

## Rethinking the UK languages curriculum

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# Rethinking the UK Languages Curriculum: Arguments for the Inclusion of Linguistics

ARTICLE – LINGUISTIC

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues for a place for linguistics within the UK Modern Languages curriculum as part of a more pluralistic approach to languages study. Based on an intervention involving over 300 A-level students of French, German and Spanish, we demonstrate: 1) that it is feasible and appropriate to include linguistics topics on the A-level Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) curriculum; 2) that many of these topics are inherently interesting for A-level language students; and 3) that pupils report increased confidence in their language skills after having been exposed to a short linguistics course (four hours). In light of our further finding that there is already considerable untapped scope for linguistics within the current formal framework of the A-level MFL qualification, we recommend that linguistics topics should be included in MFL A-levels as a matter of priority. This is the case not least because linguistics has the potential to attract new pupils to the study of MFL, while also providing a crucial bridge between language skills and cultural content, which are so often kept apart in existing MFL curricula. Lastly, we argue that the introduction of linguistics into languages teaching raises awareness of the harmfulness of deeply entrenched prescriptive and standard-language-ideological beliefs in schools, and this will lead to a more inclusive discipline.

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The discipline of “modern” languages—also referred to as “foreign” and, more recently, “world” languages—has long been noted to differ markedly from other academic disciplines (Coleman; Evans; Lodge). In the UK today, languages themselves are viewed as skills by both the general public and employers, creating a tension with the conceptualisation of the study of languages—under the guise of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)—as an academic subject (Canning; Evans; Kenny).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps for this reason, the UK secondary school curriculum has become increasingly dedicated to the acquisition of core language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), while moving away from cultural content (see Pountain in “The Three Ls of Modern Foreign Languages” and “Modern Languages as an academic discipline”, who notes that the four skills go back at least as far as Sweet).<sup>2</sup> Even at A-level (the formal qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland for post-compulsory secondary education, the final ‘Key Stage’ of the national curriculum),<sup>3</sup> where content is assessed in addition to these four skills, there is little integration of the two. This is apparent, for example, in the fact that the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), a UK exam board for A-level MFL, specifies that Paper 1 Listening, Reading and Writing contributes 50% of marks for A-level French, but no marks are awarded for Assessment Objective 4 (showing “knowledge and understanding of, and respond[ing] critically and analytically to, different aspects of the culture and society of countries/communities where the language is spoken”) (see “A-level French (7652) Scheme of assessment”).

The skills/content divide can be related to the misconception that language is not a worthy topic of academic investigation in its own right. Thus Evans, in his description of how language scholars in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the 1990s conceive of their discipline, states unequivocally that “language is enabling not substantive. The object of study is not the language but the culture” (276). This overlooks the potential contribution of *linguistics* (for present purposes, the empirical and theoretical study of language form, meaning and use), which—unlike literature, history or politics which are studied *through* language—makes language itself *the object of inquiry* from a variety of perspectives. As such, linguistics provides a bridge between what Lodge terms *language as instrument* and *language as discipline*. While there are many branches of modern linguistics, we will focus here on the following core areas: phonetics and phonology (the study of sounds and how they combine); morphosyntax (the study of word and sentence structure); sociolinguistics (the study of how and why languages vary); and historical linguistics (the study of how and why languages change over time).<sup>4</sup>

In this article, we make the argument that expanding the academic conceptualisation of languages study to include linguistics holds great potential benefits for the study of languages in schools, not least because it may help increase the take-up of languages following a long period of decline (see Collen). In the English context, the obvious place to explore the possibilities

1 In what follows we use the label ‘MFL’ to refer to the school subject following UK convention, but avoid the terminology when referring to the study of languages in general, not least since 17.1% of current secondary school pupils in England (and 21.3% of primary pupils) are recorded as having English as an additional language (cf. “Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics”).

2 While the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) does include the four skills, it also includes a section on sociolinguistic variation, unlike UK secondary school curricula. Moreover, the companion volume of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018) also includes sections on interaction strategies, sociolinguistics, prosodic features, pragmatics and plurilingual and pluricultural competence, which further highlights (a) that language learning in Europe is viewed as more than the sum of the four skills, and (b) that the UK model as is an outlier.

3 Since the late 1990s, powers relating to education have been devolved across the UK’s constituent nations. England and Wales follow a National Curriculum (and Northern Ireland follows an analogous Northern Ireland Curriculum) for 3–18-year-olds composed of five blocks of years called Key Stages (KS), separate from the formal qualifications by which school pupils are assessed (Scotland has a comparable education and qualification system known as the Curriculum for Excellence). However, much of what can be said for languages study in England can also be extended to the educational contexts of the UK’s devolved nations.

4 One might wonder why we focus on these areas of linguistics, as opposed to other areas such as language acquisition, linguistic typology or conversation analysis. This is partly a matter of our own research expertise and the facility with which we could produce research-informed materials, but it is also arguably the case that the branches of linguistics included in the introductory course are also those areas most similar to students’ previous experience of language study. That said, it is highly likely that other branches of linguistics would also be of interest to languages students and we hope that our study may lead to future investigations of this.

of linguistics is within Key Stage 5 (KS5) in relation to A-levels, the high-level qualifications that students usually take aged 17/18, and which is intended to be “an integrated study with a focus on language and culture and society” (“Modern foreign languages” 4), as discussed in Section 2.2. This is because KS5 is the earliest stage at which Lodge’s notion of “language as discipline” becomes relevant and content is assessed in addition to the four skills. In the remainder of this article, we marshal empirical evidence to demonstrate that it is both feasible and appropriate to include linguistic topics at KS5 (and possibly earlier): we present evidence from a two-year intervention in UK secondary schools involving over 300 A-level students of French, German and Spanish from a range of school types.

In Section 2, we begin by providing an overview of modern languages in UK universities and schools with a special focus on MFL at KS5 in English schools (see fn3), discussing in some detail the UK government Department for Education (DfE)’s “Modern foreign languages” subject content document and AQA’s implementation of it. In Section 3, we then detail the design of our intervention, covering sampling, curriculum development and data-collection methods, before presenting the main results of the study in Section 4, in which we focus on students’ attitudes towards language and linguistics. Finally, Section 5 discusses our findings and makes a number of explicit policy recommendations relating to the inclusion of linguistics in the UK language curriculum.

## 2. MODERN LANGUAGES IN THE UK AND THE PLACE OF LINGUISTICS

### 2.1. MODERN LANGUAGES BACHELOR’S DEGREES IN THE UK

In UK Higher Education (HE), the provision of languages study is diverse, involving both “language as instrument” and “language as discipline” orientations in Lodge’s sense. Some “language as instrument” degree courses focus on the development of high-level language skills, offering intensive language training, often in several languages, and sometimes in combination with specific skills such as translation or even interpreting/subtitling.<sup>5</sup> However, most courses take a “language as discipline” approach focused on literature or “area studies”, meaning film, culture, history and/or politics (compare, for example, courses offered by the University of Essex versus University College London as of 2020).<sup>6</sup> Only the University of York appears to offer degrees that are primarily focused on the study of a language/languages plus linguistics.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, in our informal survey of 69 UK HE providers offering language degrees, we observe that  $n = 31$  UK universities also include the option of at least one linguistics module in their MFL degrees, and, at some universities, such as the University of Cambridge and the University of York (mentioned previously), language degrees necessarily include a linguistics component.<sup>8</sup> This shows that, in UK HE, there is some recognition that linguistics can be a component of advanced language study, and this is demonstrated too by research output in UK HEIs (see, for instance, the Higher Education Funding Council’s Research Assessment Exercise 2008 “French subject overview report”).

### 2.2. MODERN LANGUAGES IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS AND THE NEW MFL A-LEVEL SPECIFICATION

Despite its presence within languages degrees in the UK, linguistics is conspicuously absent from MFL provision in English schools.<sup>9</sup> MFL GCSEs (the exam taken at age 15/16 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) are essentially skills-based qualifications and, despite the DfE’s

<sup>5</sup> As a reviewer notes, such courses are often combined with another discipline such as business, law or international relations or even English or history.

<sup>6</sup> Information from <https://www.essex.ac.uk/courses/ug00176/1/ba-french-studies-and-modern-languages> and <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/undergraduate/degrees/french-ba>.

<sup>7</sup> Information from <https://www.york.ac.uk/language/undergraduate/>. That is not to say that students studying languages at other universities do not undertake degrees primarily focused on linguistics (e.g. students taking joint honours with English Language and/or Linguistics).

<sup>8</sup> Sample based on the institutions in Álvarez et al. for which the relevant information was available via public-facing web pages.

<sup>9</sup> As education is devolved, we focus here on England for illustrative purposes.

“Modern foreign languages” description of the new A-level as “an integrated study with a focus on language and culture and society” (4), there are virtually no language-related *content* topics on the new A-level MFL syllabus (and certainly none related specifically to linguistics), in contrast to literature and film which are both represented (see e.g. AQA’s “A-level French specification”, “A-level German specification” and “A-level Spanish specification”). This is markedly different from English Language provision at A-level, which introduces students to many different aspects of Modern Linguistics (see DfE’s “GCE AS and A level for English”).

