

# Consultation on revised GCSE qualifications in modern foreign languages: Cultural learning - proposal to replace themes

17 May 2021

---

The following response was submitted to the Department for Education and Ofqual [consultation on revised GCSE qualifications in modern foreign languages](#) in May 2021. Organisations supporting the proposal are listed at the end of the document.

## A Cultural Learning

1. Like the systematic acquisition of language skills, cultural learning constitutes an essential pillar of the study of language. The reasons are articulated under the Subject Aims mentioned by the review panel ('The study of a modern foreign language at GCSE should also broaden students' horizons, encourage them to step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world ... It is important that students should be taught the language in the context of the countries and communities where the language is spoken. As they learn the language, students should become familiar with aspects of the contexts of the countries and communities in which the language is spoken.')
2. Languages are the place in the school curriculum best suited to the nurturing of intercultural astuteness and agility—that is, the skills, the empathy, and the social cognition that enable us to step outside our comfort zone and navigate between our own culture and

another,<sup>1</sup> at whatever level.<sup>2</sup> From primary school<sup>3</sup> to secondary education<sup>4</sup> and higher education,<sup>5</sup> learning about cultures through their languages is a fundamental purpose of the discipline of modern languages.<sup>6</sup>

3. Learning about cultures is a major motive of student language-learners,<sup>7</sup> alongside other factors such as satisfaction derived from making progress in vocabulary, phonics, and grammar, and interest in language as a system. These motives overlap, since the vocabulary, grammar, and phonics are themselves cultural forms, experienced culturally. The GCSE in languages must satisfy these core motives. If cultural learning is not baked into the GCSE, then the qualification's appeal will narrow, and it will be harder to increase uptake.
4. By making GCSE languages an EBacc subject, the Department for Education aspires for this core subject to be taken by virtually all students, so they experience the discipline of acquiring formal skills in an additional language, and so they experience what it is like to encounter unfamiliar cultures from the inside to an extent, rather than solely from the external vantage-point of the English language. This acquisition of an ability, however basic, to experience another language and culture from the inside also gives students fresh insights into their own language and culture (because the process of acquisition generates comparisons with the L1 language and culture); so the learning involved is intercultural rather than just cultural.
5. It is vital for children to have these experiences, which, for many, are the building-blocks for subsequent experiences and opportunities (in business, mobility, education, creativity, connections); for *all* children, whatever their future pattern of work and leisure, the GCSE experience (if meaningful) fosters lifelong cognitive habits of being confident, curious, and respectful in relation to other languages and cultures, while also being aware that one's own language and culture might be perceived differently by others. Those cognitive habits are key to building a truly global, outward-looking Britain.
6. The review of the subject content is a welcome opportunity to improve the GCSE as regards both language skills and cultural learning, and so help fix England's decades-old languages

---

<sup>1</sup> Where 'culture' in the singular is used in this document, it is always a shorthand for 'cultures and societies'. It represents a broad interdisciplinary view and may include content on history, literature, linguistics, film, politics, customs, everyday life, intercultural learning etc.

<sup>2</sup> Employers value the cultural agility that comes with language-learning as much as the technical language skills themselves. See Wendy Ayres-Bennett and Janice Carruthers, 'Policy Briefing on Languages, Business, Trade, and Innovation' (outcome of policy workshop held in House of Commons in Jan. 2020)

<https://www.modernlanguagesleadershipfellow.com/policy-briefings/>

<sup>3</sup> S. Graham, L. Courtney, A. Tonkyn, and T. Marinis, 'Motivational Trajectories for Early Language Learning Across the Primary-Secondary School Transition, *British Educational Research Journal*, 42.4 (2016), 682-702.

<sup>4</sup> R. Woore, S. Graham, K. Kohl, L. Courtney, and C. Savory, *Consolidating the Evidence Base for MFL Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment Reform at GCSE: An Investigation of Teachers' Views* (2020).

