

# Content and assessment at GCSE: an investigation of teachers' views

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## 1. Background

In November 2019, the Department for Education (DfE) announced the appointment of an independent panel of experts to review the subject content for GCSEs in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), in French, German and Spanish. The panel's proposals were published in March 2021, and a consultation was launched at the same time on the proposed changes. The proposals included some major, fundamental changes to the GCSE examination, summarized in Appendix A of this document.

Research suggests that the successful implementation of any curriculum reform needs to involve teachers from the earliest stages, and critically, that it needs to be based on an assessment of 'whether change is desirable and whether the education system is ready and able to take on the burden of implementation' (Wall, 2000: p. 506). We therefore investigated teachers' views on the proposed changes, and present our findings in this report. This complements our earlier report on teachers' perspectives on reforms to the MFL curriculum, pedagogy and assessment at GCSE (Woore et al., 2020).

## 2. Methods

Participants (recruited through our professional contacts and snowball sampling) completed an online questionnaire with four parts. The first elicited background information about respondents: for example, whether they worked in state or independent schools; how many years' language teaching experience they had; which languages they taught. Then, Section A summarized the proposed changes in the new GCSE specification, and asked for respondents' views of the impact of these on their teaching, as well as on different categories of students (e.g. students overall; students with SEND; students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds). Section B reminded participants of the broad, stated aims of the MFL GCSE, and asked how compatible these aims were perceived to be, (a) with the proposed changes to the examination content as a whole and (b) optionally, with each specific change individually. Finally, Section C asked participants about the envisaged impact of the proposed GCSE changes on other phases of language learning (Key Stage 3; A Level; primary school).

## 3. Overview of respondents

140 respondents completed Sections A and C of our questionnaire; of these, 134 completed the first part of Section B, and 102 also completed the optional part of Section B. 112 respondents were currently employed as MFL teachers in England; 18 were previously secondary MFL teachers, but not currently employed in a school; and 9 were student teachers of MFL. (One person did not answer this question). The practising teachers in our sample were distributed all over England, as shown in Figure 1. Ninety of them told us that they worked in state schools (overwhelmingly with a non-selective student intake), and 27 said they worked in the independent sector (overwhelmingly selective in their intake). The length of time that respondents had spent teaching languages ranged from 1 year to 39 years, with a mean of 16.5 years. The majority of our respondents (n=115) taught French, while 79 taught Spanish, 60 German, 8 Italian, 3 Russian, 2 Latin and one each of Mandarin, Arabic, Dutch, Japanese and Turkish. (Some taught more than one language). Our sample included 28 native speakers of various languages.

**Figure 1: Locations of respondents' schools**



Image from <https://maps.google.com>

## 4. Quantitative findings

### 4a. Effects of the proposed changes on teaching and learning

Section A of our survey asked for respondents' views on how the proposed changes to the GCSE would affect their teaching of MFL, as well as the motivation and outcomes of different categories of students. Table 1 summarizes the key findings. There is a predominance of negative responses on each item, with the mean response always being below 4 (the neutral option): in other words, respondents generally felt that the changes would have a detrimental impact on teaching and learning languages. The distribution of responses is generally similar across the different items, although it is noteworthy that 37 respondents (over 25%) chose option 1 for item 3b: that is, they felt that the changes would have a particularly strong negative impact on motivation for language learning amongst students with SEND. The likely impact on students with EAL was generally considered to be lower, with 53 respondents (38%) choosing the neutral option for item 3c and 33% choosing this option for item 4c. The same data are presented graphically in Figure 2 below<sup>1</sup>.

