

## CAR and the new dialogues about language education

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## CAR and the new dialogues about language education

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a collaborative synthesis of 19 submissions from professional bodies responding to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR). Coordinated by the Coalition for Language Education (CLE) and the Committee for Linguistics in Education (CLiE), the synthesis highlights broad consensus across the language education sector. Respondents collectively call for curriculum reform that supports multilingualism, promotes language awareness, and embeds inclusion as a guiding principle. The findings also stress the need for assessment reform, more flexible post-16 pathways, and greater recognition of oracy and digital literacies. Taken together, the submissions reveal a strong, unified voice for systemic change in language education, urging policymakers to address gaps identified in the CAR Interim Report and to create a curriculum that reflects the linguistic diversity of contemporary England.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Language education policy;  
curriculum reform;  
assessment reform;  
multilingualism; inclusion

## Policy backdrop

The Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) was set up in 2024 to review England's existing national curriculum and statutory assessment system. The CAR specifically aimed to strengthen the current curriculum by updating its foundations in the core elements of reading, writing and Maths. The CAR also aimed to deliver a structure that embeds digital, oracy and life skills, as well as reflecting the issues and diversities of our society (DfE 2024).

The CAR panel issued a detailed 54-question Call for evidence (DfE 2024). These questions indicated that the review panel not only had a strong sense 'that there are parts of the system that require improvement' (DfE 2024, 7), but also which parts of the education system require improvement. The CAR panel determined its scope (laid out in the Terms of Reference, published simultaneously with the Call for evidence, and their conceptual position and working principles, published simultaneously with the Interim Report in the Conceptual Position Paper (DfE 2025)). The Call for evidence closed on 22 November 2024, and it reported on 18 March 2025 the interim findings and key areas for further work. In the Interim Report (DfE 2025), 'languages' was classified as requiring category 1 intervention, i.e. a subject currently deemed to be furthest away from the curriculum principles and for which the problem diagnosis is still unclear.

Following the initial call for evidence deadline, the newly formed Coalition for Language Education (CLE) reached out to colleagues and related stakeholder organisations inviting them to

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share their submissions. The Committee for Linguistics in Education (CLiE) offered to approach its 21 membership organisations for their submissions, host them on the CLiE web-page, and collaborate on a summary document or a digest which highlights the commonalities and divergencies across the sector's responses. This led to the formation of a working group consisting of members of CLE, CLiE and the British Academy (BA). The group collated 19 responses from bodies with expertise in the area of language in order to collate the information and perspectives that they represented. It has to be mentioned that several associations decided to go beyond the scope of the CAR, as outlined in the documents listed and discussed above. This was done in order to raise issues explicitly excluded from the CAR, such as funding and teacher training, both in their responses to the call for evidence, as well as in their responses to the Interim Report. Others did not. This paper briefly introduces CLiE and CLE, along with a selection of past initiatives on curriculum and assessment. It then outlines the collaborative response coordinated by these two groups on behalf of 19 organisations (see Rampton et al., this issue) and discusses how this response relates to the Interim Report (DfE 2025).

## About CLiE

The Committee for Linguistics in Education (CLiE) was founded in 1980 as a joint subcommittee of both the Linguistics Association of Great Britain (LAGB) and the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL). Since then, it has continued to grow in both its membership representations, as well as its knowledge exchange and outreach work across all levels of education. Central to the CLiE values are activities and research which help support and build relationships between researchers and practitioners in the teaching and development of linguistics and languages (English, Modern Foreign Languages, and Home, Heritage and Community Languages). To this effect, CLiE has also been strongly committed to and involved in shaping the National Curriculum (NC). Other curriculum and assessment related initiatives by CLiE can be found on the CLiE website under Responses, Reports and Projects.

In September 2023, CLiE formed two working groups concerned particularly with investigating reforms of GCSE Modern Foreign Language and GCSE English Language provisions. The GCSE English group constructed a paper for presentation at the English Association's Summit on the reform of GCSE English in September 2024 (Amos et al. 2024). This summit took place on the 25th September 2024, the same day the Department for Education issued their call for evidence for the CAR. The call provided motivation for CLiE's own response, and a blueprint for the later collaborative work regarding the amalgamation of submissions.

## About CLE

The Coalition for Language Education was launched in 2023, bringing together associations, organisations, and individuals working across a wide range of language fields and sectors. It is founded on the shared belief that language education in the UK is too narrow, and that more should be done to recognise and develop the full linguistic potential of individuals and communities across the UK. The Coalition is committed to expanding the linguistic repertoires and promoting language diversity as a strength. Its Founding Statement sets out a set of shared principles that highlight the role of language education in fostering inclusion, wellbeing and democratic participation (see Rampton et al., this issue). Through collaboration and collective action, the Coalition aims to support innovation, amplify impact and contribute to a more inclusive and forward-looking language education landscape.