The MFL A-level qualification has recently been revised in a somewhat controversial manner (see Pountain “Modern Languages as an academic discipline” for an overview). Following a critical review of the KS5 MFL curriculum by a government advisory body—the A-level Content Advisory Board (“Report of the ALCAB panel”)—the DfE issued a new “subject content” specification for England which aimed, among other things, to distinguish the topics covered at A-level from those studied at GCSE. In the new A-level qualification, the DfE states explicitly that, in addition to developing high-level language skills, students will develop analytical and critical skills in relation to “the language, culture and society of the country or countries where the language is spoken” (“Modern foreign languages” 3). Despite these aspirations for integration, however, the detailed specifications developed by the major English exam boards on the basis of the DfE’s “Modern foreign languages” new subject content specification retain a sharp distinction between language *skills*, on the one hand, and subject *content*, on the other, with the latter being focused almost exclusively on culture, film and/or literature (see Corr et al. for a detailed discussion). Grammar plays a central role in the new specification, but in a purely prescriptive sense, taking the form of a battery of constructions to be used, rather than a variable system to be analysed and understood in its own right. The skills/content divide is also evident in the marking criteria for the new A-levels issued by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (“GCSE, AS and A level Assessment Objectives”). According to these criteria, 80% of marks are awarded for language manipulation and use, while only 20% of marks are awarded for (a) “knowledge and understanding”, and (b) a critical and analytical response to “aspects of the culture and society of countries/communities where the language is spoken”. It is noteworthy that no marks are awarded for language analysis, the inclusion of which, as we have argued elsewhere, would further bridge the arbitrary content/skills divide (see Corr et al.).

The A-level syllabus is therefore still highly skills focused, mainly taking a “language as instrument” approach. Where critical engagement and analysis are rewarded, this is in relation to *cultural* and *societal* understanding only, with a heavy focus on the three European nation states (France, Germany and Spain), despite the more ambitious claims outlined in DfE’s “Modern foreign languages”, which sets out that subject content should cover “social issues and trends”, “political and/or intellectual and/or artistic culture” and film and/or literary texts (3–4) relating to “the country or countries where the language is spoken”. AQA’s language-specific specifications elaborate on these topics in different ways for the three languages in question but, as noted above, very few language-related topics are included and no topics relate specifically to linguistics. Moreover, there is no topic within “social issues and trends” in any of the French, German and Spanish AQA specifications which focuses specifically on language use. Within the artistic culture topics of the Spanish syllabus, we do find *las lenguas* (“languages”), which introduces students to other languages of the Iberian Peninsula (and notably not the more diverse contact languages of Latin America). Even in relation to this topic, however, the focus is on languages as cultural artefacts, rather than as complex systems requiring deeper analysis. There are, of course, separate grammar specifications for French, Spanish and German. Many of these particular areas of grammar could arguably form the basis of linguistic topics in their own right, but these grammar points have a different status to the content topics in the pedagogical framework and serve a distinct purpose. In the French, German and Spanish specifications, it is explicitly stated that “[i]n the exam students will be required to use, actively and accurately, grammar and structures appropriate to the tasks set” (“A-level French specification” 13; “A-level German specification” 13; “A-level Spanish specification” 13), mandating an instrumental acquisition of grammar. On this approach, students are expected to be able to understand and produce certain prescribed constructions, but they are not expected to either analyse or interpret underlying structure, or investigate how structure (or other aspects of language) vary across speakers, or along temporal, spatial or other social dimensions.

One remaining aspect of the new A-level is also noteworthy: the independent research project that forms a component of the oral exam. The A-level Content Advisory Board explicitly suggests language-related topics for this, such as *[l]as lenguas minoritarias en la Península Ibérica* (“minority languages on the Iberian Peninsula”)—which would build on the content topic *las lenguas* mentioned above. However, the availability of such topics varies widely by language. In the German specification, for instance, there is a strong focus on Germany and Berlin, with no mention of social or regional variation in German (which is somewhat surprising given the strong tradition of dialectology in Germany, dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century). Similarly, in the French A-level specification, there is no mention of regional languages or regional variation in Hexagonal French, nor is there any mention of the Frenches spoken in the wider francophone world, notably Francophone Africa, which is home to the majority of the world’s French speakers (“Qui parle Français dans le monde?”). MFLs are therefore portrayed to students as fixed monolithic objects to be mastered, contrary to the DfE’s stated aim to introduce students to “the language, culture and society of the country or countries where the language is spoken” (“Modern foreign languages” 3).

Furthermore, the MFL curriculum remains locked in a tradition of teaching language according to an idealised standard native-speaker norm. Focusing specifically on the pedagogical materials, there is near-exclusive reference to the standard (and therefore sociopolitically and economically hegemonic) languages of France, Spain and Germany, with little to no recognition of the different varieties—including the different (inter)national standards—of these languages around the world, or of regional or social variation. As many have noted, this presents learners with an inaccurate (and unattainable) view of “target language” that does considerable harm to the large numbers of heritage speakers taking MFL at GCSE and A-level who are taught that non-standard structures, which are otherwise perfectly acceptable in their respective speech communities, are essentially grammatically incorrect (see Train). We stress that this leaves A-level students with a misrepresentation of the linguistic realities beyond the classroom and causes considerable distress to heritage speakers (Cummins).

### 2.3 BENEFITS OF INCLUDING LINGUISTICS IN MFL TEACHING

As we have contended elsewhere (Corr et al.), the division between *language skills* and *content topics* in the new A-level curriculum (and the discipline of MFL more generally) creates an artificial distinction and misses the opportunity to create a truly integrated study with the languages themselves the object of intellectual inquiry. The inclusion of linguistics as part of A-level French, German and Spanish, and indeed other languages (including “community” languages) offered at A-level, would serve multiple functions. First, it would help bridge the content/skills divide, allowing the potential reinforcement of core language skills (which, as discussed below, constitute 80% of overall marks) through improved meta-linguistic awareness (see Teaching Schools Council’s “Modern Foreign Languages pedagogy review” on the role of meta-linguistic awareness in UK MFL learning). Second, it would introduce MFL students to the Scientific Method, encouraging new analytical skills complementing those developed through literary analysis and cultural study.

Third, the inclusion of linguistics has the potential to change students’ attitudes (i.e. patterns of evaluation, see below) towards language. For instance, one ongoing debate in language teaching relates to so-called nativespeakerism (see Blyth; Burns; Train among others) and its role in the marginalisation of non-standard voices (e.g. in the form of accent discrimination) (see Levis and Zhou; Munro), while in linguistics there is a strong tradition of critiquing standard-language ideology (e.g. Milroy and Milroy). These issues are reinforced by the embedding of a highly prescriptive understanding of language in the MFL classroom, which often dismisses all deviations from an idealised standard as “mistakes” (Valdés and Geoffrion-Vinci; Wilberschied and Dassier). Empowering students to be more critical of standard-language ideology is, arguably, particularly important given the increasing numbers of students taking A-level qualifications in their home language.<sup>10</sup> That being said, the empowerment that comes from the ways in which linguistics enables students to identify linguistic prejudice—including, notably,

<sup>10</sup> Ofqual’s “Native speakers in A level modern foreign languages” investigates the extent to which ‘native speakers’ take qualifications in French, Spanish and German, and suggests that their numbers are substantial, while also acknowledging that the notion of ‘native speaker’ is itself problematic in this context. We address this point in more detail in 4.1.2.



that which is directed towards L2 learners and educators (Holliday “Native-speakerism” in *ELT Journal* and “Native-speakerism” in *TESOL Encyclopedia*; Kohli and Solórzano; Ramjattan)—brings benefits to all.

Fourth, in gaining an understanding of language variation, students might be expected to be better prepared for authentic interactions in the target language that diverge significantly from textbook norms (see Valdman). Finally, and most importantly, it is our expectation, based on similar initiatives in different contexts (e.g. Loosen 270–71; Larson *et al.* e389), that many students will simply find pleasure in engaging intellectually with the history, structure and social reality of the language(s) they are studying. This in turn has the potential to attract different kinds of students, who might not otherwise be interested in MFL, to the study of languages—something that is to be welcomed given the current “languages crisis” (Bowler; “Languages in the UK: a call for action”; Lanvers and Coleman; Long *et al.*) and the much stated desire to transform the discipline (see Burdett *et al.* and “Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills.”).

Attempts to halt the collapse of MFL study in the UK have generally focused on the utility argument: students are told that languages are useful and advantageous from a socioeconomic perspective (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers; “Born Global”; Canning; Coleman). Recent research in Northern Ireland suggests that this message has registered among school-aged children (Henderson). The problem, however, is that this alone is apparently not enough to motivate young people to select languages beyond age 13 (when they cease to be obligatory). Instead, what motivates students to continue with a language beyond this point is enjoyment and success (Henderson). If we want to bring new life to the discipline of Modern Languages in the UK then, something is needed in addition to the utility argument in order to make the subject more enjoyable and accessible to students (see also Collini, who makes a similar argument for the humanities in general). While there are plenty of arguments to favour linguistics from the utility perspective—among them (as noted above), enhanced metalinguistic awareness, a factor often emphasised as facilitating L2 acquisition in the classroom context (“Modern Foreign Languages pedagogy review”); and the development of transferable STEM skills (as identified in the “EU Skills Panorama”) <sup>11</sup>—at its heart, the proposal we make here to incorporate linguistics into languages education comes from the inherent interest it holds for many languages students.

