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Language policy, evidence-informed practice, the role of regulatory bodies and teacher agency

This is a very unusual special issue. The articles we bring together present an expert response to recent UK government policy documents on the teaching and assessment of modern foreign languages in schools in England. Our focus, in particular, is on the Curriculum Research Review for Languages from Ofsted, the UK's school inspection service (Ofsted 2021b: henceforth, OCRR) and the related revised GCSE Subject Content for French, German and Spanish (DfE 2022) from the Department for Education (DfE).

The stated aim of the OCRR is to '... explore the literature relating to the field of foreign languages education' and 'identify factors that contribute to high-quality school languages curriculums, assessment, pedagogy and system', subsequently using 'this understanding of subject quality to examine how languages are taught in England's schools' (OCRR: 1). The GCSE Subject Content specifies the 'learning outcomes and content coverage' required for the GCSE examination at age 16 in order to provide a framework for the independent examination bodies who are responsible for producing detailed specifications, writing exam papers and administering the examinations. The 2022 GCSE Subject Content reflects the view of languages education presented in the OCRR; indeed, the DfE consultation document states that the 'ambition' behind the revision was 'to ensure the subject content reflects research in language curriculum and teaching' (DfE 2021: 4).

In line with Ofsted's own assertion that 'educational research is contestable and contested' (Ofsted 2021a), this special issue problematises the Ofsted research review initiative which claims to review 'currently available research evidence' in order to draw conclusions about 'what the evidence tells us about a high-quality education in each subject', and raises questions about the legitimacy of a regulatory body to conduct these reviews. The contributions collected here examine in some depth the interpretations of the research literature offered by the OCRR and consider the veracity of its conclusions; several contributors are authors of research cited by the OCRR in support of its conclusions. They also consider the implications that lead from the OCRR to the latest specification for the GCSE examination at age 16 (DfE 2022).

To provide some context for the discussion, we consider briefly the rationale and status of Ofsted's research reports. In a framing document (Ofsted 2021a), Ofsted asserts the primacy of the curriculum as the very core of education, driving the quality of education. It explains that it considers its research reviews to be a key evidence source informing its conception of 'high-quality education' in order to ensure the reliability and validity of inspections. Through these reviews, Ofsted seeks to be a 'force for improvement' as well as to provide guidance to schools about 'what content to prioritise, what to limit and what to omit' (op.cit.).

In the framing document, Ofsted also explains what lenses its authors use to interrogate the available research but does nothing to problematise them in any way, despite its acknowledgement cited above that 'educational research is contestable'. For example, it states that it has been guided by an understanding of a 'quality curriculum' as conceptualised by the Education Inspection Framework, without, however, questioning underlying assumptions – for example, around progress defined as

'knowing more and remembering more' – or explaining the explicit emphasis on 'cognitive sciences' promoting a view of learning as an 'in-the-head phenomenon' without due regard for the social dimension of learning (for discussion, see e.g. BERA Blog 2019).

In this way, consideration of the OCRR falls squarely within the field of language politics. This can be seen as comprising both language planning and language policy. At its core, language politics is about the way in which linguistic diversity is marshalled politically through valorisation or, indeed, discrimination of individual languages in terms of their status and use for official purposes. It can be seen as tightly linked to notions of national identity and sociolinguistic context. Language planning is usually subdivided into three domains (see Cooper 1989): status, corpus and acquisition planning. Status planning not only manifests itself in decisions about inclusion in, or exclusion from, school curricula but also relates to the privileging of certain forms of language variety and dialect over others, often linked to factors such as social class, ethnicity or geography. Corpus planning finds expression in distinctions between standard versus vernacular varieties, in decisions about precedence of certain types of orthography and script over others and in changes to the lexicon over time. Cooper (1989: 157) understands acquisition planning as 'organized efforts to promote the learning of language' while Siiner, Hult and Kupisch (2018: 1) view it as focusing on 'language users and how they acquire the communicative repertoires they need for access to opportunities in society'. Language policy and language planning have historically concerned themselves with privileging language choices and language problems in response to political and societal dynamics and have tended to be linked to powers of language regulation, i.e. expressions of normative claims about legitimate language forms and use and/or preferred language choices etc. (see e.g. Kaplan and Baldauf 1997; Lo Bianco 1990; McCarthy 2011).

The 2021 OCRR can be seen as following in the tradition of so-called 'evidence-based' policymaking. This approach was championed in the UK by the in-coming Labour government from the late 1990s. Based on the mantra of doing 'what works' (see e.g. Rycroft-Malone 2006), this emphasis persists in education policymaking today if we look, for example, at the political fervour with which organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation are being used by government to influence policy and practice in education generally, as well as teacher education and professional development in the context of the ITT Core Content Framework and the Early Careers Framework.

