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Consultation outcome

Assessment of modern foreign language GCSEs from 2023: analysis of consultation

responses

Updated 30 November 2022

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Introduction

Ofqual conducted a [consultation on a proposed adaptation to the assessment of GCSE modern foreign languages \(MFL\) qualifications](#) for students in England taking exams from summer 2023 onwards. The consultation proposed carrying forward to future assessments the changes made to last year's qualifications on the use of vocabulary. In summer 2022, these changes allowed the exam boards greater flexibility by:

- removing the [specific requirement](#) that existed in previous years for the assessments to use vocabulary that is not on the vocabulary lists
- permitting exam boards to give the meaning of (gloss) unfamiliar vocabulary, if they consider this necessary

Ofqual proposed making these changes because the Department for Education (DfE) has [consulted on a minor amendment to its published subject content](#), which aligns with these changes. [DfE confirmed its decision to make this change](#) on an ongoing basis for all GCSE modern foreign languages.

Approach to analysis

The [consultation on the proposal to carry forward to future assessments the changes made to last year's qualifications](#) on the use of vocabulary was published on Ofqual's website and available for responses, using the online form, between 29 September and 20 October 2022.

The consultation included closed questions where respondents could indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the proposals. These questions used a 5-point scale (Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree and Strongly disagree) and open questions, inviting

comments.

Respondents could use the open questions to identify any impacts of the proposals on equalities or regulatory considerations.

Respondents could choose to respond to questions in the consultation. They did not have to respond to them all. This analysis provides the number of responses received for each question. It also provides tables of the responses to the closed questions and presented them as charts. There are some instances where percentages total more than 100. This is due to the rounding of the individual percentages.

All responses to the open questions have been read in full, with the key themes that emerged presented in the discussion.

Respondents were asked to identify which group they belonged to, for example: teacher or student. The total numbers for each respondent group are set out in the table below, based on these descriptions. The tables use these unverified self-descriptions.

Some respondents chose to express their views in response to an open question without specifically answering the question. The analysis considered these responses but does not include them in the data.

A selection of comments from respondents have been included as quotes in the report to illustrate the main themes identified. Some quotes have been for clarity, brevity and to preserve anonymity but care has been taken not to change their meaning.

Who responded?

There were 497 responses to this consultation.

The following tables present the number of respondents by type.

Official organisational responses	Number of respondents
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Academy chain	10
Awarding body or exam board	3
Employer	2
Local authority	2
Other representative or interest group	3
Private training provider	2
School or college	46
Total	68

Individual responses	Number of respondents
Awarding organisation employee	2
Consultant	1
Examiner	6
Exams officer or manager	3
Parent or carer	52
SLT (Senior leadership team)	15
Student	113
Student – private, home-educated of any age	4
Teacher (responding in a personal capacity)	230
Other	3
Total	429

Views expressed

This section reports the views of those who responded to the consultation proposals.

Question 1

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the requirement for GCSE MFL assessments to use words that are not on the vocabulary list should be removed for all GCSE modern foreign languages on a permanent basis?

Question 1 response	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	442	88.9%
Agree	37	7.4%
Neither agree nor disagree	3	0.6%
Disagree	5	1.0%
Strongly disagree	10	2.0%

Total number of responses	Count
Question 1: Response provided	497
Question 1: No response	0
Survey total responses	497

There was strong support for this proposal, with 96% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing.

Question 2

Do you have any comments about the proposal to remove the requirement for GCSE MFL assessments to use words that are not on the vocabulary list for all GCSE modern foreign languages on a permanent basis?

- “ There were 177 comments in response to this question. Many respondents said the proposal would make exams in MFL subjects fairer. They also said the changes would make MFL GCSEs comparable to other GCSEs, which do not test students on unfamiliar material. The comments below reflect respondents’ opinions.
- “ This is one of the best things that could come out of the Covid pandemic exam arrangements. I can’t think of another GCSE subject that explicitly assesses students on content that is not on the specification, because it’s fundamentally not fair. My fellow middle leaders were completely baffled that this was the case in languages. This tiny change will go a small way to helping even the playing field for learners.” (Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)
- “ [It would] offer greater parity between languages and other subjects, and make assessments fairer and more accessible across the board. It is unfair that currently GCSE assessments in languages require students to be examined on content that they did not know they had to learn, and teachers did not know they had to teach. Removing those expectations should make those assessments fairer and more accessible for all students.”

