Response ID ANON-69QK-TXX6-5

Submitted to **GCSE MFL subject content review**
Submitted on **2021-05-18 11:22:07**

Introduction

About this consultation

Questions

Personal information

1 What is your name?

Name::
Professor Neil Kenny FBA

2 What is your email address?

Email::
neil.kenny@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

3 Are you happy to be contacted directly about your response?

Yes

4 Are you responding as an individual or part of an organisation?

Individual

5 If you are responding as an individual, how would you describe yourself?

Description:
Other

If 'other' selected, please specify here::
I am Lead Fellow for Languages at the British Academy, and am submitting this response on behalf of a wide range of Fellows of the British Academy, following consultation with them; this is their consolidated response. It is distinct from the response of the British Academy itself, which was submitted separately.

6 If you are responding for an organisation, what type of organisation is this?

Organisation::
Other

If 'other' selected, please specify here::

7 What is the name of your organisation?

Organisation name::

8 What is your role within the organisation?

Role::

9 Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?

No

Reason for confidentiality:

Vocabulary

10 Do you agree with the requirement that 90% of words must be taken from the top 2,000 most frequently occurring words in the most widely spoken standard forms of the language?

No

If 'no' selected, please explain your answer here::

It is certainly a good idea to specify the vocabulary to be learned at GCSE. And word frequency has a role to play in establishing the list. But we disagree about giving word frequency this degree of weight in determining the list, because:

• Basic vocabulary, which might not score as highly on corpora-based word frequency but is fundamental to basic communication, should also be included.
• Word frequency includes in the top 2000 some terms (e.g. technical etc.) that are likely to be less relevant and interesting to young people taking the GCSE than some basic terms omitted.
• We know of no-one who has learned a language by ascending through vocabulary-learning almost entirely by degrees of word frequency.
• To the extent that it is used, the frequency principle should be applied flexibly in order to allow word-fields to be covered systematically; for example, all the number words should be included, regardless of frequency, as should the days of the week.

Further points:

• Different corpora (collections of texts) will produce different lists, and the lists could be very different depending on the genres and registers selected. (Variation between lists might not matter in itself so long as lists are publicized.)
• The 'words' to be counted are actually dictionary words ('lemmas') rather than individual word forms. This should be made explicit and it should be explained how irregular word forms and special uses are to be covered.
• A distinction should be made between productive and receptive knowledge of vocabulary, with a longer list of vocabulary items being established for the receptive skills of listening and reading. (More on this below.)

11 Do you agree with the requirement for foundation tier students to know no more that 1200 words and higher tier students to know no more than 1700 words?

No

If 'no' selected, please explain your answer here::

• We agree with the principle of establishing a realistic limitation, and a requirement for foundation tier and higher tier students to know a specified number of words, given the very small amount of teaching team available for MFL, and that a solid grasp of a small range of vocabulary is a better foundation for later learning than a flimsy grasp of a wider range of vocabulary.

• We would like moreover to signal our dissatisfaction with the very small amount of teaching time devoted to MFL in this country compared with many other OECD countries (OECD). We believe that languages need more time not only because of their importance in education but also for two other reasons which set them apart from other humanities subjects: learning a language involves the learning of a skill which requires considerable practice; and learning a language is emotionally and psychologically challenging, and especially so for teenagers, so teachers need time to build trust. (Dewaele and Thirtle found in 2009 that pupils' decision about continuing a language to GCSE level was strongly related to their degree of 'Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety'.) We recognise that increasing teaching time for MFL raises structural challenges for schools and for teacher recruitment, but the cost of not addressing these challenges will be much greater.

• As regards the standards to be achieved in the GCSE, we note uncertainty and inconsistency within the recommendations. They state:
o Para 5: "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."
o Para 8: "Students should be able to use the language they are learning both receptively and productively, in spoken and written forms, for a range of audiences and purposes, in different genres and in formal and informal contexts which are relevant to their current and future needs and interests, having regard to the likely experiences of a wide social range."
However we doubt that either of these aspirations would be realistic within the vocabulary limits that are proposed, within which learners would not be independent communicators, and would be hampered in communicating very much at all. If those limits were adopted, schools would have to explain to pupils what they could realistically expect to do with so few words, and to emphasise that GCSE is best seen as an exploration of language rather than as a major step towards fluency. In particular, the limited vocabulary would make it harder to use 'authentic' material in teaching, although its use was recommended in the Teaching Schools Council's MFL Pedagogy Review, and although it tends to be more engaging and motivating for students. This mismatch between the aspirations and the reality is likely to produce frustration and disappointment.