### 3. THE LINGUISTICS IN MFL PROJECT: RESEARCH DESIGN

The shortcomings that we have identified in the MFL curriculum design have motivated the aims and objectives of the Linguistics in MFL Project, an ongoing collaboration between Anglia Ruskin University and the Universities of Birmingham, Bristol and Westminster (and previously Queen Mary University of London and the University of Cambridge). The project began in 2017 with the aim of investigating the viability of including linguistics as an element of MFL teaching in the UK school curriculum. In this initial study, we were interested in assessing the extent to which A-level students and their teachers would find a linguistic introduction to their language of study engaging and stimulating and whether such an introduction would affect attitudes towards, and confidence in that language. For our purposes, we take “attitudes” to mean a non-fleeting pattern of evaluative responses (feeling, thinking, behaving) towards a particular issue, which can be measured via an attitudinal scale (equivalent to the cognitive, affective and conative behaviour components described by Agheyisi and Fishman). As part of this investigation, the authors designed (in collaboration with external academic colleagues) three introductory mini-courses on French, Spanish and German linguistics targeted at A-level pupils. The courses comprised four hour-long sessions, covering (respectively) topics in phonetics/phonology, morphosyntax, historical linguistics and sociolinguistics of the target language. These mini-courses were then taught to A-level cohorts in a range of UK secondary schools by MFL teachers participating in the project.

<sup>11</sup> Among others, we emphasise here “the ability to generate, understand and analyse empirical data including critical analysis; an understanding of scientific and mathematical principles; the ability to apply a systematic and critical assessment of complex problems with an emphasis on solving them and applying the theoretical knowledge of the subject to practical problems” (“EU Skills Panorama”; see also “Higher education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects”; “The supply and demand for high-level STEM skills”).

The study's research design revolves around the gathering of attitudinal data from research participants (both teachers and pupils) before and after the delivery of the four classes. Between 2017 and 2019, over 300 pupils taking French, German or Spanish A-levels in UK state and independent schools took part in the study. This paper discusses results from the self-reported questionnaire data gathered from pupils addressing the following questions: 1) What do students know and think about linguistics and language in general? 2) Is linguistics appealing to students, and which areas of linguistics are likely to be most appealing? 3) How are language attitudes and language confidence affected by exposure to linguistics? We take up the results from the surveying of teachers in work in progress and focus here on the pupil responses.

### 3.1. SAMPLING

To address the project's aim, we invited MFL A-level teachers with some background knowledge or interest in linguistics (typically through exposure to linguistics as part of a HE degree) to sign up and deliver one or more of the French/German/Spanish linguistics mini-courses. Recruitment was limited in this way so that teachers would be able to deliver the course with no training and minimal support from the project team. Our recruitment method used chain-referral sampling, drawing primarily on existing language/linguistics-related distribution lists (such as those operated by the UK Linguistics Olympiad); social media platforms (namely, Twitter, given its popularity with MFL teachers in the UK) and associated community-specific hashtags (e.g. #mflchat, #mfltwitterati); and, to a lesser extent, personal contacts with secondary schools that maintained links with our host HE institutions.

Initially, significant numbers of teachers signed up to participate (61 in 2017–18 and 49 in 2018–19, with some signing up both years), but numerous schools subsequently withdrew or at least did not provide us with any feedback before or after delivering the course. Overall, students from a total of 29 schools participated in the study over the two years (23 in 2017–18 and 12 in 2018–19, with five schools participating in both years). While we made every effort to recruit teachers from a diverse range of selective state (grammar), non-selective state-run (comprehensive), state-funded (academy), and fee-paying (independent) schools, ultimately the sample was self-selecting, and independent schools are overrepresented in the sample (see [Table 1](#)).<sup>12</sup> Note, however, that, as we discuss below, respondents studying in the state sector outnumber those studying in independent schools across both the initial and final questionnaires.

SCHOOL TYPE	PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS
Academy	5
Comprehensive	1
Community	1
Independent	16
International	1
State grammar school	1
State VI form college	4

**Table 1** Final sample of participating schools (n = 29).

There are a number of possible reasons for the overrepresentation of fee-paying schools. First, it is well known that students at independent schools are far more likely to study a language at A-level (Collen; Tinsley). Second, teachers at state schools who dropped out reported a lack of flexibility and time as barriers to participation, something that may be less at issue in the independent sector.

Teachers who had signed up were then invited to teach the materials designed for the mini-course to their A-level pupils in the summer terms of 2018 and 2019. They were asked to provide feedback via online surveys after each class (in the 2018 cohort only) and at the end of the mini-course (both 2018 and 2019 cohorts). Ethical permission for this work was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Panel, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Anglia Ruskin

<sup>12</sup> While it is difficult to specify what percentage of secondary schools are classified as 'independent', the UK Government figures for 2019/20 show that there are 3,456 state secondary schools compared with 2,331 independent schools (including primary and secondary provision), <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>.



University in September 2016. All participants were given an electronic participant information sheet and asked to provide online consent before providing any information. A total of 16 schools provided data both at the beginning and end of the mini-course, and of these only 11 teachers offered final feedback based on their experience. The schools that completed the final questionnaire were a subset of those that completed the initial questionnaire, made up of eight independent schools, four academies, three state VI forms and one community school. The initial and final samples are therefore similarly split between state and independent providers.

In addition to UK teachers of MFL, we also collected data from 302 KS5 students, and this is the data we analyse here. Respondents who completed the initial student questionnaire were all aged 16–18 (153 females; 130 males; 19 prefer not to say). Of these students, 97 were at independent schools with 194 attending state providers. The remaining 11 students were sampled from a British international school overseas (and so are included on the basis of curricular similarities with the programmes of study at English schools; see, again, the caveats in fn3). At first sight, it is surprising that state school pupils outnumbered independent school pupils by a ratio of 2:1 in the student sample, given that more independent schools participated than state providers (see [Table 1](#)), but the different skewing can be explained by the fact that the state VI form colleges which participated are very big and so had large numbers of A-level language students (a total of 64 between them).

Our third population was the 97 KS5 students who completed the final questionnaire (57 female; 39 male; 1 prefer not to say), all of whom were aged 16–18. These are in all probability a subset of the students who completed the initial questionnaire, as they were drawn from 16 of the 29 participating schools but, as the data were collected anonymously, it is not possible to make direct comparisons between the two groups. Of this third population, 32 were from independent schools and 59 from state providers, in addition to the six who left this field blank. In this way, although the sample size for the final questionnaire is severely reduced, there is a reasonable gender balance, and state and independent schools are adequately represented. There are several possible reasons why the sample size for the final questionnaire is under a third of that for the initial questionnaire. The main factor seems to be that schools tended to deliver the mini-courses at the very end of the academic year and this made it difficult for their teachers to chase students and encourage completion of the final questionnaire. Other possible reasons are that schools did not have time to deliver all of the mini-course classes, simply forgot to complete the final feedback or were unaware that it was a required component of participation. Given the different sizes of the two student samples and the anonymity of the data, we will consider the initial and final questionnaires independently, making only general comparisons rather than inferences. The authors acknowledge here the shortcomings inherent in this methodological decision.

### 3.2. SURVEY

We focus here on the data collected from participating students who were asked to complete two questionnaires (prior to and following participation in the mini-course). These were designed to elicit attitudinal data on their views about language and linguistics, their own MFL confidence/proficiency, and their understanding of and interest in the topics covered by the mini-courses. The questionnaires were designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data in the form of closed and open questions, respectively. Each of the closed questions was presented with a five-point Likert scale, as in [Table 2](#). Only minor changes were made to the questionnaires between 2018 and 2019 to correct errors which had been detected.

### 3.3. MEASURES

For each question, the central tendency is reported as the Mean ( $\mu$ ), alongside the standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ); in addition, the Median (or Med) is also reported. While there is an extensive

#	LIKERT ITEMS	SD	D	N	A	SA
Q1	"I know what linguistics is"	1	2	3	4	5
Q2	"Linguistics should be taught as part of MFL at school"	1	2	3	4	5
...	...					

**Table 2** Example Likert items and scale.

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

literature on the validity of treating Likert scales as either ordinal (permitting only a rank ordering, or median, of scores) or interval (and thus reporting interval descriptive statistics such as Means, see e.g. Harwell and Gatti), we choose to report both Median and Mean statistics in order to highlight some general tendencies in the data. For open questions (e.g. *How would you describe linguistics to a friend?*) with short qualitative responses (e.g. “science of language, study of meaning” etc.), answers were categorised by semantic domain and then quantified. Longer responses were also analysed qualitatively.

## 4. RESULTS

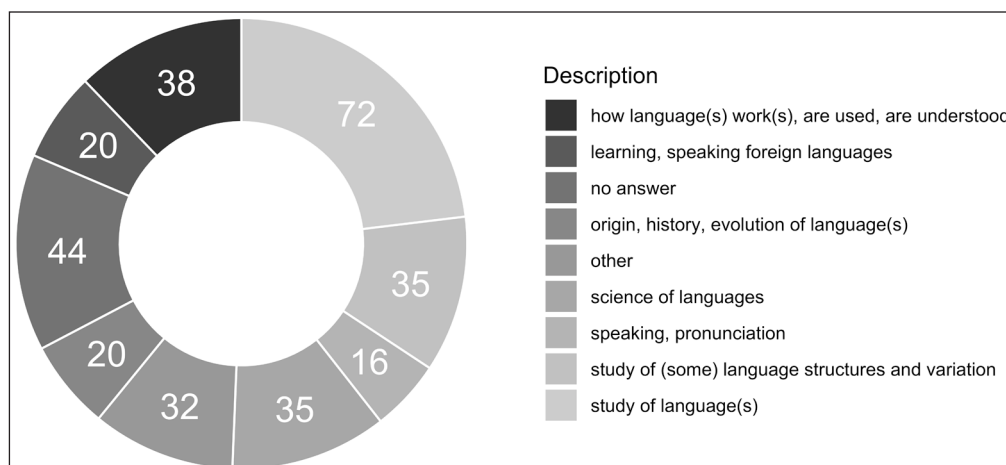
### 4.1 WHAT DO STUDENTS KNOW AND THINK ABOUT LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE IN GENERAL?

