

Opinion articles

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Comparing languages: thoughts on the new GCSE MFL specifications

by [Richard Hudson](#)

In this article, Richard Hudson, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at University College London and Fellow of the British Academy, discusses the proposed changes to the GCSE MFL qualifications in England. He argues that grammatical and phonetic comparison can demystify difficult patterns and enhance learning and hopefully renew learner and teacher interest in the structure of languages in the language classroom.

The official online introduction to the [consultation document](#) tells us that

"Our ambition is to produce a subject content that aligns more closely with the Teaching Schools Council's 2016 MFL pedagogy review and, in doing so, [to] ensure the subject content reflects research in language curriculum and teaching and [to] make language GCSEs more accessible and motivating for students."

One of the main conclusions of the [2016 review](#) is that

"An explicit but succinct description of the grammatical feature to be taught, its use/meaning/function, and where appropriate a comparison with English usage (eg when the new language differs in complex ways to English) is conducive to correctly and efficiently understanding the function and meaning of grammar." (page p10)

This recommendation gives a high priority to grammar, including grammatical comparison, but a recent [survey of the attitudes of 614 MFL teachers](#) found that they were more interested in teaching the culture than in teaching 'grammatical accuracy'. The survey didn't even bother to ask them about the importance of grammatical comparison.

Clearly there's a mismatch between the aims of the revised GCSE and those of a typical MFL teacher, so some resistance is to be expected. It's easy to understand why teachers are not

primarily interested in the target language itself: its pronunciation, its grammar, its history, its regional variation, ... After all, the content of a typical languages degree in the UK is heavily oriented towards culture and away from language, and since many graduates have not themselves been exposed to explicit instruction in elements of language pedagogy such as phonics, there is a risk that they fall back on teaching the nuts-and-bolts of the language that they themselves learned at school. Those who have studied linguistics may be more likely to welcome the proposed changes, but they're a small minority. Moreover, even if language teachers do have a more in-depth knowledge of linguistics, the majority are still unlikely to have compared the target language with English, so even the idea of comparing languages may strike them as meaningless – literally, devoid of content. If you had to compare English and French, what would there be to say?

And yet, at the same time, universities have departments of linguistics where you're quite likely to find a linguist whose research is all about the comparison of English with other languages, including those covered by the GCSE revision: French, German and Spanish. The problem isn't a lack of expertise, but that the available expertise doesn't reach the schools. What, then, could a linguist say to an MFL teacher to get them interested in the idea of comparing their target language with English? And how might teachers become experts in making such comparisons? Clearly this will take a major cultural change in university languages departments combined with a new generation of textbooks – and maybe even more changes in the exams.

Take French, and specifically, take the relation between spelling and pronunciation. In the new specifications (unlike the old ones), a GCSE exam in French has to include a short dictation, so pupils will need to know how to spell some words and how they are pronounced; and this knowledge will also be tested in the other direction when the student has to read out a short sentence. Both the dictation and the reading passage will be unseen, so they can't be done simply by memorising the answers.

How, then, are pupils to learn these links between spellings and pronunciations? One hypothetical answer, of course, is to learn them word by word, by drilling with flash cards and audio recordings. This approach may be encouraged by the new idea of a specified limited vocabulary of 1200 or 1700 words, which at least guarantees success for those who memorise the entire list (though even they will need to cope with the regular variations created by inflectional morphology, liaison and semantic twists).

But how realistic is this solution for most pupils – those with ordinary memories? Ideally, they learn the words, with teacher guidance, in context; but how many repetitions are needed for the word to become firmly embedded during classroom teaching? And the alternative of learning a list of ten or twenty items out of context as homework isn't easy either. Learning 1700 arbitrary pairings of complex sounds with complex spellings is really, really challenging. Maybe, given ample motivation, a pupil could manage it; but at the moment motivation is in short supply in MFL teaching, so the challenge is likely to be demotivating – a real turn-off for most pupils.

Brute-force rote learning, then, won't do for most pupils. The solution must be to reduce the brute-force by including generalisations. These are no harder to learn than a new item of vocabulary, and can make the learning of vocabulary very much easier. Stretching the meaning of *grammar* slightly, how might explicit teaching of grammar and language comparison help with learning French vocabulary?

One objection to explicit teaching in the case of French spelling is the relatively high degree of irregularity (compared with German and Spanish). But default rules are helpful even in the face of irregularities; and comparison with English is highly relevant because English spelling is at least as irregular as French, so exceptions can be expected and accepted. Indeed, the irregularities may even have a cognitive payoff if they encourage the separation of spelling from pronunciation – something that even linguistics undergraduates struggle with. Recognising that the spelling of *petit* is pronounced with just one vowel and no final *t* might be sufficiently shocking to force learners to think more clearly about spelling and pronunciation, with benefits not only for their French but also for their first-language English. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the general goals of teaching should be the ability to mentally separate systems that are distinct but closely interconnected, such as spelling and pronunciation.

Linguistics offers a very useful notation to reinforce this distinction, in which spellings are enclosed in diamond brackets and pronunciations in slants; so English <pat> is pronounced /pat/, and <box> is pronounced /bɒks/. Moreover, the spelling-pronunciation distinction is already very clear in the National Curriculum for English, which takes it a step further by offering the International Phonetic Alphabet for the pronunciations, giving <thought> pronounced /θɔ:t/.

At least examples like these make it crystal clear that the relation between 'graphemes' (units of spelling) and 'phonemes' (units of sound) is a complex one which is anything but trivial to learn. Even more importantly, this is an area where foreign-language learning supports first-language literacy. Learning the grapheme-phoneme correspondences for French is bound to reinforce the patterns learned years before for English.

Comparison with English will allow friends to be distinguished from 'false friends'; so <d> is a friend, because its pronunciation is pretty much the same in French as in English, unlike <i>, which is always /i/ in French (e.g. *ski*) but usually either /ɪ/ or /aɪ/ in English (e.g. *bit*, *bite*).

But English can be even more helpful to a learner of French because both languages have similar strategies for allowing letters to influence their neighbours. In English, we have what primary children call 'magic' <e>, which lengthens the previous vowel as in *bite* without itself being pronounced at all; but French also has an <e> which we might call 'magic' <e>, namely the one that prevents the previous consonant from being suppressed as in *petite* (/ptit/, contrasting with /pti/ for *petit*). And this isn't the only kind of 'magic' that the languages share

– think how a following vowel protects <n> in French (*vinaigre* but *vin*) and <r> in English (*hearing* but *hear*).

Maybe, given examples such as these, MFL teachers could be persuaded that grammar, including pronunciation, is interesting, and that grammatical and phonetic comparison of languages is even more interesting.

And almost certainly some linguists would be able to write good training material offering more of the same, and enthusiastic about doing so; after all, this has already happened in English grammar, thanks to the [Englicious](#) project, so why not in foreign grammar too?

All that is lacking is the infrastructure and resources, but there are possible sources for these too – publishers, exam boards, university departments, maybe even government. So there are reasons to be hopeful.

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About the author

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