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Can the gap get any wider? How the new GCSE curriculum will make progression to university more challenging and less inclusive

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ABSTRACT

The latest reforms to the GCSE Subject Content attempt to bring languages in line with other subject areas through a quantification of the material that needs to be learnt and a focus on the linguistic system, to the detriment of the broader communicative aims associated with 'knowing a language'. This article suggests that the reforms expose a lack of understanding of the fact that curricula based on instrumental skills do not prepare students (from state schools, in particular) for the level of reflection and intellectual enquiry that is at the core of university learning. This paper will also argue that an instrumental view of languages creates a wider gap between school and university that perpetuates inequality and that keeps promoting an Anglocentric public idea about languages. In order to mitigate the impact of the latest GCSE reforms, it is proposed that higher education institutions and schools should engage in collaborative work towards an understanding of language education that takes account of some of the principles which now inform languages curriculum reform in higher education in the UK and also in other sectors in Europe via the CEFR.

KEYWORDS

CEFR; curriculum reform; GCSE Subject Content; higher education; schools; transition

In a world that is increasingly defined by its transnational and globalised connections, there has never been a more compelling need to communicate across languages and cultures. Yet, language education in the UK is still going through challenging times, undergoing transformations and recruiting from an ever-shrinking pool of students opting for languages at GCSE and A Level.

Language learning in higher education in the UK has historically focussed on immersion in a target language – to the detriment of students' competence in other languages – and has aimed at achieving the closest possible version of the native standard. There has been criticism of this approach (see Blackledge and Creese 2010; García 2009; García and Wei 2014, on the role of 'translanguaging' in educational settings) because, first, the language of study is only conceived in terms of its immediate achievement and, second, the emphasis on accuracy and 'success' does not develop an appreciation for diversity, linguistic or cultural. In a country where 'most public opinion is monolingualist, its views shaped and echoed by a xenophobic media', where parents are 'often indifferent or even hostile to language learning and politicians under little pressure from constituents to look beyond national borders' (Coleman 2011: 127), it is not surprising that the language-education landscape is in such poor shape.

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The persistent recruitment decline in modern languages (MLs) programmes (Bowler 2020; Gallagher-Brett and Broady 2012: 263; Polisca et al. 2019: 6) has brought a heightened awareness of the necessity to engage with a vision of modern languages study that is relevant for our students; one that is global, multilingual, intercultural and interdisciplinary. Departments in UK universities are engaging in curriculum reform and are reframing their approaches to the study of languages and cultures with the aim to 'combine the study of a given geographical area with enquiry into the development of culture in global terms' (Burdett and Gorrara 2021). With a focus on culture that challenges narrow and instrumental views of language learning, curricula are being redesigned to promote an awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity that allows students to learn to research inter- and cross-disciplinarily, cross-linguistically and cross-culturally. Informed by findings from projects such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council's 'Open World Research Initiative' (OWRI)[1] and Transnationalizing Modern Languages (TML) – part of the AHRC's 'Translating Cultures'[2] amongst others – MLs departments are taking the lead in transforming language education to ensure dialogue between 'language' and 'culture' at all levels. This involves the design of curricula that can take students further through an appreciation of the role of languages within and beyond the language classroom.

Some of the basic principles behind this approach to curricular reform at higher education are:

- to signal an explicit move to go beyond the national standard of languages, so that minority language norms and cultural products are not excluded
- to diversify and decolonise education, through facilitating a debate and an enquiry into Eurocentric modes of thought at the very core of the discipline
- to expose students to topics and discourses that reflect and highlight national (local) and transnational (global) contexts
- to include different social and cultural perspectives on languages and cultures
- to build on students' educational interests, experiences and aspirations.

As part of the wider student experience and to build employability skills, students are also offered the opportunity to participate in research projects, social responsibility schemes and outreach work, connecting them more in their role of language ambassadors with their immediate community (e.g. Andersen and Magee 2013; O'Connor 2012).

In spite of the work on redefining what it means to study MLs at university and the emphasis on a curriculum that is relevant and culturally loaded, the steady 'language crisis' in higher education has resulted in an alarming decrease in undergraduate recruitment and the closure of academic departments. Declining uptake in all sectors in languages in the UK has been tirelessly documented (e.g. British Council's Language Trends surveys; Broady 2020; Parrish and Lanvers 2019, etc.) and a common challenge seems to be ensuring effective and successful progression: within the curriculum (e.g. see Mitchell 2003); across Key Stages (Hunt 2009); and between school and university. In her work on progression to higher education, Vidal Rodeiro (2017: 245) reminds us of what we have known for a while, that 'the current position of languages in schools might lead to very low levels of participation in the learning of languages other than English by the end of compulsory education'. Universities are attempting to counteract low uptake and the limited variety of language provision in schools by offering beginners languages courses, which allow students to learn from scratch as part of modern languages degree programmes, including languages traditionally taught in schools such as German and French (Bowler 2020; Critchley, Illingworth and Wright 2021: 7, 13).[3]