The aim of this section is to offer an overview of our participants’ acquaintance with linguistics as an independent field of study. Owing to the fact that different sample populations completed pre- and post-stimuli questionnaires, we do not make any direct inferences between the two sets of data. However, some broad comparisons and generalisations can be made, without implying that the changes have (exclusively) been triggered by the intervention. Questions taken from the final questionnaire are indicated by → in [Tables 3](#) and [4](#).

#### 4.1.1. Linguistics

Our student participants were vague about their familiarity with linguistics before taking the mini-course ( $Q1, \mu = 3.07, Med = 3$ ). This is supported by the evidence in [Figure 1](#), where the majority of participants defined linguistics as the “study of language(s)” (23%), followed by references to the way in which languages work; are used; and are understood (12%). A minority of participants opted for answers relating to the “science of language(s)” (11%), and the study of their structure and variation (11%). Owing to the broadness of labels such as “study of language” or “science of language”, it is difficult to evaluate the accuracy of students’ understanding of linguistics as a discipline, even if one or two well-articulated answers were occasionally offered (e.g. “The study of language. Including the study of the way a language evolves, the phonetics, the grammatical structures of different languages, how language effects [sic] the way we think and a lot more”). Notably, inaccurate answers often amounted to a definition of linguistics as the study of or competence in foreign languages (7%), probably due to the inherent ambiguity of the word ‘linguist’ (e.g. “A linguist is someone who can speak more than one language”; “someone who is good at speaking a foreign language well”). Others included a reference to a specific area of inquiry within linguistics, most notably sounds (5%), as in [Figure 1](#). Owing to the wide range of feedback offered, all respondent feedback was coded by semantic category in order to establish whether broad patterns emerged. Individual answers that do not fall into any broad category and were only offered once have been collapsed under the “other” label.

A more careful examination of answers to the question reveals that students’ acquaintance with the discipline is, in most cases, rather superficial. Among the minority of students who reported having read something about linguistics before the mini-course (24%), the majority of them (29 out of the 71 who answered, including irrelevant or very broad answers) mentioned



**Figure 1** Raw count of students’ answers to the question “How would you describe linguistics to a friend” in the pre-stimuli questionnaire.

articles or definitions from Wikipedia and other generic non-academic online sources, while only a small number of students ( $n = 19$ ) claimed to have read or scanned passages from published textbooks or popular introductory books (most commonly, Crystal; Deutscher's *The Unfolding of Language* and *Through the Language Glass*; Matthews; McWhorter; Pinker). Booklets, webpages and slides from university open days were cited as another source of information among our participants ( $n = 6$ ). When specific subfields of linguistics were mentioned, "language evolution" proved to be the most popular area, followed by more applied fields (e.g. forensic linguistics, sociolinguistics). The general picture is one of a very broad acquaintance with the field of linguistics, mainly achieved through the consultation of generic online sources, English language classes and interaction with university departments.

In the post-stimuli questionnaire, however, almost half of the group of respondents (45%) indicated that they intended to read some more about linguistics. Moreover, the intended readings mentioned in the final questionnaire are of a different qualitative nature than those mentioned in the pre-questionnaire, with only a few students citing Wikipedia and generic online sources, and several statements about a desire to gather more detailed information (e.g. "Looking at some aspects of linguistics in greater detail"; "Look more into [...]", "Find more about [...]"). Unlike in the pre-stimuli questionnaire, participants were also more inclined to mention specific topics they intended to look up, notably historical linguistics ( $n = 6$ ), phonetics ( $n = 4$ ) and variation ( $n = 3$ ), as well as French linguistics ( $n = 2$ ) and German linguistics ( $n = 1$ ). Often, students had very specific interests clearly arising from the mini-course, such as the following (1–3):

1. "I would like to look more into the roots of the french [sic] language"
2. "Further study of the IPA [International Phonetic Alphabet]"
3. "Phonology of other languages with sounds that I am not familiar with. Like in Arabic."

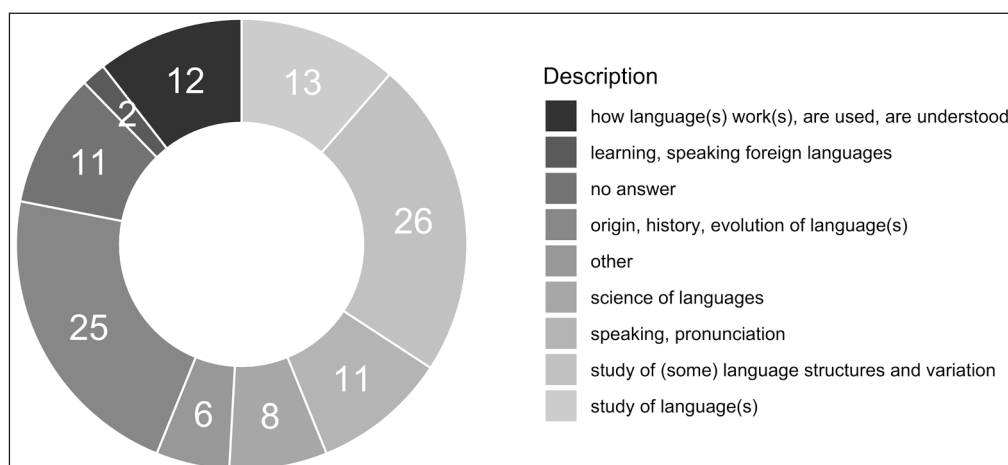
We take this as clear evidence that many of the students found linguistics to be interesting and worthy of further study.

In the final questionnaire, we observe participants employing more precise technical vocabulary, such as "structure" and "variation" when describing linguistics (23%), with more emphasis also paid to history and evolution (22%), which we also attribute to exposure to our intervention. Relatedly, connections made between "linguistics" and "foreign languages" also decrease (from 7% to 2%) (see [Figure 2](#)), evidencing a deeper understanding and engagement with the discipline.

Qualitative answers to questions such as "How would you describe linguistics to a friend?" were in one or two instances particularly elaborate, too, as in (4):

4. "Linguistics allows you to understand languages better from how they were formed, how they changed through time due to specific history and also how they change from geographical areas. Linguistics include the study of syntax, semantics, phonetics and phonology and makes you think more about your own language and the differences and similarities between other languages (from both the same language tree or others)."

The fact that 77% of students agreed/strongly agreed with the statement "Having taken the mini-course, I feel I have a better understanding of what linguistics is" in the final questionnaire

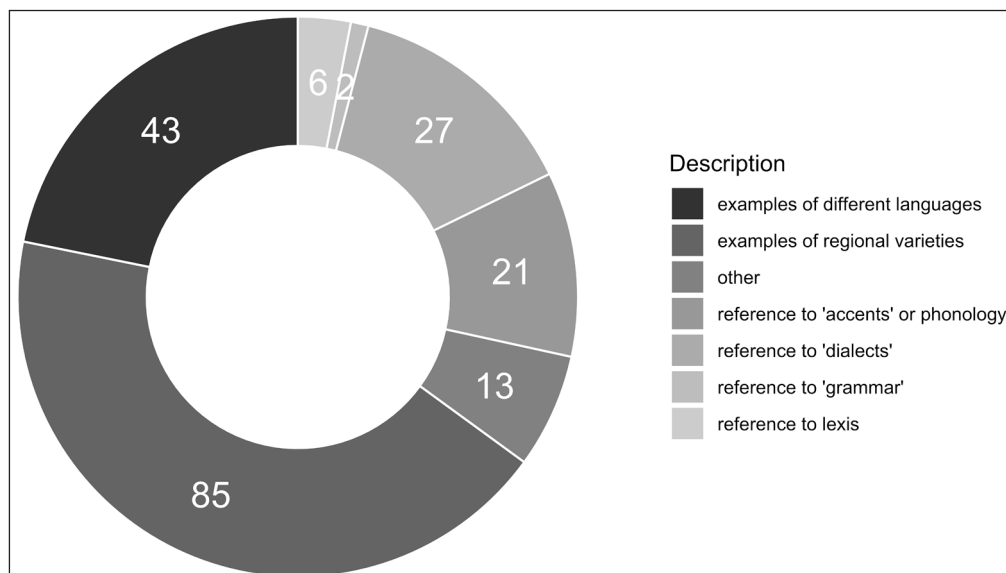


**Figure 2** Raw count of students' answers to the question "How would you describe linguistics to a friend?" in the post-stimuli questionnaire.

also suggests that students' understanding of and confidence in the discipline had grown, despite only limited exposure to our intervention (Q2,  $\mu = 4.02$ , Med = 4,  $\sigma = .87$ ). Conversely, the participants' awareness of the possibility of studying linguistics as a subject at university decreased from 72% to 65% between pre- and post-stimuli questionnaires. This decrease is likely to simply be an artefact of the sampling issues outlined above. (Note also that the mini-course did not directly intervene on this matter.) More encouraging is the fact that a higher proportion of respondents in the post-stimuli questionnaire (32%) declared an interest in studying a language and/or linguistics at university, compared with 23% in the pre-stimuli questionnaire. While we cannot draw inferences between the two samples, it is certainly worth noting that, at this stage (end of Year 12), a high proportion of students (29–37%) remain undecided with respect to whether they will study a language at university, so their experience of the discipline of MFL at this point is likely to be both formative and decisive. Likewise, students' perceptions about the usefulness of linguistics when learning a language remained stable, with 63.1% and 64.7% of students agreeing/strongly agreeing in the initial and final questionnaires, respectively. This indicates that the majority of pupils do believe that linguistics is useful when learning a language, even before embarking on the mini-course. However, as noted above, our intervention contributed to a more accurate understanding of the field of linguistics, hence the final questionnaire can be considered to have generated more reliable answers to this question.

