

# Linguistics in MFL response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence

**Submitted on 22 November 2024**

**About the Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages Project**

Linguistics in MFL is a cross-institutional collaboration investigating the feasibility of introducing linguistics into language teaching. The project was founded in 2017 and is led by six academic linguists (Michelle Sheehan (Newcastle University), Alice Corr (University of Birmingham), Anna Havinga (University of Bristol), Jonathan Kasstan (University of Westminster), Norma Schifano (University of Birmingham) and Sascha Stollhans (University of Leeds), in close collaboration with experienced Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teachers working in secondary schools across the country.

**Question 11: What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?**

The current curriculum and assessment system could be enhanced by a stronger focus on language and intercultural competence. In an increasingly globalised world, it is crucial that all children in the UK are supported to develop a global outlook, an understanding of cultural differences and diversity, as well as the means to reflect on their own linguistic and cultural background. We therefore propose an increased investment in the study of languages and a modernised Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) curriculum, which should

- Foster intercultural understanding: Students should gain insights into cultural diversity and differences, enabling them to navigate and appreciate global perspectives. This should include reflection on their own linguistic and cultural identities, creating a more holistic educational experience (Woore, Molway & Macaro 2022, Blow & Myers 2022).
- Move beyond a singular focus on accuracy: Current practices often emphasize "one correct way" of producing language (e. g. pronunciation), which risks communicating a distorted and biased image of complex cultures and societies, and it encourages learners to prioritise perfection over effective communication. A more flexible approach should encourage linguistic experimentation and practical fluency (Porter, Graham, Myles & Holmes 2022).
- Integrate linguistics: Incorporating the analytical and critical study of language—drawing on insights from linguistics—can deepen students' understanding of how languages function. Evidence from our work on embedding linguistics into MFL A-Levels (see Sheehan et al. 2024) underscores the potential of such an approach to motivate learners and improve outcomes. Even a short exposure to linguistics leads to increased confidence in the target language (Sheehan et al. 2021)

- Leverage technology appropriately: While technology is a valuable tool for language exposure and practice, it is not a substitute replacement for professional language skills and explicit teaching is urgently required in order to encourage its effective and ethical use. The curriculum should explicitly address this challenge, rather than ignoring it (Woore, Molway & Macaro 2022).

The assessment system for MFL needs reimagining to better support student progress and reflect the skills that matter most:

- Focus on communication and cultural literacy: Assessments should reward communication skills and intercultural competence, rather than rote memorisation or narrowly defined "correctness" (Porter, Graham, Myles & Holmes 2022).
- Recognise linguistic diversity: Incorporate tasks that allow for a range of accents, dialects, and linguistic registers, which better reflect the authentic use of languages worldwide and educate students about sociolinguistic variation (Sheehan et al. 2024; Stollhans 2020).

MFL qualification pathways should be restructured to inspire long-term engagement with languages:

- Broader language options: Provide diverse language options that reflect the linguistic realities of students' communities and the global economy, providing students with self-efficacity for further language learning (Graham 2022).
- Seamless progression: Design pathways that encourage continuity in language learning from primary education through to higher and further education.

**Question 12: In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?**

The current curriculum, assessment system, and qualification pathways in MFL present significant barriers to improving attainment, progress, access, and participation for learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Collen & Duff 2024) . Addressing these systemic issues is essential to ensure equitable opportunities for all students and to make language learning an inclusive and engaging pursuit.

MFL education is often perceived as the preserve of middle-class and private school students. Research such as the British Council Language Trends surveys highlights that participation in MFL tends to be lower in state schools serving disadvantaged communities. To address this, we must make language learning more relatable and relevant, which could be achieved by:

- Incorporating linguistics as a leveller: In our own research (see Sheehan et al. 2024; Havinga et al. 2024), teachers have identified the potential of linguistics as a tool to engage students by encouraging critical discussions about language. Students already hold opinions about language, and integrating linguistics into the curriculum can make MFL more appealing by connecting it to their lived experiences and cultural realities.

- Highlighting the relevance of, and incorporating, community languages: Linguistics offers a framework to show the importance of languages beyond those traditionally taught in schools. By valuing community and heritage languages, we can make language education more inclusive and relatable (Sheehan et al. 2023).

Native and heritage speakers in classrooms are often underserved by the current MFL system. Key challenges include:

- Limited teacher training: Many teachers lack the knowledge to support students who speak a language other than English at home but may not be proficient in academic or written registers. Educating teachers about linguistic diversity and registers can help integrate native speakers more effectively (Lightfoot 2023).
- University entry barriers: Prestigious universities often do not accept qualifications in heritage or native languages for their courses. This policy undermines the value of these students' linguistic assets and discourages their engagement with language learning (Fahim, Kim & Eppler 2024).

