UCML
UNIVERSITY COUNCIL OF MODERN LANGUAGES

UCML response to GCSE MFL subject content proposals

Whilst UCML recognises the importance of the Department's commitment to MFL and its wish to 'ensure the subject content reflects research in language curriculum and teaching and make language GCSEs more accessible and motivating for students', we would argue that the proposed reforms will do little on their own to revive an interest in the study of Modern Foreign Languages. They represent an attempt to quantify what needs to be learnt in terms of a language system, thus bringing languages in line with many other subject areas, but ignore other essential components of the language curriculum such as communicative and intercultural competence. These reforms will do little to ensure a continuous pipeline of language learners from primary level through to GCSE, A-level, university and beyond into the workplace.

We feel that curriculum content composed almost solely of a 'a precise specification of vocabulary and grammar to be taught' is likely to fall well short of the stated goals and signals a return to outdated teaching methods since the content will inform the pedagogical approach adopted. Although knowledge of the grammar, lexis and phonemes of a language is an important feature of linguistic competence, it fails to acknowledge the broader communicative aims of 'knowing a language'. Here we point to the important work of the Council of Europe and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which highlights the need for language curricula to include 'a focus on real-world communicative needs, organised around real-life tasks' (CEFR, 2020). They should also seek to prevent any potential linguistic and social imbalances in the classroom.

The materials from the Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy (NCELP) have shown that language learning materials which focus on the core concepts of grammar can be imaginatively designed. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to show that a grammar-based curriculum which also includes a frequency-based approach to vocabulary learning and a restricted set of vocabulary items to be learnt is sufficient to motivate learners to take a language beyond GCSE. A much broader curriculum is needed to ensure this since a language is inseparable from its community of speakers and the cultures that they share.

Paragraph 6 of the MFL GCSE Subject Content document highlights the need for language to be contextualised and for students to learn about the target language communities along with their history, geography and culture, however, there is no further mention of culture within the document. We argue that we cannot leave these important aspects of language learning to be 'referenced in assessment tasks as appropriate'. Cultural content in its broadest sense which students can relate to, together with a focus on language study, is at the very heart of language related programmes at university level. It provides high levels of motivation amongst degree students allowing them to develop the interests which have enthused them earlier in their language learning journey. We must not wait until after GCSE to introduce them to these essential aspects of learning a language.

There are many ways to motivate students and UCML members have found that this is the case, for example in their work with undergraduate ambassadors in schools, in particular through the *Routes into Languages* network of universities. School students respond very positively when they interact with their slightly older peers and are able to learn more about what it means to study a language and about the culture and contexts in which it is spoken. We would like to see a joined-up approach to collaborative work between universities and schools in England in order to support language learning and would urge the funded expansion of schemes such as the pan-Wales *Routes Cymru* network (British Academy, 2020) which can evidence an increase in language uptake at GCSE and beyond.

There is no doubt that the challenge of acquiring a new language system is motivating enough for some types of learners but certainly not all. If we are to see good numbers of highly skilled linguists in the future, and if we are to remove the notion of languages as an elitist subject, we need to move beyond the current limited proposals for MFL subject content and assessment. Within UCML, individual member associations have expressed concern that the suggested approach does not take into account distinct and important differences between languages and would be difficult to implement for the languages that they represent.

We would argue along with other concerned teachers and academics in the sector, that changes to the GCSE MFL subject content and the associated approaches to language teaching and assessment have been proposed without adequate consultation with key stakeholders. This will need to happen if we are to implement an exciting and robust 21st century curriculum which is fit for purpose.

UCML's detailed response to the MFL GCSE content review

Question 10

UCML does not 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.

This requirement does not necessarily take into account the language used by young people to express their needs and interests and this is vital if we are to motivate our young learners. Drawing on the 2,000 most frequently occurring words will also restrict the choice and use of authentic texts which are age-appropriate and this again is vital if languages are to be seen as a means of communication and not just as an object of study.

Question 11

UCML does not agree agree with the requirement for foundation tier students to know no more than 1200 words and higher tier students to know no more than 1700 word.

