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Addressing the UK's 'languages crisis': moving beyond skills-based language teaching through the inclusion of linguistics in secondary education

Anna D. Havinga, Sascha Stollhans, Alice Corr, Jonathan R. Kasstan, Norma Schifano, Michelle Sheehan | 3rd
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- The decline in language learning in the UK calls for revisions to the languages curriculum and approaches to assessments.
- Language learning in UK secondary education is largely skills-based (focussing on reading, writing, speaking and listening) and eschews the analytical and critical study of language. Linguistics, including the study of language variation and change, could fill this gap and enrich the curriculum.
- The Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages project has led on interventions to introduce linguistics into school-based language learning in three stages: first, mini-courses introducing key concepts of French, German and Spanish linguistics were developed and delivered in A-level classes; second, academics and teachers co-created and trialled linguistics-informed materials that are aligned with current A-level specifications; third, workshops for Initial Teacher Training and Continuous Professional Development programmes were developed and delivered.
- Findings from all three project stages suggest that linguistics-based content is appealing to students and teachers, may have a motivational effect, contributes to a more diverse and comprehensive learning experience, and can easily be integrated into language teaching.
- We recommend (1) capitalising on existing curricula to include key insights from linguistics in the teaching and assessment of languages in UK schools; (2) considering the more substantive inclusion of linguistics in future subject specifications; (3) promoting co-creation projects between academics and teachers; and (4) integrating linguistics into Initial Teacher Training and subsequent Continuing Professional Development.

The decline in language learners and the lack of linguistics in the languages curriculum

The decline in the number of students learning languages in the UK, sometimes referred to as the 'languages crisis' (Bowler 2020), has prompted calls for revisions to the secondary languages

curriculum, which currently focuses on the acquisition of the four traditional language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). Unlike subjects such as Physical Education and Music, which include critical, theoretical, and analytical dimensions at GCSE and A-level, language teaching lacks these elements. Whereas the A-level specifications do include critical engagement with cultural elements, such as literature and film, they eschew deeper analysis of language itself beyond the learning and application of grammar. We argue that this is an unfortunate omission as including linguistics has the potential to make a positive impact on uptake, motivation, and educational attainment. Therefore, we recommend enhancing the languages curriculum by incorporating linguistics as this would offer different perspectives to language teaching that may be appealing to a broader range of pupils.

Linguistics can be defined as the analytical and critical study of language(s), which aims to describe and understand language(s) and language use. This is a different dimension to the learning of language(s), moving it beyond grammar application and the four skills. It encompasses a range of subfields and branches, including, but not limited to, the study of sounds and sound systems (phonetics and phonology), the structure of words and sentences (morphology and syntax), meaning and meaning in context (semantics and pragmatics), and language variation and change (sociolinguistics and historical linguistics). Our research has shown that linguistics-informed content is (1) appealing to students, (2) perceived to be beneficial to language learning by students and teachers, and (3) readily integrable into the language teaching curriculum (Sheehan et al. 2021; 2024). Knowledge of linguistics can help learners of languages understand complex concepts and raise their language awareness more generally (cf. Sheehan et al., forthcoming, for a comprehensive discussion).

As part of our project, a group of academic researchers and school teachers co-created materials for the delivery of French, German and Spanish A-level teaching in England and Wales (now available through Oxford University Press via the online learning platform [Kerboodle](#)). This form of collaboration has proven to be a particularly well-suited approach to ensuring the feasibility and compatibility of introducing linguistics topics into the current curriculum (Sheehan et al. 2024).

In what follows, we describe our interventions to date and discuss our research findings on the potential of linguistics for language teaching and learning. We then offer concrete policy recommendations, particularly related to curriculum and assessment as well as teacher training.

Interventions to embed linguistics into the languages classroom

There have been numerous attempts to address the 'languages crisis', through both bottom-up and top-down initiatives (e.g. respectively, the Welsh MFL Mentoring and the recently established [National Consortium for Language Education](#)). The Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) [\[1\]](#) project – a collaboration between a team of academic linguists (the authors) and experienced teachers – pursues the same aim, namely to make a meaningful contribution to increasing uptake. While the idea of using linguistics as a means to help students learn languages is not new (cf., for example, Barbour 1986) and still part of ongoing academic discussions (cf. Hudson 2024), calls for embedding linguistics in the languages curriculum have largely been ignored by policy makers in the UK context. Projects such as [WAMCAM](#) have raised awareness about the value of multilingualism in an educational setting, but what has been missing so far is an initiative that systematically explores the benefits of taking a linguistics-informed approach to language teaching.