Overall, ensuring that languages are perceived as accessible to all requires curricula that celebrate linguistic diversity and connect languages to real-world opportunities. This can be achieved through partnerships with universities and community organisations to highlight the broader applications of language skills (Sheehan et al. 2023).

**Question 13: In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other protected characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity)?**

As noted above, ethnicities speaking community languages other than British English can experience barriers in language education. The current assessment system favours one specific variety of language and considers that one variety as the *only* "correct" version of the language (e.g. Parisian French rather than French varieties used in Africa, see Stollhans 2021). In some cases, students using non-dominant language varieties are barred from learning their native languages because they speak them, even though they may only be able to use that language in a particular register (informal) or medium (spoken).

Linguistics can break down such barriers by valuing all varieties of a language, without judging them. This, in turn, can lead to a inclusive learning environment for all pupils, irrespective of their background.

**Question 14: In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?**

Learners with SEND are often taken out of language classes. This seems to be partly due to a confusion between literacy and language learning, despite studies showing that there is no impediment to learning languages for people with dyslexia or people on the autism spectrum as long as teachers are adequately trained, see for example (Venagli and Kupisch 2024).

**Question 22: Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects where: a. there is too much content; not enough content, or content is missing; b. the content is out-of-date; c. the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy); d. there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)? Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate.**

There is currently too much content in the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) curriculum at GCSE and A level, and in many parts the content feels rather traditional and mundane, which does not make it appealing to young people and relatable to their lived realities. The curriculum needs modernising, with a focus on intercultural competent, technology and language awareness. Topics and assessment task need to be relatable and encourage learners to reflect on their own linguistic and cultural identities, whilst broadening their horizons and developing critical and analytical skills as well as empathy and understanding (Sheehan et al. 2024).

The current curriculum lends itself to such an approach but would need to be refreshed. Adding a linguistics component (i.e. opportunities to critically reflect on language itself) would. The current A-level topics, for instance, all invite but currently lack linguistic reflection. Topics such as family, multiculturalism, regional identity, cyberspace and discrimination could be significantly enhanced by the addition of linguistics; examples of what this might look like and how teachers view this can be found in Sheehan et al. 2024.

A final point is that languages stand out as the only discipline at GCSE and A level which is assessed almost exclusively as a practical skill. Compare Physical Education and Music which involve theoretical and creative components. This is likely to be one of the reasons that languages are not more popular: the practical skill required is difficult to master with limited contact time (Milton 2022), while the content of lessons is, overall, dull and uninspiring (Sheehan et al. 2024).

**Questions 23 & 24: Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society? To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about and respect others? Are there elements that could be improved?**

The current curriculum, particularly in the realm of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), holds significant untapped potential to foster positive engagement, cultural knowledge, and respect for others (Barany 2016). However, it falls short in certain areas that could be improved to better achieve these aims.

Language learning inherently provides an opportunity for students to access diverse cultural perspectives and develop empathy by engaging with ways of life different from their own. This positions MFL education as a critical tool for promoting inclusivity and dismantling stereotypes. However, the curriculum often fails to leverage this potential effectively. For example, linguistic and cultural representations in language textbooks can sometimes be oversimplified or even stereotypical - such as depicting Germans solely in traditional attire like Dirndl and Lederhosen, or only focussing on the Spanish spoken in parts of Spain. These portrayals, while well-

intentioned, risk reinforcing outdated perceptions rather than fostering a genuine appreciation for the complexity and diversity of modern cultures.

A more inclusive and authentic approach to teaching languages and cultures – emphasising contemporary life and diverse voices – would make language learning more engaging and socially impactful. Incorporating real-world materials could help achieve this.

The curriculum also overlooks a critical dimension of respect and engagement: linguistic discrimination. Discrimination based on someone's language use or accent remains one of the last broadly accepted forms of prejudice, manifesting in negative attitudes toward regional dialects, sociolects, and non-standard forms of speech. MFL education could help counter this by incorporating elements of linguistics, such as language variation and descriptivism, into the curriculum. Teaching students about the richness and legitimacy of linguistic diversity, both within and beyond the target language, would not only enrich their understanding of language itself but also foster respect for speakers of all dialects and accents (Stollhans 2020; Porter et al. 2022).

Another significant barrier to the success of MFL education lies in the structure and content of language qualifications, such as the GCSEs. Current assessments often prioritise rote memorization and rigid grammatical structures over authentic communication. Students report finding this approach uninspiring, with little connection to practical language use or cultural immersion. Revisions to the qualifications to include a greater focus on meaningful, real-world communication could enhance both student motivation and the broader aims of the curriculum.

