

Consolidating the evidence base for MFL curriculum, pedagogy and assessment reform at GCSE: An investigation of teachers' views.

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Background. Low motivation for studying Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and falling uptake of the subject at both GCSE and A Level are long-standing challenges in English secondary schools. Much work has been done, and is underway, to address these issues at a policy level, including: Ofqual's recent decision to adjust grading standards in French and German; the government's announcement of an ambition for 75% of pupils to take EBacc examinations (which includes an MFL) by 2024, rising to 90% by 2027; the introduction of MFL as a compulsory part of the Key Stage 2 curriculum from 2014; and current reviews of GCSE syllabuses and examinations by Ofqual and the DfE. Against this backdrop, to feed into the review process, we sought evidence from those most directly affected by the MFL curriculum and examinations: the teachers themselves.

Methods. We initially planned a project with multiple strands of data collection: (a) a national, on-line questionnaire for MFL teachers; (b) a pen-and-paper questionnaire for students in a purposive sample of 15 schools in three geographical areas (East Midlands, London and Portsmouth/Isle of Wight); (c) interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with pupils in the same schools. However, due to Covid-19, we were unable to complete in-person data collection, and so we present here only the findings of strand (a), our on-line questionnaire for teachers.

The teacher questionnaire was disseminated via our existing professional networks. We additionally relied on snowball sampling, inviting anyone who completed it to forward the link to others who met our inclusion criteria (i.e. MFL teachers currently working in schools in England). There were three main sections in the questionnaire. The first elicited background information (e.g. years' teaching experience; school type; location), including the school name, so that we could access publicly-available data on pupil demographics such as the number of pupils classified as having English as an Additional Language (EAL) or eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). The second and third sections invited teachers to share their views on (a) the MFL curriculum and (b) the GCSE examination in MFL, and what these would contain 'in an ideal world'. Each of the latter sections began with an open-ended question, so that teachers could give us their views freely and unconstrained by any predetermined options. There were then a series of closed items (which will be outlined below) to provide us with quantitative data.

Sample. We obtained 614 valid responses to our on-line survey, from teachers working in 473 schools all over England (Figure 1). Of these respondents, 400 said they work in the state sector (in 325 different schools) and 169 in the independent sector (105 schools); 45 did not state their sector. The views of teachers in the independent sector are therefore overrepresented in our sample relative to the national picture (since only around 7% of pupils nationally attend independent schools).

Based on publicly-available information retrieved from the DfE, the mean percentage of pupils attaining grade 5 or above in English and Maths was 48.2% for the state sector schools in our sample and 68.8% for the independent schools, compared to the national average of 43%. Our sample is therefore somewhat skewed towards academically higher-attaining schools. Similarly, the state schools in our sample had, on average, above-average numbers of pupils entered for the EBacc (44.6% compared to national average of 40%). Conversely, our schools had, on average, slightly below-average numbers of pupils eligible for FSM (25.4% compared to the national average of 27.7%) and categorized as having EAL (14.4% versus 16.9%)¹.

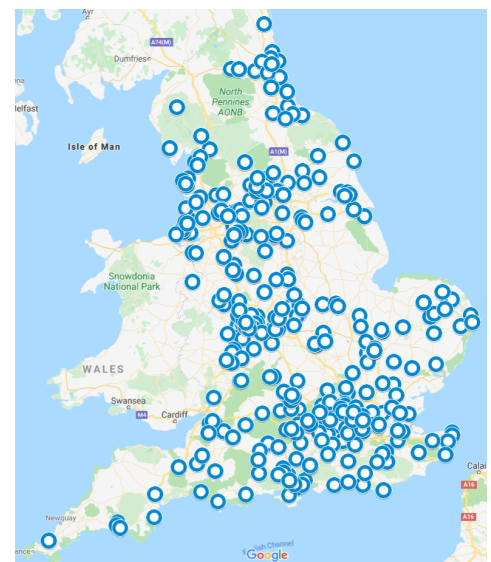


Fig. 1: Location of schools responding to survey

Key quantitative findings (I): 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. Table 1 shows the list of statements, in order of overall mean score (i.e. the inverse of their ranking: rank 1

¹ Note: figures for EBacc uptake, FSM eligibility and EAL students are unavailable for independent schools.

= 5 points, rank 2 = 4 points, etc.). This gives an indication of the overall importance which our respondents attached to each of these aims. In our respondents' eyes, the two most important aims of MFL teaching at KS4 relate to the appreciation of other cultures and an open-minded attitude. The aim of developing students who are 'open to and curious about the wider world' was also the item which received by far the highest number of first place rankings (n=144). Items relating to specific aspects of the target language culture (reading, watching video content, listening to music) were seen as least important. 'Accuracy of language use' and 'knowledge of the target language grammar' also received low ratings, with few respondents placing these in their top five.