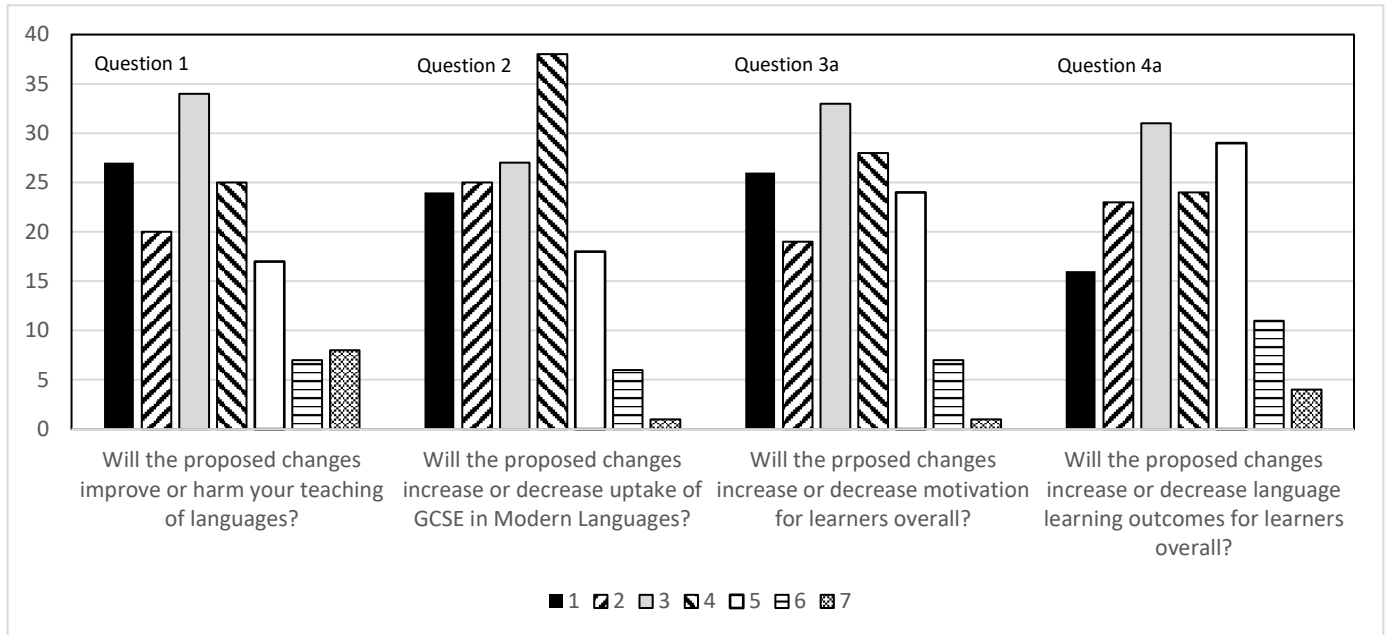
**Table 1. Respondents' views on the impact of the proposed changes on teaching and learning in MFL<sup>1</sup>.** Note: the grey shaded column represents the neutral option (no change).

	Response options (1=most negative; 4 = neutral; 7=most positive)							<4 indicates a negative response overall; >4 is positive.	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	Median
1. Will the proposed changes improve or harm your teaching of languages?	27	20	34	25	17	7	8	3.3	3
2. Will the proposed changes increase or decrease uptake of GCSE in Modern Languages?	24	25	27	38	18	6	1	3.2	3
3. Will the proposed changes increase or decrease motivation for language learning, for the following groups of pupils?									
a. Learners overall – on average	26	19	33	28	24	7	1	3.2	3
b. Learners with SEND	37	17	21	35	22	5	2	3.1	3
c. Learners with EAL	22	17	23	53	17	4	2	3.4	4
d. Socially disadvantaged learners	28	19	22	36	26	5	1	3.2	3
e. Learners with high prior attainment	25	19	27	37	15	9	6	3.4	3
f. Learners with lower prior attainment	22	21	31	26	27	10	1	3.4	3
4. Will the proposed changes increase or decrease learners' language learning outcomes for the following groups of pupils?									
a. Learners overall – on average	16	23	31	24	29	11	4	3.5	3
b. Learners with SEND	28	24	22	28	28	5	3	3.3	3
c. Learners with EAL	18	23	19	44	20	7	3	3.5	4
d. Socially disadvantaged learners	25	19	29	30	25	7	2	3.3	3
e. Learners with high prior attainment	22	16	20	36	21	15	6	3.6	4
f. Learners with lower prior attainment	24	19	28	26	29	6	3	3.3	3

<sup>1</sup> Note: There were very few missing responses to individual questions (ranging from 1 to 5 respondents) and so these are disregarded in the analysis of data.

<sup>1</sup> The response patterns to questions 3 and 4 are broadly similar for both (i) 'learners overall – on average' (item a) and (ii) individual categories of students (items b-f). For simplicity, only the responses to questions 1, 2, 3a and 4a are shown.

**Figure 2: Responses to questions 1, 2, 3a and 4a (1=most negative; 4 = neutral; 7=most positive)**



Finally in Section A, we asked respondents how well-prepared they currently felt to prepare learners for an exam based on these proposed changes, for first teaching in September 2023. Responses to this question were on a six-point scale. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the proposals have only just been announced, responses were generally negative, with a mean response of 2.5, well below the midpoint of 3.5. A third of respondents (n=46) chose option 1, indicating that they felt ‘not at all prepared’ (Table 2). 118 respondents said they would need new resources to help them better prepare; 110 said further training; and 86 said new textbooks. A subsequent open-ended question invited teachers to suggest any other forms of support they would need in preparing to teach the proposed new specification. There were 23 responses to this question, containing the following main themes (beyond those already covered in the closed questions): time to prepare (n=6 responses) and funding to pay for this (n=2); specimen exam papers (n=6); and more detailed guidance from the examination boards (n=3).

