

Not dumbing down but stimulating up: Reading in the reformed GCSE Modern Foreign Languages classroom

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Introduction

Modern Foreign Language (MFL)¹ skills in England have become a cause for concern. In a recent survey, only 36 per cent of employers were satisfied with school/college leavers' foreign language skills, while 70 per cent valued foreign language skills in their employees (CBI/Pearson, 2013). Within Europe, England has one of the highest percentages of citizens unable to hold a conversation in a language other than their native language (Coleman, 2009), indicating that many people in England are not benefiting from the economic and cultural benefits of being able to use a foreign language. Furthermore, uptake of MFL at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced level (A level) has been falling over the last 20 years (Malpass, 2014). This is partly as a result of societal and cultural factors, such as a shift in public opinion against greater European integration or the perception that English speakers do not need to learn a foreign language, and also due to the removal of MFL from the core curriculum at Key Stage 4 (KS4) in 2002 (Coleman, 2009; Macaro, 2008). Additionally, the transition between GCSE and A level is considered to be particularly difficult in MFL (Ipsos Mori, 2014), indicating a mismatch between the skills and knowledge taught at these levels. This may lead to fewer students deciding to continue the study of foreign languages post-16.

The current programme of reform for GCSEs and A levels in MFL aims to address these issues. New performance measures for schools, such as the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a school performance indicator linked to GCSE, which requires students to study at least one language², have already led to an increase in the number of students studying languages at GCSE (Truss, 2013). Planned reforms to MFL GCSEs will increase the level of demand of the qualifications, and include changes to the content and assessment. In particular, the type and demand of texts which students are expected to read will change. It is hoped that these reforms will increase the foreign language competence of 16 year olds, and facilitate transition to A level. In this study we focus on this aspect of the reform to GCSEs: specifically, the increased focus on reading authentic texts at GCSE, and investigate how teachers may be supported to adapt to this change.

The planned reforms to GCSE aim to redress the balance between reading and the other skills of speaking, listening and writing. At GCSE, reading is often a neglected skill, which attracts less teaching time because it is considered to be easier than speaking, listening or writing (Brammell, 2011). Students often consider their reading skills to be stronger than other skills, even though their examination performance does not necessarily reflect that view (George, 2013). The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) has highlighted the teaching of reading to be a weakness in many schools, with schools often limiting reading materials to short texts found in textbooks or past examination papers

(Ofsted, 2011). Currently the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) GCSE subject criteria specify equal weighting in the assessment to each of the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening (Ofqual, 2011). However, there is some flexibility. For example, the Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) MFL GCSE specification gives a weighting of 30 per cent each to speaking and writing, and only 20 per cent to reading and listening (OCR, 2012). Furthermore, currently, students are expected to read and comprehend a variety of forms of short text. These include signs, instructions, messages, emails, postcards, letters, internet sources, articles and brochures in the GCSE assessment. Although this may seem to be a wide range of text types, these texts are typically short, simple, and inauthentic (written for non-native speakers). The assessment model for the reformed GCSEs in MFL weights each of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) equally, and does not allow for any flexibility. The new subject criteria state that learners should:

Deduce meaning from a variety of short and longer written texts from a range of specified contexts, including authentic sources involving some complex language and unfamiliar material, as well as short narratives and authentic material addressing a wide range of relevant contemporary and cultural themes.

(Department for Education [DfE], 2014, p.6)

It seems, therefore, that students will be expected to read a much wider range of texts during their GCSE course, including some literary texts. Furthermore, these texts are much more likely to be authentic materials, originally written by native speakers for a native speaking audience, rather than texts targeted specifically at language learners at this level³. Although the weighting of reading (25 per cent) in the reformed GCSE will be relatively similar to the current GCSE, the change in the types of text which students will read is likely to require significant changes to the way in which reading is taught and learned, with implications for the whole MFL curriculum. This reform therefore provides an opportunity to re-examine the role of reading in the MFL curriculum, and to explore how different approaches to teaching reading might best support students' language learning. During times of change, curriculum support resources can provide opportunities for teacher learning which can help teachers to deepen their existing content and pedagogical knowledge, and enable them to adapt their existing knowledge and skills to navigate change (Loewenberg Ball & Cohen, 1996; Remillard, 2000).