I want my students to...	mean score	rank 1	rank 2	rank 3	rank 4	rank 5
be able to understand and appreciate other cultures	2.3	61	130	112	92	55
be open to and curious about the wider world	2.1	144	59	47	53	64
be able to carry out simple transactions in the target language, e.g. buying things	1.8	89	72	57	68	53
be able to have a simple conversation in the target language	1.7	68	91	67	52	36
be able to have a conversation about things that interest them	1.6	73	64	54	63	63
be able to express their own thoughts and feelings in the language	1.4	44	57	75	67	62
develop general language learning skills and strategies	1.4	54	45	56	65	85
be more capable users of language overall, not just foreign languages	1.0	50	30	42	31	48
have a firm grounding in the grammar of the language	0.9	14	32	58	56	55
be able to use the language accurately	0.5	10	19	23	28	28
be able to read for pleasure in the target language	0.2	6	4	8	14	14
be able to understand TV programmes and videos in the target language	0.2	6	8	14	26	1
be able to listen to and understand music/songs in the target language	0.1	1	1	4	11	18

Table 1. Respondents' ranking of 'ideal' curriculum aims at KS4

Key quantitative findings (II): Examination content. Respondents saw 9 statements relating to possible contents of the GCSE examination, and indicated their agreement with each of these on a scale of 1-6. As well as tabulating teachers' levels of agreement with each statement, we also collapsed these responses into two larger categories: teachers who agreed with the statement (selecting 6, 5 or 4) and those who disagreed (selecting 3, 2 or 1). We also calculated the mean response to each item. Table 2 shows the results, ordered by the levels of overall agreement (the grey-shaded column), from highest to lowest.

The exam should...	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Mean rating
	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree			
assess how well the student can use the language to communicate information related to their own life, e.g. personal information, their life in the UK				10.6	88.4	5.0
include tasks that assess the range of vocabulary learners can use and understand				9.8	88.4	4.8
assess students' understanding of the cultures of the countries where the target language is spoken				19.7	79.5	4.5
include tasks that assess how accurately students can use grammatical structures in speaking and in writing				22.3	76.9	4.3
just assess how well the student can use the language in communicative tasks for everyday situations, e.g. buying things, getting things done abroad				22.3	76.5	4.6
ask students to communicate about an aspect of culture from the target language that they have studied				26.2	72.6	4.3
include exercises that test specific vocabulary knowledge (e.g. gap-fills, multiple-choice items).				32.1	66.8	3.9
include formal grammar exercises (e.g. gap-fills, multiple-choice items)				34.7	64.0	4.0
assess the same kind of things that it assesses now				40.9	57.3	3.6

Table 2. Respondents' views on the GCSE exam

(Note: There were a small number of missing responses on each item, ranging from 0.8% to 1.8% of respondents)

Ranking the statements instead by mean response gives a slightly different ordering, but the following three statements are in the top four of both rankings: *The exam should assess how well the student can use the*

language to communicate information related to their own life; The exam should include tasks that assess the range of vocabulary learners can use and understand; The exam should assess students' understanding of the cultures of the countries where the target language is spoken. Conversely, three items showed the lowest level of agreement across both rankings: The exam should include exercises that test specific vocabulary knowledge (e.g. gap-fills, multiple-choice items); The exam should include formal grammar exercises (e.g. gap-fills, multiple-choice items); The exam should assess the same kind of things that it assesses now. The lowest level of agreement, by some margin, is with the idea of keeping the examination as it currently stands. Note, however, that all items, including this one, received a positive rating overall (i.e. more teachers agreed than disagreed with them).

Key qualitative findings (I): Curriculum content. Teachers were asked about their motivation for teaching languages and what, in an ideal world, would be the most important things for students to achieve by the end of Key Stage 4. (This open-ended question was asked before respondents were provided with the list of statements for the ranking exercise, to avoid influencing their responses). We received 603 responses to this question, which we analysed and coded into themes. Since many teachers made multiple points in answering this question, our analysis resulted in 2,532 individual coded responses. Of these, 89 related to respondents' motivation to teach. The most frequent themes here were 'encouraging students to value other cultures' (mentioned by n=30 respondents) and 'inspiring students to love languages' (n=30). A further 10 responses mentioned inspiring students to travel. These views are summed up by the following quotation from an experienced secondary comprehensive school teacher:

I love languages myself and want my students to love them as much as I do. I want them to open their minds and find out about life and ways of thinking in other countries.

There were also 2,430 coded responses relating to what students should achieve by the end of KS4. Three key themes emerged, relating to the development of: language skills (49% of coded responses); students' dispositions towards languages and culture (25%); and students' knowledge (22%). Within the first theme, 'Skills', most responses (42%) related to enabling students to engage in 'real world', everyday communication, summarized in one teacher's statement that students should develop the 'ability to communicate across a range of everyday situations – [the] ability to make themselves understood if they came into contact with speakers of that language or visited the country'. A further 40% of coded responses in this category referred to the development of the four language skills, with speaking being a particular priority for many teachers (14%). Smaller numbers of responses related to the ability to communicate spontaneously in unfamiliar situations (4%) and to use language creatively and independently (4%). Within the second theme, 'Dispositions', by far the largest category of responses (42%) related to the development of a tolerant and open-minded attitude towards other languages and cultures, summed up by the following quotation from an experienced teacher:

I think learning a foreign language is essential for being able to see different perspectives, understand better other cultures and so promote better global harmony. It is also a fascinating insight into the self: you are a different person in a different language.