**Table 2. Respondents’ preparedness to teach to the proposed new GCSE**

	Response options (1=not at all prepared; 6 = extremely well prepared)						mean	median
	1	2	3	4	5	6		
How well-prepared would you feel to teach learners taking an exam based on these proposed changes, for first teaching in September 2023?	46	33	26	19	9	5	2.5	2

#### 4b. Compatibility of proposed content changes with stated aims of GCSE

Respondents were presented with the overall stated aim of the GCSE (Appendix B). They were then asked to indicate how compatible or incompatible they thought this aim was with (i) the proposed content changes as a whole and (ii) various individual components of the changes, 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 felt each component of change was compatible with the stated aim (i.e. those who selected 6, 5 or 4) and those who felt it was incompatible (selecting 3, 2 or 1). We also calculated the mean response to each item. A

mean of 3.5, the mid-point score, indicates a neutral response to an item; anything below or above 3.5 indicates a negative or positive response, respectively.

Table 3 shows the results, ordered by levels of perceived compatibility (the grey-shaded column), from lowest to highest. It should be noted that 89% of respondents answered this question in relation to ‘the proposed changes as a whole’ (shown in row 3 of Table 3), but only 66% did so for the more detailed aspects of the proposals.

**Table 3. Respondents’ views on the compatibility of proposed changes with the stated aim of the GCSE exam**

<b>How compatible is the stated aim with:</b>	<b>Incompatible (%)</b>	<b>Compatible (%)</b>	<b>Mean rating</b>
<i>There will be no prescribed Themes and Topics</i>	78	22	2.4
<i>The Assessment Objectives</i>	73	27	2.8
<i>The proposed changes as a whole</i>	71	29	2.8
<i>Students will be expected to undertake dictation exercises from short spoken extracts, with credit for accurate spelling</i>	67	33	2.7
<i>Students will be expected to know 1200 lexical items at Foundation Tier and 1700 at Higher Tier for the examination</i>	66	34	2.9
<i>Written texts in the examination will comprise the defined vocabulary and grammar for each tier; at higher tier, 98% of words used in texts will have to be from the defined list</i>	64	36	3.0
<i>Students will be expected to read aloud, using clear and comprehensible pronunciation, short sentences from the written form of the language and demonstrate understanding of them (for example by answering questions)</i>	64	36	3.0
<i>At least 90% of words selected for inclusion in the examination must be from the 2,000 most frequent words</i>	63	37	3.0
<i>The 2% of words not from the defined list must be glossed i.e. there will be no requirement for learners to infer or deduce meaning of unfamiliar language</i>	60	40	3.1
<i>Students will be expected to undertake role play simulating a context such as a social conversation where instructions are unambiguous and there are no unexpected questions</i>	60	40	3.4
<i>Spoken texts will comprise defined vocabulary and grammar for each tier which are delivered at a pace which is no faster than a moderate pace, where each word is clearly discernible, and which do not contain extraneous distractions or interruptions</i>	55	45	3.3
<i>Students will be expected to develop and use their knowledge of grammar throughout their course. The grammar requirements for GCSE are set out in two tiers: foundation and higher. Students will be required to use their knowledge of grammar from the relevant lists, appropriate to the language studied and to the relevant tier of entry.</i>	50	50	3.5
<i>Where questions are designed to test comprehension of written and spoken texts in the assessed language, these comprehension questions will be in English. Other types of question will be in English or the assessed language as appropriate to the task. Rubrics will be in English</i>	48	52	3.7
<i>Students will be expected to write text in the language in a lexically and grammatically accurate way, based on simple and familiar stimuli.</i>	41	59	3.7

Ranking the statements instead by ‘mean rating’ (the right-hand column) would give a slightly different ordering, but the overall picture would remain similar. All but two of the proposed changes received a mean score of below 3.5, and were perceived to be less compatible than compatible with the exam’s stated aims: in other words, over 50% of those who responded thought that these changes were incompatible with the stated aims of the GCSE. The proposed changes relating to (i) the use of English in comprehension questions and (ii) writing in a lexically and grammatically accurate way were the only items perceived to be more compatible than incompatible with the stated aims (i.e. having a mean score above 3.5), and then only marginally so. Under both rank orderings, the

absence of proposed topics was perceived to have the lowest degree of compatibility with the exam aims, and the following also received very low compatibility scores: the proposed changes as a whole; the Assessment Objectives; the dictation assessment tasks; and the expectation that students should know 1200 lexical items for the Foundation Tier of the examination and 1700 at Higher Tier. In other words, teachers generally did not feel that the proposed changes would allow the aims of the GCSE to be met.

