The Committee for Linguistics and Education(CLiE)'s response to the
DfE consultation on the GCSE and
Ofqual consultation on assessment objectives for GCSE MFL (French, German and Spanish)

The Committee for Linguistics and Education(CLiE) is a joint committee of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) and the Linguistics Association of Great Britain (LAGB), both of which organisations support the statements below.

CLiE welcomes the initiative to review the GCSE MFL and offers a detailed response below. CLiE would welcome it if the GCSE reform were to be part of genuine, complex overhaul and reform of MFL teaching in the UK, as required to address the language learning crisis. This should include:

- clear CEFR targets for each KS
- clear rationales for learning MFL, and clear communication of these to students
- effective learning strategies

Piecemeal attempts will not address the systemic issues of lack of coherence and planning from one KS to the next, wash-back teaching, subject elitism, demotivation, and decline in uptake. The low motivation noted among learners is a complex, multifaceted and multidirectional issue, and it is comprised of more than just low *self-efficacy* (the belief in one's ability to succeed in a certain area). This means that reducing the complexity of the task does not necessarily improve motivation. Currently, students have poor understanding of the relevance of the subject, and the often repetitive and unstimulating lessons contribute largely to poor learner experiences. Students have few opportunities to be autonomous in their learning. The current reform plans include some notions of addressing poor self-efficacy. In addition to our above-described reservations about the measures proposed, we observe that improving self-efficacy alone will not address the motivation crisis: students need to understand why they are learning a language in the age of Global English, and they need to be given more opportunities in class for meaningful self-expression.

Above all, they need to experience a sense of progress from one KS to the next, and develop language learning strategies and an awareness of subject relevance, from the very beginning of language learning in KS2. Following the Primary MFL White Paper recommendations, transition from KS2 to KS3 could either focus on matching target languages from feeder to secondary schools, or enhancing student learning strategies.

10. 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?

No

The target is not aspirational, and seems to represent a lowering of standards (though this is hard to establish in the absence of similar quantitative measures in the current specifications). We have concerns about the frequency principle as this could become the sole/principal determiner of what is learned. Will this prepare for effective use and student satisfaction? This may limit the language learning experience rather than improve it e.g. only 3 animals fall into the top 2000 in French: animal, poisson and chien, according to one source which currently seems to be in use (Lonsdale and LeBras 2009). Experience may differ in French and Spanish in relation to parts of the body being learned depending on the corpus used.

11. 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

We welcome the attempt to make the subject more accessible and appealing, and the scheme of work more transparent. However, the apparent reduction of the vocabulary students need to know is unlikely to achieve this, and is likely to negatively influence motivation. Studies show a clear link between overall proficiency levels reached and amount of vocabulary a student knows. The suggested vocabulary would barely reach an A2 CEFR level.

As opportunities for self-expression diminish with restricted vocabulary knowledge, the risk is that students' already high levels of boredom and frustration are likely to increase. Moreover, as vocabulary demands are already lower than those expected of their peers abroad, further reduction risks further negative effects on self-efficacy. In sum, reducing vocabulary is a retrograde step in several respects: not improving learning outcomes, widening the gap to A level, not improving motivation and learner experiences, nor proficiency, nor opportunities for adolescents to talk about their lives and identity, and not addressing the transition between Key Stages.

We suggest making a distinction between active and passive vocabulary, and between content and function class words. Common function words only have meaning when used with other words e.g. pas in French; do in English (often a 'dummy'/ auxiliary).

CLiE recognises the very real problems that can arise from a change of language between KS2 and 3, but we suggest nevertheless that there is an opportunity to be seized here to work on progressive vocabulary lists from KS2 to KS4, both in line with the recommendations made in the White Paper on Primary Languages, and addressing the problem of repetitiveness and boredom in the transition from KS3 to KS4. Such lists would also allow teachers at secondary level to identify what has or has not been covered by their learners, thus enabling appropriate actions by teachers.

12. 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 don't understand this question.

13. 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 skill to recognize cognate words should be fostered in students to facilitate self-efficacy in vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary learning and vocabulary building strategies should form part of the focus on fostering effective learning strategies, so that students build not only their knowledge but their understanding of how they can build vocabulary at school and during later language learning experiences. The 'washback' (learning to pass exams only) danger of them just learning a list will reduce their independence as learners.

14.1. 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?

No

The ability to deduce meaning from context is a highly authentic skill. The popularity of UKLO (UK Linguistics Olympiad, www.uklo.org.uk) suggests that learners welcome linguistic challenge. Glossing all unlisted words will also not aid differentiation in marking and opens the possibility that teachers/exam boards may be 'forced' into adding trick questions to enable differentiation.

14.2. 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, although the content of such lists will need to be very carefully considered. For example, would a Spanish list just contain proper nouns commonly used in Europe.

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

Yes

Abolishing topics, and focusing instead on the vocabulary list to be covered, offers teachers more freedom to design lessons appropriate for their contexts, potentially increasing opportunities for including authentic materials, and removing potential topic-related SES biases. However, teaching needs to include content: here, we propose to add literature and culture, with contents reflecting the diversity of lives in L2 communities. We also need to include varieties of the target language, and differences between spoken and written language.