• On the requirement that "in the proposed new content, students will be required to demonstrate both receptive and productive knowledge of all words on the list": we would like to see a role for inference (guessing) to make language-learning more challenging and correspondingly more satisfying and interesting. Sticking rigidly to the memorised vocabulary, with all other vocabulary glossed, leaves no room for intelligent guessing; for instance, a child faced in writing with the French word chocolat doesn't really need a gloss, and might be able to guess the French for toothbrush on the basis of brosse and dent. So in addition to a list of terms to be known productively, there should be allowance for terms to be known receptively (perhaps in the form of a prescribed list of them) for the skills of reading and listening.

• The proposed vocabulary target for GCSE will inevitably impact on the curriculum for A-level and perhaps on expectations at BA level.

12 Do you agree that the vocabulary lists proposed for GCSE should set out all content required for GCSE, even though in many cases some of this may have been learnt prior to the start of the GCSE course itself?

No

If 'no' selected, please explain your answer here::

• We find this a strange question. After all, English and maths both examine at GCSE some knowledge that was probably acquired in Key Stage 2. Why should GCSE MFL be different? The question implies that transition not just from KS2 to KS3 but especially from KS3 to KS4 is not working for MFL. If that is the case, those problems of transition need to be addressed.

Cultural content should also be specified, in a way that is coordinated with the specifying of vocabulary and grammar. The DfE is asked to set up a working group to consider and recommend how to do this. Please see the detailed proposal for the remit of such a working group that has been submitted by the British Academy and supported by a dozen education and research organisations: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3308/GCSE_consultation_cultural_learning_proposal.pdf

13 Do you agree that cognate words (words which are very similar or the same in English and the assessed language) should be included and counted in the defined vocabulary in a way which reflects their frequency of occurrence in the assessed language?

Yes

If 'no' selected, please explain your answer here::

Yes, so long as the teaching explores the cognates and why they exist, thanks to change and to borrowing. In any case, cognates are always sufficiently different in pronunciation, grammar and meaning to need learning, and pupils need to learn to beware of 'false friends'.

However, this should be implemented in a way that does not disadvantage EAL students.

14.1 The revised subject content expects higher tier students to read texts that may include a small number of words that fall outside the vocabulary list defined by the awarding organisation. English meanings of such words must be supplied adjacent to the text for reference. Do you agree that no more than 2% of words in any given higher tier text that fall outside the vocabulary list defined by the awarding organisation, must be included in an adjacent glossary?

No

If 'no' selected, please explain your answer here::

The question is ambiguous: only 2% of words to fall outside the vocabulary list, or only 2% to be glossed? In either case, the limit is too low, and should be set higher than 2%. It should also be applied at foundation as well as higher tier.

14.2 All proper nouns (such as cities or countries) that are not listed in the most frequent 2,000 words and are not deemed to be easily understood, can be included in an adjacent glossary. Do you agree that such words can be included in an adjacent glossary?

Yes

Themes and topics

15 Do you agree with the proposal not to require overarching themes and specific topics in the revised subject content?

No

16 Do you agree that teaching and assessment will instead be informed by the vocabulary specified for teaching given that, due to its high frequency, this vocabulary can cover a range of topics?

No

Question types

17 Do you agree that, where questions are designed to test comprehension of written and spoken texts in the assessed language, they will be constructed in English?

Yes

18 Do you agree that all rubrics will be in English?

Not Answered

19 Do agree with the requirement for students to read aloud short sentences from the written form of the language and demonstrate understanding of them?

Not Answered

20 Do you agree with the requirement that students undertake dictation exercises from short spoken extracts, with credit for accurate spelling?

No

21 Do you agree that, where students are expected to understand spoken extracts, these extracts will be delivered at a pace which is no faster than a moderate pace?

Yes

22 Do you agree that, whilst students will continue to learn about the culture of the countries where the language is spoken, cultural content will not be specified or tested in the revised subject content?

No

If 'no' selected, please explain your answer here::

While we agree that the current system of overarching themes has drawbacks, we think it should be overhauled rather than entirely removed, so that cultural content should also be specified, but no longer in the form of overarching themes, and now in a way that is carefully coordinated with the specifying of vocabulary and grammar, reinforcing (rather than competing with) the learning of that prescribed vocabulary and grammar. The DfE is asked to set up a working group to consider and recommend how to do this; a detailed proposal for its remit has been submitted by the British Academy and supported by a dozen education and research organisations: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3308/GCSE_consultation_cultural_learning_proposal.pdf
Alternatives to themes should be explored. (Classics is currently enjoying a boom in popularity due in part to Percy Jackson.). Cultural learning should be included in the assessment, in ways that are appropriate to each tier of GCSE level (and that are very distinct from A Level). If cultural learning is not included in the assessment, it will be an optional extra that is taught proportionally more by advantaged schools.