Finally, we asked teachers to consider the impact of the proposed changes as a whole on learners before and after the GCSE years: i.e. those learning languages at primary school, in Key Stage 3 and at A-level. Responses were on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 represents ‘a very negative impact’, 4 ‘no impact’, and 7 ‘a very positive impact’. We also collapsed these responses into three larger categories: teachers who felt the impact would be negative (selecting 1, 2 or 3), those who thought it would have no impact (selecting 4) and those who felt the impact would be positive (selecting 5, 6 or 7). Table 4 presents the responses, ranked from lowest to highest.

**Table 4. Perceived impact of the proposed changes on other phases of language learning**

Impact of the changes as a whole on:	A negative impact (%)	No impact (%)	A positive impact (%)	Mean (< 4 is negative, > 4 positive)
<i>Uptake of languages at A level</i>	62	13	25	2.9
<i>Language learning at Key Stage 3</i>	66	8	26	3.2
<i>Language learning at primary school</i>	39	49	12	3.4

As before, respondents were more negative than positive about the likely impact of the proposed changes, especially with respect to uptake of languages at A-level.

## 5. Qualitative findings

### 5a. What exam boards should consider

Teachers were asked what, in their view, exam boards should be mindful of when implementing these proposed changes. We received 119 responses to this question, which we coded into themes. Since many teachers made multiple points in answering this question, our analysis resulted in 275 individually coded responses. Often, teachers simply expressed a concern, which by implication they wished the exam boards to take note of when implementing the changes.

#### 5.a.i Impact on practitioners

The most frequent theme – raised in 80 of the 275 responses (29.1%) – related to ‘impact on practitioners’, which was seen in a negative light. The most frequent themes here were ‘cost to schools’ (mentioned by n=22 respondents), timing (n=13), teacher workload (n=13) and teacher morale (n=9). Sub-themes included the importance of listening to teachers (n=7), the need for teacher support (n=6), the need to avoid a negative washback on teaching (7) and the fact that there had been too many changes in a short space of time (3). Several of these views are summed up in the following quotation from an experienced teacher in a state school<sup>2</sup>:

*More change at a time when teachers are already at full stretch; no need to change it so radically - especially now; huge cost at a time when budgets are tighter than ever; more work for hard-pushed staff; too soon after last change; it prescribes how to teach – reduction in creativity, likely to cause some staff leaving in view of more change – no consultation with MFL teachers.*

<sup>2</sup> Where illustrative quotations are given, information on the teacher’s background is provided where available.

### 5.a.ii Rationale for language learning

The second most frequent theme – mentioned in 79 responses (28.7%) – related to teachers' views on the 'rationale for language learning', that is, what they believed to be the purpose of language teaching and learning. Three key sub-themes emerged.

The most frequent sub-theme within this category related to the place of themes and topics in the syllabus (n=19), predominantly expressing discontent at having no prescribed themes or topics. As one respondent noted:

*They need to consider whether to stick with thematic topics and they will have huge problems making the exam wide-ranging enough with such a small vocabulary list of words which have come from adult corpora.*

Among the responses, four teachers alluded to the fact that having no themes and topics could lead to students in different schools having varying experiences, summed up by the following quotation from an experienced teacher in an independent school:

*Language is taught in context, which usually means situations or topics. By getting rid of topics, there is a danger that individual schools or adherents to certain exam boards begin to diverge in different directions. There does need to be some framework for content, otherwise the idea of "no unpredictable questions" is absurd.*

The second sub-theme within the 'rationale for language learning' category (15 responses) related to vocabulary, including concerns about the vocabulary lists (largely the choice and limit of words). Only one of these responses mentioned that a smaller range of vocabulary would be a good thing.

The third sub-theme (12 responses) related to speaking, expressing concerns about the lack of spontaneous communication in the proposed examination. These views are summed up in the following quotation from an experienced teacher in an independent school:

*I am appalled that there seems to be no 'general conversation' section to the proposed speaking exam, where pupils will have a chance to speak with a degree of spontaneity, using vocab of their choice that might come from outside the 'defined content'.*

Finally in this theme, some respondents mentioned concerns about: the lack of cultural content and the wish to see it included (n=5); the challenges posed by questions without topics (n=4); the emphasis on grammar, with this 'not being indicative of language ability, even in native speakers' (n=4); reading aloud (n=4), although one other response was in favour of this; the limited value of dictation (n=3), although again one respondent did mention this in a positive light; the target language being dumbed down (n=2); and the fact that students would not be required to infer meaning (n=2).

