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Around and beyond the DfE's curriculum & assessment review: working across sectors for the future of language education

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ABSTRACT

Animated by general agreement that language education in England is too narrow, this article introduces a multi-layered approach to policy development, and outlines six tenets guiding the recently formed Coalition for Language Education: 'Recognise the richness of language in our lives', 'Accept linguistic diversity'; 'Engage with social and cultural change', 'Respect the complexity of classrooms', 'Build partnerships', and 'Draw on universities'. These precepts are backed by a great deal of research and practical experience, and they feed into at least three pressing tasks for our Coalition: specifying collective problems (see our joint CLIE & CLE digest of submissions to the DfE's Curriculum & Assessment Review [CAR]); strengthening teacher education; and promoting richer models of language for education. The opportunities for dialogue afforded by CAR are a very welcome addition to the policy landscape, and point to the need for a longer-term forum beyond the DfE for ongoing consultation with stakeholders. But there are also other important sites and forms of alliance – multilingual cities, third sector/ university collaborations, teacher associations – and the Coalition's six tenets are offered as broad orientation points for these and other policy actors, proposing an overall direction for the incremental changes they seek.

The DfE's Curriculum & Assessment Review and the Coalition for Language Education are both products of a particular educational *Zeitgeist*. This is a very general sense that after more than three decades of test-driven education 5–19, it is time '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', to develop 'a curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring all children and young people are represented', and to shape 'an assessment system that captures the strengths of every child and young person and the breadth of curriculum, with the right balance of assessment methods whilst maintaining the important role of examinations' (DfE CAR 2024).

The Coalition, though, is firmly grounded in the view that there is always far more to any actual policy than a decision taken at the centre delivered smoothly down the system (Ball et al 2012; McCarty 2011). There are a plurality of 'policy actors' located across a range of different sites and levels – community, professional and academic groups, school managers, department heads, teachers, parents and students themselves, as well as regional and local government – and unanticipated issues,

changes, problems and solutions endlessly emerge close to the ground as well as in the wider context. So whether or not the CAR's final report uplifts or disappoints us, the challenge of rebuilding language education is widely shared, and in this document, we outline six tenets to guide its redevelopment, sketch three key tasks, and close with some suggestions for strengthening, around and beyond the CAR, the multi-directional dialogues so greatly needed now in language education.

1. A cross-sectoral consensus on language education

The Coalition for Language Education started in late 2023,[1] and it draws together associations, organisations and individuals working in both different language fields[2] and different sectors (schools, FE, universities, community & non-profit). They come together in a consensus that for the most part, UK language education is too narrow, and they are agreed on a set of general tenets laid out in the Coalition's Founding Statement.[3] The Statement argues that contemporary language education needs to:

1.1 RECOGNISE THE RICHNESS OF LANGUAGE IN OUR LIVES: The ways we communicate, and our linguistic repertoires and relationships, are complicated. They are closely tied to the different situations where we find ourselves, and connect with who we are, where we are from, what we do, and what we want to be. But a great deal of education operates with very limited ideas and models of language and communication – models that concentrate on only a narrow set of skills, that dwell on student deficiencies, that separate language too sharply from culture and the expressive potential of our bodies, and that emphasise formal standard language to the exclusion of persuasiveness, creativity and voice.

1.2 ACCEPT LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY: Language diversity is a fact of life, and in many situations, linguistic plurality and difference are treated as normal – expected, addressed, accepted and enjoyed. Across a range of media, at work, at home and in community life, people switch, mix and blend languages, styles and forms of communication, in both routine and creative ways. But all too often in the UK, language education policies and institutions neglect this and promote linguistic sameness in an exclusionary way, creating inequality, division and insecurity instead of recognising diversity as a source of enrichment, growth and connection.

1.3 ENGAGE WITH SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE: The world is changing fast, with new technologies, new communicative styles, and new intercultural encounters. Language education has a crucial role to play optimising our involvement with these changes, but the approaches, concepts and categories with which we think and act on language need regular reviewing.

1.4 RESPECT THE COMPLEXITY OF CLASSROOMS: Language development involves many people in different spaces throughout the lifespan, but classrooms are primary sites for the lived experience of language education. Far from being just endpoints in the delivery of a policy or programme devised elsewhere, a very wide and changing range of influences, openings, pressures and constraints come together in the 'quick of activity' in class. At present, however, the capacity of teachers and students to optimise their interaction in a productive response to this 'ecology' is often severely limited by systems of assessment and external regulation. Standardised prescriptions of 'best practice' usually oversimplify the issues, and instead, purposeful, challenging and enlivening classrooms are often best served by dialogue and a practical analytic understanding of the local ecologies, enhancing learning and awareness with a variety of different forms of context-relevant assessment.

1.5 BUILD PARTNERSHIPS: Collaboration between different people, groups and institutions is essential to the development of multilingualism and communicative repertoires. But language education is fragmented, divided into institutional sites, categories and subject areas that are often out of step with the mixed and fluid realities of contemporary language use. Improvements to the organisation of this educational provision require sustained dialogue and collaboration, between students, teachers, schools, communities, universities, charities, government and other organisations, both locally and much further afield.

1.6 DRAW ON UNIVERSITIES: Universities have many of the same issues to consider as other educational institutions. But academics often still have more autonomy than colleagues in other sectors, and they can be well positioned to bring systematic and potentially illuminating theories and accounts of language development and cultural change to discussions of language education. Collaborative dialogue with non-academic stakeholders is crucial to this, influencing university research, teaching and teacher training, feeding into policy, practice and intervention beyond. Students, too, can introduce a vital understanding of contemporary diversity, themselves playing a significant role developing partnerships with organisations and groups outside.