The other dominant category in this theme was the development of students' confidence (23% of coded responses). A range of other desirable dispositions were also mentioned, including a desire to continue learning languages (8%), enjoyment of language learning (7%), enthusiasm for languages (5%) and resilience (5%). Turning to the third theme, 'Knowledge', the majority of coded responses (54%) related to cultural knowledge, with many clearly linking this to the development of tolerance and intercultural understanding. Also within the Knowledge theme are numerous responses relating to the development of 'Knowledge About Language' (36%), by which we mean an understanding of how language works – but also, as one teacher put it, a broader 'appreciation of the fact that other languages exist and that the English way of saying things is not the only way'. Finally, 10% of coded responses in the Knowledge theme referred specifically to vocabulary knowledge, with some teachers noting the importance of high-frequency and 'key functional language – not irrelevant topic vocab'.

Key qualitative findings (II): Examination content. Teachers were asked what they thought should be included in any revised GCSE exam (i.e. what skills, knowledge and understanding should be assessed). (Once again, this open-ended question preceded the rating scale items on the same topic). We received 579 responses to this question, which we again coded and analysed, resulting in 2,747 separate coded responses (because many teachers made several different points in their answers). The three largest themes to emerge from the coding were labelled 'Skills' (44% of responses), 'Assessment' (23%) and 'Curriculum Content' (17%). Within the 'Skills' theme, the largest single category was related to using the language for real world communication (23% of coded

responses). A further 56% of responses related to the individual language skills, with most weight being given to speaking (17%) followed by listening, reading and writing in equal proportion (13% each). As for the 'Assessment' theme, this refers to direct comments on the format and content of the GCSE examination. There were a number of subcategories within this code; we focus on those four which were mentioned in 10% or more of the coded responses. The most frequent subcategory was Listening (12%). Numerous negative comments were made on listening assessments in recent examinations, which were considered linguistically too difficult, inaccessible and inauthentic in terms of the tasks that students had to complete. This is summed up in the following quotation:

The listening exams are just too hard. If native speakers can't gain full marks, or languages teachers who have studied the language intensively have to re-listen to parts, then in all honesty, what chance do our English-speaking students have?

Several respondents also felt that learners should be able to control how many times they hear the recordings, while the issue of using video rather than simply audio was also raised as a better approximation to real-life listening tasks. The second category within the Assessment theme was 'Difficulty' (11% of coded responses). This code was used when respondents talked about the difficulty of existing GCSE examinations (without referencing a particular skill). In all but one case, these comments were negative, i.e. the examinations were seen as too difficult, inaccessible to many learners and therefore demoralizing. The third category in this theme we labelled 'Trickery' (10%). This contained a number of sometimes strongly-worded comments about the way current examinations (particularly listening and reading tasks) were seen intentionally to 'confuse', 'trick', 'trap' and 'trip up' students with 'deliberate distractors' and 'red herrings'. This was perceived as unfair and demoralizing. Finally, the fourth category in the Assessment theme related to the perceived inaccessibility and 'elitism' of current examinations, with too much content being reliant on a middle-class lifestyle and particular cultural capital that is not available to all learners, thus disadvantaging them. Finally, turning to 'Curriculum Content', the largest single category of responses in this theme (49%) contained comments on the topics covered in examinations. Thirty-six respondents believed that there is currently too much content in the examination syllabus, particularly given the limited teaching time available. A number of specific suggestions were also made as to which topics should or should not be included in the examination, but it was hard to discern a pattern in these responses. A number of comments did refer to target language literature (n=36), but these were fairly evenly divided between those who felt that this should be included in the examination (albeit often qualified by stating that it should be modern literature from the 20th century onwards) and those who felt that it should not be included. The second main category within this theme was 'Relevance' (32% of coded responses). Many teachers emphasized that the examination content needs to be relevant and interesting to teenagers, which was not felt to be the case currently. The following quotation from a mid-career teacher in a comprehensive school sums up this view:

I don't want to dumb down the study of languages in any way but frequently my students say to me 'When would I ever need to talk to someone about school rules, Miss?' They find some of the content in the current GCSE ridiculous. They want to be able to communicate with people their own age about things they want to talk about.

Conclusions. Given the key role played by teachers in planning and implementing an effective curriculum, we believe it is vital to take their views into account when making policy decisions. A dominant theme in all strands of our analysis is the importance attached by our respondents to developing students' knowledge of other cultures and a positive, tolerant attitude towards these – what might be termed 'Intercultural Understanding' (ICU). This emerges not only as a key aspiration in terms of respondents' motivation for teaching MFL, but also 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. Also important to our respondents, both in terms of curricular aims and what should be assessed at GCSE, were: language skills and the ability to use these in simple conversations and for practical, real world purposes; and the development of knowledge, particularly a broad vocabulary. By contrast, respondents placed less emphasis on accurate language use and the development of grammatical knowledge. They also saw less value in being able to access specific types of authentic target language, such as literature, music or film.