This context sets the stage for the collaborative synthesis of the 19 submissions shared with CLE and CLiE.

## Collaborative synthesis

The 19 organisations<sup>1</sup> who shared their submissions are made up of subject associations covering English (NATE, EA), literacy (UKLA), EAL (English as an additional language at school: NALDIC),

ESOL (English for adult speakers of other languages: NATECLA), Home, Heritage & Community languages (HHCLs; ALL, NATECLA), Modern Languages (ALL, BGA, LMFL, UCFL), Classics (TCA), and bodies with a wide cross-curricular brief for languages (AQA, BC, BA, CIOL, CLE, CLiE, NALA, TBF, WoLLoW). Although there are significant stakeholder organisations that are not included in this summary, these 19 submissions combine to provide a uniquely comprehensive view of what professional specialists in different areas of language education think of the current provision for 5–19 year olds in England, along with examples of good practice and many of their ideas for improvement. This synthesis explores areas of commonality and divergence across the 19 submissions, which collectively represent key perspectives from within the UK language education sector.

The synthesis was completed by a working group led by Dr Eva Eppler (University of Roehampton, Chair of the Committee for Linguistics in Education), and consisted of Dr Jenny Amos (University of Suffolk), Prof Charles Forsdick (University of Cambridge), Prof Dick Hudson (UCL), Dr Petros Karatsareas (University of Westminster), Dr Viktoria Magne (University of West London), Prof Ros Mitchell (Southampton University), Prof Ben Rampton (King's College London), Camilla Smith (UCL) and Prof Zhu Hua (UCL). Each member of the working group was assigned a specific section of the Digest, which corresponded to the DfE CAR response. Each member took ownership of the section assigned to them, with some members working together to share the load, but to also provide an additional layer of accountability and consistency. Upon completion of the draft, all working group members were given the opportunity to read and comment on the full document within a specific timeframe. Each change or comment was then discussed and agreed on during weekly meetings of the working group. A further layer of accuracy was obtained, before general dissemination, by sharing the summarised document with contributing organisations to check for accurate representation.

## Shared findings/areas of consensus

The findings are presented thematically to reflect the structure of the original Digest, which itself followed the format of the DfE's call for evidence. However, it should be noted that, while the summary did not have a dedicated section for Inclusion, we felt it was important to draw certain themes and threads together and, as such, Social Justice and Inclusion are framed as overarching principles. Taken together, the 19 submissions summarised in the Digest convey a broad consensus that significant reform is needed to create a system that better reflects the linguistic realities of learners and supports inclusive, flexible, and forward-looking language education in the contemporary world.

## Curriculum reform

The submissions consistently call for a more expansive and inclusive approach to curriculum design in language education. There is widespread support for a curriculum that builds learners' communicative repertoires, fosters language awareness, and actively supports multilingualism. Submissions consistently argue that all children should have the opportunity not only to develop competence in English, but also to learn and maintain languages other than English, including HHCLs. A more flexible curriculum is seen as essential, particularly to accommodate the needs of EAL learners and students from linguistically diverse backgrounds. However, as noted by Cunningham and Little (2023), teachers feel unsure about teaching language awareness, and facilitating multilingualism and multiliteracy. That being the case, a curriculum review which actively responds to the country's growing multilingual population in a positive way is necessary to avoid a 'hierarchy of languages' that may cause further disadvantages to those already marginalised.

Responding organisations also highlight the need for increased attention to oracy, digital literacy, and the use of diverse, multimodal texts. The promotion of a more joined up approach (see Tolentino and Lawson 2015 and Theodotou 2017, for example) would enable students to better see the connections between the technical aspects of language and their practical application, as well as how to

design language for different audiences/purposes, and how to engage readers and listeners in different ways. Several organisations also call for stronger cross-curricular integration of language (see Sheehan et al. (2024) for evidence of how the integration of linguistics at MFL A Levels improves learner motivation and outcomes), and they advocate for language learning and awareness to be embedded throughout the broader curriculum, not limited to English and MFL. Many of the submissions themselves draw on a substantial body of research to support these points, reinforcing the case for a more integrated and inclusive approach to language education.

