Blog 3

The new curriculum for languages at KS2 and KS3

**The Purpose of Study**

The Purpose of Study sets out clearly why learning a foreign language is important. The message that language learning is an antidote to insularity and deepens our understanding of the world is, whilst not new, one we can endorse wholeheartedly as languages teachers. We can also welcome the reference to real communication for practical purposes within the opening statement.

**Aims**
The four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are clearly represented in the aims of the National Curriculum section. I welcome in particular the statement about speaking, with its emphasis on spontaneity and enabling learners to communicate ‘what they want to say’ and the reference to ‘discussion and asking questions’.

**KS2

Headlines**

* Primary languages will be compulsory at KS2
* The steer is for one language to be taught at primary over the 4 x year
* It should be one of the 7 languages listed (French, German, Spanish, Italian, Mandarin, Latin and Ancient Greek)
* KS2 teaching will focus on listening, speaking, reading and writing, with a skills focus on sound-writing links (phonics) sentence-building and memorisation

**Commentary**Although not a surprise, we can welcome the firm proposal to add foreign languages to the primary national curriculum for the four years of KS2. Also positive is the clear commitment to providing a continuous schema of language learning from 7 – 14, whereby the importance of developing an understanding of how language works at the earliest stage lays the foundation for language learning throughout education and for later life. I view particularly positively the focus on sound-writing links (through phonics) and the emphasis on acquiring a secure vocabulary (including key verb structures) to aid independent sentence-building, both orally and in writing.

I am less convinced by the prominent inclusion of Latin and Ancient Greek alongside the five languages still spoken in today’s world. Whilst I would in no way wish to discourage schools from offering ancient languages in addition to a foreign language, I cannot see the purpose behind the suggestion that one might offer either Latin or Ancient Greek ***instead*** of a modern foreign language. As is clear from the wording in the documentation and the clumsy \*, the purpose of learning is not the same for ancient and modern languages, such that they sit uncomfortably in the same list. I would much prefer that the two were presented separately, and that the strong encouragement to include either Latin or Ancient Greek were made ***in addition*** to the requirement to teach a modern language. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that there are any schools that offer Ancient Greek without offering Latin, which makes the list more anomalous.

**KS3
Headlines**
Language learning at KS3 should:

* build on KS2
* develop grammatical knowledge and vocabulary
* teach listening (for information and for accurate transcription)
* develop speaking (spontaneously too) and with accurate pronunciation/intonation
* enable reading for understanding (and some authentic texts, including literary texts) and for cultural understanding/appreciation
* include translation into English
* include translation into the foreign language
* teach learners to write creatively (i.e. from memory)

**Commentary**From the Commons debate ([http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/commons/todays-commons-debates/read/unknown/318/](https://webmail.combertonvc.org/owa/redir.aspx?C=4MfVGzgZq0aJLYBlSZM3aRpO8zVX2c8IHj9ZFWb8PmNhNN9zd39wxSQBGpdSNbNeiVQB5WAjyr4.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.parliament.uk%2fbusiness%2fpublications%2fhansard%2fcommons%2ftodays-commons-debates%2fread%2funknown%2f318%2f)), it is clear that the main changes for foreign language learning are perceived by Michael Gove to be ‘a new stress on learning proper grammatical structures and practising translation’. Whilst this might at first sound like a return to grammar-translation methodology, I think that as languages teachers we must not allow ourselves to jump immediately to this conclusion. After all, we would not argue with a focus on grammar for practical communication. This is essential if students are to be able to say what they want to say. Furthermore, although absent from recent textbooks, I know that the vast majority of teachers make use of translation, both from and into the foreign language, as part of their classroom methodology. Instinctively we know that translation, when used appropriately and as one of a range of different teaching strategies, is a learning activity that helps students make real linguistic progress.

The steer towards the inclusion of authentic texts, including some literary texts, should not worry us either; rather I welcome the list of text types which includes ‘stories, songs, poems and letters’. Many of us will already have these in our schemes of work at KS3.

Broadly speaking, I concur with others who have welcomed a slimmed-down version of the national curriculum, which leaves a lot of room for flexibility, creativity and choice in the way we interpret it. What is essential, though, is that languages teachers and other languages professionals quickly find ways to work together to develop best practice in how we teach within this new framework. I think that subject associations have an absolutely key role to play here, and it is of paramount importance that teachers engage actively with the Association for Language Learning (<http://www.all-languages.org.uk/> ) so that they are not left feeling that they must interpret the new curriculum in isolation.

**KS4**The changes announced by Michael Gove did not only relate to KS2 and KS3. There are implications for languages of the announcement made in the Commons.
 **Headlines**

* The proposal is to replace the existing 5 A\* - C standard measure with a progress measure based on pupils’ average scores across a suite of 8 qualifications. The 8 qualifications counted in the measure will be English, mathematics, 3 further English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects, and 3 other high value qualifications – EBacc, other academic, arts or vocational.
* The Ebacc subject list (from which students must now choose a minimum of 3) are: **Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Double Science (counting as 2), Geography, History, Computer Science, Languages.**

**Commentary**

I think that a completely unintended consequence (on the government’s part at any rate) or the new 8-subject performance measure is to water down significantly the steer towards continuing with a language post 14. From the headlines above, you can see that the expansion of the Ebacc subject list, together with the 8-subject performance measure, makes it relatively easy to avoid opting for a language at KS4.

The reason I give the government the benefit of the doubt over this outcome and describe its consequence as ‘unintended’ is because it is completely incongruous with the strong positive message about the importance of language learning in this country given by its statutory inclusion at KS2. Which rightly-minded and forward-thinking government would give with one hand only to take away with the other? I can only imagine that in trying to balance the measure so that the rightful place of creative and technical subjects is upheld, whilst at the same time pushing up participation in foreign languages, something has been temporarily ‘lost in translation’. I say temporarily because therein lies the purpose of consultation. As languages teachers, it is now incumbent on us to provide the informed ‘checks and balances’ on these proposals, such that unintended consequences can be avoided, and the position of languages at KS4 can be suitably supported so that its position within the curriculum is consistent with the new KS2 policy.