**Question 26: In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?**

There are two issues regarding this aspect when it comes to language learning. Firstly, there is no focus on self-efficacy, so students lack the skills to learn languages independently after completing school (Graham 2022). Secondly, the aim of language proficiency at the end of GCSE is too low for students to use languages in life and work.

The inclusion of linguistics in MFL teaching helps to understand different languages and language learning (e.g. language variation and change), which makes language learning more accessible and relatable, and help students learn further languages. Linguistics can also contribute to the proficiency in one particular language as pupils learn to find patterns, understand rules, and, therefore, retain their proficiency, rather than learning language chunks by heart (Havinga et al. 2024).

Question 27: In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?

What has been noted in response to Question 26 applies here too. Studies have found that language learners do not necessarily have the right language skills needed in professional contexts as these learners often lack the analytical and critical study of language (Davie 2022). As noted above, linguistics can add this component to language learning.

**Question 32: [Our analysis of curriculum subject trends over time (published alongside this document) has shown that while many subject areas are thriving and take-up is growing, take-up of some subjects has declined over time. Of course, this is not necessarily a problem: these changes may reflect policy directions or other social trends, or they may reflect changes in policy and accountability measures over time.]**
**Do you have any explanations for the trends outlined in the analysis and/or suggestions to address any that might be of concern?**

Languages stopped being compulsory at key stage four (years 10 and 11) in 2004. Since then, the number of students taking a language at GCSE and A-level has fallen significantly. Due to harsh grading, the aforementioned lack of diversity, and an uninspired curriculum, languages are often mistakenly perceived to be hard high-stake subjects (Stollhans 2024). In addition, the lack of language learning in schools leads to a lack of language graduates and therefore a shortage of qualified language teachers.

These narratives need to be changed and language learning should be inspiring and rewarding experience. Our recommendation would be to make languages compulsory again as they are a key component of a well-rounded education. In this context, we also recommend reinforcing the original goals of the EBacc and highlight the crucial role of languages in achieving these.

**Question 40: What more can we do to ensure that: a) the assessment requirements for GCSEs capture and support the development of knowledge and skills of every young person; and b) young people's wellbeing is effectively considered when assessments are developed, giving pupils the best chance to show what they can do to support their progression?**

Current assessments often prioritise rote memorization and rigid grammatical structures over authentic communication. This makes assessments uninspiring and inauthentic. The use of single examinations, including short oral examinations, as opposed to continuous assessments creates a high-stake environment, in which teaching focusses on assessments rather than learning opportunities ('teaching to the test').

The current assessment system favours one specific variety of language and considers that one variety as the only "correct" version of the language (e.g. Parisian French rather than French varieties used in Africa, see Stollhans 2020: https://www.lspjournal.com/post/linguistic-variation-in-language-learning-classrooms). ). In some cases, students using non-dominant language varieties are barred from learning their native languages because they speak them, even though they may only be able to use that language in a particular register (informal) or medium (spoken).

**Question 41: Are there particular GCSE subjects where changes could be made to the qualification content and/or assessment that would be beneficial for pupils' learning? While pupils are currently not formally assessed at key stage 3, there are concerns and some evidence that some pupils make little progress in key areas at this key stage.**

Harsh grading in languages should be addressed as this may impact students' motivation to take the subjects. There also needs to be a shift away from the 'teaching to the test' culture to help enthuse pupils instead of putting them off choosing valuable subjects.

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**To find out more, read our "Manifesto for linguistics in language teaching in the UK context" and take a look at our recent and forthcoming publications:**


- Sheehan, Michelle, Alice Corr, Anna D. Havinga, Jonathan R. Kasstan, and Norma Schifano 2021. 'Rethinking the UK languages curriculum: Arguments for the inclusion of linguistics' . *Modern Languages Open,* 1: 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.368
- Sheehan, Michelle, Anna D. Havinga, Jonathan R. Kasstan, Sascha Stollhans, Alice Corr and Peter Gillman. 2024. 'Teacher perspectives on the introduction of linguistics in the languages classroom: Evidence from a co-creation project on French, German and Spanish'. *British Educational Research Journal,* 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4009
- Havinga, Anna D., Stollhans, Sascha, Corr, Alice, Kasstan, Jonathan R., Schifano, Norma, Sheehan, Michelle. 2024. 'Addressing the UK's 'language crisis': moving beyond skills-based language teaching through the inclusion of linguistics in secondary education'. *Languages, Society and Policy.*
- Sheehan, Michelle, Alice Corr, Anna D. Havinga, Jonathan R. Kasstan, Norma Schifano and Sascha Stollhans. Forthcoming. 'Languages teaching needs languages science: A manifesto for linguistics and language teaching in the United Kingdom' in Humanities Forward: Opportunity, Innovation, Policy in the 21st Century, ed. by Stephan Nitu and Arlene Holmes-Henderson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press)