In this article we first provide a brief overview of some psycholinguistic underpinnings of reading in a foreign language, and then relate this to the

1. We use the term 'Modern Foreign Language' to reflect current usage among awarding bodies, though acknowledge that the term 'modern language', 'living language', or merely 'language' is sometimes preferred.

2. This may be an ancient or a modern language.

3. See Gilmore (2007) for a discussion of the definition of an authentic text for use in an MFL classroom.

context of learning a language at GCSE and A level. We then present the findings from a focus group of MFL teachers which explored the use of reading resources at GCSE with respect to the reformed GCSE curriculum.

Reading and language learning

Reading in a foreign language

Reading is a complex skill, which requires the integration of lower and higher level cognitive processes to recognise words, and interpret the meaning of the text as a whole. Second language⁴ (L2) learners are different from children learning to read, because L2 learners are typically already literate in their native language, but do not have fully developed knowledge of their L2. However, writing systems vary across languages. Where the native language (L1) and the L2 writing systems are similar, L2 learners might be able to transfer their L1 reading skills to the L2. For example, if both the first and second language use the same alphabet, and have similar sound-letter relationships ('bottom up' knowledge), then L2 learners may be able to use this L1 knowledge in their L2 (Frost, 2005; Goswami, 2008). Similarly, where the L1 and L2 are culturally similar, L2 learners may be able to apply background knowledge, and knowledge of text types ('top down' knowledge) to reading in their L2. L2 learners which have weak literacy skills in their L1 may need additional support to develop these skills in their L2. However, even where there are strong similarities between the L1 and the L2, L2 learners do still need to learn aspects of reading specific to their L2 (Nassaji, 2014).

Benefits for language learning

Reading in a L2 may support language development, by providing input or exposure to the L2. This may be particularly important where spoken language input is limited. Additionally, reading may provide exposure to grammatical forms which are infrequent in spoken language. Written language typically uses a wider range of vocabulary than spoken language. Reading may facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary by providing exposure to vocabulary in context, allowing learners to develop breadth (quantity) and depth (knowledge about usage) of vocabulary. However, L2 learners are not always able to accurately infer the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary items from context (Nassaji, 2003), and can only do this accurately when texts are targeted at learners' proficiency levels (Waring, 2006). Where texts are more demanding, there are benefits from instruction which provide an explicit focus on vocabulary learning, because incidental vocabulary learning is unlikely to occur. Additionally, L2 learners need extensive practice to learn to recognise words rapidly and automatically, using texts which are relatively undemanding, and so can be read fluently and easily. Nation and colleagues estimate that L2 learners should know approximately 98 per cent of vocabulary in a text for this type of reading to be possible (Hirsch & Nation, 1992; Hu & Nation, 2000). It is therefore important for teachers to provide their students with texts which are relatively undemanding, to allow the development of reading fluency, and provide explicit instruction to support vocabulary development for more demanding texts. Since it is important for L2 learners to have extensive practice of reading, choosing texts which motivate students to read is particularly important for reading and language development. If students are not provided with interesting texts, they are unlikely to read them.

GCSE and A level context

Ofsted (2011) has identified the teaching of reading as a key area for improvement in MFL at secondary level, because it believes that reading is frequently not taught well. Often, schools do not exploit the range of authentic reading materials which are available, and typically rely on short texts in textbooks or past examination papers. Furthermore, Ofsted found that opportunities for students to read for pleasure or develop intercultural understanding were rare. However, the blame for these perceived weaknesses should not necessarily be given solely to teachers. Teachers' practice is shaped by the GCSE course which they are teaching. If current GCSE specifications (and assessments) do not support good practice in teaching reading, then it will be difficult for teachers to build effective reading activities into their teaching.