(Other representative or interest group)

A few respondents remarked that unfamiliar vocabulary made exams more

stressful for students. They suggested the proposal would improve their confidence and ability to prepare effectively.

“ I believe that it is unfair for students studying GCSE MFL to be given further vocabulary which is not on the required vocabulary list given that it causes a lot more stress in students whilst studying for our exams.”
(Student)

“ These GCSE examinations are difficult enough for students due to the questioning style and differences in questions for different exams, that it is unnecessary to involve vocabulary outside of the vocabulary lists. Students’ cognitive load is already at a maximum with regards to the questions provided and the content that they have to know, without adding extra stress and pressure.”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

Some respondents agreed with the proposal as they believed it would help to mitigate the disruption to education resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“ Students affected by the pandemic will especially benefit so this needs doing immediately, but it is right to change it permanently because it is so detrimental and demoralising for students when they are tested on something they have never been taught.”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

Many respondents said the requirement to have unfamiliar vocabulary was inappropriate. The rule meant assessments tested students on content they hadn’t studied. This meant tests rewarded the wrong skills (such as guessing).

“ I don’t think it harms students to come across vocabulary that they don’t know, but this shouldn’t be part of an exam. It’s important that students feel confident that they will be tested on what they have learnt and not on what they can guess or work out based on what they have learnt. That is a life skill not an exam skill.”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

“ While it may only be 1 or 2 extra words, vocabulary from outside the lists can completely change how you interpret a question, as it can side-track you into thinking about a different topic whilst trying to figure out a meaning. Furthermore, there is no possible way we can know these words, as we have never seen them before. It allows marks for guessing, rather than logic, which goes against every other subject, as in many cases an educated guess isn't even possible.”

(Student)

A few respondents reflected on how the proposal would impact assessments, in terms of their creation, use, validity and demand. Two exam boards said the proposal would align the requirements for current GCSE MFL qualifications and the revised GCSEs in French, German and Spanish (that will be taught from 2024). They also said the proposal would make exams more accessible. It continued an arrangement that had improved students' confidence when preparing for exams.

Another exam board discussed the role of the minimum core vocabulary list. They said that most of the content in the listening and reading exams could be taken from this minimum list. However, the possibility of glossing unfamiliar words would allow the inclusion of a word when there was no appropriate alternative from the list. They did, however, point out that past papers, prior to 2022, did not reflect this arrangement, which might cause difficulties for centres when providing mock exams.

Two exam boards noted that they would need to alter their exam papers, which raised the risk of introducing errors. Both a representative group and an exam board thought that exam boards should be able to include some vocabulary either from key stage 3 or not listed in the specification (such as cognates, near cognates, simple or commonly-used words and primary colours). This would avoid unfairly increasing the demand of the tasks and maintain their validity. They believed this approach would also increase the flexibility of assessment design and mitigate the risk of potential error from editing assessments. The proposed changes would not prevent exam boards including such vocabulary in their assessments, if they considered this appropriate.

Of the 3% of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal, many considered removing unfamiliar vocabulary would leave

students unprepared for either real-life situations or progression to A level.

“ ... Preparing students for their GCSE exam focusing on a limited number of words will make the transition to A level almost impossible. This will have a serious impact on the uptake of languages for A level exams which will continue to decline. Furthermore, restricting the vocabulary will make language learning boring and without interest.”

Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

“ We have to ask ourselves if we teach the students to pass an exam or to be competent in a language so that they can use what they have learnt in school when they go on holiday or study abroad. Personally, I think that restricting the exam to a list of vocabulary makes no sense, as in real life, students would be confronted with words that they don't know. If we do limit ourselves to a list of vocabulary, it also means that we don't believe they have the ability to make connections between words by inferring the meaning of a word they don't know.”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

A few respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal believed unfamiliar vocabulary helped students to learn how to infer the meanings of words, which also distinguished the most capable students.

“ I believe that there is much more behind the use of unknown words. It's all about the skills that the students are using to decode and infer meanings from the context. As a linguist, they must be capable and will be in situations where they hear/read unknown words. This does not take away the understanding of the general meaning of the communication. I am strongly against spoon feeding the students during an examination.”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

“ The vocabulary lists can be very restrictive and there is a case for the inclusion of other words in translation and comprehension type exercises to test the students' powers of deduction especially towards the awarding of top grades.”

(Parent or carer)

Some responses fell outside the scope of the consultation and proposal. These included concerns about levelling up for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, uncertainty over how exam boards would implement the proposal and comments about the perceived harsh grading of MFL exams, the difficulty of reading and listening papers, and whether native speakers or those who had lived abroad should sit a different exam.

Equality impact

As a public body, Ofqual is subject to the public sector equality duty. The consultation considered whether these proposals might impact (positively or negatively) on students who share protected characteristics.

Question 3

Are there other potential equality impacts that we have not explored?

Question 3 response	Count	Percentage
Yes	55	11.1%
No	442	88.9%

Total number of responses	Count
Question 3: Response provided	497
Question 3: No response	0
Survey total responses	497

All respondents answered this question with the majority (88.9%) answering 'no'.

Question 4

If yes, what are they?

There were 56 responses to this question. In the main, these responses fell outside the scope of the consultation and proposal. Many of the comments identified wider impacts that either were outside of the scope of the consultation or go beyond protected characteristics [\[footnote 1\]](#).

These comments often outlined issues the respondents had with GCSE MFL qualifications in general. Many respondents mentioned disparities in social advantage and identified both advantages and disadvantages for making the change proposed.

“ Disadvantaged students with a lower level of vocabulary and lower reading age in English suffer from not being able to infer meaning. This is increased significantly if the unknown vocabulary is in a foreign language. Therefore by including unspecified vocabulary this inherently includes, promotes and exacerbates disadvantage by design of the test.”

(SLT – senior leadership team)

“ If they want to be able to use the language in the real world, students will need to independently teach themselves the skills to deal with unfamiliar words. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to have access to resources enabling them to do this.”

(Student)

Some respondents pointed out that MFL papers included topics and vocabulary relating to holidays, which were unfamiliar to students from less affluent backgrounds.

“ ...I teach pupils who have no experience of many things discussed in exams and the extra vocabulary included. They, for example, have never been on holiday and may not have a good understanding of vocabulary surrounding it”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

Many respondents stated that MFL qualifications were more accessible to native speakers, those who spoke the language at home or attended bilingual or independent schools.

“ MFL is the only subject where there is a strong imbalance due to the presence of native speakers in the annual exam cohort. These speakers are at a distinct advantage...often taking the top grades, to the detriment of non-native students, especially in an exam which prizes knowledge of untaught content in the receptive aspects.”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

Some respondents cited the continuing impact of disruption to education from the COVID-19 pandemic and variations between the support offered by different schools and colleges, such as their ability to offer one-to-one tuition and online learning.

“ There are still impacts on speaking, listening, pronunciation from lockdowns and COVID isolations where students were not having live or face to face teaching. Huge impact on MFL and also on vocabulary known or remembered from KS3”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

“ I go to an independent school as a Year 11. I feel very grateful that my school had the facilities to make online learning possible (although it was naturally very difficult to learn new content online). Yet, I do not believe that state schools were as efficient as mine was, and I fear that this may impact the GCSE knowledge of my peers in these schools.”

(Student)

A few respondents mentioned the positive impact of the proposals on students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and mental health issues.