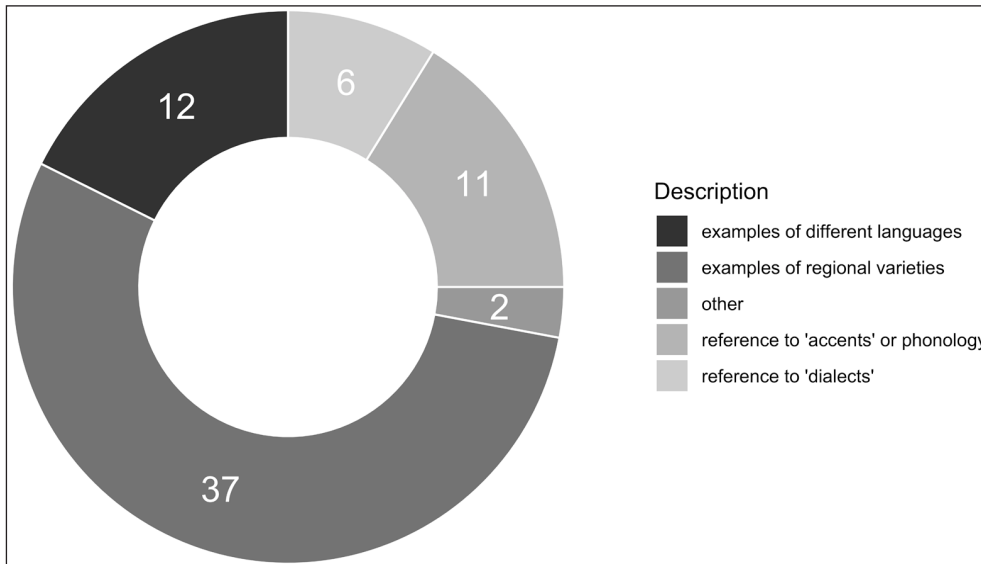
#### 4.1.2. Language variation and change

An interesting insight into students' perception of language and language change is also provided by questions pertaining to the existence of different linguistic varieties. In the pre- and post-stimuli questionnaires, similar numbers of students acknowledged that there are different varieties of the language they were studying (65% and 60% respectively). However, the qualitative feedback is highly revealing, and indicative of students' confusion with regard to, for instance, the status of various minority languages of Europe. In the pre-stimuli questionnaire (see [Figure 3](#)), 43% of respondents provided clear and accurate examples of regional varieties of the language they study (e.g. Mexican Spanish, Canadian French, Swiss German), but a significant minority (22%) named different languages as examples of regional varieties—especially among the Spanish students (e.g. Catalan, Basque, Galician). Conversely, the French and German students exhibited a better understanding (with some exceptions, e.g. Dutch, which was mentioned as an example of German variation several times). Furthermore, many students seemed to consider linguistic variation to be restricted to phonology only (11%), or amounting to variation in grammatical gender, thus showing how, even among those who were aware of the existence of different linguistic varieties, the notion of “variation” itself is not always clearly understood and is often imbued with extra-linguistic connotations (e.g. mentions of “normal” Spanish and “normal” French). The keyword “dialect” was also frequently employed (14%), but as the intended meaning remains unclear, we have included it in a separate category. It is likely that some students are using this term to identify diatopic variation, but others may use it in a more informal sense.



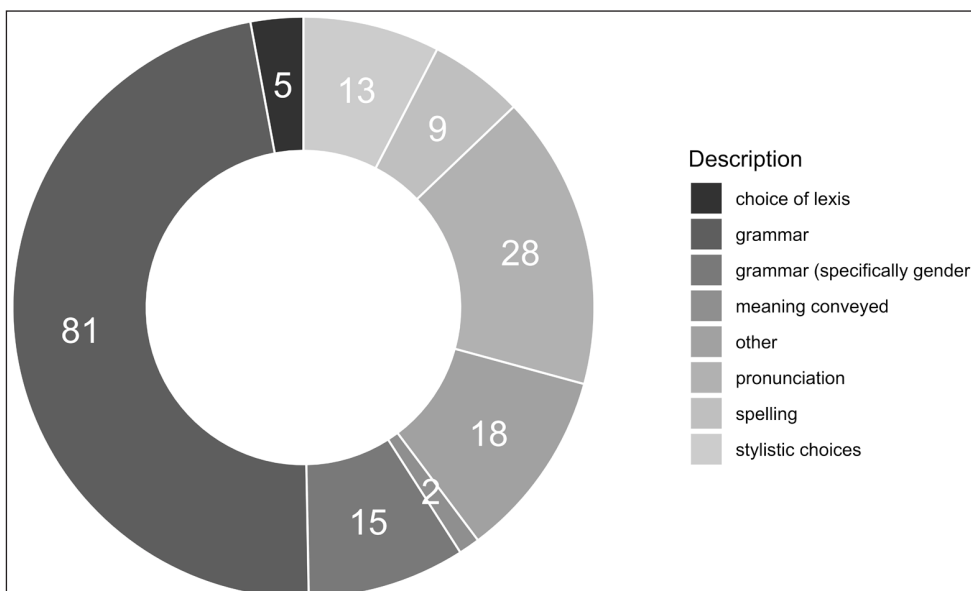
**Figure 3** Raw count of students' examples of language variation in the pre-stimuli questionnaire.

A similar picture emerges from the post-stimuli questionnaire (*Figure 4*), but with some small differences. Following the mini-course, more than half of the participants (54%) provided clear examples of regional variation. Nevertheless, 18% of them still mentioned different languages; the emphasis on phonology (16%) and on “dialects” (9%) also remains. These results imply that, overall, the mini-course led to a slightly better understanding of variation within the languages that students studied, but some misunderstandings remained. Clearly, this fundamental premise of linguistics is difficult for students to grasp after such brief exposure and any future materials developed for the MFL curriculum would do well to address this point more effectively, particularly given the scope for its inclusion in the specification, as we outlined earlier.



**Figure 4** Raw counts of students' examples of language variation in the post-stimuli questionnaire.

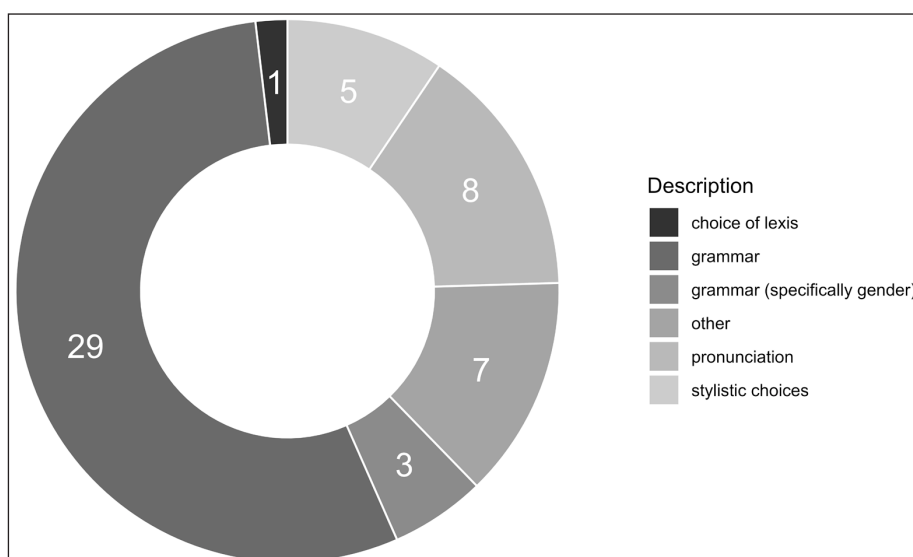
As our intervention was designed to introduce students to a descriptive approach to language and linguistics, we were interested in how participants might interpret lay notions such as “mistakes” in language. Both in the initial and final questionnaires, respondents proved to be uncertain about the possibility that a native speaker (broadly interpreted) of a language could make a mistake: when asked, 17% and 22% of students responded “not sure” in the pre- and post-stimuli questionnaires, respectively, with 5% and 1% of respondents giving a negative answer. In fact, we were, of course, interested in how students interpreted the notion of mistake in this context and whether they equated linguistic variation (language change), slips of the tongue and L2-type ‘errors’. The qualitative data again offer interesting insights regarding the students' attitudes on this issue. By way of illustration, *Figure 5* shows students' examples of possible mistakes made by native speakers in the pre-stimuli questionnaire.



**Figure 5** Raw count of students' examples of possible mistakes made by native speakers in the pre-stimuli questionnaire.