However rational it may seem to base policy on 'evidence', it is, of course, important to recognise, as Marceta (2021) does, that 'evidence-based' policy takes neither politics nor ideology out of the policy process, however hard government might try at times to pretend otherwise. Inherent in the process of amassing and evaluating 'evidence' are such thorny issues as what counts as the 'powerful' knowledge to be considered and what hierarchy of research methods is favoured. Typically, large-scale randomised control trials (RCTs), systematic reviews and meta-analyses are preferred, which leads to the question of how much – or rather, how little – (tacit) practitioner knowledge and practitioner research are valued (see e.g. Cairney and Oliver 2017).

Indeed, this point is discussed in more detail in this issue by Robert Woore and his colleagues. They point to the risk of the OCRR:

feeding into what has been called an "executive technician" view of teaching (see Winch, Oancea and Orchard 2015), a top-down model whereby researchers generate findings, curriculum designers interpret these findings and teachers then apply the resulting protocols to their own classrooms.

In such a process, teachers' professional judgement is constrained, making them 'less able to respond effectively to their own particular contexts'.

Critiques of evidence-based policymaking (see e.g. Rycroft-Malone 2006) are quick to point to the genesis of the 'evidence-based' movement in the health sector, inter alia as a means for politicians to justify cost savings and to be part of a model of what Rycroft-Malone calls 'scientific-bureaucratic medicine' in which 'the idea that personal experience (however critically examined) is the primary source of valid knowledge is rejected' (Rycroft-Malone 2006: 97, with reference to Harrison 2002).

Rycroft-Malone continues: '... this model assumes that working clinicians are either too busy or not skilled enough to find and interpret this knowledge for themselves'.

In their discussion of evidence-based policymaking, Cairney and Oliver (2017) identify some important dilemmas for researchers seeking to influence policymaking through their research, such as the extent to which they may need to be prepared to resort to 'manipulative emotional appeal to influence the policy agenda', jettison important 'governance principles' such as 'co-production' with key stakeholders and service users, and be willing to engage in policymakers' tendency 'to base judgements on their beliefs, and shortcuts based on their emotions and familiarity with information' (Cairney and Oliver 2017: 1). The 'policy wars' over the use of 'synthetic phonics' to teach reading in English primary schools over the last decade or so offers a very pertinent example of this (see e.g. Wyse and Bradbury 2022; Gibb 2022). Other commentators, such as Colyer and Kamath (1999: 188) also note what they call the 'consonance with the aspirations of the dominant political culture' by which they refer, among other things, to the valorisation of certain types of evidence above the expertise of clinical practitioners. They also caricature the emphasis on 'external clinical evidence', which can be used for political expediency, derived from RCTs etc., observing that 'practice may become tyrannised by evidence that is inapplicable or inappropriate for an individual patient. Without best evidence, practice runs the risk of becoming ineffective and inefficient' (Colyer and Kamath 1999: 189). Several contributions to this issue emphasise the importance of individual teachers in the classroom being able to evaluate any 'advice' from research. As Woore (this issue) puts it: 'Research evidence of course provides a crucial source of evidence in teachers' decision-making, but it should complement, not override, other aspects of teachers' expertise'.

Liddicoat (2018), in similar vein, notes that in language planning, the focus has tended to be on the level of government activity rather than on the agency of local actors, in particular, language professionals, who are normally framed as policy recipients and implementors (see also Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2021). The OCRR seems to reflect this orientation: a report to Parliament by a non-ministerial department of the UK government, which offers a particular reading of empirical evidence and scholarship in the field of language education, constructing it into a partial narrative, peppered with a small number of recommendations as pedagogical 'calls to action' and prescriptions for pedagogical interventions. Liddicoat's research sensitises us to the inherent and multiple difficulties of micro-level policy and planning in schools and the 'ecology of forces' constraining language teachers' 'agentive possibilities' (Liddicoat 2018: 149). One wonders, therefore, what chance of success there might be for prescriptions based on a reading of *some* of the research evidence available, undertaken by a state-sanctioned body that is specifically charged with inspection of the operationalisation of these interpretations.

The papers included in this special issue demonstrate just how partial Ofsted's reading of the language teaching and learning research can be, and confirm that its interpretations are not always shared by the authors of the research themselves. More broadly, as pointed out by several contributors, the OCRR seems to lack understanding of important contextual factors such as local ideologies of education, structural and organisations features of provision and notions of professionalism subscribed to by language teachers in schools (see e.g. Pachler et al. 2008).