16. 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?

No

see answer to 11.

17. 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?

No

While we recognise the danger of penalising candidates for misunderstanding instructions, we also recognise disadvantages to using English for rubrics: for example, there is a cognitive cost of code switching for those learners who do not switch regularly.

However, instructions should belong to easy and early taught language and should be within reach of all learners. In addition, not teaching the language of rubrics represents an opportunity lost to improve the range of students' understanding.

18. Do you agree that all rubrics will be in English?

No

See question 17.

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

No

This can introduce a large washback effect (teaching only to the assessment), and is not a valid test of their phonic awareness, as students already know these words they are tested on.

CLIE recognises that it may be problematic to assess learners who have been exposed to different varieties of a language, but we believe that this merits further discussion as there is a risk that one variety is promoted above others and learners need to appreciate the richness of accents and dialects. Furthermore, insistence upon one accent, for example, may disadvantage teachers of that language, such as Spanish teachers from South America.

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

No

21. 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?

The rate should not fall below 120 words per minute, otherwise the speech rate is artificially slow.

22. 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?

No.
Language and culture are intrinsically linked, so to teach about target language culture, vocabulary is essential. Teaching about culture is an ideal opportunity to add authentic teaching materials to lessons, and motivate students. Not assessing (inter) cultural knowledge means that it risks being neglected and demoted in teaching and learning.
This would represent a **lost** opportunity to grow understanding and to widen horizons, one of the claims made in the National Curriculum for KS3 (DfE 2013):
 'Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures.'
Learning vocabulary is very important but just learning words and phrases and learning to read snippets out loud are not enough for a motivating and enhancing language learning experience. Some cultural content in the examination of language skills is essential if decontextualization is to be avoided.

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

In our view, these are clearer for some languages than others and may benefit from a carefully considered re-write based on the work of grammar experts. We refer you to the more detailed answer to this question in the response from the British Academy.

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

The subject content is clear. However, CLIE is very concerned that the approach to the subject content is over determined by a concentration on high frequency vocabulary. In our view, this could serve to demotivate learners, who need to be engaged with the language and to derive satisfaction from seeing its relevance to the circumstances of their lives. Linguistic and cultural competency cannot be separated and we are thus of the view that material relating to culture should be included; but culturally-specific vocabulary may not be among the most frequent words.

Ofqual consultation

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment objectives for GCSE MFL (French, German and Spanish)?

We disagree on the targets set which are not high enough. They also need to align with CEFR. Integrating the 4 skills is a positive move: in practice, they are used jointly. However, we think that 'AO3: demonstrate knowledge and accurate application of the grammar and vocabulary prescribed in the specification' should be revised: here, accuracy is listed along with the aural and written skills as if it were a skill, not a marking criterion.
Furthermore, the proposal overall does not align sufficiently with communicative language teaching methodology. We propose a 50/50% split for aural and written skills. In all assessment (final as well as NEA, see below) marking, the following marking criteria should be respected: accuracy, complexity and comprehensibility.

Overall, the assessment reform does not go far enough. To add much-needed authenticity into the assessment and avoid the well-known assessment problems related to washback (boredom, repetitiveness, demotivation), we propose the following:

-50 % weighting of end assessment, and 50% of assessment via non-exam assessment (NEA). We welcome the plan to keep the NEA but it should be extended, from speaking, to assess aural and written skills in a variety of formats. Course work, in a variety of both written and spoken forms, should be submitted repeatedly, at several points, (e.g. 2 written, 2 spoken) during the GCSE year. GCSE coursework is accepted in a number of subjects (English, Geography, Sciences). Moving from one-time high stakes exams to repeated measuring of student progress permits fairer assessment and more authentic assessment design. It will permit students to submit varied individual outputs, recreating near-authentic communicative interactions, and will permit the testing of authentic communicative ability, giving students opportunities for some autonomy.

We recommend that all interactive tasks in assessments are kept in the target language and that no English is used, provided this can be achieved without penalising pupils for misunderstanding the instructions. Furthermore, we recommend that authentic texts, modified and glossed as needed, must be included in assessment and teaching materials. Again, both will help to lend much needed authenticity to the assessment tasks.

Question 2: Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment objectives for GCSE MFL (French, German and Spanish)?

See 1

No opinion

see answer to 3

No
see answer to 3

No

NEA should be given higher stakes. See answer to 1.

No
see 1

No
see 1

No

Yes
Further steps can be taken to address the already negative motivational spiral among learners.
In addition, assessment exercises such as dictation furthermore disproportionately disadvantage students with special needs (dyslexia).

Question 11: We have set out our understanding of the cost implications and burdens of our proposals for schools, colleges and exam boards. Are there any other potential costs or burdens that we have not identified?

There will be very significant unforeseen costs in revising schemes of work for KS3 and KS5. Currently, it remains totally unclear what the impact on ITT programmes will be.

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