Grammar

23 Do you consider the grammar annexes to be comprehensive, unambiguous and easy to understand?

No

If 'no' selected, please explain your answer here::

We have a number of concerns about the grammar appendices.

• There is no discussion of how the lists of grammatical features have been constructed. Unlike the vocabulary lists, they are not based on frequency in corpora, and they seem haphazard. For instance, why do the grammar appendices all start with the formation of feminine nouns? Is that really as important as the formation of plurals (which comes next in each list)? And how many words in the top 1200/1700 would it apply to?

• Given the importance of cultural learning, it is a pity that all three grammar appendices fail even to mention the important matter of 2nd-person pronoun choice (tu/vous, Du/Sie/Ihr, tu/usted), which gives some insight into the social choices that the languages require, in sharp contrast with English. The choice is especially important because it invites comparison not only with modern English, but with Shakespearean English (where the same choice still existed). This little area of grammar shows that different languages don't always express the same meanings.

• More generally, there is very little comparison with English other than mentioning English equivalents for individual words. The 2016 pedagogy review, which is meant to inform this proposal, recommends (6) that "languages teachers should know and build on the grammar taught in the key stage 2 national curriculum for English." and that teaching should include (5.4) "where appropriate a comparison with English usage"; but comparison with English plays a very small part in the present proposals. A particularly striking case of mismatch between the MFL proposals and the teaching of English is in phonics, where the MFL proposals use the term "sound-symbol correspondences" rather than the term that is established in the primary National Curriculum, "grapheme-phoneme correspondences". And more generally there is very little evidence in the main document of the grammatical terminology taught and tested in KS1-2, apart from the term determiner – and even this is undermined by the use of terms such as interrogative adjective for subclasses.

• The lists of grammatical issues are very traditional and show very little influence of modern linguistics. Each appendix has the same overall structure, starting with 'formation of feminine nouns', regardless of the needs of the language, implying a fixed overarching framework for thinking about surface grammar which was fashionable in earlier centuries but which is now discredited. To take a few further examples:
o French: "Partitive articles when distinguishing between parts and wholes; after jouer with musical instruments; after faire with sports" No mention of the fact that the 'partitive' article more often translates as English some or any, maybe because there's no convenient traditional term for these words.
o German: "Formation of compound nouns, including final word gender rule" No mention of the similarity between German and English, nor of the notion 'head' (which determines the gender) and its role in determining meaning.
o Spanish: "Infinitive used as a noun i.e., as equivalent of the -ing (gerund) in English." but later "Present continuous (e.g., estar + gerund) " Note the use of gerund for two different Spanish forms (e.g. hablar, hablando), justified by their equivalence to a single English form (talking).
We recommend commissioning new appendices to be written by grammarians. Better still, each appendix should cross-link to a website where the relevant grammatical information is presented in full.

• The main document proposes (para 18) that "the vast majority of lexical items listed as vocabulary will be single word vocabulary items (with their grammatical gender where appropriate)," Only gender? This conflicts with the appendix for German grammar, which says that some plurals will be listed in the vocabulary – indeed, plural formation is so unpredictable in German that plurals probably need to be specified for most nouns. More generally, the fact is that a great deal of grammatical information has to be included in lexical entries. Apart from irregular morphology (such as German plurals), there is a lot of 'valency' information such as the use of accompanying prepositions which has to be learned lemma by lemma. This is likely to be especially true of the most common vocabulary.

General

24 Do you consider the revised subject content to be unambiguous, clear and easy to understand?

No

If 'no' selected, please explain your answer here::

Although much of the revised subject is clear, there is a core inconsistency between ends and means (see answer above to Question 11 above), and the grammar appendices are muddled, which is potentially a source of enormous frustration for both exam boards and teachers.

SUPPLEMENTARY POINTS
We would like to insert the following comments to explain our responses to two questions above (for which there is no comment box):

Q18 (which we left unanswered):
This would need to be handled with great care, since there are problems in both directions. (Could the option of having rubrics in both English and the target-language be assessed?) Apart from the fact that this may put EAL students at a disadvantage, reading instructions and rubrics in English would put students in an 'English mode' (see work by F. Grosjean, among others) which doesn't help them dealing with French, German or Spanish. This may not matter very much if the whole aim is to test mechanical learning and memorizing of vocabulary; but if the aim was to test broader knowledge of the L2 (including an ability to draw inferences in context), mentally switching back and forth between English and the L2 would not be advantageous.

Q20:
This would create major problems of equality between languages, since the relation between sound and spelling is very different in French from Spanish and German.

It would create other problems of equality too, because it would severely disadvantage dyslexic students.