



GCSE Modern Foreign Language (MFL) subject content review: Public Consultation Response – May 2021

In November 2019, the Department for Education announced that a review would be launched into the GCSE MFL subject content for England. This review related to French, German and Spanish GCSEs only. The Department is now seeking views on the proposed changes within the revised subject content. The consultation closes on May 19th 2021

CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTS RESPONSE

Vocabulary

Do you 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?

The Chartered Institute of Linguists does not agree with the requirement that 90% of words must be taken from the top 2000 most frequently occurring words in the most widely spoken standard forms of the language. While we understand that the proposal aims to guarantee the relevance of the words that are learned at GCSE level, we are not convinced that the most relevant words for this age range and level will be included within the top 2000 most frequently occurring words, as proposed. There is a clear risk that this restriction excludes important areas of communication which will motivate progression, further study and the onward probability of considering and developing a career as a linguist.

The words learnt at GCSE level need to provide the basis for communication on content of immediate interest to learners and extend their range of communication, preparing them for future study and the world of work. Above all, learners should be motivated to use language and expand their vocabulary and grammar independently with materials that they find relevant and motivating and these should include elements of culture, life and work.

Do you 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 words?

No, a greater level of vocabulary learning is necessary if students are to communicate effectively or progress to higher levels of study or have any chance of securing a career which includes a significant language component – which the UK very badly needs. These proposals appear to be lowering the demands at GCSE at a time when we should be raising standards in order to improve the country's language skills.



Do you agree that the vocabulary lists proposed for GCSE should set out all content required for GCSE, even though in many cases some of this may have been learnt prior to the start of the GCSE course itself?

We do not believe that all content required for GCSE should be set out in the vocabulary lists. Prior learning should be built on. Also, the vital skill of reading, which requires the development of the skill of inference, should not be based simply on vocabulary lists. We believe that a more productive approach would be to include vocabulary related to students' study of the culture and society of the countries and communities where the language is spoken and wider cultural/social issues including current affairs and real world content, which is of relevance to them.

Do you 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 in a way which reflects their frequency of occurrence in the assessed language?

No.

The revised subject content expects higher tier students to read texts that may include a small number of words that fall outside the vocabulary list defined by the awarding organisation. English meanings of such words must be supplied adjacent to the text for reference. Do you 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?

We agree with the principle that less frequent words in any higher tier text, that fall outside the vocabulary list defined by the awarding organisation, should be included in an adjacent glossary and indeed would encourage this as part of developing broader vocabulary in support of cultural, social and professional contexts. However, we also believe that higher tier students should demonstrate the ability to infer meaning.

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. Do you agree that such words can be included in an adjacent glossary?

Yes



Themes and Topics

Do you agree with the proposal not to require overarching themes and specific topics in the revised subject content?

We are concerned about the removal of overarching themes and specific topics in the revised subject content. Though there is scope for reform here in how themes translate into specific topics, the overarching themes provide a means of showing how language is intimately bound with culture and ways of living and working. Language teaching at all levels should be fundamentally concerned with the multilingual and multicultural environment in which students learn and about which they seek and can be motivated to deepen their understanding. Relevant topics are a motivator for out of classroom and onward study.

Do you agree that teaching and assessment will instead be informed by the vocabulary specified for teaching given that, due to its high frequency, this vocabulary can cover a range of topics?

We are not confident that teaching based on high frequency vocabulary will cover an appropriate range of topics. We believe that a more structured approach to addressing topics of interest and relevance is needed to promote interest, progression and further study.

Question types

Do you agree that, where questions are designed to test comprehension of written and spoken texts in the assessed language, they will be constructed in English?

Yes

Do you agree that all rubrics will be in English?

Yes

Do you agree with the requirement for students to read aloud short sentences from the written form of the language and demonstrate understanding of them?



No. We are not confident that this is an authentic form of communication and therefore a valid test of students' phonic awareness. It is also unsuitable for students with dyslexia, and speech-related problems.

Do you agree with the requirement that students undertake dictation exercises from short spoken extracts, with credit for accurate spelling?

No. We do not believe this form of assessment contributes to assessing spontaneous interaction or communicative competence which should be the focus at this level of study. Dictation exercises also disadvantage students with dyslexia and do not reflect the modern world of work or the ubiquitous availability of technology (spell-checkers, keyboards, smartphones).

Do you agree that, where students are expected to understand spoken extracts, these extracts will be delivered at a pace which is no faster than a moderate pace?

Yes.

Do you agree 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?

The Chartered Institute of Linguists disagrees very strongly with this. We believe cultural content should be specified because it underpins an understanding of the language both written and spoken and provides the context for communication. Culture and language are integrated. Our professional members – who have the highest levels of spoken and written competence consistently tell us that one of their greatest motivations in studying languages was the access it gave them to understanding how other cultures, ways of seeing and ways of living operate in different parts of the world. This is invariably what piqued their interest and attracted them to languages.

Cultural content should be integral to GCSEs. The DFE must ensure that cultural content that is of immediate interest and use to GCSE students is at the core of the curriculum. We believe cultural material can be prepared that will perform an important part in ensuring the advancement of the UK's (and more specifically England's) linguistic and cultural competence. At a time in which it is more important than ever that the UK has the languages and linguists that it needs to promote trade, growth,



recovery from pandemic, public health and public safety as well as maintaining the UK's 'soft power', diplomacy and global standing, this is work that needs to be done.

Grammar

Do you consider the grammar annexes to be comprehensive, unambiguous and easy to understand?

No. The grammar requirements seem strange. It is unclear how these have been constructed and how the decisions about what to include in foundation tier and higher tier have been made. There seems little evidence that grammar has been organised with priority given to the needs of communication for real-world purposes.

General

Do you consider the revised subject content to be unambiguous, clear and easy to understand?

The subject content is clear, however, we are concerned that the focus on high frequency vocabulary is 'crowding out' content, context and culture. Learners need to be engaged with a language and to see its relevance to their lives. The Chartered Institute of Linguists believes that languages and language learning should be at the core of education, because they benefit other areas of the curriculum and widen the cultural horizons, life and work opportunities of students.

Finally we would strongly encourage a clear reference being made to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which provides an internationally recognised scaffold against which to measure attainment, progress and progression to higher levels of language use. If we want our young people to achieve and our nation to succeed in the global economy we need to equip ourselves to the standards which are commonplace all around the world.