### 5.a.iii Student interest and motivation

The third most frequent theme – addressed in 47 responses (17.1%) – was 'student interest and motivation'. Most respondents felt that language learning should be relevant to students (n=17), i.e. interesting to school-aged learners, useful and relevant to real life, summed up by the following quotation from an experienced state school teacher:

*The proposed changes are treating the subject as nothing more than an academic exercise. Studying something for its intrinsic academic value does not motivate young people. They need to see a purpose in what they are studying and an application which matters to them. The ability to communicate in the language is very important to young people and for most, it is the most essential element, as this is how they see themselves using the language in the future, not to write essays or do written translations or grammar exercises but to participate in and understand conversations and therefore to reduce the importance of listening and speaking would be disastrous.*

#### 5.a.iv Accessibility

28 responses (10.2%) referred to issues which we coded under the theme of 'Accessibility'. Within this theme, we created a sub-code entitled 'equal access' (n=20). In this category, respondents mentioned that the changes would disadvantage particular groups of students, including the following: SEND students (in particular, through the use of dictation and reading aloud for students with dyslexia); students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; lower prior attainers (specifically in relation to grammar); and current Year 7 students. One respondent also wondered how questions would remain accessible to all students when they were presented in English rather than the target language (perhaps with EAL students in mind). Finally, within the theme of 'Accessibility', respondents were concerned about grade boundaries (n=2), tiering (n=1) and the importance of avoiding 'trickery' (n=5), i.e. not intentionally trying to catch students out in the exam.

#### 5.a.v Assessment

19 responses (6.9%) related to 'Assessment', including the need for clear guidelines, marking schemes, weighting and statement of rationale. In addition, respondents mentioned the need to see plenty of specimen papers, sample questions, and the vocabulary list itself. Several saw this as a matter of urgency.

#### 5.a.vi Other

Eight responses referred to the disparity between languages (i.e. with some perhaps being harder to learn than others). Finally, there was a group of miscellaneous responses that referred to disparate themes: accuracy versus communication; listening; role play; skills weighting; task types; the CEFR; Brexit; the Ebacc; NCELP; research; GCSEs in other subjects; industry expectations; dumbing down of languages; and the transition to A level.

#### 5b. Impact on A level.

Teachers were asked what impact, in their view, the proposed changes as a whole would have on uptake of languages at A level. (This open-ended question followed the rating scale item on the same topic.) We received 72 responses to this question, which we again coded and analysed, resulting in 110 separate coded responses (because some teachers again made more than one point in their answers). The two largest themes to emerge from the coding were labelled 'Preparedness / Gap' (n= 41; 37.3% of responses) and 'Student interest and motivation' (n= 37; 33.6%). The next most frequent theme was coded under 'Rationale for language learning' (n=17; 15.5% of responses).

#### 5.b.i Preparedness / gap

This theme was used where respondents referred to a jump in difficulty between GCSE and A level and/or how prepared students would be for A level as a result of the proposed GCSE changes. The majority of responses were negative. References were made to a 'big leap', 'harder transition', 'increase in difficulty', and 'disconnect' between GCSE and A level, where students would be unprepared for the latter. Within this theme, reasons given for the idea of a widening gap included: the vocabulary list; lack of spontaneous speaking; 'dumbing down' of the target language; no inferencing; less knowledge of grammar; and lack of themes and topics. A few respondents mentioned that there would need to be concomitant changes to the A level assessment. Only one respondent mentioned that the proposed GCSE changes would *better* prepare students for A level overall, and one other referred to 'students being slightly better prepared in the area of grammar'.

The following quotations (the first from an independent school teacher and the second from a state school teacher) illustrate the notion of a gap and feelings of unpreparedness:

*Pupils will not be taught to develop coping strategies when faced with unfamiliar vocab, won't be used to 'thinking on their feet' when replying to an unpredictable question*

*The leap between A Level and GCSE will be even greater as there is almost no scope for spontaneous speaking within the new speaking proposals.*

### 5.b.ii Interest and motivation

The second main theme referred to student interest and motivation (n=37). The majority of respondents (n=23) thought there would be a negative impact in this area. These negative comments included references to a 'more dry, dull approach' which would be 'far less appealing', such that 'pupils will be put off languages'. They also included more specific comments relating to: the limited vocabulary (5); potential A Level candidates being lost at GCSE (4); students' perception of languages being harshly graded (2); a focus on grammar (1); the lack of assessment of spontaneous conversation (1); lack of learning about target language culture (1); and the need for a joined-up approach between the different Key Stages (1). A further two respondents mentioned the low status of languages affecting motivation (which is not necessarily related to the proposed changes, but rather, a wider issue). Some respondents were more diffident in their responses, as in these quotations, the first from an experienced state school teacher and the second from a student teacher:

*Difficult to say. If students feel more confident and grades are more predictable, students might be encouraged to choose languages for A level.*

*We need a KS3/KS4 curriculum that helps to create a passion for language and culture that then motivates students to take languages further. Whether the new design will help teachers to create this kind of atmosphere in their classrooms is still open to question.*

One respondent mentioned that they did not think there would be any change to the low uptake of languages with the new proposal. Six respondents felt there would be a positive impact on motivation.