The planned reforms to MFL GCSEs will require students to study a wider range of text types than at present, including some literary texts. These texts are likely to be longer, and more demanding, due to an increased emphasis on the use of authentic texts than those which are currently used at this level. Students will be expected to respond to these texts in a variety of ways. For example, they will be expected to understand general and specific details in texts, identify the overall message and themes in a text, be able to scan for particular information and draw inferences in context (DfE, 2014). In this section we evaluate current GCSE specifications with respect to their suitability for supporting the development of reading skills, and suggest ways in which the specifications could be reformed to support the new subject criteria for reading, with a particular focus on vocabulary.

Hirsch and Nation (1992) show that it is necessary to know approximately 98 per cent of vocabulary in a text for adequate comprehension, and that for English, a vocabulary of approximately 2,000 words is needed if the most frequently used words are taught and learned. However, more recent analysis indicates that this may be a conservative estimate. Instead, it has been suggested that 2,000 words would provide only 80 per cent coverage, and 6,000–8,000 words are needed to reach the coverage required for comprehension (Milton, 2007). The Common European Framework of References for Language Learning and Teaching (CEFR) places GCSE Foundation Tier at level A2 (Basic User, Waystage/Elementary), and Higher Tier at B2 (Independent User, Vantage/Upper Intermediate). For B1, a vocabulary of about 2,000 words is specified, and for A2, 1,000 (Council of Europe, 2001; Milton, 2007). Since the move from A2 to B1 marks a shift towards independent language use, this suggests that a vocabulary of 2,000 words can be considered a minimum for relatively independent text comprehension.

At GCSE, vocabulary lists which specify the vocabulary which students will be expected to know in the examination⁵ are provided by awarding bodies (e.g., OCR, 2009). For Foundation Tier, students are expected to know 1,400 words, with an additional 520 for the Higher Tier, a total of 1,920 words. Although it is difficult to compare counts of vocabulary, because there may be differences in what are considered to be different vocabulary items for the purposes⁶, for the Higher Tier, at least, this approaches the level of vocabulary specified by Hirsch and Nation (1992)

4. We use second language (L2) to refer to any additional language first learned after the native language (L1), and typically, but not necessarily after the onset of puberty.

5. At Higher Tier some unfamiliar vocabulary which students are expected to understand from the context is included in the assessment.

6. For example, masculine and feminine forms of professions may or may not be treated as one item.

and the CEFR. However, even if these levels of vocabulary are specified for the GCSE assessment, it is not necessarily the case that students will be taught this vocabulary. Tschichold (2012) analysed the vocabulary featured in a series of French textbooks, *Encore Tricolore*, which is widely used at Key Stage 3 (KS3) and GCSE. Overall, Tschichold found that learners were exposed to more than 2,500 word families (which include different morphological forms of the same root word), again indicating that learners potentially have the opportunity to acquire sufficient vocabulary for reading authentic texts. Since we might expect that students would be exposed to additional vocabulary in other contexts, such as other reading and listening materials, then this can be considered to be a conservative estimate of the vocabulary which students may encounter. However, the fact that students may have been exposed to a vocabulary item, does not entail that they will have learned it, particularly if they only see or hear it a small number of times.

Milton (2006) estimated the vocabulary levels of students in each year of French study in a school in England (Table 1). In this school, students start learning French in Year 7, and have the opportunity to continue to study French to A level. Vocabulary levels were estimated based on the probability of correct responses in relation to a list of the most frequent words in French. Since there are likely to be discrepancies between the input which students had received and the words which are most frequent in French, these may be conservative estimates of the vocabulary which students actually knew. However, since the estimate is based on the most frequent words in French, it provides an indication of whether students are developing a vocabulary suitable for reading authentic texts.

Milton (2006) found that student vocabulary levels do not increase at the same rate from year to year. He found that between Year 7 and Year 9, students on average acquire only about 150 new words, which is then followed by a larger increase over the GCSE course. However, on average, students taking the GCSE only know about 852 words, substantially less than the vocabulary list specified for the Foundation Tier, and less than the 2,000 words suggested by Hirsch and Nation (1992). Even the maximum vocabulary level reached by any student in his study, 1,800 vocabulary items, falls short of this level. Furthermore, vocabulary levels increase dramatically between Year 11 and Year 12, the start of A level and Advanced Subsidiary level (AS) courses. This indicates that one cause of transitional difficulties might be the differences in vocabulary required at each level.