The announcement of the latest reforms to the GCSE Subject Content (DfE 2022) brings an inevitable sense of déjà vu (see Liviero 2017 and Dobson 2018, for a discussion on the role of grammar in MFL education after the 2015 GCSE Subject Content review). The latest document intensifies a past trend of bringing languages in line with other subject areas, in this case through a quantification of what needs to be learnt and a focus on the linguistic system. The curriculum is set to focus almost solely on a precise specification of the vocabulary, grammar and phonological features or 'phonics'

to be taught, relegating other essential components of the language curriculum such as communicative and intercultural competence. The 'Subject aims' (DfE 2022: section 6, p.3) do refer to the need for students to 'become familiar with aspects of the contexts and cultures of the countries and communities where the language is spoken' but, unfortunately, this is the only reference to 'culture' in the document. Crucially, the new curriculum does not acknowledge the concept of language as social discourse, the broader communicative aims associated with 'knowing a language', and of how a holistic view of languages (knowing 'about' languages) can help challenge the monolingual language mindset which typically considers languages irrelevant and difficult. Here it is important to highlight once more the work of the AHRC and its OWRI and TML projects mentioned above, and to point to the Council of Europe (2020), and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which emphasise the need for language curricula to include 'a focus on real-world communicative needs, organised around real-life tasks' (CEFR 2020).

Language is inseparable from its community of speakers and the cultures that they share; 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 and provides high levels of motivation amongst degree students allowing them to develop the interests which have enthused them earlier in their language learning career. The implications of the GCSE reforms are undoubtedly worrying: while there is no denying that knowledge of grammar, lexis and phonics is a key part of linguistic competence, treating language learning primarily as the acquisition of knowledge 'ignores the multidimensionality of language and the relationship between language, culture, society and identity' (Arber et al. 2020: 2). Furthermore, it reinforces a very limited public idea about what languages are and what language learning involves 'based on partial information, complex realities and unhelpful discourses' (Copland and McPake 2021: 8)

The fact that the proposed reforms to the GCSE curriculum are taking place in spite of the vigorous response by language associations, headteachers and teachers (see ALL 2021; British Academy 2021, 2022; CIOL 2021; UCML 2021, amongst others) shows that research findings, recommendations and curriculum reform processes in higher education are *not* informing educational policy and are *not* having an impact in secondary schools (or primary). In spite of detailed arguments in the responses to the consultation, the latest GCSE Subject Content (DfE 2022) exposes a lack of awareness of how curricula based on instrumental skills have historically failed students in their transition to higher education by not preparing them for the level of reflection and intellectual enquiry that is at the core of university learning.

More worryingly, the tight specification in terms of vocabulary, grammar and phonics that the new reforms are proposing will not alleviate the inequalities in the access to language education that have been reported in the literature and by the media for a long time (Vidal Rodeiro 2017, with regards to A-level uptake; Tinsley 2019a, 2019b, Paton 2011; are just a few examples) and which reinforce the notion that languages are an elitist subject (Lanvers 2017). The Language Trends reports (Collen 2020; Tinsley 2019a, 2019b) are clear that students' aspirations to continue language study are strongly influences by their socio-economic background: students from private or grammar schools, who have benefitted from smaller classes, more staff, and more timetable flexibility, are more likely to pursue languages degrees and are better prepared for the transition period; in state schools, the picture is different. Harnisch et al.'s (2011) report on a top performing sixth form college, describes how state-school students planning to continue with languages at university, only do so 'as part of a combined programme, with, for the most part, languages accounting for the minor element'. Harnisch et al. (2011) also state that students who do not want to continue with language learning 'felt that they had reached an adequate level, were better at other subjects or that language learning is too hard' (2011: 166–167).

The British Academy's response to the announcements of the final version of the revised GCSE Subject Content (DfE 2022) expressed 'concerns that the extent of the emphasis on vocabulary lists, grammar, and phonics will sideline fundamental aspects of the discipline of modern languages, such as communication and intercultural learning' (British Academy 2022). From the point of view of

transition from school to higher education, a school curriculum that only offers an instrumental view of languages creates a wider gap, perpetuates inequality and promotes an anglocentric public idea about languages (Copland and McPake 2021) that needs to change. Clearly, in order to mitigate the impact of the latest GCSE reforms, it is imperative for both higher education institutions and schools to engage in collaborative work towards an understanding of language education that can lead to a view of languages that is less instrumental, more open and more inclusive. One possible way to start this process is by the development of joint proposals for language education that take account of some of the principles which now inform languages curriculum reform in higher education in the UK and also in other sectors in Europe via the CEFR, i.e. the diversification, decolonisation, transnationalisation, and integration of languages within a cultural context. If school language students are able to engage with the *realities* of multilingual language use in the UK and the world, and also see languages working in partnership with other subjects, we may see a more positive trend in languages uptake and an increasing number of skilled linguists emerging from UK universities in the future.

Notes

1. AHRC OWRI brochure Final R0.pdf (sas.ac.uk)
2. Transnationalizing Modern Languages | Mobility, Identity and Translation in Modern Italian Cultures (transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk)
3. Many UK universities have a policy of 'institution-wide language provision' (IWLP) whereby all students, not just those studying for languages degrees, have the opportunity to study a language or languages at different levels from beginner onwards. Some of these courses can count as credit towards a degree. For more detail, see Critchley, Illlingworth and Wright 2021.

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