Whilst specifying a set vocabulary list may level the playing field and allow more students to master the subject content, a target of 1200 words to be learnt at foundation tier and 1700 words at higher tier lacks aspiration and is likely to be severely limiting for the best students since they will not be rewarded for having more extensive vocabulary knowledge. Research carried out by OFQUAL (2019) shows that students who achieve GCSE Grade 9 would achieve low to mid CEFR B1 in all 4 language skills in French, German and Spanish – whilst those achieving Grade 4 would achieve low to mid A1 except in German where they would achieve slightly more. CEFR B1 recognises not just competence in relation to common everyday language but also to the learner's 'field of interest' whereas CEFR A1 indicates a more restricted knowledge of everyday familiar language. We should be encouraging all of our learners, at least at the higher levels of competence, to strive for more than a minimum core vocabulary which relates to common topics (often outside their sphere of interest) and to engage in

sometimes unfamiliar texts using appropriate strategies. It is this which will lead to increased motivation and a sense of progression.

It is also unclear why students will have to demonstrate both receptive and productive knowledge of all words on the list at both foundation and higher tiers since, as stated, research shows that receptive knowledge is likely to be greater than productive knowledge. It is this requirement which is limiting the target number of words to be learnt and tested receptively and it does not appear to be justified.

Question 12

We do not agree that the vocabulary lists proposed for GCSE should set out all content required for GCSE.

We do indeed need to take into account the beginner language learner by making quite clear what is to be learnt. However, we cannot presume that even if all the curriculum content is mastered that these learners will reach the same levels of linguistic competence as the students who have been learning the language for longer since language is acquired cumulatively over time. Studying a language at GCSE should allow learners to build on previously acquired knowledge and for vocabulary to be learnt as appropriate to their needs. A sense of progression is crucial to ensuring ongoing student motivation.

A further point concerns the topicality and age-appropriateness of lexical items – we need to give our learners the tools to engage in current topics and debates as again these points are crucial to ensuring ongoing motivation. It is not always easy to predict what these lexical items are and the corpora that will be used to select items for the chosen vocabulary lists will not always be current – the global pandemic has shown how quickly the frequency of certain vocabulary items can change and how quickly new words and meanings are created.

Question 13

We do not 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.

As mentioned in earlier answers, there needs be a degree of linguistic challenge built into the curriculum so that the weaker students are able to achieve their potential and the stronger students are stretched in order to achieve theirs. The language strategies used to 'guess' the meaning of unspecified cognates and of unfamiliar words are to be encouraged in all students but should be expected in the stronger student.

Question 14.1

We do 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.

However, we do need to maintain a level of linguistic challenge and it may be that the glossary should not be adjacent to the text but should be found as is more usual at the end of a document.

This should be the same for proper nouns (see next question).

Question 14.2

We agree that 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.

Question 15.

We agree in principle with the proposal not to require overarching themes and specific topics in the revised subject content.

It is important that teachers have the freedom to choose themes and topics in relation to the needs and interests of their learners. However, there is a danger that the required content will take precedent and that the language presented will be decontextualised rather than offering opportunities to engage in authentic communication through a number of interesting themes and topics. **If topics are indeed abolished, they will need to be replaced with authentic and stimulating content of various kinds.**

Question 16

We do not agree that teaching and assessment should instead be informed by the vocabulary specified for teaching.

A curriculum oriented around specified vocabulary and grammar does not necessarily take into account communicative competence or the ability to communicate at some level in a variety of contexts. It is very hard to define what is extraneous content for the needs of any one group of learners without defining **what it is they need to do** with the language.

Question 17

We do not agree that, where questions are designed to test comprehension of written and spoken texts in the assessed language, they should be constructed in English.

This is a difficult question since the use of English in the question encourages an over-reliance on translation and the use of the L1. However, it is unfair to penalise a student who has not understood the question and goes on to give the wrong answer. The answer may be to gloss the question in English before the question is put in the target language. The higher achieving students that we hope will go onto study languages at A-level should be getting accustomed to see all rubrics in the language they are learning.