<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:1f797d25-98b4-4b89-863a-779b2348ae20>

<sup>5</sup> As shown for example by the AHRC-funded OWRI and TML programmes:

<https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/themes/owri/> ;

<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/policy-briefings/transnationalizing-modern-languages/> .

<sup>6</sup> For cross-sector perspectives on the issue, see various studies by Michael Byram and by Claire Kramersch.

<sup>7</sup> S. Graham, 'Experiences of Learning French: A Snapshot at Years 11, 12 and 13', *Language Learning Journal*, 25 (2002), 15-20. 10.1111/j.0026-7902.2004.00224.x; S. Graham, 'Giving Up on Modern Foreign Languages? Students' Perceptions of Learning French, *The Modern Language Journal*, 88 (2004), 171-191.

problem.<sup>8</sup> The GCSE's current approach to culture—via themes—has some drawbacks; it does not stimulate and engage KS4 learners as much as the curriculum of other KS4 subjects; it can demotivate learners and lead to less effective teaching; it can require learners to devote disproportionate energy to learning certain specialized vocabulary items. What is needed instead is cultural input that is meaningful, engaging, and varied *while at the same time* being carefully designed to accelerate the acquisition of the prescribed vocabulary and grammar.

## B Review Panel's Proposals

7. The review panel's proposals respond to the drawbacks of the themes-based curriculum, as currently organized, by removing overarching themes. The proposals still allow for culture to be explored in the form of themes devised by the examination boards, within the confines of the approved vocabulary list, but with no account being taken of this cultural learning in the assessment. This is problematic, because
  - a. the cultural learning, not being assessed, will be treated as an optional extra, especially for Foundation Tier and lower-ability learners, but also for many Higher Tier ones, since marks will be awarded for vocabulary, phonics, and grammar alone; this will result in the cultural component tending to be taught more to socio-economically advantaged learners;
  - b. although cultural learning in the GCSE needs to be circumscribed by certain parameters of vocabulary and grammar, the parameters as currently proposed will make it impossible for the examination boards to specify meaningful and engaging cultural (theme-based) material; so the cultural learning will end up being even less interesting to learners than at present;
  - c. progression to the important cultural component of A-Level in these languages will become very problematic.

## C Three Necessary Steps

8. So to achieve the review panel's proposed Subject Aims (para. 1 above), it is necessary to
  - a. ensure that meaningful cultural (i.e. intercultural) learning takes place in the languages GCSE;
  - b. ensure that it takes place as much at Foundation (proportionally) as at Higher, with appropriate adjustment of level, since otherwise Foundation Tier learners will be excluded from key benefits of learning the authentic discipline of modern languages and will experience an impoverished and less engaging version of it rather than just an appropriately lower-level one;
  - c. ensure that cultural learning is assessed at GCSE.

## D A Pause for a Working Group

9. Whether or not there is a wider review of the current recommendations (and we hope there will be), we therefore propose that the DfE convene a working group tasked with developing a way of achieving the three steps outlined in para. 8 above within the broad framework (i.e. that of specifying vocabulary and grammar) that has been proposed by the review panel, but with some key adjustments to that framework.
10. The working group would establish a KS4-appropriate definition of cultural and intercultural learning, recommend how it should be specified, recommend how best to

---

<sup>8</sup> Other issues would also need to be addressed to achieve that aim fully, in particular (a) severe grading and (b) transitions between Key Stages.

achieve this learning outcome, assess feasibility and resource issues, and take account of implications for Primary, KS3, and KS5. The group could report by, say, autumn 2021. To ensure it was as informed as possible and avoided unintended consequences, it would need to include secondary and Higher Education organisations, Initial Teacher Training specialists, examination boards, and other stakeholder organisations.