To evidence these benefits, the Linguistics in MFL team (with contributions from other academics) initially created four stand-alone linguistics mini-courses for French, German, and Spanish A-level (on the sounds, structures, and history of the languages as well as language variation). Feedback on these sessions was very encouraging (cf. Sheehan et al. 2021). However, several teachers suggested that resources that are explicitly linked to the current A-level materials would be more helpful as they would be easier to integrate into their language teaching, given the limited amount of time assigned to language learning in schools. To act on this feedback, we co-created new materials with six experienced secondary school teachers that specifically addressed the content covered by the current A-level specifications (four sessions per language) in the second phase of the project. This resulted in different materials for each language, but all with an overarching focus on dispelling language myths (e.g. the idea that there is a single 'correct' version of French/German/Spanish). 156 teachers registered to test these new materials in their classrooms, with 17 teachers and 65 students (primarily from academies and independent schools) providing both qualitative and quantitative feedback via post-trial questionnaires. Additionally, seven teachers participated in semi-structured interviews about the co-created materials (discussed in Sheehan et al. 2024).

The feedback from teachers stressed that the co-created materials are compatible with the existing A-level curriculum while at the same time offering new and exciting content (cf. Sheehan et al. 2024). The comprehensive teacher notes we had produced as part of the resources ensured that even teachers with little or no background in linguistics felt comfortable teaching the materials (as validated in teacher feedback). Teachers reported that their pupils benefitted from the linguistics-focused input as it enhanced their awareness, appreciation, and understanding of language as well

as their skills for critical analysis. Specifically, teachers noted that students adopted a more descriptive and less subjective view of language use after studying the materials.

The feedback from pupils echoed some of the teachers' comments. The majority of students found the materials interesting, engaging, and novel (see Table 1). 72% of students sampled agreed or strongly agreed that studying linguistics is useful when learning a language, with a further 18% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Three quarters of the students would recommend the co-created materials to a friend and 69% of those sampled would like linguistics to be taught as part of the languages curriculum in schools. Half of the students felt more inclined to study languages and/or linguistics at university after encountering linguistics content through the co-created materials, with a further 29% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. The feedback from students thus provides evidence that even relatively minor interventions that introduce students to linguistics contents can have a significant impact.

Table 1: Feedback from pupils (n=65) on the co-created materials to Likert-scale questions (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Statement	% agree/strongly agree	Mean
1. The content of the classes was interesting.	84.6%	4.23
2. The activities in the classes were engaging/stimulating.	67.7%	3.89
3. The content was different from what we usually cover in language classes.	81.5%	4.22
4. I learnt a lot from the classes.	67.7%	3.94
5. It is useful to study linguistics when learning a language.	72.3%	3.98
6. I would recommend these classes to a friend studying A-level languages.	75.4%	4.06
7. I would like linguistics to be taught as part of Modern Foreign Languages in schools.	69.2%	3.91
8. Having taken the classes, I now feel more inclined to study languages and/or linguistics at university.	50.8%	3.40

The feedback from both teachers and students shows that it is feasible to introduce linguistics into the current A-level languages curriculum and that pupils would benefit from this. In addition to providing resources, the project team also offered two-hour virtual Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions for teachers and trainee teachers, e. g. as part of Postgraduate

Certificate in Education (PGCE) and School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) programmes. These CPD sessions provided definitions of central concepts in linguistics, introduced the co-created materials and explored further ideas for how to use linguistics in the classroom.

Feedback from such sessions for secondary MFL PGCE students at the University of Bristol (26 participants, with 21 of them providing feedback before and after the session) and the University of Oxford (13 participants) indicates that only half of them studied some linguistics during their undergraduate degree. Almost three quarters had, however, read about linguistics before the session, suggesting that trainee teachers generally consider linguistics relevant to language learning and/or teaching (or at least interesting). The relevance of linguistics for language learning and teaching is also reflected in the relatively high Mean scores for statements 11 to 13 in Table 2, which increased slightly after the two-hour training session. A stronger increase in Mean scores can be observed with regard to statements 9 and 10, suggesting that even a very short introduction to linguistics can increase metalinguistic awareness. While a few PGCE students were sceptical about certain elements of the co-created materials (e.g. the use of sound charts in the French and Spanish materials or explanations for sound changes in the German resources), the majority of participants intended to incorporate linguistics in their own teaching (71%) and felt that the co-created materials would be helpful and relevant to language students (74%). Overall, these findings suggest that even minor interventions can be very beneficial to (trainee) teachers.

