

Opinion articles

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When Learners Become Linguists: Content – Culture – Community. A Response to the GCSE MFL Content Review

by [Charlotte Ryland](#)

In this article, Charlotte Ryland, Director of the Translation Exchange at the University of Oxford, considers the value of creative translation in the context of the proposed changes to GCSE MFL qualifications in England. She proposes that the creative translation approach and engagement with a community of linguists can have positive consequences for pupil motivation.

The proposals for a new GCSE come at a crucial moment for Modern Languages. MFL uptake is on a negative trajectory whose course was set when, in 2004, it became optional for schools to offer languages to their students beyond Key Stage 3. When languages become optional, the question becomes: how do we motivate young learners to take that option? A more fundamental question underlies this: what ‘option(s)’ are we actually offering to students? What does it mean to choose a languages course in 21st-century England? My experience of creative translation has taught me so much about those questions, about where motivation comes from and what value and purpose we can and should attribute to the study of languages. At the [Stephen Spender Trust \(SST\)](#) and [Translation Exchange \(QTE\)](#) we engage learners in authentic texts through creative translation. Our experience over the past decade has shown that to motivate young learners, regardless of ability or background, we need to treat them very explicitly as language-users as well as -learners. And crucial to this language use is that it is embedded in authentic cultural content from an early age. By doing this, we stand the best chance of achieving what an MFL education can and should deliver: an inclusive intercultural education that equips young people with the communicative, critical and intercultural skills necessary for the 21st century.

Here I lay out the three key ways in which learners can become intercultural language-users, which I describe here as ‘linguists’, and the risks that the new GCSE proposals pose to this set of opportunities for our young people.

1: Meaningful content and intrinsic motivation

Fundamental to this learner-as-linguist concept is the importance of the immediate experience over any imagined futures. Whether it is future careers, future travel or (in the case of the new GCSE proposals) future assessments, MFL has become obsessed in recent years with a future-oriented and utilitarian approach to motivation. Yet the numbers opting for that future continue to dwindle. Instead, the focus should be on making the core content of the classroom experience inspiring, challenging and rewarding at the point of learning. Creative translation offers this kind of content, by engaging students in a cultural and linguistic process in whose outcome they are invested and which has immediate rewards. Research by Suzanne Graham, Robert Woore, Katrina Barnes and others confirms the inspiration and motivation that comes from engaging young learners in challenging, inspiring texts; while Barnes goes on to show that the real-life process of task-based ‘Dynamic Translation’ is motivating and confidence-building, enabling students to learn and practise metalinguistic skills while focusing on a communicative goal. Task-based ‘Dynamic Translation’ is defined by Barnes as ‘activities in which students become translators in simulations of real-world, communicative, creative translation tasks.’ Feedback from teachers engaging in our new Anthea Bell Prize for Young Translators has confirmed this motivation time and again, with poetry translation resources helping Key Stage 3 and 4 students ‘to understand why they are studying languages’ and generating ‘contemporary relevance and a space for creativity’.

2: Making culture intrinsic to language acquisition

But what good is motivation if the students are not at the same time acquiring language and learning to communicate? The area of the debate around the new GCSE proposals that I find most damaging is the artificial distinction being drawn between ‘language’ and ‘culture’. This is not a conception of either language or culture that I recognise. Our experience of creative translation shows us that language can be acquired and assessed through culture, and this is supported by research into how reading and/or translating authentic, inspiring and challenging texts improves MFL learners’ vocabulary acquisition, writing skills and grammar (Woore, Graham, Barnes, Carreres). We know that by using carefully scaffolded approaches, we can empower learners from beginner onwards – and their teachers – to access literary texts and other authentic media.

Creative translation is hugely flexible and can take any form, from a 10-minute starter activity to a day-long workshop. When we embed language acquisition within this inspiring, creative, collaborative process, an intrinsic motivation to decode and understand the mechanics of the language emerges: I want to understand what the adjective endings are

doing in this text because I wish to understand it, to make it my own and share it, not because we have reached the ‘adjective endings’ item on the curriculum.

This language-through-culture approach is present throughout Stephen Spender Trust (SST) and Translation Exchange education programmes, but my favourite remains a lesson that was co-designed by an SST translator and an MFL teacher in 2017. Seeking to develop an activity that would engage under-motivated Year 11 boys at the teacher’s state comprehensive, the pair co-developed a lesson on translating stories from the Argentine comic *Mafalda*. This exercise enthused the boys at the same time as teaching and consolidating grammar and vocabulary on the GCSE syllabus. [A full report of this programme can be read here.](#)

The next stage for creative translation is to build on the evidence that it supports learning and teaching and to look at how it can be used to assess the cultural component of a languages course. In a paper published this year, Katrina Barnes makes a case for using task-based translation exercises of this kind for assessment: ‘Why not present students with a DT [Dynamic Translation] task followed by a translation commentary exercise, in which credit is given for evidence of culturally sensitive decision-making?’ This is precisely the exercise – translation plus commentary – that has been ‘assessed’ by the Stephen Spender Prize judges every year since 2004. We know that this approach to translation appeals to a range of learner types, and are now exploring ways of giving that reflective exercise (currently the ‘commentary’) similarly diverse appeal. The cultural component of a languages curriculum can and should be assessed, in order to ensure that the resulting cultural capital is available to all and not just the privileged few. Creative translation shows us how it can be done.