## E One Possible Model: a Portfolio

11. One model that this working group might consider is outlined below. Other models would be possible.
12. Each examination board to specify not themes but rather a portfolio or collection of items.
13. Parameters for the size, scope, and nature of the portfolio to be set out by the DfE in the subject content.
14. Items in the portfolio
  - a. should include some or all of the following: short texts; short videos or films; podcasts and recordings;
  - b. should range widely, for example from fact to fiction, from journalism to literature,<sup>9</sup> from documentary to entertainment (introducing students to the notion of genre-based variation in the language of study);
  - c. should be from not just one country (e.g. France or Spain) but from others across the world where that language is spoken (introducing students to geographical variation in the language of study);
  - d. could be grouped under thematic clusters within the portfolio.
15. Each school (or in some cases student) would choose a given number of items from those listed in the portfolio.
16. Examination boards would select items for the portfolio that would last for the lifetime of the specification.
17. Examination boards would select items according to two key criteria:
  - a. the item's capacity to engage students, to spark their interest in, and their meaningful learning about, the target-language culture; for items to grip students, the items need to be authentic or semi-authentic (i.e. edited, adapted and/or abridged); it is hard for concocted items to grip students;
  - b. the items' capacity to support the learning of the prescribed vocabulary and grammar;<sup>10</sup> the items would be 'authentic [or semi-authentic] materials on the new language, selected to support the school's systematic sequencing of vocabulary and grammar'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In contrast with the English Literature GCSE selection of poetry, most items in the ML portfolio would be non-literary. But for one example (among countless possible ones) of the kind of literary item that could be included, see the end-of-Y8 NCELP lesson on a short poem by Goethe:

[https://resources.ncelp.org/concern/parent/vd66w071k/file\\_sets/3197xm97j](https://resources.ncelp.org/concern/parent/vd66w071k/file_sets/3197xm97j)

<sup>10</sup> See Woore et al. above; and also S. Graham, L. Fisher, J. Hofweber, and H. Krüsemann, 'Getting Creative in the Languages Classroom', in K. Kohl et al. (eds.), *Creative Multilingualism: A Manifesto* (Open Book Publisher, 2020), pp. 151-176. One of the findings of this study, which worked with over 500 Y9 learners, is that the personal and emotional responses elicited by culturally engaging texts boosted the learning of vocabulary.

<sup>11</sup> *Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review: A Review of Modern Foreign Languages Teaching Practice in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4*, Teaching Schools Council (2016).

18. Certain adjustments should be made to the broad framework proposed by the review panel:

*a. Productive/receptive knowledge*

Receptive knowledge of vocabulary should be treated differently from productive knowledge: a list of terms to be known receptively should be added (for the skills of reading and listening) to the list of terms to be known productively. This rests on well-established pedagogical principles of language-teaching: inference, while not a quick means to productive knowledge, is a natural, satisfying, and motivating part of building receptive knowledge, and an important skill to develop in language-learning because it better equips the learner for further learning (e.g. in real-life contexts); extending vocabulary via cultural content, within clear limits, will help secure the richer input that students need in order to achieve the review panel's stated learning goals.

*b. Glossing*

Terms that the learner cannot be expected to learn even receptively can be glossed up to a limit (e.g. 10% for both tiers) that is higher than the 2% proposed (for Higher Tier only) in the consultation.<sup>12</sup> Navigating between English and the target language is an intercultural skill that is central to the discipline of modern languages as it has come to be understood in recent years, as evidenced by much research<sup>13</sup> and as reflected by the panel's recommendations for English to be used in rubrics.

19. Wherever possible, the raw items specified in the portfolio would be ones freely available to schools.<sup>14</sup>

20. On the other hand, packages that supported the teaching and learning of the portfolio items would be developed on a commercial basis by examination boards and publishers. These would contain schemes of work and additional contextual material, as well as integrating the items with the prescribed vocabulary and grammar. These packages would provide scaffolded support for studying the portfolio at Foundation and Higher Tiers. Teachers would of course be free to develop their own alternative or supplementary schemes of work and contextual materials.

*21. Offer of Higher Education input*

Subject specialists from Higher Education would help examination boards source, identify, select, develop, and contextualize the portfolio items, as well as assisting publishers. Organisations of Higher Education specialists (UCML, AMLUK) among the signatories below have indicated that they would be keen to do this (in ways that minimise copyright issues), and that they would be pleased to formalize this cooperation. Secondary specialists would of course play the key role in the appropriate pedagogical development of the materials.