“ EAL (English as an additional language) and SEN pupils are already at a disadvantage, adding vocabulary that isn't on the lists could have

adverse effect on their overall result. I find it unfair that they could go above and beyond to revise everything they have learned and what they are meant to know, to then be at a further disadvantage for not knowing words they were not supposed to learn. They have no way to prepare for this.”

(Teacher – responding in a personal capacity)

One respondent said students with physical disabilities were disadvantaged because GCSE MFL writing exams required students with a scribe to spell out each word. Another respondent drew attention to the needs of visually impaired students. These students would be a positively impacted by the proposed change.

“ Blind children need all new vocabulary explained to them in concrete terms. Using unknown words can place them at a disadvantage – never assume a blind child has the same understanding of the world as a sighted peer ...adding curveballs of new words in my view, could disadvantage them therefore I would welcome this stopping.”

(Local authority)

Question 5

Do you have any suggestions for how any potential negative impacts on particular groups of students could be mitigated?

There were 59 responses to this question which were, in the main, unrelated to the proposal and instead focussed on changing the format of MFL exams. Respondents’ suggestions included removing tiers, designing separate exams for native speakers and independent school students, adjusting the difficulty of MFL exams, removing questions designed, in their view, to catch students out, and putting exam rubrics in English.

A representative group suggested there needed to be measures in place to ensure the inclusiveness of the vocabulary lists.

“ There must be safeguards that vocabulary lists do not lead to a very

Western-centric focus at GCSE. Vocabulary lists also need to take account of current political developments in the field of social justice.”

(Other representative or interest group)

Regulatory impact

Question 6

We have set out our understanding of the cost implications and burdens of our proposals for schools, colleges and exam boards. Are there potential costs or burdens associated with removing the requirement for assessments to use words that are not on the vocabulary list that we have not identified?

Question 6 response	Count	Percentage
Yes	19	3.8%
No	478	96.2%

Total number of responses	Count
Question 6: Response provided	497
Question 6: No response	0
Survey total responses	497

All respondents answered this question with the majority (96.2%) answering 'no'.

Question 7



If yes, what are they?

There were 18 comments in response to this question. These comments focussed on how the proposal would increase expenditure on new resources such as textbooks and subscriptions, training and administration and result in more work for teachers in the form of replanning lessons.

An exam board stated that there were several significant costs involved in reviewing and revising assessments in their final production stages, assessments nearer the start of their production, and assessments that have yet to be released.

Question 8

Are there any additional steps we could take to reduce the costs or burdens of our proposal?

There were 27 comments in response to this question. Respondents suggested providing more funding to cover the cost of training and purchasing new resources. They also suggested informing and giving guidance to exam boards in good time so they could make the necessary changes to assessments, giving teachers a set of lessons for them to adapt, and developing an app with a bank of vocabulary. An exam board observed that, although there were challenges involved in revising exam materials, the fact that there were few changes to regulations or adaptations in 2023 for most other qualifications made implementing the proposal more manageable.

Annex A: List of organisational respondents

When completing the consultation questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether they were responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation. These are the organisations that submitted a non-confidential

response:

- Abell Morliss International
- AQA
- Ark
- Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- Ayesha Siddiqah Girls School
- Bancroft's School
- Caroline Chisholm School
- Codsall Community High School
- Confederation of School Trusts
- Co-op Academy Leeds
- Croxley Danes School
- Dame Alice Owen's School
- Catherine Cormier French Tuition
- Grey Court School
- Guildford High School
- Hadleigh High School
- Heathfield Community College
- Hodge Hill Girls' School
- Honeywood School
- Impington Village College
- Jersey College for Girls
- Kings Priory School
- King's Ely
- NAHT
- Pearson
- Plymouth College
- Putney High School
- Queensbridge School
- Radcliffe School
- Rednock School
- St John's Marlborough

- Testbourne Community School
- The Ripley Academy
- Toynbee School
- United Learning
- Vandyke Upper School
- Vyners School
- Wickersley School and Sports College
- Withington Girls' School
- WJEC
- Wolverley CE Secondary School

Workington Academy

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