If learners of French are exposed to about 2,500 word families by the end of their GCSE course, why, on average, do learners acquire less than half of these words? Repeated exposure to vocabulary is necessary for acquisition to take place (Schmitt, 2008). Tschichold (2012) found that for many vocabulary items there were insufficient opportunities for recycling of vocabulary to support acquisition. This is consistent with George (2013), who reported that pupils felt that they did not have sufficient opportunity to revisit vocabulary. Furthermore, Milton's (2006) estimate was based on word knowledge relative to a list of the most frequent words. This might suggest that the vocabulary which is commonly taught at GCSE does not correspond to the most frequently used words. Tschichold (2012) compared the vocabulary presented in *Encore Tricolore* with the *Français fondamental* (a list of words which are accepted as representing the most frequently used French words) with the limitation that the list is based on oral speech recorded several decades ago. Overall, while 65 per cent of the vocabulary in *Encore Tricolore* was included in the *Français fondamental*, 35 per cent was not. Additionally, 40 per cent of the

vocabulary in *Français fondamental* was not covered by *Encore Tricolore*, indicating that *Encore Tricolore* does not provide good coverage of the most frequently used French words. Furthermore, this is not limited to French: Häcker (2008) conducted a similar analysis of German textbooks, and obtained very similar results.

It is perhaps not surprising that teachers do not use authentic reading materials more widely at GCSE, since it is unlikely that students' prior vocabulary learning would enable them to access many authentic texts easily.

Why don't GCSE courses teach students the most frequent vocabulary? Current GCSE courses are organised into topics, such as Health and Sport, or Travel and the Wider World (OCR, 2012), so students' vocabulary learning is focused on a limited set of contexts. Textbooks frequently present vocabulary in a series of mini-dialogues, such as in (1a) and (1b), where students are presented with what is effectively a list of vocabulary from the same semantic (sports) and syntactic (nouns) category (Häcker, 2008). It is highly unlikely that all of the sports that are presented are among the most frequently used vocabulary in a language.

(1a) *Machst du Sport? "Do you do sport?"*

(1b) *Ich spiele ...Fußball "I play football"*

...Basketball "basketball"

...Tischtennis "table tennis"

...Tennis "tennis"

...Volleyball "volleyball" and so on.

This approach does have some advantages. It is important for motivational reasons for students to be able to talk about themselves, and their own context, and allows students the opportunity for genuine communication in the target language (Harris, Burch, Jones, & Darcy, 2001). Such a list does provide a reasonable chance that most students will learn the vocabulary for the sport that they are interested in, although this is still somewhat limiting. Häcker (2008) suggests that textbooks are unlikely to present, for example, the word "*Spielfeld*" (playing field), "*Tor*" (goal), or "*Spiel*" (match or game), which restricts further communication on the topic. However, these vocabulary items (or similar items) are on the vocabulary list specified by OCR for GCSE German (OCR, 2009). Further work would be needed to determine the extent of any mismatch between textbook coverage and the GCSE specification. However, since textbooks are designed, at least to some extent, with the goal of preparing students for examinations (Ofqual, 2012), then it is plausible that a lack of coverage in the textbook may be related to what is perceived to be commonly assessed.

Teaching vocabulary in the form of a list of semantically related words, such as a list of sports or a list of pets, is intuitively appealing because students learn words which are related. However, presenting lists of semantically related words which share the same syntactic category (e.g., a list of nouns) can lead to lexical interference, making the vocabulary more difficult to learn. Instead, it is easier to learn words which are semantically related, but from a mixture of syntactic categories (Tinkham, 1997). As a result, the form of presentation of new vocabulary may be unintentionally impeding students' acquisition of vocabulary. However, there are different approaches to the presentation of new words. In many German Bundesländer, (federal state) foreign language teaching is based around the reading of longer texts than those used in foreign language teaching in England. For example, Gruber and Tonkyn (2013) found that the average length of text in a French textbook in

