

# ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP on MODERN LANGUAGES

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## Statement on the MFL GCSE Subject Content review and consultation

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (APPG MFL) notes widespread concern and disquiet in relation to the review. At a time when languages are already uniquely fragile in English schools, the proposals in their present form represent a fundamental change to the nature of language learning, with unclear evidence that the approach would be successful in relation either to raising standards or increasing take-up. The APPG MFL believes that changes to the GCSE specification should be suspended to allow time for further evidence and expertise to be taken into account to avoid unintended consequences. The proposals appear to reduce the subject content and exclude integral aspects of language learning that should be taught at this level. A summary of concerns is listed below. The APPG MFL calls on the DfE (a) to work with stakeholders to build a consensus on a way forward and (b) to delay any changes until this has taken place.

### 1. Untested, conflicting evidence, and lack of national and international comparisons

- The APPG MFL has been struck by the number of teachers, school leaders, linguists and education experts contesting the theoretical basis for the reforms<sup>1</sup>. These concerns must be addressed:
  - Basing the GCSE on the most frequent 2,000 words; and not distinguishing between productive and receptive knowledge of vocabulary;
  - Not specifying, in the subject content, communicative skills linked to assessment;
  - Not specifying, in the subject content, culture linking to cultural awareness and intercultural competence;
  - Reducing subject content and unpredictability which is likely to create problems for awarding organisations in discriminating between candidates and could lead to greater unpredictability of grading by default;
  - Not taking into account motivational factors for different learners in second language acquisition;
  - Not taking into account whether the approach is suitable for other languages (especially non roman script languages).
- The APPG notes that the KPIs for the proposed methodology as deployed by NCELP/MFL Hubs have not been published; there is no published evidence about the success of the approach and there has been insufficient time to assess impact.
- The reforms move the GCSE away from established practice internationally (most notably the Common European Framework of Reference) and nationally (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and the Mandarin Excellence Programme, which has been demonstrated to be an effective model<sup>2</sup>.

### 2. A risk to standards and take-up

- A mismatch between the ambitions set out in the subject aims of the review and the limitations in the subject content.
- Contention around the expected language level for a GCSE candidate; concerns that 1200 words (foundation tier)/1700 words (higher tier) out of the 2000 most frequent words is too limited and represents a lowering of standards<sup>3</sup>; as research indicates learners learn as little as 20% of input vocabulary, especially when thematic input is limited<sup>4</sup>, these proposals warrant greater scrutiny.
- Concerns the reforms risk removing key motivational elements of the GCSE, thus negatively impacting take-up of the MFL GCSE given the optional status of the subject at KS4;
- Concerns the drop in linguistic and cognitive demand in subject content will result in an increased gap between GCSE and A level, with negative consequences for take-up at GCSE, A level and, by extension, university.

### 3. Implications for international dimension, real life application, and the place of MFL in the curriculum

- The UK's national language skills deficit is evident in real world settings such as trade, exports, international relations, diplomacy, security, international development<sup>5</sup>. These are settings where communication and intercultural skills are needed. The APPG MFL is concerned that the proposals appear to be moving away from communicative skills, inference skills, and cultural content, when these real life skills should be at the heart of any MFL GCSE; and that they could disincentivise genuine interactions with native speakers and the countries where the languages are spoken, despite the stated aims of the review.
- The proposals, if unamended, could complicate cooperative partnerships with Embassies and Cultural Institutes, which contribute positively to the learning, quality and take-up of MFL in our schools.
- The reforms appear incompatible with the statutory requirements for the national curriculum KS2 and KS3; the subject content for A level; and the full set of recommendations of the 2016 Pedagogy Review.

### 4. An especially risky time for fundamental, untested change in a subject already under pressure

- Schools report significant disruption to MFL due to Covid-19 lockdowns with only 60% (2020) to 80% (2021) of state school pupils engaging with language learning<sup>6</sup>; in addition to disruption to language assistants, educational visits, exchanges and teacher recruitment due to post-EU changes, possible Covid-related travel restrictions and the loss of the Erasmus+ programme before the reach or impact of the replacement Turing scheme is known.

<sup>1</sup> For example: Milton on approaches based on vocabulary frequency; Woore et al. (2020) on cultural knowledge and opening to the world as the primary benefits and motivators for language learning; CLIE on communicative skills being often more effective than phonics.

<sup>2</sup> Nicoletti & Culligan, *Mandarin Excellence Programme Evaluation Report 2019/2020* (2021)

<sup>3</sup> Milton, *French as a foreign language and the Common European Framework of Reference for languages* (2006)

<sup>4</sup> Milton, *Measuring Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition* (2009)

<sup>5</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, *National Recovery Programme for Languages* (2018)

<sup>6</sup> British Council, *Language Trends* (2021)

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- **ALL** (Association for Language Learning)
- **AMLUK** (Alliance of Modern Languages, Area Studies and Linguistics Subject Associations UK)
- **ASCL** (Association of School and College Leaders)
- **The Association for German Studies**
- **CLIE** (Committee for Linguistics in Education)
- **The British Academy**
- **The Chartered Institute of Linguists**
- **HMC** (Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference)
- **ISMLA** (Independent Schools' Modern Languages Association)
- **Linguistics in MFL**
- **NAHT** (National Association of Head Teachers)
- **NALA** (National Association of Language Advisers)
- **Network for Languages North East**
- **North West German Network**
- **UCML** (University Council of Modern Languages)