### 5.b.iii Rationale for language learning

Under the theme which we coded as 'Rationale for language learning' (n=17), four respondents mentioned that the rationale embodied in the proposed new GCSE is unclear. This view is exemplified in the following quotation from an experienced independent school teacher:

*Pupils want to know what they are signing up for, as do teachers. At the moment, the entire concept is very vague and abstract. This doesn't really encourage acceptance. Examples alongside the rationale are needed.*

Two respondents mentioned that the clarity of the proposed content may benefit A level. However, further negative comments related to lack of opportunities to infer meaning, lack of conversation, lack of themes and topics, the vocabulary list and questions in English for the higher tier. An example of these views is summed up in the following quotation from an experienced teacher in a state school:

*The skills required for A level, such as recognising cognates, word patterns, independent use of language, using complex constructions, dealing with unseen language, all seem to be actively discouraged.*

### 5.b.iv Accessibility

Here, respondents (n=8;7.3%) raised concerns about the 'dumbing down' of languages, and referred to grading and issues with severe grading. More positively, two mentioned that the proposals might result in 'levelling the playing field' with other subjects.

### 5.b.v Assessment

There were also comments coded as 'Assessment' (n=5; 4.5%). In this category, most respondents felt that, if the proposed changes to the GCSE went ahead, then there would also need to be some changes to the A level specifications. On the other hand, one respondent felt that the new assessment objectives would be more closely aligned with A level.

### 5c. Impact on Key Stage 3

Teachers were asked what sort of impact, in their view, the proposed changes as a whole would have on language teaching at Key Stage 3. (This open-ended question followed the rating scale items on the same topic). We received 65 responses to this question, which we analysed into 110, individual coded responses. The largest theme to emerge was 'washback on teaching' (n=47; 42.7%); second was 'rationale for language learning' (n=23; 20.9%); third was 'impact on practitioners' (n=21; 19.1%); and fourth, student interest and motivation (n=17 15.5%). There were additional codes for 'parity between languages' and 'accessibility'.

#### 5.c.i Washback on teaching

In the 'washback on teaching' category, there were 23 negative responses. Among the issues of concern were: reading aloud and dictation limiting creativity; too much focus on grammar; teaching lists of vocabulary; limited speaking opportunities; prescriptive teaching; and teaching time being cut (because of the perceived lower standard required by the proposals, meaning that a GCSE could be reached in less curriculum time). The following illustrative quotations in this category both come from experienced teachers in state schools:

*It will make the teaching at Key Stage 3 very dry – it will return to heavy teaching of single word vocab and grammar.*

*By having prescribed content, the conversation elements risk becoming stilted and impractical.*

Eleven respondents, however, were more ambivalent. They saw some possible positive washback effects, whilst also expressing concern that this might not be the case. The following quotations exemplify this view (the first from an independent school teacher and the second from a state school teacher):

*Difficult to tell – in some schools, they might use the time to do creative work before the constraints kick in, in some they might use it as a grounding for grammar. Some may carry on as usual.*

*If the exams get more approachable and the content more meaningful, there might be positive outcomes. What worries me is the heavy focus on grammar, which seems a bit out of context. Hopefully it will be meaningful and easy to teach.*

In addition, one respondent commented that it was hard to say what the impact would be until they had seen the sample exam materials. There were also twelve positive comments under the theme 'washback on teaching'. These related to: having a defined vocabulary and grammar list (3); freedom from topics (3); focus on phonics (2); using the NCELP scheme of work (1); more time for recapping (1); using authentic materials (1); and a focus on skills not content (1).

#### 5.c.ii Rationale for language learning

Under the next largest coded theme, 'rationale for language learning', most comments suggest that respondents had reservations about the proposed changes. The comments relate to what respondents felt is the purpose of language learning, mainly in relation to the lack of themes and topics and to the defined vocabulary and grammar lists. The following quotation is an example:

*What will be the topics? There have to be topics to hang the vocabulary, grammar [and] phonics on. The corpora don't include common words such as 'swimming pool' or 'bakers', so how would you plan a KS3 curriculum?*

Nonetheless, five respondents made positive comments related to phonics and reading aloud, themes and topics, and in relation to the choice of high frequency words.

### 5.c.iii Impact on practitioners

The next category related to the impact on practitioners (n=21). Once again, frequent themes related to cost to schools (n=4), including training teachers in phonics. The comments were generally negative. A few respondents felt concerned about the fact that teachers had not been listened to (n=2); too many changes in a short space of time (n=1); the burden of the workload in adapting schemes of work (n=4), particularly within a short time frame; the timing of the proposed changes in relation to the current year 7s, who have missed so much school due to the pandemic (n=5); and the negative impact on teacher motivation (n=5).