Germany was 1,394 words, compared to 727 words for a French textbook in England. Furthermore, these texts typically cover more cognitively challenging topics, and a wider range of vocabulary and syntax (Gruber & Tonkyn, 2013). Such an approach allows students to acquire vocabulary which extends beyond their own context (e.g., related to the other culture), but, depending on the text, may not help students to talk about their own interests or context (e.g., a text about visiting Bavarian castles may be culturally relevant, but students may not learn vocabulary relevant to their own leisure interests). Vocabulary is frequently presented in conjunction with a text (see, e.g., the Green Line textbook used in Bavaria [Beile, Beile-Bowes, & Dick, 2001]), such that vocabulary is semantically related, but from a mixture of syntactic categories (Gruber & Tonkyn, 2013). Presenting vocabulary in such texts may facilitate the acquisition of deeper lexical knowledge, such as collocations, and level of formality. In a comparison of the writing skills of 14 to 16 year old English L1 and German L1 learners of L2 French, Gruber and Tonkyn (2013) found that the German L1 learners had a larger vocabulary, and showed greater lexical diversity, even once total learning hours had been taken into account. However, the syntactic complexity of writing was not significantly different across the two groups.

It seems therefore, that reforms to GCSEs will need to change to teach more, and more appropriate vocabulary to support reading development. Furthermore, if students are to read authentic texts *during* their GCSE course, then they will need to have acquired sufficient and appropriate vocabulary before the end of the course, so that reading activities do not become primarily focused on vocabulary. Additionally, if students are to develop reading fluency, then they need to be able to access at least some of the texts which they read relatively easily. However, not all authentic texts are equally demanding. It would be possible, for example, for authentic texts to be graded by level, to allow a progression of texts throughout the course. It is likely that teachers would need considerable support to compile a list of such texts, and maintain a list of texts which are up to date. Milton (2006) noted that students moving from GCSE to A level study showed a large increase in vocabulary level; if reforms to GCSEs include changes to the quantity and nature of vocabulary, then this may facilitate transition to A level.

Thus far we have focused on the role of vocabulary at GCSE, because previous work in this area has focused on vocabulary. However, it seems plausible that a similar analysis could be undertaken for morpho-syntax (grammar). This may be more dependent on text type. For example, if students are expected to read narratives, then it is likely that they will encounter different forms of the past tense more frequently than other tenses. In French, for example, the past historic, or *passé simple* tense is predominantly used in written narratives, and so may be particularly useful if students read this form of text frequently. In German, for example, a form of the subjunctive, *Konjunktive I*, is used for reported speech, and may support the comprehension of newspaper articles. However, these structures are not included in the subject criteria (DfE, 2014; Ofqual, 2011), so teachers may need to provide strategy instruction to help students to access texts which use these structures.

In summary, the current GCSE courses do not fully support the development of reading skills, by not providing students opportunities to acquire sufficient, and appropriate vocabulary to access authentic texts. If students are to read a wide range of authentic texts, then the reformed GCSE should take a different approach to vocabulary, focusing on the most frequently used vocabulary. However, reading more lexically diverse

texts can, if appropriate support is given, support the acquisition of vocabulary. Similarly, the relationship between the morpho-syntax which is taught, and that which is likely to be encountered by students when reading should be considered.

Method

Participants

Nine teachers participated in all aspects of the research. The majority of teachers reported teaching more than one language. Across the group, seven taught French, three taught German, and six taught Spanish.

Materials

Resource sets

Wilson, Carroll, and Werno (2014) developed a typology of the various dimensions of reading activities, based on psycholinguistic and pedagogical aspects of L2 reading. This typology was used to develop five sets of resources which exemplified different aspects of the typology (Table 1). Each resource set contained an example of an approach to teaching reading in each of French, German and Spanish, to ensure that the texts and activities used in the resources were accessible to all participants.

Resource set 1: This resource is an adaptation of a traditional extensive reading activity. Students are directed to a newspaper/magazine website in the target language, and asked to select articles to read which interest them.