Question 18

We do not agree that all rubrics should be in English.

See above – this may be relevant for the foundation tier however in order to maximise the chance of comprehension.

Question 19

We do not agree with the requirement for students to read aloud short sentences from the written form of the language and demonstrate understanding of them.

This is not an authentic language activity and so should not form part of the assessment. However, it is likely that reading aloud short sentences may give confidence and the experience of producing streams of connected speech so may well be useful as a teaching and learning technique.

Question 20

We do not agree with the requirement that students undertake dictation exercises from short spoken extracts.

Similar to the requirement to read out loud, this is not an authentic language activity and should not be used for assessment which should aim to assess grammatical and communicative competence. It is not clear what dictation would be testing in this sense. As with reading out loud there may be some merit in the creative classroom of the use of dictation for encouraging confidence and levels of accuracy.

There is also the potential for the proposed dictation exercise to disadvantage some categories of learners, such as those with dyslexia. It is also unclear how a dictation task can differentiate clearly between different levels of competence and the exam boards will need solve this issue of differentiation fairly.

Question 21

We do agree that, where students are expected to understand spoken extracts, these extracts should be delivered at a pace which is no faster than a moderate pace.

However, it is hard to know what a moderate pace is – above all the speed of delivery should be natural and not artificially slow

Question 22

We very much disagree with the proposal 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?

We fully agree with the sentiment expressed at the outset that 'an appreciation of culture, history, geography and working environments of the countries and communities in which the language is spoken is an integral part of a well-designed language course and is likely to be motivating and interesting for students'. However, we cannot agree that specifying a minimum level of cultural knowledge and awareness would increase the burden of content to be taught since this is partly a skill which can be acquired and is part of 'knowing' the language which is being learnt.

If we are to encourage independent and proficient learners with a sense of both linguistic and intercultural curiosity, we cannot see time taken to include cultural knowledge in the curriculum as detracting from teaching time to practise the language. At GCSE level, many learners have the linguistic confidence and competence to access cultural content (e.g. films, social media, songs) and if learners are not enthused by their encounter with language learning at GCSE, they will certainly not continue 'to the next stage of education' where it is proposed that their linguistic skills will give them access to 'wider cultural content'.

Research data collected during a recent cross-project Open World Research Initiative (OWRI, 2021) mentoring scheme in which undergraduates worked with students taking a GCSE showed how this sort of contact which allows school students to find out more about the language and culture of the target language country and future opportunities can lead to motivation and increased uptake at A-level. In this study, 29% of those who had been mentored continued beyond GCSE to take a language and 14% of those students who had just been involved in general classroom sessions did so. This compares with a national progression rates ranging from 6% to 8% in French, German, and Spanish.

It should also be added that the CEFR offers exempla of assessment criteria for cultural knowledge.

Question 23

We do not consider the grammar annexes to be comprehensive, unambiguous and easy to understand.

It is useful for a language learner to have full access to the grammar requirements of their curriculum and the annexes are comprehensive and unambiguous for the professional user although they are less easy for learners to understand. It is good to see that grammar is defined in the latest sense of including both morphological and syntactic knowledge but we remain convinced that grammatical and lexical knowledge alone cannot determine the shape and content of the GCSE curriculum.

Grammar opens up the way for the learner to access meaning and research has shown that the de-contextualised learning of grammar is less effective, in terms of learner outcomes than the teaching/ learning of grammar in context.

Question 24

We do not consider the revised subject content to be unambiguous, clear and easy to understand.

The revised subject content is unambiguous and easy to understand but we cannot agree with the premise behind it. We feel that a curriculum composed almost solely of a 'a precise specification of vocabulary and grammar to be taught' is likely to fall well short of the stated goals of the revised curriculum and signals a return to outdated teaching approaches. Although knowledge of the grammar, lexis and phonemes of a language is an important feature of linguistic competence, the revised subject content fails to acknowledge the broader communicative aims of 'knowing a language' and here we point to the important work of the Council of Europe and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which highlight the need for language curricula to include 'a focus on real-world communicative needs, organised around real-life tasks' (CEFR, 2020).