### 5.c.iv Student interest and motivation

The final major theme in this category related to 'student interest and motivation' (n=17). On the whole, respondents expressed negative comments or doubts about the likelihood that the proposals would enhance students' interest and motivation in learning languages. As one teacher put it:

*I can't see how this won't reduce the already reductive curriculum to almost nothing of real interest.*

By contrast, five respondents commented positively in relation to student interest and motivation. These responses mentioned: improving the perception of languages; liberty to select topics; and possibly a focus on culture and differentiation being key.

## 5d. Impact on primary languages

Teachers were asked what sort of impact, in their view, the proposed changes as a whole would have on language teaching in the primary school. (Once again, this open-ended question followed the rating scale items on the same topic). We received 56 responses to this question, resulting in 74 individually coded responses. Many of these responses seem to reflect on the state of primary language teaching in general, rather than relating specifically to the proposed GCSE changes.

### 5.d.i Language provision in primary schools

The largest theme to emerge, 'language provision' (n=38; 51.4%), referred to the current provision of language teaching in primary schools. A sub-theme was coded as 'inconsistency'. Apart from one respondent who mentioned the primary base as being 'solid', 23 respondents felt that primary MFL teaching is currently inconsistent. Respondents referred to the teaching as being 'not well established', 'basic', 'barely any teaching' and 'so varied', with 'little systematic teaching going on'. Amongst those respondents who felt that the provision was inconsistent, eleven also mentioned the disconnect between KS2 and KS3, as primary schools 'go it alone'. The agenda is 'not joined up', and so 'a new GCSE spec won't even be on their radar'. In any case, 'schools tend to accept [that] the language learned at primary might not be offered at secondary level'. A further nine respondents also referred to the disconnect between primary and secondary schools, where they work 'so exclusively already' and there is 'little correlation' between them. These sentiments are summed up in the following quotation from an experienced state grammar school teacher:

*Primary language teaching already seems patchy and inconsistent across the country. Students arrive at secondary school having learned different languages to varying degrees. It seems that Primary initial teacher training does not properly prepare teachers for L2 teaching. I have to confess that our KS3 curriculum does not take into account any learning from KS2. It is difficult to see how the proposed changes will lead to improved teaching and consistency at primary level.*

Thirty respondents in this category felt that the proposals would not impact, or would have little impact, on language teaching in primary school. However, one respondent felt that the disconnect would worsen, as secondary MFL staff would have 'no time for liaison with primary colleagues'. Another respondent felt that the negative impact 'could be addressed through effective transition, but [this is still] a long way off'. Another respondent mentioned that it would depend 'entirely on the set-up in [the] primary school and the communication

between primary and secondary schools. With no defined themes or topics and a lack of MFL specialists in primary, this could become worse’.

Finally, there were a few miscellaneous comments in the ‘language provision category’. Two respondents felt that there should not be any primary school language teaching. Another felt that the only way to impact on primary language teaching would be to enforce the language teaching requirement. One other respondent felt that primary language teaching could impact positively on uptake at GCSE, provided that ‘excellent compulsory language teaching were offered to all’.

#### *5.d.ii Washback on teaching*

The second largest group of responses relating to the impact of the proposed changes on primary MFL fell into a category of ‘washback on teaching’ (n=18; 24.3%). Fourteen respondents seemed very concerned about what they felt were negative washback effects on primary teaching. For example, there would be problems with: the curriculum being ‘too small to warrant any primary teaching’; ‘curriculum time being narrowed further’; the ‘dumbing down’ of languages; the prescriptive content; and the lack of clarity. The following quotations exemplify these concerns:

*A top-down approach for young-learner beginners will not work and be impossible to implement. Singing, reacting with some phonics heavily modelled by teachers and resources with good pronunciation is vital.*

*Basically these proposals seek to dumb down languages, they remove interdisciplinary links and content, they don’t prepare students for the real world. I expect them to have a very very negative impact on the perception of languages in society and on uptake*

*The notion of 1200/1700 items of vocabulary after 7 years of study does not place a value on the contribution which KS2 languages should and do make. Instead it devalues KS2 language learning which could well mean that in time primary head teachers vote with their feet.*

Two respondents, however, felt that there would be highly positive washback on primary teaching in relation to vocabulary, grammar and phonics. Two further respondents were also generally positive, but with some reservations. The expectation of positive washback is illustrated in the following quotation from an experienced teacher in a state school:

*There are clear lines of continuity [from KS2], for example, in terms of phonics knowledge. Equally, the explicitness of the vocabulary and grammar will support curriculum planning at KS2, KS3 and KS4.*