Resource set 2: This resource is taken from GCSE Foundation Tier papers. Students are given a short informational text, which is undemanding in terms of vocabulary and grammar, and answer comprehension questions on the text. This resource was used because it was assumed that it would represent a type of reading activity which all teachers would be familiar with.

Resource set 3: Students are provided with a set of five short newspaper articles. Each newspaper article has a headline and picture. After brief discussion about which articles look interesting, students choose two or more articles to read, and write short quiz questions about information in the texts. These questions are then used in a class quiz.

Resource set 4: Students are given some language focused activities, to pre-teach vocabulary, and so on, before reading a poem.

Resource set 5: Students are given reading strategy-focused activities before reading a short story.

Feedback forms

Participants were provided with a feedback form for each resource set. The feedback forms asked participants to provide their views on the resources, and comment on the type of text used, the level of demand, the usefulness of the resource, and whether it was similar or different to resources which they currently use.

Procedure

Feedback forms

The resources and feedback forms were sent to participants before the focus group. Their individual views on these resources were gathered through feedback forms on each resource set.

Table 1: Dimensions of reading resources

	<i>Resource 1 Extensive reading</i>	<i>Resource 2 GCSE question (from Foundation Tier paper)</i>	<i>Resource 3 Quiz questions from authentic texts</i>	<i>Resource 4 Language focused poetry activity</i>	<i>Resource 5 Short story, strategy- focused</i>
Type of text: • informational text • short story • poem	Any – students choose	Informational	Informational – authentic newspaper articles	Poem	Short story
Types of supporting activities: • language focused (e.g., to teach necessary vocabulary/structures) • strategy-focused (e.g., to develop reading skills)	None	None	Some strategy, to facilitate reading of texts	Teaching of vocabulary (e.g., from Harris et al., 2001, Chapter 2)	Strategy-focused – use of paralinguistic features, such as pictures. Teachers provided with information about strategies, and how to make them explicit
Demand – may vary in terms of vocab and (morpho-) syntax. Levels to include texts which are: • accessible after KS3 • targeting KS4 • beyond KS4	If authentic texts, likely to be high, but choice offers varying levels	Low	High	Medium to High	Medium to High
Surrounding activities: • pre-reading activities (e.g., to teach necessary vocabulary) • during and post-reading activities – to structure reading activity • post-reading activities – which give the reading purpose	No – or just a minor post-reading check that reading has occurred	Post-reading comprehension questions	During and post-reading activities – identifying information suitable for generating quiz questions, then using quiz questions in a class quiz	Pre-reading	Pre-reading
Length: • shorter • longer	Any	Short	Short	Any	Longer
Choice: • unlimited choice of text • limited choice • no choice	Unlimited choice	No choice	Limited choice	No choice	No choice
Paralinguistic features: • some texts (with e.g., pictures) • some without	Possibly	No, or very restricted	A picture for each text	No	Yes, pictures related to text
'Top down'/'bottom up'	'Bottom up'	Low demand, so may support development of fluency, but somewhat short for this purpose	Not specified, but may develop background knowledge for 'top down' processing	'Bottom up'	'Top down'

Focus group

The participants' views on the resources, and the teaching of reading were further explored in a focus group. The main facilitator was responsible for the discussion and the timing of each focus group, in addition to ensuring that all participants had an opportunity to respond to each question. The focus groups were audio recorded and participants provided their consent for this.

Analysis

Feedback forms

For each topic on the feedback form, participants' responses were coded as to whether they expressed a positive or negative view of the resource, or a view which was felt to be either positive or negative. One researcher coded the data initially. Subsequently, the second researcher reviewed the

coding. Any instances where there was disagreement between the two researchers were discussed and the coding amended.

Focus group

The audio recordings of the focus group were transcribed. Two researchers coded the transcriptions. Initially, the coding scheme was based on the structure and content of the questions specified in the schedule. This coding scheme was then modified to take additional themes into account. One researcher coded the data initially. Subsequently, the second researcher reviewed the coding. Any instances where there was disagreement between the two researchers were discussed and the coding amended.