Digging a little deeper into the results summarised above, it is possible to identify two main categories of perceived “mistakes” in language production. On the one hand, we find several instances of features that are not ungrammatical but simply amount to attested variation, notably regional variation. This is particularly clear for many of the cases in the “pronunciation” category (e.g. “not pronunciation [sic] word endings e.g. Pescado some people say ‘Pescao’”, Spanish student) but also extends to “grammar”, including, for example, cases such as Spanish *leísmo* (i.e. use of indirect object pronoun *le* instead of direct object *lo* in a specific set of contexts). Stylistic variation is also often treated as a “mistake”, as evidenced by the examples included in the style/register/slang category (“in informal situations some people have used incorrect grammar or pronunciation”, German student), as well as several examples included in the grammar category, such as the reduced use of subjunctives which may occur in casual registers (“subjunctive often isn’t used”, French student), or *ne*-deletion in French negation clauses (“je sais pas instead of je ne sais pas”, French student). This illustrates that our respondents have (unsurprisingly) assumed a hierarchical view of language that valorises standard forms at the expense of non-standard ones (see Train and the discussion in Section 1 above). In one instance, this is overtly expressed by a student in the sample: “most French speakers will deviate from the recommendations of the *Académie française*”. On the other hand, we find in our respondents’ answers genuine examples of mistakes, insofar as these correspond to language produced by L2 learners. In other words, there is a tendency among students to attribute the mistakes that they (or others in their class) personally make as L2 learners to L1 speakers of that variety, as seen in several examples about gender confusion mentioned by German students (“it is easy to confuse gender”, German student) or uncertainty about Spanish *por* versus *para* (“a very common mistake is confusing *por* and *para* that would translate in English as: “for” and “in order to” completely changing the meaning of the sentence”, Spanish student). Such phenomena may be subject to linguistic variation among L1 speakers anyway, such that identifying what counts as a “mistake” is conceptually problematic in the first place (an added layer of complexity is the linguistic patterns of heritage speakers, who are also sometimes referred to as “native speakers”, and whose language is likely to differ from monolinguals and other bilinguals in interesting ways, see Cummins; Polinsky and Kagan; Polinsky and Scontras etc.). Nevertheless, a few students did challenge the notion of “mistakes” contained in the questionnaire, as shown by the answers supplied in 5–6, and similar results can be gathered from the answers provided in the post-stimuli questionnaire, as represented in [Figure 6](#):

5. “A native speaker of any language could just make a simple grammatical mistake. Also, if you define a ‘proper’ way to speak a language, you could say that anyone who speaks a ‘non-proper’ local dialect is continually speaking incorrectly. However, within their local dialect, their speech could be considered completely grammatical. So I suppose it depends on how you define the correct way of speaking.” (Spanish student)
6. “Yes, but i don’t like to call them mistakes because that’s a bit prescriptivist? but yes, every native speaker uses language non-standardly unless they are a bit up themselves.” (Spanish student)



**Figure 6** Raw counts of students’ examples of possible mistakes made by native speakers in the post-stimuli questionnaire.



In addition to the same or very similar examples of regional and stylistic variation, as well as of common mistakes produced by learners rather than by L1 speakers (e.g. Spanish *por* versus *para*), the answers provided in the post-stimuli questionnaire still reveal some misconceptions about language, such as the idea that the grammar of one's own native language must be studied explicitly ("grammar mistakes [occur] as many native people just say what feels right as they haven't learnt their language like someone who doesn't know Spanish") and that its rules are consciously mastered by speakers and as such can be forgotten ("Forget a certain rule"), although some challenges to the notion of "native mistake" were still posed (e.g. "depends on the approach you take to the language: – descriptive – prescriptive"; "Depends on what you define as mistake"). This closely relates to students' understandings of the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language (Table 3, Q4), as discussed in the mini-course, with possible positive effects, as demonstrated by the fact that while in the pre-stimuli questionnaire 59.7% of students disagreed/strongly disagreed that they understood the terms "descriptive" and "prescriptive", this number dropped to 19.7% post-stimuli.

#	LIKERT ITEMS	MED	$\mu$	$\sigma$
Q1	"I know what linguistics is"	3	3.07	1.19
Q2	→ "Having taken the course, I feel I have a better understanding of what linguistics is"	4	4.02	0.87
Q3a	"It is useful to study linguistics when learning a language"	4	3.77	0.97
Q3b	→ "It is useful to study linguistics when learning a language" <sup>13</sup>	4	3.88	0.82
Q4a	"I understand the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language" <sup>14</sup>	2	2.41	1.30
Q4b	→ "I understand the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language"	4	3.32	1.03

**Table 3** Questions concerning knowledge of linguistics (Likert items).

#	FORCED-CHOICE QUESTIONS	YES	MAYBE	NO
Q5a	"I have read something about linguistics before"	24%	0%	76%
Q5b	→ "Having taken the course, I intend to read some more about linguistics"	45%	15%	40%
Q6a	"It is possible to study linguistics as a subject at university"	72%	25%	3%
Q6b	→ "It is possible to study linguistics as a subject at university" <sup>15</sup>	65%	23%	12%
Q7a	Are you thinking of taking a language and/or linguistics at university?	23%	37%	40%
Q7b	→ Are you thinking of taking a language and/or linguistics at university?	32%	29%	39%
Q8a	Are there different varieties of the language you are studying? <sup>16</sup>	65%	15%	13%
Q8b	→ Are there different varieties of the language you are studying?	60%	18%	22%
Q9a	Can a native speaker of the language you are studying make mistakes when speaking? <sup>17</sup>	78%	17%	5%
Q9b	→ Can a native speaker of the language you are studying make mistakes when speaking? <sup>18</sup>	77%	22%	1%

**Table 4** Questions concerning knowledge of linguistics.

### 4.1.3 Interim summary

In conclusion, the data discussed in this section demonstrate that students are somewhat familiar with the subject of linguistics, although their acquaintance with the discipline is a rather superficial one, mainly achieved by perusing generic online sources. One potential positive outcome of the mini-course is that their confidence with, and understanding of, linguistic terminology improves over the course of the intervention, and it seems to have

<sup>13</sup> Note that this question was added to the post-stimuli questionnaire in 2018–19, so these numbers are based on a sample of 51 students only.

<sup>14</sup> Note that this question was added to the pre-stimuli questionnaire in 2018–19, so these numbers are based on a sample of 82 students only.

<sup>15</sup> Note that this question was added to the post-stimuli questionnaire in 2018–19, so these numbers are based on a sample of 51 students only. This may explain why a smaller proportion of students showed an awareness of linguistics as a potential subject of study at UK universities.

<sup>16</sup> 21 respondents (7%) left this field blank in the initial questionnaire. For this reason, the percentages do not add up to 100%.

<sup>17</sup> 26 students left this question blank.

<sup>18</sup> 10 students left this question blank.

inspired many of them to pursue more academic reading sources. The usefulness of linguistics in the acquisition of an additional language was acknowledged by the majority of students in both the pre- and post-stimuli questionnaire, but with a notable improvement after the mini-course. However, some of the students' understanding of what linguistics is was not necessarily accurate, particularly before the mini-course. Furthermore, the qualitative data we collected reveal that the concept of language variation is not always appropriately understood, there being some confusion surrounding the (admittedly complex) difference between a distinct language and a regional variety, and the components of language that can be affected by variation, with phonology a popular choice. Similar results come from our investigation into students' perception of L1 speakers' "mistakes", which are either confused with regional/stylistic variation or with outputs typically produced by learners, as a consequence of their general lack of acquaintance with the difference between a prescriptive and a descriptive approach to the study of language. In sum, there is evidence that our intervention had a positive impact in that at least some pupils gained a more nuanced grasp of fundamental linguistic concepts, particularly notions such as linguistic variation and prescriptive versus descriptive approaches to language, but there are obviously limitations to what can be achieved after only four hours of exposure to these concepts. Were linguistics to be a more integral component of the MFL specification, it is likely that this effect would be compounded and that students would more generally be in a position to analyse and understand language in more critical terms.

## 4.2. IS LINGUISTICS APPEALING TO STUDENTS? WHICH AREAS OF LINGUISTICS ARE LIKELY TO BE MOST APPEALING?

### 4.2.1. Students' views on the appeal of linguistics

While the questions discussed in Section 4.1 probed how much students knew about linguistics and how this was affected by their participation in the mini-course, the questions discussed in this section aim to investigate the appeal of linguistics to A-level students, and how they felt about the mini-course itself. To establish this, the students were asked to answer the following questions in the pre- and post-stimuli questionnaires.

While in the pre-stimuli questionnaire pupils were ambivalent towards the statement that linguistics should be taught as part of MFL (Q10, [Table 5](#); Med 3,  $\mu$  3.35), in the post-stimuli questionnaire students were more likely to agree with this statement (Q11, Med 4,  $\mu$  3.57), suggesting a potential change in the perception of the place of linguistics by those students who had taken the mini-course. When combined with responses to Q14, there is evidence to suggest that MFL students find linguistics an appealing subject. While students showed an interest in linguistics after being taught some aspects about it through the mini-course, the question of whether students were interested in attending more lessons like those devised in the intervention (Q13) resulted only in fairly neutral scores. This may be due to issues of A-level workload or a perception that they had already completed the course.

