**Arguments for the inclusion of linguistics in the UK Modern Languages curriculum**

**What this study was about** Linguistics does not currently feature as part of the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) curriculum in the UK. The MFL GCSE specification is largely skills-based, around the four skills of Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. At A-Level, too, where content is assessed, there remains a divide between language skills, as at GCSE, and content: in reality, content refers to literature, film or some other element of culture, but not language as an object of inquiry in its own right. The researchers argue that including linguistics in MFL A-Level curricula could bridge this gap. Furthermore, based on an intervention involving over 300 A-Level MFL students, the researchers consider other benefits such as more nuanced student attitudes towards language, development of new ways of analysing language, enhanced authenticity of language exposure and greater enjoyment of language learning. The researchers argue that these benefits could help to address the declining take-up of MFL in UK schools.

**What the researchers did** In order to assess the viability of including linguistics in the MFL curriculum, researchers wanted to gather and analyse the views of MFL teachers and students before and after being exposed to linguistics materials. They wished to answer the following research questions:

* What do students know and think about linguistics and language in general?
* Is linguistics appealing to students, and which areas of linguistics are likely to be most appealing?
* How are language attitudes and language confidence affected by exposure to linguistics?

*They used the following approach:*

1. Researchers designed mini-courses in linguistics in French, Spanish and German for A-Level MFL students. These mini-courses comprised four one-hour sessions, covering phonetics/phonology, morphosyntax, historical linguistics and sociolinguistics of the target language.
2. They invited teachers to deliver these materials. This was voluntary and recruitment proceeded mainly through networks and snowballing. Over the two-year study, 29 schools participated, including 16 independent schools, 8 state schools, 4 sixth-form colleges and 1 international school. Teachers were then asked to fill out an online survey before and after delivering the materials. 16 teachers completed the pre- and post-delivery surveys.
3. Students were then invited to participate, and to also complete an online survey before and after being taught the materials. From these 29 schools, 302 A-Level MFL students (16-18 years, balanced for gender) completed the pre-delivery survey. A majority (65%) attended state schools (due to the larger cohorts in the sixth form colleges). 97 then students completed the post-delivery survey.
4. The surveys included closed (Likert 1-5 scales) and open questions to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers analysed the pre- and post-delivery data separately; analysis of the student data informed the answers to the initial research questions.

**What was found**

* The researchers found that students’ understanding of linguistics and linguistic concepts improved over the period of the intervention, from an initial position of unfamiliarity. An acknowledgement of the usefulness of linguistics also increased following the mini-course.
* The researchers observed that a majority of students found the idea of including linguistics in MFL lessons appealing and viewed the materials positively.
* Student views on language remain highly prescriptive.
* There was a perceived improvement in language skills following the intervention, and students reported a positive impact on their understanding of structures in both English and the target language.
* All topics were perceived positively by the students. The most popular topic was historical linguistics. Morphosyntax was the least popular, though many students reported enjoying all aspects of the course.
* Students reported enjoying that linguistics represented something new and different as part of their MFL study, which captured their interest beyond language learning in the classroom.

**Things to consider** The students were only exposed to four hours of linguistics, so there are limitations to the extent of the impact. It can be argued that were linguistics included as an integral part of the MFL curriculum, this impact would likely be more significant. In terms of sampling, although a majority of students attended state schools, independent schools were over-represented, possibly due to greater uptake of MFL A-Level in independent schools and more flexibility over curriculum in these settings.

**Implications and future plans** The findings suggest that A-Level MFL students are willing and able to engage with concepts in linguistics and even from the mini-courses, clear benefits were seen. The study provides empirical evidence that linguistics should be included in the A-Level MFL specification. Topics such as language variation and historical linguistics were most popular and should therefore be key topics to include. There is scope for linguistics to feature as part of the current A-Level specification without significant changes. For example, the increased meta-linguistic awareness that exposure to linguistics can offer, as shown in this study, can contribute to improved acquisition of language skills (80% of the summative assessment at A-Level). Similarly, linguistics can fit into content topics too, such as “Social Issues and Trends”, or “Political and Artistic Culture”. There are no obstacles to including linguistics in the A-Level specification, which would bridge the gap between skills and content, and work towards the DfE’s stated goal of A-Level MFL being “an integrated study with a focus on language and culture and society”. The findings from this paper suggest that the inclusion of linguistics could also introduce a new way for students to look at languages, and recruit new students to language study, thereby addressing the decline in MFL uptake. Furthermore, linguistics as an integral part of MFL would offer a way to educate students about prescriptivism and linguistic prejudice, which has implications beyond the MFL classroom.