---

<sup>12</sup> There seems to be no reason to limit glossing to Higher Tier. It makes items more accessible, not less.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. see n. 4 above. On the skills of mediation and translanguaging, see <https://www.pearson.com/english/professional-development/experiences/mediation.html>

<sup>14</sup> Examples of existing free resources include [www.institut-francais.org.uk](http://www.institut-francais.org.uk), which directs teachers to various support resources, including [www.ifprofs.org](http://www.ifprofs.org), the Institut français's free collaborative platform for teachers of French, and [www.culturetheque.com](http://www.culturetheque.com), its free digital library with about 200,000 authentic online resources, as well as <https://ifcinema.institutfrancais.com/en> which offers free access to French language films for schools and teachers. The Goethe-Institut has the online digital library, [Onleihe](http://Onleihe). Other relevant free resources that have been developed by bodies in the devolved jurisdictions, which face broadly similar language-learning challenges to England, could be used. A web portal called LanguagesUK, currently being developed (by the British Academy and others) as a one-stop shop for languages, could house a link to the portfolio items, as could other websites.

22. There could be optional variations on and enrichments of the portfolio model outlined. For example, work on one of the portfolio items could take the form of exploration of that item (and its contexts) in partnership with a school in another country, with mutual exchange of content produced by students, enabling them to communicate across borders; or schools could have the option of replacing one element of the portfolio with intercultural work exposing students to target-language stimuli that enabled them to do work outside the confines of a specified portfolio item.

23. *Assessment of cultural learning*

The cultural learning done through work on the specified portfolio items would be integrated into assessment, for reasons given above (para. 7). This would require modification of the assessment objectives proposed by Ofqual. The working group would recommend a modification, with input from assessment experts.

24. Assessment tasks relating to the examination board's specified portfolio would reward linguistic and/or cultural learning (depending on the nature of the task), e.g.:

- a. listening to or reading target-language reactions to or descriptions of items in the portfolio, rewarding knowledge of the language used within the portfolio and prescribed elsewhere within the specification;
- b. responding to images related to or derived from the portfolio as part of the speaking examination;
- c. writing a personal response, in the target language, to one or more items in the portfolio (a response to an opinionated text, an imagined day in the life of a character, a visit into the setting of a film).<sup>15</sup>

## F Summary

- A working group should be set up to extend the review panel's approach (that of prescribing and circumscribing content) from vocabulary and grammar to cultural learning.
- Greater specification of cultural content will still allow students and teachers some freedom of choice, while enabling the cultural learning to be more motivating and meaningful than at present, because the cultural materials used for both Tiers will be richer and more engaging.
- The cultural materials will be sourced, selected, and developed in a more coordinated way than previously and than currently proposed.
- That process of sourcing, selecting, and developing will integrate the cultural materials tightly with the prescribed vocabulary and grammar; that will enable students at both Tiers to learn the prescribed vocabulary and grammar better than they can do in a cultural context that is vaguely specified or non-existent.
- To achieve that, and also to ensure that all learners benefit from cultural learning, cultural learning should be incorporated into the assessment objectives, in a GCSE-appropriate way.

---

<sup>15</sup> If it was decided to take cultural learning a step further still, another assessment task might be to articulate a level-appropriate analysis of a portfolio item or cultural theme in English or the target language.

## Organisations supporting this proposal

- **ALL** (Association for Language Learning)
- **AMLUK** (Alliance of Modern Languages, Area Studies and Linguistics Subject Associations UK)
- **ASCL** (Association of School and College Leaders)
- **British Council**
- **CLiE** (Committee for Linguistics in Education)
- **Creative Multilingualism**
- **Goethe-Institut London**
- **ISMLA** (Independent Schools' Modern Languages Association)
- **LAGB** (Linguistics Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
- **Linguistics in MFL**
- **The British Academy**
- **UCML** (University Council of Modern Languages)