

The languages curriculum and disadvantaged students

Introduction and background

Poorer outcomes in languages and lower uptake of languages for those who are socio-economically disadvantaged have been well documented for many years through annual surveys such as Language Trends. Members of NALA have expressed concerns about whether the curriculum itself (particularly the GCSE) was exacerbating the problem. As a result, NALA looked at the past two years of GCSE papers, particularly speaking and writing test questions. They found that questions about holidays, family relationships, descriptions of a student's house, restaurant visits, and live events were potentially problematic for vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils. To explore what other professionals felt about the curriculum, they conducted a survey of language teachers, consultants, teacher trainers and trainee teachers. A total of 556 responses were received, 94 per cent of which came from teachers currently working in secondary schools. There were also 1734 extended responses explaining the opinions given.

Key points

School contexts and the languages curriculum

- Teachers were asked about the extent to which they thought the social background of their pupils would inhibit their ability to answer GCSE questions. Thirty-four per cent said that it would cause difficulty for many students, 10 per cent felt that it would cause difficulty for most students and 41 per cent felt that it would cause difficulty for some students. Only 2 per cent felt that the social background of pupils would have no impact at all.
- Several teachers explained that the background of the students often meant they had little to draw on in terms of personal experiences to answer many of the questions. More concerning were comments suggesting that the personal nature of the tasks could cause distress – for example, students describing family members when they are in care or describing holidays when they cannot go on them.
- Some teachers felt that the questions made an assumption about cultural capital which not all students would have. They might not, for example, know about gap years or about a wide range of careers. Teachers in particularly disadvantaged areas felt that they had to cover cultural contexts, as well as the languages curriculum, thus eating into valuable teaching time.
- Poor literacy skills were mentioned as a barrier for some students – they have more difficulty recognising cognates, as they have fewer words in English.
- Respondents were asked if their students found it difficult to answer questions when they had no direct experience of the topic. Over 95 per cent of respondents said that at least some of the time students find it difficult to make up answers where they have no experience. Ninety-three of respondents said that they felt making up an answer disadvantages students. As one respondent commented: 'It's difficult to give an account of a day on holiday if you've never been on holiday'.
- Sixty-eight per cent said that this disadvantage would be significant. Many commented that students feel they should be 'telling the truth' and teachers must tell students that it may be necessary to make up an answer or 'lie'. Many said that this is problematic for students.
- There were comments about the additional cognitive load involved in having to write about something which students were imagining as well as having to find the correct language. One respondent commented that 'You are asking students to be creative and to speak a new language – 2 difficult skills – speaking authentically about your life doesn't require as much creativity and is less cognitively draining'. Another respondent felt that students with ASD find it particularly challenging to write about something which they have not experienced.



The themes and topics

- Respondents were asked about the topics covered in the GCSE syllabus. Most respondents (71.4%) felt the topics covered disadvantaged some students and 73.1 per cent said that they did not think that GCSE topics were necessary for effective language learning.
- Nearly two thirds (61.9%) felt that the topics made learners feel uncomfortable and 75.1 per cent said that this discomfort impacted on students' performance and motivation.
- Some topics were identified as more problematic than others. Family and friends, house and home, holidays, leisure activities, charity and volunteering, lifestyle, social issues and work were rated as the most challenging for disadvantaged or vulnerable students.
- Although most of the comments about topics related to speaking and writing, there were also some concerns about reading and listening. One respondent highlighted the potential problems: 'It's mainly in the reading and listening that pupils are disadvantaged. Foods that certain pupils will never know (crudités!) or ideas that they wouldn't understand (au pair). Some of the reading topics cover areas that only middle class pupils would understand making the content inaccessible and disadvantaging them'.
- Many respondents felt that the content was a main reason for low uptake of languages.

Respondents' suggestions for a way forward

- In the open comments, several respondents made suggestions which are outlined below
- A small number of respondents (under 1%) felt that it was the teachers' responsibility to ensure that all can achieve appropriately. One respondent said that 'we are supposed to provide pupils with the language to talk about anything, regardless of personal experiences'.
- A further suggestion was to tweak the examination so that the students would have more choice of questions and could therefore avoid topics with which they were not comfortable.
- Some respondents suggested that the assessment criteria could be adjusted so that students were rewarded for communicating what they wanted without being penalised for making mistakes.
- Some respondents felt that it was important to speak to students and that this might be a way of making curriculum content more relevant to all socio-economic groups. One responded stated that: 'the comments I've had from the students that didn't opt for the subject, even though we thought they would because they are able linguists, were that they didn't know what to say for some of the topics or it wasn't relevant for their future life'.
- Some respondents felt that the curriculum should avoid content based on individual experience as this was problematic for some. Linked to this were suggestions about making the curriculum content more intellectually challenging and culturally enriching to motivate pupils. One respondent made a comparison with other subjects: 'The GCSE MFL curriculum is rather shallow compared to the content of, say, History or Geography. Why can't we look at meatier, deeper topics that in addition have clear cross-

curricular links such as French/Belgian resistance in WWII, climate change affecting Francophone Africa...'.
Finally, there were suggestions about alternative qualifications to GCSE, for example offering a course which focuses more on everyday/holiday/language without the extensive grammatical and cultural knowledge required for GCSE.

Recommendations

- Based on the analysis of the teachers' responses, the report makes several recommendations.
- The current languages GCSE and languages curriculum should be reviewed carefully to ensure that no group of students is disadvantaged. The on-going work of the GCSE review body should make this aspect a priority of their work.
- A curriculum which motivates, engages and allows all to achieve needs to be intellectually challenging and meaningful. In languages, the curriculum should be enhanced by encouraging study of the culture and peoples of the countries where the language is spoken.
- To meet the needs of all learners the languages curriculum should be made accessible through a reformed GCSE and a wider range of qualifications.
- Content should be devised in such a way that students feel that they are making progress from the outset and that the programme is able to sustain that progress through KS3, KS4 and beyond.
- Although not included in the survey, the current pandemic raises concerns about fairness in the 2021 awarding process. Students have missed a large chunk of learning and evidence shows that the disadvantaged have missed most. In the immediate future, a plan for awarding grades fairly for the coming academic year should be considered in light of potential disruptions.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://university-council-modern-languages.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NALA-Report-on-socio-economic-deprivation-and-MFL-2020-Full-report.pdf>