

Opinion articles

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Decline by Design? The proposed new MFL GCSE for England

by [Oliver Hopwood](#)

In this article, Oliver Hopwood, London-based languages teacher and Chair of the Independent Schools Modern Languages Association, supports moves to revamp MFL at GCSE. He calls on colleagues to engage in a long overdue conversation about how to develop a more engaging curriculum connecting language and culture.

Readers of these pages will be fluent in narrating the catastrophic decline of language-learning in England. But the protracted sense of alarm which has dominated discourse within the subject for several decades has not yet yielded a coherent roadmap for growth and vitality. For this we need two things: a sober, honest and unequivocal consensus on how we have got here, and an ambitious, creative, contemporary vision for the future.

In understanding the drivers of our decline, we must confront some uncomfortable facts. Yes, there are push factors which turn students away from our classrooms: a high-stakes and flawed grading system, Brexit, the dominance of the English language online and around the world, the decision to make the study of languages optional at Key Stage 4, and so on. There are also pull factors which attract students to competitor subjects such as History, Sociology, Psychology and Economics. But all of these push and pull factors are distractions, for they are beyond our control.

The temptation for policymakers has been to blame teachers. Time after time we hear that better teaching is the route to the success. But this, too, is a fallacy, and frankly an insulting one. Teaching is not the problem. Language teachers are not less competent or effective than teachers of other subjects. We cannot, though, as a national language workforce, inspire young learners with a curriculum which is fundamentally broken.

Those readers based in schools will understand that the subject marketplace is a competitive one. There is no mileage whatsoever in decrying the appeal of STEM subjects, and it is short-

sighted to conveniently overlook the enduring allure of other humanities subjects such as History. Across the land, students opt first and foremost for subjects which they value and enjoy. This is clear in research with pupils and parents (Panayiotou et al 2017). The appeal of languages needs to be so compelling that it outweighs the push factors which lie beyond our sphere of influence and trumps the allure of other subjects on offer in the marketplace. Languages need viscerally compelling ‘pull’ factors of their own.

And herein lies our fundamental problem. Wingate (2018) characterises the pupil experience as one of “lots of games and little challenge”. NALA’s research (2020), meanwhile finds that the topics in the current GCSEs alienate disadvantaged learners, echoing Coffey (2016), who asserts that utilitarian, touristic character of the secondary languages curriculum fails to resonate among students “who do not envisage a future needing this transactional capital”. In letters to the Guardian (2019) newspaper discussing the subject’s decline, readers complain of the “dreary subjugation” of language-learning to exam tasks and the “crashing banality” of language courses in schools. Curriculum is the problem. Meanwhile, young people grow up in a world in which they perceive – not inaccurately – that English is *a* or *the* lingua franca. There is a world in which translation technology is powerful, helpful and exciting. These are realities which we must run towards. Arguments about the ‘need’ for young people to learn French, German or Spanish, are shrill and unconvincing.

It was with a great sense of excitement, therefore, that I learned of the Government’s intentions to revamp MFL at GCSE. But I am bitterly, bitterly disappointed. What we see in the proposals is technocratic realpolitik which amounts to little more than managed decline. Languages would become the only subject in England where decreasing standards are achieved by design. It is an arithmetic curriculum which, as an advocate for languages, I simply cannot endorse. The art of building curriculum is the careful balance of challenge, intrigue and relevance, but on all three counts I find the proposals lacking.

Dörnyei’s influential model of motivation in language learning – the L2 Motivational Self System - reminds us that our motivation is broadly determined by three factors: whether we feel we *need* to learn the language, whether we *want* to, and whether our classroom experiences encourage and inspire us. In the anglophone context, therefore, a curriculum is not viable unless it directly develops students’ appetite and curiosity for languages through rich classroom experiences. For language learning to be successful, students need some sort of bond with the cultural identities associated with the language being learned.

In other words, the languages curriculum has to have intercultural learning at its very heart, not relegated to the ungraded curriculum. What is ungraded so often ends up being not valued, not taught or at best seen as an optional extra. If the cultural learning is worth zero marks, then it suggests to our learners that it doesn’t really matter. Yet it is through engagement with cultural identities that students can, in modern Britain, find the motivation to learn the languages which those cultures use to articulate their sense of self. It is simply not good enough to expect students to want to learn a language just because we say they should, even if they can be entertained in their lessons or be successful in conjugating verbs.

What the debate about these proposals reveals, though, is a damaging confusion about what we believe the purpose of our subject to be. And I say this not least because the actual lexical content on offer is in no way congruent with the goals espoused. What impact do we want to have on our students' lives? Is our subject principally about giving students some practical tools and knowledge for holidays and trade? And/or do we learn languages because a new language is a new lens through which the world is understood, a lens which delivers value in social cognition and cultural decentering? The proposals as they stand satisfy neither of those ambitions: this is a word list uncluttered by communication or culture.

This debate – measured, mature and open as it should be – is long overdue. But it is an exciting and productive one. I know which articulation of language-learning I believe in, and I know which I feel puts us on a viable, strong footing for the 21st Century. And we will need the courage of our convictions to be bold and innovative in turning our collective understanding of the purpose of languages into a curriculum we can teach and a classroom experience that our students will love. Merely serving up a lop-sided and curtailed vocabulary list, with extra lashings of grammar and 'phonics', will get us nowhere fast, and students will see right through it.

These proposals might still be the policy initiative that revives languages: but only if they end up being the moment at which we come together to more fundamentally update, enhance and reconfigure language learning in England's schools within a more courageous conversation about the future of our subject and about its identity from Key Stage 2 to HE and beyond.

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