In Section 2, we argued that the introduction of linguistics into the MFL specification has the potential to attract new kinds of students to the discipline, which may help ameliorate the much-discussed "languages crisis". This claim would appear to be at odds with the response to Q12, which showed that students did not show an overall tendency to want to study some linguistics at university following the mini-course. The lower results in response to question 12 can be explained by looking at the answers to an additional question on the post-stimuli questionnaire: "Are you thinking of studying a language and/or linguistics at university (either alone or in combination with another subject)?" In response to this question, four students stated that they do not plan to go to university and 24 that they do not plan to study a languages or linguistics. None of these students agreed with the statement "I am now more interested in studying some linguistics at university". At the same time, more than half of the 31 students who stated that they *will* study languages and/or linguistics disagreed (26%) or

#	LIKERT ITEMS	MED	$\mu$	$\sigma$
Q10	"Linguistics should be taught as part of MFL at school"	3	3.35	1.08
Q11	→ "Linguistics should be taught as part of MFL at school"	4	3.57	1.02
Q12	→ "I am now more interested in studying some linguistics at university"	3	2.69	1.10
Q13	→ "I would be interested in attending more lessons like these"	3	3.43	1.05
Q14	→ "I would recommend this course to a friend"	4	3.57	0.96

**Table 5** Questions concerning appeal of linguistics to students.

were neutral (35%) about being *more* interested in studying some linguistics at university, possibly because they were already showing an interest in the subject. Overall then, it can be concluded that many students do find linguistics appealing, which is shown in particular by a general tendency for participants to judge the inclusion of linguistics in MFL study positively, with low standard deviations. Of course, not all students can be expected to like linguistics (see Section 5.2): 15% of the respondents indicated that linguistics should not be part of the MFL curriculum (two disagreed strongly and 13 disagreed with the statement Q11 in [Table 5](#)). More than half of the students (55%) taking part *did*, however, feel that it should be taught as part of MFL at school (34 agreed, 19 agreed strongly), while 29 students (30%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

#### 4.2.2. How linguistics affects language confidence

Possible reasons for the appeal of linguistics among many students can be found in answers to questions about the students' perceived language skills after the intervention. Many students indicated that they felt that the mini-course had contributed to an improvement in their language skills and understanding of certain aspects of the language(s) they were learning. When asked specifically, there was marginal evidence that they felt more confident about their pronunciation (Q17, Med 3,  $\mu$  3.30) and grammar skills (Q18, Med 3,  $\mu$  3.24). [Table 6](#) lists the questions relating to such attitudes on competency following participation in the mini-course. The results reveal that respondents were generally positive about the impact of linguistics on their overall language competency. We observe a general tendency for a perceived improvement in language skills. This tendency is reflected in the qualitative data too, where candidates reported a greater understanding of differences between the structure of English and their target language(s).

#	LIKERT ITEMS	MED	$\mu$	$\sigma$
Q15	"Learning a bit about linguistics has helped me with my language skills"	4	3.52	1.04
Q16	"I now understand better how the sounds of [language] differ from the sounds of English"	4	3.95	0.93
Q17	"I feel more confident about my pronunciation in [language]"	3	3.30	0.97
Q18	"I feel more confident about putting words together into a sentence in [language]"	3	3.24	0.98
Q19	"I now know more about the history of [language]"	4	3.70	1.14

**Table 6** Attitudes about competency after the mini-course.

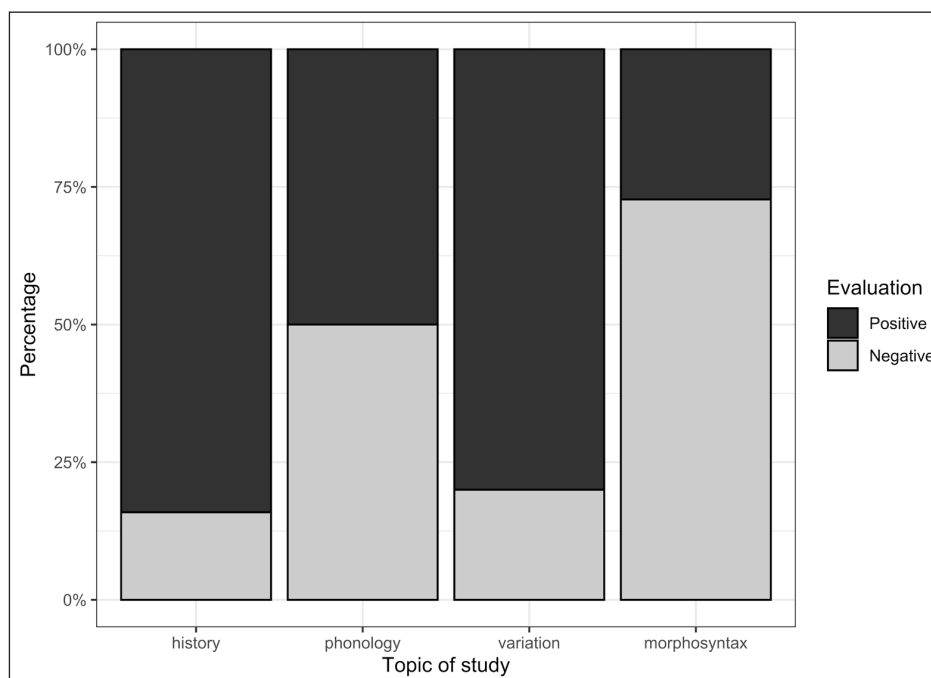
#### 4.2.3. Which areas of linguistics did students prefer?

The perceived usefulness of linguistics may be an important contributing factor in its appeal to students. It is, however, not the only factor that makes linguistics attractive. Students seemed genuinely interested in the content of the mini-course, with certain aspects being more popular than others, but all being appealing to many. Overwhelmingly, over both periods, the most popular material related to historical linguistics, followed by phonology and phonetics, linguistic variation and then morphosyntax. The historical linguistics session was reported as a favourite component by 37 students (38%), sounds by 22 (23%) and variation by 16 students (16%). In contrast, only 6 students (6%) noted that the session on structures was preferred. Meanwhile, 14 students did not answer this question, but only  $n = 2$  specified that they had not enjoyed any of the sessions. A few students provided additional feedback, too, as in 7–10 below:

7. "It had different approaches to language"
8. "Discussing and comparing variation in English and Spanish"
9. "The opportunity to discuss the socio-political implications of prescriptive and descriptive approaches to linguistics, e.g. does it alienate individuals and communities when one version of grammar is deemed 'correct' and superior to other forms?"
10. "It is oddly scientific to study in humanities"

These answers suggest that the students found the mini-course appealing because linguistics was something new and different, applicable not just to their language learning but also to wider social contexts. The evidence would also appear to support our claim that the inclusion of linguistic content could attract a more varied cohort to the study of languages.

Naturally, not all students claimed to enjoy every aspect of the mini-course (see [Figure 7](#) for the positive and negative response to the four topic areas). Regarding the class on phonetics and phonology, for instance, while popular with many students, others perceived this session to be less useful than others from a purely skills-based perspective, with one student stating that “[t]he pronunciation of words [was the least favourite topic] as I knew most of them”. The class on morphosyntax elicited somewhat similar responses (reported to be least preferred by 16 students). Tellingly,  $n = 5$  referred to this session as “grammar”, whereas none of the students who listed structures as their favourite topic did so, instead calling it “syntax” or “word structure”. Some mentioned “learning the grammatical terminology” as the part they did not enjoy. However, across the sample, this session was still perceived as useful, with one student commenting: “learning the grammer [sic] and having to memorise [was the least favourite part] but it is helpful”. More striking is the most common response to the question “What did you find least interesting about the course?”, which was to leave the answer box to this question blank ( $n = 32$ ), implying that the students broadly did not have a least favourite topic, with  $n = 5$  stating this explicitly: for example, “I found all the parts to be useful in understanding what linguistics is. No part was less interesting to me personally.” This suggests that the more technical areas of linguistics may be off-putting to some students but should not necessarily be avoided as they clearly appeal to others and are also often perceived to be “useful” (more so in the case of morphosyntax than phonetics/phonology).



**Figure 7** Summary of most and least favourite topics.

[Figure 7](#) quantifies the positive and negative responses to the four sessions of the mini-course. Owing to net positive appeal of historical linguistics and linguistic variation and change, we suggest that these content topics would make obvious candidates to be introduced into the MFL curriculum first with little or no risk that they would be off-putting to A-level students.

In summary, students enrolled in our intervention found linguistics appealing: they considered it useful for their language learning and it also offered them a new approach to studying languages, with implications and interest beyond language learning in the classroom. The discussion of historical linguistics and language variation seemed to be perceived particularly positively. Any further linguistics materials developed for the MFL curriculum should, therefore, include these subject areas. The more technical areas of phonology/phonetics and morphosyntax were also appealing to some students and thought to be useful by some, but care needs to be taken with these areas of linguistics because students are wary of technical vocabulary and, further, they may associate the study of morphosyntax with traditional grammar teaching.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We began this paper by examining the field of “modern” languages—and particularly what it means for students to study and learn them—in the UK context. Noting the so-called languages

crisis and the favouring of *language as instrument* rather than *language as discipline* in UK schools' curricular approaches to languages study, we have examined the viability of including linguistics as an element of MFL at KS5, and argue in favour of the intellectual rewards of the interdisciplinary field of linguistics. Specifically, the research reported here has assessed the extent to which A-level students find a linguistic introduction to their language of study (viz. French, German, Spanish) engaging and stimulating by eliciting attitudinal data on their views about language(s); their confidence and perceived proficiency in their own language skills; and their understanding of and interest in the topics covered by our intervention.

In this final section, we discuss our findings and their implications for the study of MFL in the UK. To summarise, our key findings are as follows:

- Students' overall acquaintance with the discipline of linguistics is broad yet, in many cases, superficial.
- Students' understanding of the discipline of linguistics appears to have improved in depth, accuracy and engagement after exposure to our intervention, an improvement that we derive from students' self-reported perceptions of increased understanding *as a result of* exposure to the stimuli.
- Despite this, students' attitudes towards language remain highly prescriptive and more intense exposure to linguistics would be necessary to challenge these deep-seated views.
- Many students found linguistics interesting, with 45% of students in the post-stimuli questionnaire declaring an intention to read more, often following up on topics touched upon in the mini-course.
- Students reported that learning about linguistics had helped their language skills and were also increasingly aware of the usefulness of linguistics to language study in the post-stimuli versus pre-stimuli questionnaires (to the extent that these can be compared).
- Qualitative comments from students in terms of the inclusion of linguistics in languages study identified the following areas of particular appeal and/or utility: historical linguistics; language variation; language ideologies; comparative linguistics; the Scientific Method.

