



National Association of Language Advisers

National Association of Language Advisers (NALA) survey: **The languages curriculum and disadvantaged students**

Executive summary

October 2020





National Association of Language Advisers

Executive summary of the report on the NALA survey investigating the opinions of language education professionals on the impact of the MFL curriculum, and in particular the GCSE examination, on disadvantaged pupils.

Why NALA carried out the survey

The link between poorer outcomes in languages and lower uptake of languages for those who are socio-economically disadvantaged has been well documented for many years through annual surveys such as Language Trends.

NALA welcomed these reports but members were still expressing concern about the curriculum itself and particularly GCSE. Members regularly reported examples of the further disadvantaging of those already disadvantaged. As a result, NALA decided to investigate the past two years of GCSE papers, particularly speaking and writing test questions. We looked at GCSE because this curriculum content often determines the contexts for learning at key stage 4 and, by implication, at key stage 3. We found that many questions asked for responses based on candidates' personal experience.

This initial research revealed that questions about holidays, family relationships, descriptions of a student's house, restaurant visits, and live events were potentially problematic for vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils. NALA wanted to find out if other language professionals felt that such tasks could disadvantage specific groups of students.

Survey responses

The survey received 556 responses from language teachers, consultants, advisers, teacher trainers, and trainee teachers. In all there were 1734 extended responses explaining the opinions given. In the full report NALA has tried to let these comments speak for themselves and has included a representative sample to illustrate teachers' views.

The responses came from across the UK with the significant majority of answers from England. 94% of respondents were teachers currently working in secondary schools.

What teachers said about school contexts and the languages curriculum

- 85.2% of respondents said that the socio-economic background of some, many or the majority of the students they teach would adversely affect examination outcomes.
- A number of teachers explained that the background of the students often meant these young people had little personal experience on which to base their answers to examination questions. Many explained that it was not a simple issue of not having any experience to draw on but that the personal nature of tasks could be distressing for students.
- Examination questions often mistakenly assume that students have "cultural capital".

"The topics centred around holidays, aspirations, work and volunteering need lots of background teaching as some pupils don't know about gap years or a wide variety of careers. They also don't recognise lots of other places for tourism, for example why people go on holiday to the south of France."

- Colleagues, in particularly disadvantaged areas, felt that they had to cover these contexts, as well as the languages curriculum, thus eating into valuable teaching time for many disadvantaged students.
- Some teachers' comments referred to teaching exam technique to help students with the content and the impact this has on spontaneity and students' personal integrity:

"I always need to give the children ideas of what they can say. I ALWAYS find myself telling them that they need to show off their Spanish not tell the truth, which curbs the opportunity for spontaneity."

- Poor literacy skills are a barrier for some students:

"Literacy levels are a major issue in my area and this means students have fewer English words to supply cognates so that they can access reading texts. They lack confidence and first language literacy issues reduce their confidence in accessing MFL texts."

- Although not directly related to disadvantage, some respondents pointed out that many candidates feel that some of the tasks were unrealistic or irrelevant although a small minority of comments felt that the content was appropriate.

What happens when students make up answers

- Over 95% of respondents said that at least some of the time students find it difficult to make up answers when they have no experience or understanding of a context. 93% of respondents said that they felt making up an answer disadvantages students. 68% said that this disadvantage would be significant.

"I have bright capable students who struggle with answering many of the questions and I am constantly telling them that their answers don't have to be true and they can just 'make it up'. Unfortunately, however, this makes their learning less meaningful as they are talking about things that are not relevant to them or even true so their willingness and motivation drops..."

- Respondents were concerned about asking the follow-up questions, which are often necessary to secure higher grades, when the original event was imaginary.

"It is a real block for some students that they have to narrate imagined events. Obviously, it makes follow up questions harder - and they tend to gravitate towards simple, familiar answers (I played football) which in turn limit their marks. It's an unfair increase in cognitive load to have to fabricate your answer and then translate it."

- Less than 1% of respondents commented that students need not have experience of a particular context to be able to respond meaningfully. Many felt that it was unfair to base questions on students' personal experience:

"It's difficult to give an account of a day on holiday if you have never been on holiday."

- Teachers commented on the cognitive load of having to imagine something, remember what has been imagined as well as find the correct language.

"They are faced with linguistic challenge - how to explain something complex in a few words? - but also have to remember what they have said - e.g. I have no pets (to avoid talking about a dog that recently died) and then remember the story that they have created."

"You are asking students to be creative and speak a new language - two difficult skills - speaking authentically about your life doesn't require as much creativity and is less cognitively draining"

The Themes and Topics

- 71.4% of respondents felt the topics covered in key stage 4 disadvantaged some students and 73.1% said that they did not think that GCSE topics were necessary for effective language learning.
- Respondents identified some topics as more problematic than others. Family and friends, house and home, holidays, leisure activities, charity and volunteering, lifestyle, social issues and work were rated the most challenging for disadvantaged or vulnerable students.

Respondents' suggestions for a way forward

Teachers' suggestions about possible changes ranged from remaining with the status quo to full scale reform:

- Teachers adapt how they teach
- 'Tweaking' the examinations to give more choice of questions
- Adjust the assessment criteria
- Ask the learners
- Avoid content based directly on personal experience
- Make the curriculum content more intellectually challenging and culturally enriching in order to motivate
- Provide alternative qualifications to GCSE

Summary of findings

- The majority of language teaching professionals who responded, feel that the current GCSE content disadvantages some students including:
 - socio-economically deprived students
 - students with less typical family life, e.g. children in care
 - those who are less able
 - those with special educational needs
- The majority of respondents feel that this disadvantage impacts on pupil motivation, engagement, and performance.
- The current content disadvantages some students and is considered unnecessary for effective language learning by the majority of respondents.

Recommendations

- The languages GCSE and languages curriculum should be reviewed carefully to ensure that no particular group of students is disadvantaged. The on-going work of the GCSE review body should make this aspect a priority of their work.
- A curriculum which motivates, engages and allows all to achieve needs to be intellectually challenging and meaningful. In languages the curriculum should be enhanced by encouraging study of the culture and peoples of the countries where the language is spoken.
- To meet the needs of all learners the languages curriculum should be made accessible through a reformed GCSE and a wider range of qualifications.
- Content should be devised in such a way that students feel that they are making progress from the outset, and that the programme is able to sustain that progress through KS3, KS4 and beyond.



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