

Opinion articles

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The proposed changes to GCSE MFL qualifications in England: the perspective of school leaders

by [Suzanne O'Farrell](#)

In this article, Suzanne O'Farrell, MFL Consultant for ASCL, considers the proposed changes to the GCSE MFL qualifications in England from the perspective of school leaders. The article examines the background context, their implications and unintended consequences for schools, teachers and pupils.

There is undoubtedly political pressure to do something about the take-up of modern languages at GCSE. The longstanding decline started in 2004 when disapplication of languages at GCSE began. School leaders are all too aware of the pressures of accountability and recognise that one of the key reasons behind the introduction of the *English Baccalaureate* (Ebacc: an accountability measure based on attainment in 5 core subjects which included a modern language) was to boost uptake of languages; this led to a slight increase in MFL entries in 2013 after the Ebacc's introduction in 2011.

As Progress 8 (a new accountability measure which does not mandate the inclusion of a modern language) took effect in 2016, MFL GCSE entries dropped again. It was easier for schools to score a higher Progress 8 score if students were entered for sciences and humanities to fill the requisite Ebacc entries, than MFL. Why? School leaders recognise the historic anomaly of MFL [severe grading](#) at GCSE, meaning that on average, [the grades obtained by students in MFL are lower by up to one grade than other EBacc subjects](#).

With the introduction of a revised Ofsted framework in 2019, entries have risen again slightly. Accountability is a key curriculum driver and changes to GCSE MFL entries are inextricably linked to the pressures it exerts on schools.

Another key principle to bear in mind is that of Ofqual's system of comparable outcomes, which was introduced in 2010 to guard against grade inflation. Comparable outcomes means that from one year to the next the grades awarded in a particular subject will be similar to

those in previous years (taking into account any change in the prior attainment of the students taking the particular subject).

So while the principle of comparable outcomes is in place, no change to the subject content or pedagogy will alter the outcomes (grades) in GCSE MFL (or any other subject). All this begs the question – whilst severe grading of MFL prevails and whilst the principle of comparable outcomes is in place, will these new GCSE content and assessment proposals make any difference at all to GCSE uptake?

The Department for Education certainly hope so, and in [a recent statement](#) a spokesperson said, “*The revised subject content for French, German and Spanish GCSEs will encourage more students to take up these important subjects, broadening their horizons and improving employment opportunities*”.

School leaders certainly want an attractive, accessible and motivating MFL GCSE curriculum, and appreciate the aims behind the proposals; however, they want to understand what these proposals will mean for their students and teachers in the classroom. At first glance, the stated aims of the proposals look appealing, however some of the detail is raising some questions.

An initial cause for concern is the timing; the current GCSE has only been examined since 2018 and given the pandemic, changes are continuing to bed in. Teachers are still developing resources, commercial materials have been purchased and curriculum development for all subjects has been a major recent school priority and investment - both in financial terms and professional learning. It would mean starting this process all over again for French, German and Spanish, putting them out of sync with other subjects and other taught languages in school – notwithstanding the time and money wasted.

The biggest change is the removal of all subject content (topics) which is replaced by vocabulary lists defined by the frequency of occurrence in the language (90% of words selected must be from the 2,000 most frequent words). This vocabulary list will form the entirety of teaching, learning and testing. Sounds simple? But it is precisely the simplistic and rigid nature of this proposal that could be problematic. How is frequency defined? The lists contain political, technical, medical, business-centric and literary words and whilst these may be frequently occurring among certain sectors of society, they are used infrequently by young people. A number of seemingly commonplace lexical items are excluded and teachers worry that the list does not equip learners with the content vocabulary to talk about issues that are relevant to them, nor to talk about themselves in any meaningful way. This limited opportunity for self-expression could have a negative impact on pupil motivation. A balance between high frequency vocabulary, basic vocabulary and interesting content seems preferable and would be a good starting point.

School leaders are already asking what this will mean for assessments. They and [exam boards](#) are concerned that the restrictive corpora will generate difficulties in creating assessments which are fair, valid and reliable. There are fears this may lead to a dull and demotivating language learning experience for pupils as they will be unable to answer questions about themselves (seemingly authentic tasks) as this will involve words that are not on the

particular list. Given the restricted vocabulary lists, assessment tasks will need to achieve a spread of marks to avoid a bunching of marks around grade boundaries; this may result in ‘setting traps’ for pupils by testing specific grammatical features in order to achieve this spread of marks. Amidst the pressures of school accountability measures and the stipulation of marks awarded only for grammar, vocabulary and phonics, schools will need to guard against overt teaching to the test at the expense of intrinsic interest and the implementation of wider curriculum objectives.

For teachers teaching and pupils learning languages [the main purpose of learning a language is to ‘communicate’ across cultures](#); teachers want something that encourages and inspires their pupils in the long term and [learning about culture is a major motive for language learners](#). Will a word list determined by frequency result in culturally rich and engaging specifications? Currently exam boards are required to have a theme covering culture, which means that in practice teachers will teach it and textbooks will cover it. Given the proposed parameters of vocabulary and grammar, it could be difficult for examination boards to develop engaging, stimulating and authentic cultural material, so the cultural content may end up being less intellectually engaging than at present.

There are some changes to the assessment that are welcome – the rubrics being in English, changes to the speed of the listening assessments and the principle of some carefully selected high frequency vocabulary.

In conclusion, the proposals represent a significant risk at a time when the subject is already fragile. Contrary to the desired outcome of broadening the qualification’s appeal, it may well narrow its appeal among pupils and teachers. There are many alternative ideas being put forward by language teaching communities; these proposals in the consultation represent a starting point, but not an end point. I urge a halt in the process and a more widely representative working party which includes practitioners, awarding bodies and other important stakeholders to come together, to evaluate these ideas, build on what we know works well already and develop in a rewarding and enriching age-appropriate experience for language learners in the 21st century.

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About the author

Suzanne O'Farrell has been ASCL's Modern Languages Consultant for 2 years, having spent 5 years as ASCL's Curriculum and Inspections Specialist. Suzanne now works with policymakers and schools in a variety of projects to support the uptake of languages in primary and secondary settings. She has recently developed a transition toolkit to promote transition between primary and secondary schools for languages. Before joining ASCL, Suzanne spent 27 years in secondary education and was headteacher of a large secondary school in Staffordshire for 7 years. You can find her on Twitter as [@ofarrellsuzanne](https://twitter.com/ofarrellsuzanne)