Table 2: Feedback from PGCE students (pre-session n=39; post-session n=34) to Likert-scale questions (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Statement	Mean before session	Mean after session
9. I feel I have a good understanding of what linguistics is.	2.95	3.97
10. I feel I have a good understanding of the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language.	2.31	3.71
11. It is useful to study linguistics when learning a language.	3.85	4.15
12. Linguistics should be part of MFL teacher training.	3.87	4.12
13. Linguistics should be taught as part of MFLs at school.	3.69	4.00
14. Having attended this workshop, I intend to incorporate linguistics in my own MFL teaching.	n/a	3.82
15. I feel that the materials would be helpful and relevant to MFL students.	n/a	3.88

While we acknowledge the limitations of small-scale attitudinal studies (cf. Sheehan et al. 2024) and although we are not claiming that an inclusion of linguistics alone can solve the 'languages crises', all three stages of our project to date (linguistics mini-courses, co-created A-level resources and teacher training courses) have delivered promising results, making an overall strong case for the inclusion of linguistics in language teaching and learning. In the next section, we translate these findings into concrete policy recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

In response to existing calls to action, we published a "Manifesto for Linguistics and Language Teaching in the UK Context" (Sheehan et al. 2023) based on our research interventions described in the previous section and our discussions with teachers, academics and other stakeholders. This manifesto was launched in July 2022 at a meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Modern Languages at the House of Lords, and endorsed by 18 organisations and learned societies in the UK, including the Alliance of Modern Languages, Area Studies and Linguistics Subject Associations UK (AMLUK), the University Council for Languages (UCFL) and the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL).

In the manifesto we identify opportunities, challenges and actions related to the inclusion of linguistics in school-based language teaching and learning. The actions and policy recommendations, some of which we discuss in this section, can broadly be subsumed under six themes: (1) employability and skills development; (2) social inclusion; (3) multilingualism; (4) motivation; (5) transitions; and (6) curriculum and assessment design. Our policy recommendations are designed to address the aforementioned challenges by embedding linguistics into secondary education, ensuring a robust and more comprehensive approach to language teaching.

First, we recommend capitalising on existing curricula to include key insights from linguistics in the teaching and assessment of languages in UK schools. Existing MFL curricula already lend themselves to the inclusion of linguistics-informed content and could easily be enriched by a focus on the analytical study of language. This move needs to go hand in hand with greater joined-up efforts to increase and diversify the dissemination of relevant findings from linguistics and to collaboratively promote the use of linguistics-informed materials. By leveraging a network of stakeholders, including the Department for Education (DfE), the APPG on Modern Languages, the National Centre for Language Education (NCLE), universities, and subject associations, our aim is to bridge the communication gap, ensuring that such ways to enhance the MFL curriculum are accessible to the educational community. This dissemination effort may include creating accessible

resources and organising events such as festivals, conferences, and workshops that make broader findings from linguistics appealing and relevant to both teachers and students.

Second, we propose considering the more substantive inclusion of linguistics in future subject specifications to help create a more comprehensive learning experience as well as a more authentic evaluation of students' language abilities. This inclusion will contribute to preparing students for target-culture experiences, where linguistic variation, for example, is a reality. It will also foster an open mind towards linguistic complexities and cultural differences, creating a more diverse and inclusive learning experience. Moreover, our data has shown that embedding linguistics into language teaching can have a motivational effect on learners.

Third, we recommend stronger collaboration between academics and teachers (cf. Herrenkohl et al. 2010), as well as between teachers of related subjects, such as MFL and English language. Universities, schools, and subject associations must foster these partnerships, promoting co-creation projects that develop novel resources and teaching materials. Our own co-creation approach (cf. Sheehan et al. 2024) has proven a successful and enriching experience for everyone involved. Recognising that limited formal training in linguistics among teachers may be perceived as a barrier, meaningful collaboration could address this challenge by creating a supportive environment where teachers can experiment with and adopt innovative approaches informed by linguistics. Such partnerships will enable the development of interdisciplinary materials that highlight the interconnectedness of language studies, making language learning more holistic and engaging for students.

Finally, whilst our interventions have demonstrated that carefully designed and annotated materials can be taught by teachers with no or limited training in linguistics, we recommend that basic training in linguistics be embedded in Initial Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development. Professional training in linguistics will not only enhance teachers' understanding of language but also improve their ability to convey this understanding to students, thereby enriching the overall educational experience. As our data on teacher training courses in linguistics shows, even short but focused CPD interventions can increase teachers' understanding of linguistics and their confidence in drawing on linguistics as a toolkit for their language classes. We, therefore, encourage ITT and CPD providers to include introductory sessions on linguistics in their provision – at least for language teachers; further work might show how any teacher could benefit from this, given the importance of language use and awareness for any subject.

By disseminating findings from linguistics, fostering collaboration, advocating for curriculum integration, enhancing teacher training, and informing curriculum and assessment design, these

recommendations aim to move beyond a skills-based approach to language teaching. They seek to create an educational environment where linguistics-focused content enriches language learning, ultimately nurturing students who are not only proficient in languages but also possess a deep understanding of the complex nature of language itself. This holistic approach promises to help revitalise language education in the UK, aligning it with both academic and professional demands.

Endnotes

[1] When we founded our project in 2017, we chose this name to highlight the project's focus on languages as a subject in British schools, where it is often called "Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)". However, we are aware of, and very much agree with, the criticism of the terms 'modern' and 'foreign' to describe languages.

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