3: Building a community of linguists

Young language-learners should feel part of a community of linguists which stretches through the generations, not participants in an esoteric activity that stops when you finish the curriculum. To achieve this, they need to do what linguists do – read, listen to and watch authentic media in other languages. Culture is the space where that community is founded and sustained. Approached with care and attention, it is also the space where language-learning can become more inclusive than it currently is. As well as the inevitable sense of community that comes from giving students access to authentic texts and the capacity to understand them, creative translation provides a coherent and exciting link between being a linguist at school, at university and in one’s professional life. Our Creative Translation Ambassadors and Translators in Schools initiatives support this link by bringing undergraduates, professional translators and pupils together for collaborative translation activities.

The GCSE Content Review

The new GCSE content proposals presuppose that to motivate learners we need to make them proficient at the systems of language – vocabulary, grammar and phonics. Aside from the major questions around whether the proposed content will deliver that proficiency, I am not convinced that it will motivate learners enough to reverse the current decline. By limiting vocabulary, removing authentic texts and excluding cultural learning and inclusive contexts from assessment frameworks, the GCSE proposals fillet out everything that powers the content, culture and community described above. They make the experience of learning a language subservient to the exam at the ‘end’ of it, treating students as takers-of-exams rather than as linguists.

In doing so, the proposals keep students firmly in a very limited ‘learner’ category, explicitly closing them off from the key skills and experiences that constitute being a ‘linguist’. They are not required to use inference or contextual understanding; there is no intense engagement with authentic or inclusive material; the restrictive vocabulary lists limit that engagement further; and refusing to assess cultural learning sidelines the value of that culture, making it an optional extra.

Those who lose out in all this are the students, from whom the opportunities of a rich intercultural language education are withheld. The GCSE proposals represent a dramatic change to the status quo and a partial view of the value and purpose of language-learning, with major risks of unintended consequences. The greatest of these is the likelihood that meaningful engagement with culture will disappear from the curriculum for all but the most privileged of learners: those with the curriculum time and school resources to make this ‘added extra’ possible. Our experience with creative translation shows that engagement with culture can be central to student and teacher motivation, that it facilitates language awareness and acquisition, and that it can be assessed. There is huge potential in this intercultural, linguist-validating approach to reverse the decline in uptake, and widespread experience and expertise to make it happen. The case has not been made that the GCSE proposals will ‘make languages more accessible and motivating for students’ (DfE), and here I add my own to the voices of concern and resistance that are proliferating. Rather than simply reject those proposals, however, it is time for the subject community to come together to build consensus on the purpose and value of language-learning. This consensus approach stands to make a languages curriculum more inclusive, and to develop new generations of inspired, skilled and outward-looking young linguists.

I am grateful to Katrina Barnes for endlessly fascinating discussions about the role of translation in the language classroom, for her groundbreaking research in this field, and for her conceptualisation for me of the distinction between language-learner and language-user.

Further Reading

Barnes, Katrina. 2021. '[Translation in the UK language classroom: Current practices and a potentially dynamic future](#)', *Translation and Translanguaging in Multilingual Contexts*, 7.1: 41-64

Barnes, Katrina. 2018. '[Reviving pedagogical translation: An investigation into UK learners' perceptions of translation for use with their GCSE Spanish studies and beyond](#)', *Translation and Translanguaging in Multilingual Contexts*, 4.2: 248-281

Carreres, Ángeles. 2006. 'Strange Bedfellows: Translation and Language Teaching. The Teaching of Translation into L2 in Modern Languages Degrees: Uses and Limitations' in *Sixth Symposium on Translation, Terminology and Interpretation in Cuba and Canada. December 2006, La Havana: Canadian Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters Council*: 1–21

Carreres, Ángeles . 2014. 'Translation as a Means and as an End: Reassessing the Divide.' *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 8.1: 123-135

Graham, Suzanne and Creative Multilingualism. 2019. [Linguistic creativity in the language classroom](#)

Graham, Suzanne and Creative Multilingualism. 2018. [Are creative or functional teaching approaches more effective in the language classroom?](#)

Lawes, Shirley. 2021. '[Foreign Languages](#)' in *What Should Schools Teach?* (ed. Alka Sehgal Cuthbert and Alex Standish, 2nd edn). London: UCL Press

Woore, Robert, Suzanne Graham, Alison Porter, Louise Courtney and Clare Savory. 2018. '[Foreign language education: unlocking reading \(FLEUR\) - a study into the teaching of reading to beginner learners of French in secondary school](#)'.

Resources

[The Anthea Bell Prize for Young Translators](#) (Queen's College Translation Exchange)

[Stephen Spender Trust](#)

Katrin Kohl and Creative Multilingualism, [Creativity with Languages in Schools](#) (2020)

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About the author

Charlotte Ryland is Director of the [Stephen Spender Trust](#) and founding Director of the [Queen's College Translation Exchange](#) (Oxford), organisations dedicated to promoting language-learning, multilingualism and translation. In both of these roles she works to engage people of all ages and backgrounds in international culture through translation, with a particular focus on bringing creative translation activities into UK schools. Charlotte recently co-founded the [Future of Languages](#) campaign, which brings together linguists from across the sector to develop and share an ambitious vision for language-learning. You can find her on Twitter [@charlotteryland](#).