



Pearson response to DfE's proposed **GCSE MFL Subject Content** (first teaching 2023)

At Pearson, we believe languages should be accessible and motivating to all learners, allowing them to develop the skills they will need to communicate confidently and successfully in a global society. We support actions which address the barriers to increasing engagement with, and uptake of, Modern Foreign Languages at GCSE, particularly within the wider context of long-term declining entries in these subjects.

In March 2021, the DfE launched a consultation on the proposed new GCSE subject content for French, German and Spanish, and a parallel consultation on the proposed revised assessment arrangements was released by Ofqual.

We welcome the statement in the draft subject content that *“GCSE specifications in MFL should ... encourage students to develop confidence in, and a positive attitude towards, MFL and to recognise the importance of languages. They should also provide a strong linguistic and cultural foundation for students who go on to study MFL at a higher level post-16.”*

Over the past 12 months, we have been engaging with teachers, subject associations, language stakeholders and the Department for Education to provide feedback on the proposed subject content. There are some proposals which we believe will have a positive impact on the experience of learners, such as questions in English, rubrics in English and spoken extracts being delivered no faster than a moderate pace. These positive changes could have an equally beneficial impact on the current language qualifications.

However, we are concerned that the draft content may not effectively achieve the stated aims, as outlined below.

Timing

We would welcome a decision to postpone the first teaching date by a year from September 2023 to September 2024.

Within the current context of Covid-related workload and catch-up activities, we are concerned that not all teachers will have had the time to fully engage with the proposals, and may also lack the time to prepare adequately for the scale of change in teaching approach.



Vocabulary frequency approach and volume of vocabulary

We would support a wider and/or more flexible approach to the vocabulary requirement to ensure cohesive and engaging content can be developed.

The proposed subject content requires 1200 words for the foundation tier and 1700 words for the higher tier, with 90% of the words selected from the top 2000 most frequently occurring words and 10% free choice.

Our analysis highlights a range of potential issues with this prescription:

- the lack of suitability of the corpus vocabulary to meet the interests and needs of the age group;
- the number of words ‘missing’ from the top 2000, which are required to deliver cohesive thematic content, being more than 10% of the allowance;
- limitations on the availability in the top 2000 of culturally significant vocabulary;
- the vocabulary volume sitting below the A2 threshold on the CEFR, which is considered equal to GCSE Foundation level;
- the requirement to build upon the KS3 content, but also to assume no prior knowledge in the creation of the vocabulary lists, presents an inherent challenge.

Equal and equitable access to language content

A wider and/or more flexible approach to the vocabulary requirement would better enable awarding organisations to create inclusive qualification content.

There are many words which represent the diverse nature of our classrooms which are not included in the 2000 most frequent. We want all students to be able to express themselves in productive tasks and to see themselves represented in receptive tasks, with no additional learning burden.

Comparability and differentiation of demand

We welcome actions to address the long-standing concerns around level of demand in GCSE MFL qualifications. Sufficient time to trial and evaluate the inclusion of new assessment activities and approaches would enable comparability, and appropriate differentiation, to be properly established.

Our analysis highlights a range of potential implications for comparability and demand:

- inherent demand differences in tasks between languages e.g. dictation and read aloud in French vs Spanish and/or German;



- content which supports appropriate differentiation e.g. deduction, inference, spontaneity;
- language skills, rather than language volumes, as a differentiator e.g. communication, conversation;
- overly defined and structured assessment tasks.

Efficacy of pedagogy

We would welcome the opportunity to support further trialing through to year 11 to increase levels of confidence in the changes and allow further time for preparation and training

We are mindful that the subject content panel represent a particular pedagogy promoted by NCELP (National Centre for Excellence in Language Pedagogy). NCELP promote research-based teaching methods, and we note that currently this pedagogy has only been trialed in a small number of schools for Years 7 and 8. We believe further research is required to confirm confidently that this method should inform the design of KS4 assessment.

Conclusion

In summary, whilst we welcome the aims of the proposals, we recommend further time for collaborative review to ensure that the qualification content, delivery and assessment can be implemented successfully. In the meantime, a number of the proposals could be incorporated into the current GCSE subject content, which could have an immediate impact on how today's students access GCSE language examinations.