Cairney and Oliver (2017: 1) conclude from their analysis that 'engagement in "evidence-based policymaking" requires pragmatism, combining scientific evidence with governance principles, and persuasion to translate complex evidence into simple stories'. The OCRR may well meet the criterion of telling simple stories with its pithy mandates for practitioners. We deliberately use the term 'mandates' here, rather than 'recommendations', given that these are recommendations made by a national inspection body responsible for quality assurance. Ofsted appears to be acting here as both 'judge and jury'. The extent to which this may lead to tacit or intentional self-regulation on the part of practitioners in their choice of pedagogical approaches; and how, judging by some of the contributions in this special issue, they are starting to be reinforced through school inspections, affect pedagogical choices of teachers and potentially undermine teacher pedagogical agency.

Whilst the discussion of language policy and planning above recognises the desirability for, and to a certain extent the legitimacy of, government and its agencies to be active players in decisions about language status and choice, our reading of the contributions to this special issue raises serious questions concerning the legitimacy of a regulatory body trying to get involved in language acquisition planning in the way that the OCRR manifestly does.

Simon Coffey's piece, for instance, highlights how the OCRR is inherently 'ideological' in the way that the 'problem' or 'crisis' of languages in England is cast as residing in school structures, poor curriculum and poor teaching. In contrast, reports from expert bodies also recognise broader societal factors and the constraints imposed on teaching by 'top-down politico-ideological' decisions. Similar observations emerge in the articles by Alison Porter and colleagues, and by Ursula Lanvers and Suzanne Graham, while René Koglbauer, reflecting on implications for teacher development, points out how the OCRR seems to place responsibility for complex curriculum and assessment design almost uniquely on school languages departments, with only limited mention of the roles of other significant players, including policymakers. Coffey concludes by arguing the need for a *broader* curriculum focus in modern languages, not the narrower one implied in the OCRR and now specified in the latest GCSE Subject Content (DfE 2022). This becomes a leitmotif running through almost all the contributions to this special issue.

Robert Woore and his colleagues at the University of Oxford also reflect the 'political' dimension of a curriculum research review being conducted by the national schools inspectorate, in that 'any problematic elements ... will inevitably be amplified by the powerful status of the organisation whose name it bears'. While commending aspects of the OCRR, they highlight some of these 'problematic elements': a lack of focus on communicative interaction; little consideration of the affordances offered by digital technologies for 'genuine communicative interaction with other speakers of the target language'; the view that engagement with the target language culture should be delayed until after the 'building blocks of grammar, vocabulary and phonics' have been established; and the recommendation that challenging texts should not be used in case they 'demotivate' learners.

The OCRR configures 'high-quality' language education for English schools as focusing primarily on the 'building blocks of language', also represented as the 'three pillars' of phonics, vocabulary and grammar. This view is justified by reference to the concept of 'self-efficacy', interpreted as pupils needing to 'feel successful in their learning' and being 'clear about how to make progress' (OCR:5–6). Three longer papers by leading researchers examine in detail the OCRR's interpretations of research in three of these four key areas: Suzanne Graham on self-efficacy, Robert Woore on phonics and James Milton on vocabulary. (The paper by Woore et al. touches on the fourth key area of explicit grammar teaching).

Through careful consideration of primary sources (the works of Albert Bandura), Graham demonstrates how the Ofsted interpretation of self-efficacy is flawed: it is not enough for learners to feel 'confident' and in control of their learning; they also need to *value* that learning as it is used to achieve success in challenging tasks. How we help learners value their language learning through meaningful challenges is a key element missing from the OCRR, and, as Graham points out, the research cited by the OCRR does not support its conceptualisation of 'high-quality' languages education.

Robert Woore commends the OCRR for foregrounding the teaching of phonics in the foreign language classroom in order to improve pupils' decoding skills, and confirms that this is largely supported by what research has been conducted in such settings. He cautions, however, that the research evidence is limited and it is still unclear how phonics should be best taught.

Milton meanwhile demonstrates how the OCRR interpretation of research on vocabulary learning wrongly leads to a recommendation to prioritise vocabulary breadth (focusing learning on a limited number of high-frequency words) while ignoring the related, if not more important, issue of vocabulary size. Milton points out that to achieve CEFR A2 level, which GCSE (higher level) is assumed to aim at, a vocabulary of at least 3000 words will need to be taught, in stark contrast to the

specification in the DfE Subject Content (DfE 2022) of 1700 words. The OCRR approach to vocabulary, Milton argues, will lead to very limited outcomes at GCSE.