Results and discussion

The planned changes to reading in MFL GCSE represent a major change to the curriculum. The teachers who participated in the focus group felt that these changes, and the resulting impact on the wider MFL curriculum, would have a positive impact on their subject. This is consistent with the views of the Association for Language Learning (ALL), which stated that the introduction of a wider range of authentic materials at GCSE would enrich students' linguistic and cultural knowledge, and had the potential to increase student motivation for language learning (ALL, 2014). Teachers said that they felt that the topics (e.g., environment) currently taught at GCSE were boring for both students and teachers. They felt unable to teach more interesting material beyond the syllabus because they are constrained by the pressures of achieving good grades for their students. They further thought that the emphasis on controlled assessment for speaking and writing meant that reading was often not given priority, consistent with the findings from the Ofsted (2011) review of MFL teaching.

In the focus group, teachers examined resources which used a range of different types of authentic text, including literary and journalistic texts. They were very positive about increasing the use of poetry in MFL teaching at GCSE, because it supported the development of language skills. Poems were also valued because they are short, and so can be read relatively quickly. The teachers indicated that using poetry would be a significant departure from their current practice at GCSE, and so would need to be introduced carefully, but that the benefits of reading poetry would make this worthwhile.

Because in a poem, essentially, the words are chosen so carefully, because there are so few of them, the language skill leads into the reading skill anyway.

Participants were enthusiastic about the use of literature in general, because they can extend students' cultural experience. Additionally, literature can be used as a starting point for a wide range of activities in the MFL classroom.

It makes people realise that they can read literature, they can read books, they can read short stories and get something out of it.

I think the charm of this resource is also that language is actually secondary in here and it's everything else that comes first, that is, enjoying literature, enjoying maybe different ways of exploiting a longer piece of work, well, not so long a piece of literature and do something with it, that is, you know, design a story board or read it aloud, act it out, work with the drama department and do something

together or design, this is just an idea off the top of my head, but design a poster advertising the story as a play for instance, so many different ways of enjoying this piece.

Overall, they felt that such texts would be demanding, particularly for less able students. However, somewhat encouragingly, they felt that with appropriate support, GCSE students would be able to read such texts successfully. Teachers noted that by reading authentic texts, students would be exposed to unfamiliar vocabulary which is not commonly taught at GCSE, consistent with Häcker (2008) and Tschichold (2012). It seems therefore that a focus on the most frequent vocabulary used in the target language would facilitate the inclusion of authentic texts in the curriculum, and may be particularly useful if students use or continue to study the target language after the GCSE.

Teachers also noted that some authentic texts, such as online news articles may have paralinguistic features such as pictures and diagrams which can help students to access texts. Such features can help students to understand the gist of a text, even where the level of language is relatively high.

I think the big possibility about it, is that it mixes and I found quite a lot of, what you would call prose narrative material, but it was backed with data, it might be graphs or pictures, which to me makes it accessible to more people, more instantly. On a very simple level, you read a sports report, the students may at least understand the score or the result and then that gives them immediate access to the writing, which may be above them in itself.

Authentic texts may therefore require students to make greater use of 'top down' processing strategies. If students become accustomed to reading authentic texts, then they are more likely to develop reading strategies, and become more confident at applying such strategies when they don't understand everything in a text. However, teachers may need support to teach such strategies, because there may be less need to ensure students are able to use such strategies in the current GCSE courses. Furthermore, students who have not developed effective 'top down' strategies in their L1 may find this particularly difficult. The texts used currently in GCSE reading assessments, which are typically not authentic, do have some advantages for such students, because they are accessible, and may help to develop confidence.

The ones doing Foundation, reading and listening, they need very structured and limited text, they need to understand to get confidence. For some less able, it's good, they can do days of the week.

However, this type of text was felt to be very limiting, both for students and teachers, because it is not very interesting, and does not allow students to develop as learners.

I think if teachers cannot come up with something more interesting than that, after teaching for ten years, then it's a shame on us really and it makes our life less interesting as well as the students'.

Teachers were aware of the benefits of reading for language development more generally, and thought that reading authentic texts would help students to develop vocabulary skills and grammatical knowledge, which benefits their productive language abilities.

