellier and Roehr-Brackin (2017) illustrated how this approach can be successfully implemented in England with primary school learners who were explicitly taught language structures through Esperanto,[2] and made strong gains in metalinguistic understanding compared to control groups. At secondary school level, Sheppard's (2021) study encouraged pupils aged 13 to 14 to use all available language resources (home and heritage languages alongside those learned formally in school) to create and compare translations of short sentences in regular 'multilingual translation' tasks, developing cross-linguistic awareness. She found that pupils in the intervention group made significant gains in their ability to spot patterns in new languages.

Since an understanding of how languages are formed, and how they work, can support the learning of additional languages in the future, we suggest – again following the suggestion of Hawkins (1981) – that this 'language discovery' strand of learning be prioritised at primary school level, building strong foundations for any future language learning at secondary school and beyond. As argued above, a primary curriculum focussed on raising learners' language awareness and building transferrable metalinguistic knowledge would also resolve many of the practical problems which currently beset language teaching at primary school. Knowledge-sharing between primary and secondary schools at transition could then focus on the content and nature of the primary curriculum (in relation to knowledge about language) rather than individual levels of attainment in any one particular language.

At secondary school level, learners could continue to focus on building metalinguistic understanding whilst also applying this to the new project of developing expertise in a single language. There is, further, potential for a 'linguistics' element to the language curriculum to hold inherent interest for learners, as demonstrated by a recent study with students at A Level (Sheehan et al. 2021). In the English context, where uptake and retention in MFL courses have historically been challenging, fostering such engagement through metalinguistic strategies could help maintain interest in language learning.

Conclusions

The National Curriculum in England makes language learning statutory in key stages 2 and 3, reflecting the value of this subject for all young people. However, the full potential of language learning is not yet being realised! The expert panel in the Curriculum and Assessment Review (DfE 2025a) explicitly flagged languages as a subject that is not currently working as well as it could.

In this article, we have noted various current challenges faced by Languages in England's schools, including persistent issues of low uptake, motivation and attainment (Bowler 2020). We have highlighted the plurality of the subject discipline, and a mismatch between its stated aims and assessment content at GCSE. The National Curriculum's *Statement of Purpose* (DfE 2013) for Languages is highly ambitious, encompassing multiple aims, but only one of these (language skill development) is systematically pursued and examined. We have also problematised the way in which the current curriculum framework tries to fit all subjects into a common mould, despite the distinctiveness of our subject. The way in which communication in a new language has the power to relativise and transform a learner's sense of self is unique within the curriculum. Language learning is also distinctive in

that it focusses on skill development, in many ways more akin to learning a sport or musical instrument than studying an academic 'discipline'.

At primary level, we have noted many practical issues with language provision which undermine its potential, including: challenges with teacher recruitment, teacher development and expertise; the lack of a clear assessment framework; and insufficient dedicated curriculum time. The key issues with primary-secondary transition noted in the Curriculum Assessment Review (DfE 2025a) arise because of a situation in which some pupils continue learning the same language in Year 7 whilst others change language. This often results in a 'blank slate' approach where secondary teachers feel they have no choice but to deliver a curriculum that assumes no prior knowledge. At secondary school, learners currently experience three years of statutory language learning at key stage 3. For many, their language learning journey ends at this point with nothing to show for it, which must surely be experienced as demotivating and is a wasted opportunity. Lastly, across the key stages, we note that learners' home languages are not explicitly valued within the current curriculum. These home language skills – including, in some cases, literacy knowledge – can be seen as a huge, untapped resource, in many cases slowly withering through lack of cultivation.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review offers an opportunity to address some of these problems and to improve language learning in England's schools. Below, we summarise our key recommendations to the review panel.