## Assessment reform

There is strong and consistent concern across the submissions about the current assessment landscape, particularly the dominance of high-stakes national tests and end-of-course exams. These were widely viewed as placing excessive pressure on learners, narrowing curriculum focus, and promoting a culture of teaching to the test across primary and secondary provisions (see Ofsted 2018 and Sellgren 2018, for example). Many contributors called for modernisation of the assessment frameworks in order to respond to diverse learners' needs. In this context, the potential of digital and online assessment methods should be explored, to promote individualisation and assessment for learning, as well as greater flexibility in summative assessment. These changes would enhance diversity across assessment methods, creating stronger cohesion across a broader curriculum in language(s), and supporting inclusivity. Moreover, questions were raised about the effectiveness of the Phonics Screening Check and the Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling tests at primary level and the severity of grading of MFL assessment. A number of organisations have highlighted the narrowness of the available qualifications calling for alternative skills-based assessments outside the traditional exam system, both in English and in languages other than English.

## Qualification and pathways (16-19)

It was noted that, while the curriculum for A-level English Language systematically teaches language analysis (the only qualification in English to do so, see Hudson 2010 and Hudson et al. 2021), the participating organisations agreed that the structure of the current GCSE English Language is presently not fit for purpose, and, thus, provides a poor foundation to English Language and Linguistics study at Key Stage 5. This has been judged as a contributing factor to lower levels of uptake at A Level. Many organisations advocated for the inclusion of a more diverse and engaging curriculum that includes contemporary texts, spoken language assessment, creative writing and digital communication in order to create a more varied experience for students and promote the transition to further study. In addition, it was highlighted that qualifications should be provided in a wider range of HHCLs as the current provision does not integrate the sociolinguistic reality of language use in many parts of England. To support this, organisations called for the development of an alternative criterion-referenced qualification, both pre- and post-16, for both HHCLs and modern languages for non-specialists. An additional recommendation was to reconsider the current 'resit' requirement for GCSE English (and Maths) in favour of alternative vocationally oriented qualifications to recognise diverse forms of knowledge expression.

## Equality and inclusion

Submissions consistently emphasise that social justice and inclusion must be addressed through an intersectional lens, recognising the overlapping effects of socio-economic status, race, gender, religion, disability, and language background. Many organisations stress that current education policies and practices disproportionately disadvantage learners with individual or intersecting characteristics (socioeconomic, gender, ethnicity, religion, SEND, ESOL/EAL). There is strong agreement that the curriculum and teaching materials do not adequately reflect the diversity of contemporary British

society. Organisations highlight the lack of culturally relevant and linguistically inclusive content, the underrepresentation of diverse identities, and the failure to support multilingualism as an educational asset. Indeed, a call for more recognition of (inter)cultural learning and practice of skills associated with (inter)cultural competence (see Byram 2021) was made as a means of promoting and enhancing community cohesion and inclusion for students of all linguistic backgrounds (Marshall 2024).

Regional inequalities, funding disparities, and a persistent two-tier system between state and private schools were also flagged, contributing to unequal access to high-quality language learning, especially post-16. Particular concern was expressed about regions where access to language learning is limited or in decline, often due to funding constraints and structural inequalities. Submissions also highlighted the challenges faced by SEND learners, who encounter multiple systemic barriers, including a lack of tailored support and exclusion from language learning opportunities (Fahim 2023). Additionally, respondents noted that language difficulties are too often confused with literacy or behavioural issues, especially in multilingual learners. These patterns are echoed in the Interim Report (DfE 2025), which acknowledges the complexity of the issues raised and the diversity of perspectives represented.

### **Areas needing further discussion and the Interim Report**

The Digest reveals substantial common ground though a number of areas emerged that require further discussion. While the Interim Report notes that 'a balanced and cautious approach is necessary given the diverse, and often conflicting, views expressed by stakeholders' (DfE 2025, 43), the field of languages stands out since 19 expert bodies had already identified points of divergence and areas that needed more evidence and deeper exploration. These were largely the same as outlined in the Interim Report (the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), specific aspects of assessment and digital skills/technology) and will be discussed in this section. The Interim Report, however, does not address areas of language education that are widely regarded as in crucial need of reform to achieve the CAR's aims by the 19 stakeholder organisations whose views are summarised in the digest. These will be discussed in the next section.

Across the 19 expert organisations there is clear consensus that language learning at Key Stage 4 needs to be improved, but some associations call for the replacement of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) with alternatives (see Lanvers this issue), while others acknowledge its role in stabilising the decline in languages and recommend its restructuring. The Interim Report also notes that the EBacc may unnecessarily constrain the choice of students, impacting their engagement and achievement, and limiting their access to, and the time available for, other subjects. The Interim Report commits the Review Panel to conduct further analysis of the evidence and assess the place of the EBacc performance measures within the wider accountability framework, paying close attention to evidence of the impact of all performance measures on young people's choices and outcomes, and their impact on institutional behaviours.

