

Dialogues

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A place for linguistics in Key Stage 5 Modern Foreign Languages

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In this article, Michelle Sheehan, Alice Corr and Jonathan Kasstan description of article ...

The new Modern Foreign Language A-levels

In 2015, the UK's Department for Education (DfE) published [the new subject content for the AS/A-level in Modern Foreign Languages \(MFL\)](#), calling it “an integrated study with a focus on language and culture and society” (DfE 2015:4). This document ostensibly addresses the concerns from the 2014 curricular review by the [A-Level Content Advisory Board \(ALCAB\)](#), firstly that the previous syllabus was “rather dull and uninspiring”, and secondly that the topics it covered were both “too general”, and too similar to GCSE topics (ALCAB 2014:2). Concerning the new specification, the DfE stresses that, in addition to developing high-level language skills, students will develop appropriate analytical and critical skills in relation to “the language, culture and society of the country or countries where the language is spoken” (DfE 2015:3).

In this paper, we note that these changes open up the possibility for linguistics to constitute a core aspect of the MFL A-level in England, but that exam board specifications have not yet capitalised on this opportunity. We outline a number of ways in which the inclusion of linguistics in the AS/A-level curriculum could make a substantial contribution to the DfE's (2015) core aims, and we make suggestions regarding what a revised programme could look like.

MFLs at Key Stage 5

Negative attitudes towards MFL study in the UK are reflected in part in low pupil uptake of MFL subjects beyond Key Stage (KS) 3. There has been a steady decline in uptake in KS4 and 5, which has accelerated in recent years (for details, see [Dobson 2018:76](#), [Poliska 2018a:1-2](#), [2018b:1](#)). This decline is sometimes understood to be linked to the removal of MFLs from the compulsory curriculum at KS4 post-2004 ([Tinsley & Doležal 2018](#), who also report on the perceived difficulty of (a) AS/A-level study in MFL, and relatedly, (b) attainment of the highest grades in MFL compared with other subjects).

The DfE's (2015) subject content aims to enable A-level students to “develop knowledge and understanding, through the language of study, of themes relating to the society and culture, past and present, of the country or countries where the language is spoken”. In part, this must be achieved through the compulsory study of “authentic spoken and written sources from a variety of different contexts and genres, including online media” in order to engage with themes related to “social issues and trends” and “political and/or intellectual and/or artistic culture” in addition to film and/or literary texts (DfE 2015:3–4).

Despite the DfE's understanding of MFL study as interdisciplinary, it is clear that exam boards such as AQA differentiate between language *skills* and subject *content* in their new specifications. Moreover, subject ‘content’ focuses on film, literature and culture *to the exclusion* of language-related topics. This, we contend, is a missed opportunity, since linguistics not only provides a means to bridge the (unnecessary) divide between language *skills* and *content*, but also offers an intellectually fulfilling way to implement the stated aims and objectives of the DfE's new subject content.

Moreover, [Ofqual's marking schema](#) specifies that 80% of marks should be awarded for “language manipulation and use”, while only 20% are reserved for knowledge, understanding, and analysis of, and critical engagement with “aspects of the culture and society of countries/communities where the language is spoken” (Ofqual 2017:7). Therefore, the new AS/A-level qualification remains largely skills-focused. The study of linguistics within such a curriculum is doubly desirable, as it necessarily promotes greater metalinguistic awareness, which in turn is reported to be linked to greater success in UK classroom-based MFL learning at lower Key Stages ([TSC 2016](#)).

What linguistics can do for MFL study

Linguistics is inherently interdisciplinary, interfacing with history, literature, psychology, sociology, mathematics, education, information technology, and the natural sciences. The English Language A-level (which is essentially English linguistics) provides an excellent example of how language-focused content can be accessible, interesting and intellectually demanding in its own right (see [DfE 2014](#)).

There are obvious differences between the study of English and that of MFL, however, which introduce potential barriers to the inclusion of linguistics for our purposes. Perhaps the most obvious

issue is the tension between *descriptive* and *prescriptive* attitudes towards language. Linguistics, as a discipline, takes a *descriptive* approach, noting how languages vary according to geographical, social and age-based factors. Initially, this may seem like a barrier to the inclusion of linguistics in MFL A-levels, as, with respect to grammar, for example, the AS/A-level specification clearly takes a *prescriptive* approach. Prescriptive attitudes to language are often deeply entrenched and difficult to change, but challenging them should be a central aim of the AS/A-level. There are also practical benefits: the AS/A-level syllabus emphasises the use of real data from a variety of sources (spoken and written, including traditional print and online material). Such language seldom adheres wholly to prescribed standard norms, so students will need some awareness of non-standard features in order to understand them fully. Furthermore, it is only by being made aware of the differences between standard and non-standard usage that students can reach an understanding of what the standard is, and use it confidently. We thus see the understanding of linguistic variation as an essential component of communicative competency.

The second way in which linguistics can enrich MFL curricula is by providing students with analytical and critical skills. Much work in linguistics adheres to principles of falsifiability, reliability, and validity. This scientific method can be employed by MFL students in relation to many of the grammar points that form the focus of the DfE specification. For example, students could be asked to ‘decode’, in a manner similar to [UKLO](#) puzzles, when exactly personal *a* in Spanish is used, or they could be asked to investigate it using online corpora or spontaneous speech samples. In fact, ALCAB (2014) mentions the possibility of Spanish and German linguistics projects. This kind of language analysis enhances metalinguistic awareness and makes core aspects of the discipline such as grammar and pronunciation seem more interesting and less arbitrary. Language analysis of this kind provides a motivation to learn grammar and terminology by transforming it into a discovery process.

The DfE’s new subject content explicitly states that the qualification should “foster [students’] ability to learn other languages”. Here, too, linguistics can make a significant contribution. Consider the study of phonetics and phonology: [TSC \(2016\)](#) strongly advocates the use of phonics in MFL teaching from the earliest stage. At A-level, a basic understanding of sound-spelling correspondences could be substantially enriched through the study of phonetics and phonology. Again, this can be discovery-based, using the students’ existing knowledge to posit and test phonological rules. Links can be made to phonetic features of English spoken as a second language by Spanish, French and German speakers and to more general principles (e.g. vowel reduction). This has the potential not only to improve pronunciation in the target language, but also to foster intercultural understanding of the difficulties that learners of English face, and to promote essential skills for future autonomous language study.

Phonetic, stylistic and discourse analysis fits well with the use of authentic spoken materials, including films, where linguistic cues (e.g. code-switching and turn taking) may be crucial to character or plot development, and is consistent with some of the DfE objectives. Topics in sociolinguistics, such as multiculturalism and linguistic discrimination, would make excellent alternative learning units within the A-level’s compulsory “social issues and trends” theme, making students aware of politicised aspects of language and requiring them to take a critical stance.

Conclusions

This brief report has outlined how linguistics could be integrated into existing MFL AS/A-level provision and has stressed the benefits of such an adjustment. Linguistics helps students develop new analytic and critical skills, distinct from and complementary to those developed through literary/cultural analysis. In doing so, students gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between standard and nonstandard language, enhancing their ability to use a language authentically in different sociocultural contexts. They also gain a more nuanced understanding of their own and their target language's linguistic structure, and acquire useful skills for future language learning.

We hope that exam boards will consider these arguments when revising their specifications, and that, in future government-issued guidelines, a more explicit endorsement of the potential of linguistics will be made. In a qualification that aims to be “an integrated study with a focus on language and culture and society”, we argue that linguistics is *essential*.

Further reading

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