Some ideas for evolution

Having noted the Expert Panel's wish for evolution rather than revolution, we would suggest some relatively simple changes that could be made, whilst retaining the overall architecture of provision. First, the aims of the Languages curriculum could be more strongly and explicitly formulated as encompassing intercultural understanding, 'Knowledge About Language', and communicative language skills, perhaps with different emphases at different key stages. We recommend that official guidance (for example, Ofsted's (2021) Curriculum Research Review) be updated to include an expanded vision of the 'pillars' of language learning, which might instead adopt the metaphor of a woven rope, including grammar, vocabulary and phonics as strands alongside intercultural understanding, metalinguistic awareness, strategic behaviour and communicative skills.

Second, there could be serious consideration of the ways in which the various aims of the Languages curriculum are assessed. At key stage 2, we suggest the introduction of a teaching and assessment framework focussed on building knowledge about language (how languages develop over time, and how they work) as a foundation for language learning in secondary school. At key stage 3, a portfolio approach could be used to track learners' cultural learning. Learners' progress in language skills could also be tracked and accredited in some way, with learners completing assessments on a rolling basis when their teachers feel they are ready for the next step. We suggest aligning this with the A1 and A2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CoE 2020). The Languages Ladder (DCSF 2007) offers a practical, existing framework that could be drawn on here. Such a framework could also open up the possibility of offering accreditation of language learning – in a wide range of languages – to older learners as alternatives (or as complements) to GCSEs and A Levels.

Finally, knowledge of any language (in oral and written forms) should be recognised as a resource that can support the learning of English and additional languages. The curriculum should explicitly place value on the learning of all languages, including those spoken in the learners' homes and local communities. At a minimum, schools could be expected to offer pupils, as a matter of course, the opportunity to sit a GCSE in their home and heritage languages (where available), to promote such opportunity, and to offer practical help and guidance in how to prepare. This expectation might create opportunities for schools to forge closer links with complementary schools in their local area and other community resources.

Two ideas for revolution!

Whilst we recognise that the Curriculum and Assessment Review is not currently considering a wholesale reimagining of the curriculum, we challenge the panel to recognise that, in the case of languages, a more radical repositioning within the curriculum is required. A distinctive curriculum model is needed for a distinctive subject. The current review creates an opportunity to recognise and account for the complex strands of language learning rather than brushing them under the carpet. Alongside the recommendations made above, we suggest two further, larger-scale curriculum innovations.

First, if the vision in England is truly for a languages curriculum that speaks to *all* its children, we recommend that the narrow requirement for learners to make 'substantial progress in one language' at primary school be abandoned. This restrictive demand forces schools to privilege whichever foreign language happens to fit staffing availability and creates an impossible situation around transition to secondary school. At the same time, it sidelines the rich linguistic repertoires pupils already bring with them from their local communities. Instead, we recommend unlocking time at primary school for the development of genuine language awareness: comparing, contrasting and celebrating the languages of children's homes, the playground, the local community and the wider world. This moves minoritised languages from the margins to the centre of school life, a clear signal that they are assets, not obstacles. This change in focus also finds a way around the persistent shortages of time and teacher language knowledge in primary Languages provision, as well as solving the problem of transition in a context where there may not be straightforward links between feeder primaries and receiving secondaries.

Second, if we really want pupils to make significant progress in a language at key stage 3, we need to recognise that it is a 'skill-rich' rather than simply a 'knowledge-rich' subject, in which the model of pupil progression is different from other curriculum areas. A way needs to be found either to increase substantially the amount of time allocated to language learning, or to redistribute the existing time allocation across more frequent but shorter lessons. In our view, this is particularly important early on, in Year 7.

Taken together, we suggest that the above proposals for both evolution and revolution would root languages education in the lived experiences of pupils in England's classrooms and give the subject the time needed for successful, transformative learning to take place.

Notes

1. It may also be noted that the annual *Language Trends* surveys, from which the above data are taken, are consistently based on a small, non-representative sample of respondents in which schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged populations are under-represented. Therefore, this key evidence base used to monitor socio-economic bias in Modern Languages is itself socio-economically biased.
2. Esperanto is a constructed language, designed by Ludovic Zamenhof to be a universal second language for international communication (https://www.genekeyes.com/Dr_Esperanto.html).

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