More generally within assessment, the Digest reveals that there needs to be more discussion of the relative merits of summative approaches and coursework, the increased involvement of teachers in assessment, and the adoption of a broader range of alternative modes of assessment. The Interim Report also sees the end of Key Stage 2 statutory assessments (in reading, writing, grammar, punctuation and spelling), the failure rate in GCSE English (and Maths) and the resit policy for GCSE English as problematic. There is less agreement between the Digest and the Interim Report on the Phonics Screening Check. The language-related stakeholders criticise the Phonics Screening Check for only measuring one among a wide variety of reading strategies, which is not necessarily more effective than alternative methods of reading instruction (see Brooks 2023 vs. Bowers 2023 and Wyse and Bradbury 2022), and encourages teaching to the test (and, thus, one reading strategy). The Interim Report takes the high pass rate of pupils in the phonics screening check as evidence for it 'broadly working well'. The Interim Report counters the digest's appeal for increased involvement

of teachers in the assessment process with the impact this would have on the workload of education staff.

With regard to the language-related stakeholder organisations' call for the adoption of a broader range of alternative assessment modes, the Interim Report stresses the role of summative assessments as fair measures of the extent to which pupils have mastered the knowledge and skills prescribed in the NC, and as accountability measures.

Nuanced differences also emerge in what the 19 bodies with expertise in the area of language say about particular developments, such as digital technologies and Knowledge about Language. Digital technologies are seen as offering substantial opportunities, such as providing personalised progression routes, as well as the risk of inequalities in digital access. According to the CAR polling, digital skills rank second in what learners and their parents would like to spend more time on during primary education, but both the Digest and the Interim Report agree that the potential of digital technologies needs further exploration.

Knowledge about Language, as currently embedded into teaching, is regarded by some language-related stakeholder organisations as technicist/mechanistic (to the detriment of understanding) and encouraging teaching to tests. Therefore, it is in need of reform (more focus on understanding language structure to be able to apply it across languages), broadening in scope to include language variation, sociolinguistics and language awareness across languages, i.e. multilingualism, by others. The Interim report contains little subject specific material and Knowledge about Language is not mentioned. This leads us onto the next section where we will return to Knowledge about Language and Language Awareness.

## Gaps in the Interim Report

While points of divergence and areas calling for further evidence and/or discussion identified in the Digest largely overlap with those identified in the Interim Report, several areas that hold a prominent position in the Digest are notably left unmentioned in the Interim Report. These are multilingualism in its various forms (English as an additional or second language; HHCLs), Language Across the Curriculum (English, MFL including HHCLs and all school subjects), spoken language, Knowledge about Language and Language Awareness. These gaps are particularly noticeable as, according to the Call for Evidence (DfE 2024), the 'curriculum and assessment system must ensure that young people leave education prepared for life and work, equipped with the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to thrive and become well-rounded citizens, who appreciate the diversity and pluralism of our society' (p. 7).

One of these gaps has already been mentioned – Knowledge about Language (KAL). The language-related stakeholder organisations agree that a reflective awareness of language structures at sound, word, sentence, discourse and societal level deserve more support in terms of curriculum time and teacher training in linguistics to facilitate understanding of structures across languages and the multilingual world in which we live. There is general agreement among the 19 submissions included in the Digest that primary languages should include a strong language awareness component, understood as representing metalinguistic and intercultural knowledge especially across the MFL submissions. This language awareness activity should take account of the child's first language(s), including languages other than English, and deepen their understanding by bringing in other repertoires and styles.

Furthermore, the Digest strongly argues for increased cross-curricular links between languages and other subjects, i.e. language across the curriculum: The curriculum needs to address language development and language awareness in all subject areas, both academic and vocational, and language needs to be reconceptualised, not just as a subject but as an integral part of the school's ethos and culture (see, for example, *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL), Coyle et al. 2010; Cenoz et al. 2014). This includes suggestions, for the longer term, to integrate study of an existing or new language (MFL) with other subjects, and that every teacher should be

a language teacher, embedding literacy and oracy development in all subjects and alternative skills-based language(s) qualifications. Some of the benefits of such a cross-curricular approach to language(s) are oracy and literacy in one language supporting the same skills in others (Harvey 2025), enhanced cognitive and metalinguistic skills (Marian and Shook 2012), as well as inclusive curricula which convey the value of languages not only in economic terms, but in relation to cultural awareness, community cohesion, mutual understanding, a sense of identity and a sense of belonging (see e.g. WoLLoW).