### 5.1. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LANGUAGES/MFL CURRICULUM

Owing to the length of the mini-course (four discrete, one-hour sessions focusing on four separate subfields of linguistics), the classroom intervention through which students were exposed to linguistics in the context of their MFL studies was, by its nature, very limited in disciplinary scope and depth. Yet even with limited exposure to the material presented, our findings suggest that A-level students of languages are fully able to engage with the conceptual, methodological and ideological challenges to MFL study that linguistics brings. Moreover, students' questionnaire responses reveal increased awareness in terms of the component linguistic systems of their languages of study; processes of linguistic variation and change; linguistic ideologies; the metalinguistic knowledge and skills to describe their understanding of the materials presented; and the acquisition of knowledge this exposure entailed.

Despite our preliminary evidence that the above-reported intervention leads to a better understanding of prescriptive versus descriptive approaches to language, one noteworthy finding in this study relates to the fact that students' prescriptivist attitudes towards their language of study nonetheless persisted. This finding is not surprising given the pervasiveness of standard-language ideological thinking, which characterises not only the languages classroom but constitutes a normative perspective shared by the rest of the educational establishment and societies at large (e.g. Ndhlovu; Santos). However, challenging prescriptivist attitudes—and by extension the linguistic misconceptions and (unconscious) biases and prejudices implicit in these—is widely agreed among language scientists to be one of the most fundamental educational contributions to society that the linguistics community can make (e.g. Charity Hudley *et al.*; Rickford and King). For this reason, more extensive exposure to descriptivism and critical interrogation of standard-language ideology would be required in order to deconstruct pupils' prescriptive attitudes towards languages (see Kibbey for arguments that descriptivism does not go far enough in this endeavour). This is true in relation to pupils' L1, of course, but also, we would contend, in relation to L2s.

## 5.2. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MFL A-LEVEL

While the above-outlined considerations have broader implications for the study of languages at any educational level, our specific contention is that linguistics does indeed provide a vehicle through which to achieve DfE's purported goal for the MFL A-level qualification to be "an integrated study with a focus on language and culture and society" ("Modern Foreign Languages" 4), and to bridge the artificial divide between *content* and *skills* in MFL (A-level) study and assessment that has arisen in practice. Since we have already outlined several advantages of MFL study at A-level here and in previous work (Corr et al. 2019), we do not expand on them further now. Instead, this section offers rebuttals to possible objections to the proposed integration of linguistics in languages study at A-level.

A common objection to teaching and learning innovations in the UK context is that, given the top-down approach taken to formal qualifications at the national level, curriculum reform cannot be realistically contemplated—neither by the examination boards (e.g. AQA, EdExcel) who translate government policy (implemented by the DfE and regulated by Ofqual) into formal qualifications, let alone schools themselves—unless instigated by the DfE itself. However, the inclusion of linguistics—even in the current iteration of the A-level—does not necessitate a structural overhaul. On the contrary, as we outline above, there is ample room for the integration of linguistics teaching and learning *within* the current specification. We have already argued in favour of the position that linguistics can help students develop their language knowledge and understanding, and facilitate instrumental skill acquisition ("Modern Foreign Languages" 3–5) in the form of metalinguistic awareness and through exposure to linguistic variation. In particular, the study of language through linguistics—especially those subfields that directly involve (quantitative and qualitative) "language analysis"—takes as its primary data "authentic spoken and written sources from a variety of different contexts and genres, including online media" and "interaction with speakers of [a given] language [...] including communication strategies" ("Modern Foreign Languages" 4–5).

On the one hand, our empirical evidence suggests that exposure to linguistics can raise students' (here, declarative)<sup>19</sup> meta-linguistic awareness, which in turn can be deployed in pursuit of the instrumental acquisition of language *skills* which currently make up 80% of summative marking criteria of the A-level qualification (see Ofqual's Assessment Objectives 1–3). Increased metalinguistic awareness, coupled with exposure to language variation, is, we contend, likely to produce concomitant improvements in terms of students' sociocultural, pragmatic and discourse competence (Littlewood 503), leaving students better equipped to cope with authentic data and real-life interactions with language users whose language practices will differ markedly from textbook norms. While we may question the epistemological validity and utility of the notion of "authenticity" in relation to linguistic variation and language practices, it nonetheless continues to hold considerable currency (e.g. Müller-Hartmann and Schocker von Ditfurth 84; Nunan 49–54) within the communicative language framework that presently dominates teaching and learning practices.

Not least, exposure to and analytical study of linguistic variation—to include non-standard(ised), stigmatised and racialised as well as normative practices—in the target language presents students with a prime opportunity to acquire "knowledge and understanding" of, and "respond critically and analytically to", the complexity of language and its relation to "the culture and society of countries/communities where the language is spoken", per Ofqual's Assessment Objective 4 ("GCSE, AS and A level Assessment Objectives") for the current MFL A-level. That languages and language practices are interwoven—and inextricably so—with the social, political and cultural dimensions of human experience is not disputed in the field of linguistics. The inclusion of linguistics thus provides a new perspective from which to inform and augment critical and analytical discussion and evaluation of "social issues and trends" as well as "political and/or intellectual and/or artistic culture" ("Modern Foreign Languages" 3–4) from which linguistics is currently arbitrarily excluded. In other words, the inclusion of linguistics in MFL can be undertaken entirely within the existing parameters for A-level study at the level of the government's own reforms and regulation (the latter through Ofqual).

<sup>19</sup> Insofar as students were able to discuss concepts in linguistics accurately, irrespective of their deployment of discipline-specific terminology, this suggests that they also developed *implicit* metalinguistic awareness through the study's classroom intervention.



In fact, preliminary results from our current collaborative research with A-level teachers (Kasstan et al. *fc.*) clearly demonstrate that the inclusion of linguistics in MFL can be undertaken *within the current specifications* (viz. the 2016 MFL specifications drawn up by AQA and EdExcel)—as laid out by the examination boards themselves. To cite just two examples from the French AQA specification, the study of linguistic ideologies and linguistic justice fits directly into the subtopics “life for the marginalised” and “diversity, tolerance and respect” (within 3.1 *Social Issues and Trends*); contact-induced language change corresponds directly to the subtopic of “politics and immigration” (3.2 *Political and Artistic Culture*). In this sense, existing A-level frameworks present no formal obstacles to examination boards regarding the integration of linguistics into the study of languages at KS5 and the A-level qualifications through which most students of languages in England are assessed.

Another objection we seek to refute here is the fallacy that the study of languages at A-level has no space for further content. Incorporating the study of linguistics does not mandate that students cover it (unlike the current stipulation that students *must* study key texts and/or films), nor does it detract from the study of other valuable components of the A-level. Rather, objections based on the overcrowded curriculum fallacy (Clyne; Ndhlovu) serve only to circumscribe what languages and language study can be (e.g. Macedo; Makoni and Pennycook), and speak to how we conceptualise their place in the world (typically, within a hegemonic norm). Indeed, the inclusion of linguistics does not necessitate that *all* students need enjoy it, much like we do not (expect to) find that all students embrace all literary and cultural study with equal enthusiasm. The presence of linguistics at A-level would, instead, expand the choices for students and teachers, and would make for a pluralistic qualification that broadens the horizons of what it means to study and teach languages. This, in itself, has the potential to recruit different kinds of students to the study of languages. Relatedly, the inclusion of linguistics without mandating its study circumvents the potential obstacle of teacher training, given that many schoolteachers lack a background in linguistics (Corr and Pineda; Dean; Sweetland)—an issue that nonetheless can be remedied through informal interventions (e.g. self-study of any of the many introductory linguistics for teachers books) or, more formally, as part of a teacher’s continuing professional development (e.g. in-service training days; language learning associations; or specialised training) and ideally—and as happens in a number of other educational systems internationally (e.g. Eiesland and Fløgstad)—initial teacher training.

### 5.3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has provided conceptual and empirical support for our hypothesis that the integration of linguistics into languages study offers novel ways of thinking about language(s), and a fresh means of tackling the UK’s languages crisis. However, the ultimate aim of the reported research is not only to increase recruitment to MFL in England and the UK’s devolved nations, but to call for a more radical rethink of how students experience languages in the classroom setting in the UK and beyond. In particular, we emphasise the following recommendations:

- To achieve the DfE’s “Modern Foreign Languages” goal that A-level MFL should be “an integrated study with a focus on language and culture and society” (4), language teaching should seek to close the arbitrary divide between languages skills (“language as instrument”) and content (“language as discipline”) which pervades MFL study in UK schools.
- Integrating linguistics topics into the MFL A Level can bridge this divide, since linguistics takes as its *object of inquiry* the target language itself, offering new perspectives that inform and augment understanding of both the target language and its sociocultural dimensions.
- Since the inclusion of linguistics in MFL can be undertaken entirely within the existing parameters for A-level study (as formalised by DfE, Ofqual and the AQA and EdExcel examination boards), linguistics topics should be included in MFL study at A-level as a matter of priority.
- Teachers should be supported through continuing professional development, while initial teacher training should also include a basic introduction to linguistics.
- Educating students about the harm and (unconscious) biases and prejudices implicit in prescriptive attitudes should also be a matter of priority, and could be achieved through more extensive exposure to linguistics in the languages classroom and beyond.

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