Several contributors reiterate Milton's argument, that it is hard to imagine how texts based only on the 1200 or 1700 most frequent words of a language, as specified in DfE (2022), can possibly enable meaningful – and motivating – engagement with authentic target language text. The three papers by Alison Porter and colleagues, Michael Evans and Linda Fisher, and Ursula Lanvers and Suzanne Graham all raise concerns about the narrower curriculum focus on linguistic 'building blocks first'. This, they argue, is not supported by wider research on language teaching and learning.

Again, the political dimension is inevitably present. Porter et al. point out how the OCRR seems, in its preamble, to prioritise the need to improve the government's school performance measure, the English Baccalaureate. The authors emphasise, in contrast, how important it is to find a curriculum rationale for language learning in England that is 'meaningful to both learners and teachers'. They cite research evidence that both teachers and learners valued communication skills and cultural and creative activities, and contend – in similar vein to Woore et al. – that reflection of this 'bigger picture' is missing from the OCRR. They argue that creativity, challenge and culture are essential elements in the modern languages classroom, a view echoed by Cazzoli in the context of modern languages in higher education, particularly in relation to the central importance of culture(s).

Michael Evans and Linda Fisher add a further, related dimension to the 'bigger picture', highlighting the importance of the learner's sense of identity in language learning; school students need to have opportunities to explore how language(s) is/are relevant to them. They review pedagogic interventions which focus on multilingual identity themes and find that these can have significant impact on MFL pupils' enjoyment and pride in language learning (among other things), suggesting that helping learners see themselves as future multilingual speakers may provide an important basis for language learning motivation, particularly in English schools.

Discussion on motivation is further taken forward by Ursula Lanvers and Suzanne Graham, who conclude that the OCRR tends to either ignore or misinterpret motivational theory. In this paper, Lanvers and Graham introduce the concepts of competence, autonomy and relatedness that comprise Self-Determination Theory to assess initiatives and approaches that could contribute to the 'bigger picture' of 'high-quality languages education'. Few of the studies they review have been considered in the OCRR, and yet here are projects that, research suggests, may well 'work' to promote motivation.

The following two papers, by David Blow and Helen Myers, and by Alice Gruber and Oliver Hopwood, both focus in on the detail of curriculum specifications for languages at secondary level. Blow and Myers, experienced teachers and curriculum leaders, highlight the significant shift in focus onto 'language knowledge' in the revised 2022 GCSE Subject Content and away from 'language skills' and 'strategies', which were given some emphasis in the 2015 version. Gruber and Hopwood widen the perspective and compare the UK 14–16 MFL curriculum, as represented in the 2015 GCSE Subject Content (DfE 2015), and the curriculum specification for secondary French in the German region of Rhineland-Westphalia. While there are similarities, the big contrast that emerges is between the focus on 'outcomes' in the German curriculum versus 'inputs' in the English one. The German curriculum specification sets up the rationale for learning French based on the notion of personal development (*Bildung*) and the competence of 'mediation', in other words, being able to use the target language to function in social interaction. This looks at what learners can 'achieve', even with limited proficiency in the target language, in a socially meaningful setting. Thus, language learning is about developing social skills for a multilingual world. That rationale is entirely absent from the English documents.

Our final two papers look at implications of the OCRR and the related GCSE reforms for different sectors. René Koglbauer sees challenges for teacher education, particularly in the complex area of curriculum design and 'balanced' assessment, while Marcela Cazzoli highlights the dissonance between the narrow focus on language knowledge in the revised GCSE Subject Content, and the renewal of the modern languages curriculum at university, based on the integration of language

study within a critical cultural context and the use of language(s) to deepen study in other disciplines.


This special issue brings together contributions from a wide range of eminently qualified researchers, teacher educators and teachers. Almost all have experience of the classroom realities of teaching languages in the UK as well as a detailed understanding of the research in their area. Most have extensive experience of interpreting that research with teachers and other practitioners. All, furthermore, recognise the need for MFL curriculum renewal in England, commend careful attention to research evidence and acknowledge that, for example, some focus on ‘the building blocks of language’ may be valuable in the ‘input-poor’ language learning environment of the UK. But the ‘building blocks’ should not be the *sole* – or perhaps even the *major* – focus of a ‘high-quality languages education’: that is *not* what languages are about.


The OCRR highlights the dilemma, alluded to at the start of our editorial, of a research review undertaken by a government schools inspectorate in order, ostensibly, to establish a ‘shared’ vision of ‘high-quality’ education as a basis for school evaluation. The contributions to this special issue demonstrate that this research review is inevitably partial, and therefore ‘political’, and thus cannot realistically claim the apparent objectivity of being ‘evidence-based’ or the democratic value of being ‘shared’. The OCRR and the associated 2022 GCSE Subject Content represent a narrowly focused prescription for a very limited approach to languages education in England.

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