Spoken language and oracy only feature in the Interim Report under interview skills and Communication (debating and public speaking), but were raised by 32% of learners (N=2,000) and 36% of their parents (N=5,000) as something they would have liked (their child) to spend more time on between years 7 and 11 (DfE 2025, 26). Given this rather narrow view of speaking / oracy, this is an area where the CAR would do well to heed the 19 stakeholder organisations' calls for higher priority of and systematic attention to oracy. They argue that the teaching of oral language should be broadly based and should not focus narrowly on formal presentations or on features of Standard English (Hudson and Trousdale 2019). It should furthermore include explicit study of oral language (Language Awareness & Knowledge about Language), extended to those with speech disabilities (BA), and oral language should be reintroduced to GCSE English Language as an integral element.

The last big language gap in the Interim Report is multilingualism in its various forms (English as an additional or second language; HHCLs). According to Department for Education statistics, '21.4% of pupils were recorded as having a first language known or believed to be other than English. This is an increase of 0.6% from 2023/24 and continuing a recent trend of increase' (DfE, Schools, pupils and their characteristics, academic year 2024/25, published 5 June 2025). The social justice and inclusion sections of many language-related stakeholder organisations – and thus the Digest – abound with the disadvantages EAL/ESOL learners face in the current education system (Eppler et al. 2024) as well as good practice examples and innovative solutions of how to address them. Yet the Interim Report focuses solely on socioeconomically disadvantaged learners and learners with SEND to the exclusion of new arrivals in the UK and/or learners who use a language other than English in the home and community. There is general agreement among the 19 organisations that education fails to reflect the diversity of contemporary society, that there is insufficient provision for HHCLs, as well as insufficient support for students who are not yet proficient in English.

The Digest concludes that, more generally in language education (as in other areas), the design and delivery of curriculum and assessment raise complicated issues that call for extensive stakeholder discussion, drawing on a broad range of evidence, and there are also significant implications for funding and teacher training (two issues which did not feature in the CAR's questions).

As noted in the introduction, the subject 'languages' was classified as requiring Category 1 intervention in the Interim Report (DfE 2025), i.e. a subject currently deemed to be furthest away from the curriculum principles and for which the problem diagnosis is still unclear. We, therefore, call on the task and finish group, consisting of an undisclosed collective of key stakeholders of the language community, to address these language gaps in the Interim Report.

## Conclusion

The collaboration and knowledge exchange between 19 bodies with expertise in language (education) is a significant marker in the effort to get our voices heard within the ongoing debates of curriculum and assessment review. The agreement of the 19 stakeholders for their responses to be centrally stored on the CLiE webpage, and then the initiative of a group of representatives of some of them (BA, CFE, CLiE, LAGB) to systematically compare the 19 submissions, point to a strong spirit of collaboration between stakeholder organisations, and the outcome of this – the Digest – reveals a very high level of substantive consensus on the priorities and values for language education.

While 'subject' languages are not explicitly defined, they were deemed to be furthest away from the curriculum principles. With the problem diagnosis is still unclear, languages need a strong and unified voice. We hope that the combined voice of 19 prominent language-related stakeholder organisations is loud enough for the CAR to hear us, particularly as it is the commonalities which dominate when the responses are considered as a whole, and considered alongside the interim report. Indeed, we can also suggest that even the areas of divergence provide opportunities to strengthen the lines of communication between researchers and practitioners (a value which is at the very core of CLiE's foundations). For, if the identified language gaps in the interim report (multilingualism including EAL, ESOL and HHCLs; language across the curriculum, Knowledge about Language and Language Awareness and oracy) are addressed in the next phase of the review, or in any follow-up exercises, the Department for Education should be in a strong position 'to refresh the curriculum to ensure it is cutting edge, fit for purpose and meeting the needs of children and young people to support their future life and work' (DfE 2024).

## Note

1. For acronyms and URLs, please refer to Appendix.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix. The 19 submissions

- CLiE (Committee for Linguistics in Education)
- ALL (Association for Language Learning)
- AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)
- BC (British Council)
- Bell (Bell Foundation)
- BA (British Academy)
  - BA1 (General)
  - BA2 (Language specific)
- BGA (British-German Association)
- CIOL (Chartered Institute of Linguists)
- CLE (Coalition for Language Education)
- EA (English Association) [summary only]
- LMFL (LinguisticsMFL)
- NALA (National Association of Language Advisors)
- NALDIC (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum)
- NATE (National Association for the Teaching of English)
- NATECLA (The National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults)
- TCA (The Classical Association) [summary only]
- UCFL (University Council For Languages)
- UKLA (UK Literacy Association)
- WoLLoW (World of Language, Languages of the World)