#### *5.d.iii Impact on practitioners*

Closely linked to the ‘language provision’ theme (section 5.d.i) is the category ‘impact on practitioners’ (n=15; 20.3%), which was the third most frequent category of responses to this question. Here, nine respondents mentioned the lack of MFL specialists in primary schools. Seven felt that the lack of specialists was another contributory factor in explaining why the proposed changes would not impact on language teaching at primary. Conversely, two respondents felt that, in light of the new proposals, the lack of MFL specialists would have a worse impact on primary language teaching. Negative impact on ‘teacher motivation’ was also referred to by three respondents. Two respondents mentioned ‘teacher workload’: one of these felt that primary school teachers would not have the time to make the necessary changes to prepare students, whilst the other felt that they would not ‘expect teachers to teach to an exam so far removed from the years they teach, and I would not expect their teaching to be very grammar heavy in early years.’ Finally, one respondent commented negatively about the financial cost to schools of adapting to the changes.

#### 5.d.iv Student interest and motivation

Finally, in answer to this question, there were three comments relating to the prescriptive content impacting negatively on student interest and motivation.

#### Summary

The responses of 140 teachers (mainly working in state schools) to our online questionnaire indicated an overwhelmingly negative response to the proposed changes to the GCSE examination in MFL. The quantitative and qualitative responses told a consistent story, with most teachers feeling that, if implemented, these changes would have a harmful effect on their teaching of MFL, on students' motivation for language learning, on students' uptake of the subject at GCSE, and on students' outcomes. Teachers also felt that the changes would negatively affect language learning at primary school, Key Stage 3 and A Level, and were concerned about their damaging impact on practitioners themselves – particularly in the context of various other recent changes to the teaching and assessment of MFL. Finally, the proposed changes were generally felt to be incompatible with the stated aims of the new GCSE examination.

We are aware that our approach to recruiting participants in the current study (including the use of snowball sampling) means that our respondents are a self-selecting sample, whose views may be unrepresentative of MFL teachers more widely. Nonetheless, the extent and depth of respondents' concerns indicate the importance of taking teachers' views into account when formulating proposals for major examination reform in a given subject area. Our view is that any major curricular innovation can succeed only with the support of the practitioners who will implement it.

#### References

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## Appendix

### Appendix A. Summary of the main proposed changes

- The following Assessment Objectives will apply to the GCSE:
  - A01 Understand and respond to spoken language in speaking and writing 35%
  - A02 Understand and respond to written language in speaking and writing 45%
  - A03 Demonstrate knowledge and accurate application of the grammar and vocabulary prescribed in the specification 20%
- Students will be expected to know 1200 lexical items at Foundation Tier and 1700 at Higher Tier for the examination
- At least 90% of words selected for inclusion in the examination must be from the 2,000 most frequent words
- Written texts in the examination will comprise the defined vocabulary and grammar for each tier; at higher tier, 98% of words used in texts will have to be from the defined list.
- The 2% of words not from the defined list must be glossed i.e. there will be no requirement for learners to infer or deduce meaning of unfamiliar language
- Spoken texts will comprise defined vocabulary and grammar for each tier which are delivered at a pace which is no faster than a moderate pace, where each word is clearly discernible, and which do not contain extraneous distractions or interruptions
- Students will be expected to undertake dictation exercises from short spoken extracts, with credit for accurate spelling
- Students will be expected to read aloud, using clear and comprehensible pronunciation, short sentences from the written form of the language and demonstrate understanding of them (for example by answering questions)
- Students will be expected to undertake role play simulating a context such as a social conversation where instructions are unambiguous and there are no unexpected questions
- Students will be expected to write text in the language in a lexically and grammatically accurate way, based on simple and familiar stimuli
- There will be no prescribed Themes and Topics
- Where questions are designed to test comprehension of written and spoken texts in the assessed language, these comprehension questions will be in English. Other types of question will be in English or the assessed language as appropriate to the task. Rubrics will be in English
- Students will be expected to develop and use their knowledge of grammar throughout their course. The grammar requirements for GCSE are set out in two tiers: foundation and higher. Students will be required to use their knowledge of grammar from the relevant lists, appropriate to the language studied and to the relevant tier of entry.

## Appendix B. Stated aims of the GCSE

### **The proposed changes begin with the following stated aims for studying a GCSE in MFL:**

*Through studying a GCSE in a modern foreign language, students should develop their ability and ambition to communicate in speech and writing with speakers of the language for authentic purposes and about subjects which are meaningful and interesting to them. The study of a modern foreign language at GCSE should also broaden students' horizons, encourage them to step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world.*

*It is important that students should be taught the language in the context of the countries and communities where the language is spoken. As they learn the language, students should become familiar with aspects of the contexts of the countries and communities in which the language is spoken.*

*This is because an appreciation of the culture, history, geography and working environments of these countries and communities is an integral part of a well-designed language course and is likely to be motivating and interesting for students. Such contexts will be referenced in assessment tasks as appropriate*