And of course it feeds directly into their spoken and written ability then, doesn't it?

Yes, and they pick up the high frequency vocabulary that comes up and time and time again and the core vocabulary that transfers, they pick

up that and they realise. I think it gives a bit more gravitas than just the teacher saying, 'You need to learn these ten words.' When they see it coming up again and again, they believe that rather than believing you as a teacher.

I think it just helps, it reinforces what they've learnt in the lessons, but it helps them, you know, really see the language patterns, because we only teach it in isolation, sort of, single sentences or maybe very, very short paragraphs, but the more that they read and the longer of the text that they read, it's constantly back in their faces, being reinforced over and over again.

The proposed reforms to reading in GCSE MFLs will require teachers to change the way that they approach reading. Students would need time to become familiar with the new approach, and would benefit from using shorter, relatively accessible texts at first. A role for awarding bodies to provide guidance in this area was also identified.

They do need training, because we are training them in a different way at the minute, because we have to meet everything that's on the exam and make sure that they can pass the exam and cover the spec as best that we can.

Increasing the use of authentic texts in the MFL classroom would provide greater opportunities for cross-curricular work. In particular, the potential for forming greater links with English departments to support the development of literacy skills was seen as advantageous. However, teachers indicated that at present there are relatively weak links between MFL and English departments, and little sharing of expertise as a result.

Although this is quite sad, I'm looking at the German resource, a sad poem, it's open for, you know, it provides a lot of opportunity to go deeper into all sorts of topics and also cross curriculum with History, English, PSHE, Citizenship, you name it and it depends what you do with it.

How closely does your MFL department collaborate with the English department, because in schools I've worked in, they are two entirely separate entities which never work together, which rarely sit together, which rarely pull resources or even compare resources ... We are helping them with their English skills, we are teaching them the rudiments of the language, which they may not be doing in English anyway. Looking at how English teachers teach English and reading English would help us enormously and vice versa, I think, because I don't think they are particularly well married.

Teachers identified some challenges associated with the teaching of reading in general, including the fact that some students do not read in any language, and the challenge of finding texts which will motivate students to read.

And the mental barrier from the students, they are not used to reading in any language, so why in Spanish?

Teachers found that textbooks were useful for covering the material which students would need for their GCSE examinations, however, textbooks were considered to be expensive and boring. Identifying suitable alternative materials was considered to be beneficial, but time consuming.

A lot of the reading to do is based on textbook, because, one, it's there, they have spent thousands of pounds on them, what's the point to never use them and, two, they are tailored to the exam and that

ultimately does end up being the be-all and end-all and not getting people into A level because it's boring.

The thing I find is, if you're trying to be interesting and if you are trying to move away from the textbooks, you are working more hours than if you just stick to the textbook, do you know what I mean? It's so much harder work, if you are trying to be creative and trying to use authentic materials, that's why a central pool from OCR would be a really good idea, rather than each individual reinventing the wheel all the time.

However, there was consensus that moving towards an approach to reading at GCSE that encourages students to read in the target language could have long term benefits.

We do realise that we have to encourage reading in the target language as much as possible. That's going to help them with their language learning and hopefully the love of learning the language throughout the time at school.

Limitations

This study aimed to explore the use of reading resources at GCSE with respect to the reformed GCSE curriculum. However, it should be noted that only nine teachers participated in the focus group, so the extent to which it is possible to generalise to the wider population is limited.

Conclusions

The introduction of a greater focus on the use of authentic reading materials at GCSE presents an opportunity and a challenge, for awarding bodies and teachers alike. Although there is clear consensus that the current reading curriculum and assessments neither support good language learning nor motivate students to study languages, teachers indicated that there are some challenges, such as finding appropriate materials, associated with the reform. However, teachers welcomed the opportunity to teach a wider range of texts at GCSE level, which they felt would be motivating for students, support language learning, and literacy development more generally. It is therefore incumbent on awarding bodies and the developers of teaching resources to design assessments and resources which will facilitate the implementation of this reform.

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