These tenets integrate facts, principles, priorities and values that have a substantial pedigree. They have the explicit support of a substantial number of associations, organisations and individuals with specialist expertise in language education (see Note 3); they build on a large body of research in language education and linguistics, developed over a long period of time[4]; and they are exemplified in a great deal of practical work presented at/in workshops, conferences and journals run by, among others, the language associations.[5] The testing-&-assessment driven curricula first introduced in England in the 1990s mean that this practical work is often relatively small-scale and time-limited, but from 1989-1992, work consistent with the tenets was initiated on a large scale in the Language in the National Curriculum project (LINC), which involved 25 coordinators and more than 10,000 teachers in over 400 training courses, supported with £21 million from central government (Carter 1990:16) – this was well received by teachers, but the publication of LINC's teaching materials was blocked by Conservative ministers calling for an exclusive focus on Standard English.[6]

So there is nothing eccentric about the ideas and aspirations articulated in these tenets. What steps towards them should a broad coalition now take?

2. Tasks for the coalition

It is not the Coalition's role to arbitrate between the particular priorities advanced by its different partners, but at least three tasks stand out.

The first is to SPECIFY COLLECTIVE PROBLEMS shared across different fields and sectors of language education, and we have already made significant progress on this in our detailed overview of the submissions to the DfE's Curriculum & Assessment Review (CAR) made by 19 associations and organisations focused on language education (see CLIE & CLE 2025; Eppler, Amos and Magne this issue). This overview reveals widespread dissatisfaction with current forms of assessment in education 5–19, and points to a broad consensus that the burden of tests and end-of-course exams is too heavy, that national tests are skewing the curriculum undesirably, and that the range of available qualifications is too narrow. Instead, much greater flexibility and diversity in assessment methods are required in order to connect adequately with a broader curriculum in language(s), to respond to diverse learners' needs, and to explore the potential of digital/online assessment methods (CLIE/CLE 2025:4– 5). At the same time, there is a good deal of agreement on the directions in which language education 5–19 now needs to move, and much of this concurs with the Coalition's founding tenets. So to quote from the CLIE/CLE Digest's executive summary:

- '*Building communicative repertoires:* The curriculum should promote effective development in English for all children. It should [also] continue to offer all children the opportunity to learn and/or maintain languages other than English …
- *Diversity:* The curriculum needs new emphases to reflect contemporary society and culture, and these should extend to modes of communication – oracy and digital technology … – as well as to the contemporary world's linguistic and cultural diversity …
- *Knowledge about language/language awareness*: This should go beyond grammar, punctuation and spelling, providing rich reflection on language in its formal, discourse and socio-cultural dimensions …
- *Cross-curricular links/language across the curriculum*: The curriculum needs to address language development and language awareness in all subject areas, both academic and vocational …
- *Greater curriculum continuity* is needed across all Key Stages to support transition and children's ongoing engagement … '

These submissions focus on education 5-19, but they are consistent with, for example, the British Academy's more broadly focused recommendations (2019, 2020).

Though not covered in the DfE's Review, TEACHER EDUCATION is a second priority. Many language educators do well in difficult conditions, but to move forward on the issues and challenges now

facing us, much more initial and ongoing support tuned to our tenets is now needed in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The tenets expressed in Section 1 are important for everyone engaged in education, not just language teachers, and they should also resonate in arenas like the training of teaching assistants and family literacy tutors (see, e.g. Kakos 2025). Educators also need opportunities to network regularly beyond their workplaces; there needs to be more scope for them to interact with research, either directly or in mediated forms; and much broader recognition needs to be given to the contribution that practitioners' own linguistic repertoires can make.

The PROMOTION AND CIRCULATION OF ENRICHED MODELS OF LANGUAGE is the third task. Education needs an account of language and communication that recognises the ways in which structure, activity and culture are all closely connected, along with the fact that communication is multimodal and multi-mediated, operating face-to-face, in print, digitally etc. through sound, sign, image, gesture and so forth. We need to work with models of language and communication that are relevant right across the curriculum, to the humanities, performing arts, social sciences, natural sciences, health and social care, not only informing students, teachers, curricula and teacher education but also pastoral systems, institutional managers and indeed government. There are already a range of models available,[7] and the interaction with universities provides plenty of scope for enhancing and updating them.

To engage in these tasks, the Coalition necessarily probes established institutional boundaries, asking itself whether and how the traditional categories dividing up language teaching and learning are still useful. Indeed, this interrogative boundary-crossing also inevitably extends to more explicitly political questions: How well suited to the formulation of what is needed are current lines of command, and what might be done to ensure that democratic consultation with a plurality of different stakeholders is integrated into the processes of programme and policy development? These are questions for the next section.

3. Institutionalising cross-sectoral dialogue for the future of language education

As we have already stressed, the perspective advocated in this article draws on a good deal of research and practical experience in language education in the UK, and it is animated by cultural and democratic values that are widely shared. By definition as a Coalition, we are committed to building a cross-sectoral consensus on what is now needed in language education, and since 2019 we have been pursuing this with a website, at on-line and in-person events and conferences, in working papers, in academic and professional journals, and in work focused on the DfE's Curriculum & Assessment Review. But we are certainly not alone. There are other bodies with a similar vision for language education and a broad cross-sectoral brief like ours – for example, the Committee for Linguistics in Education, the British Association for Applied Linguistics, the British Academy's languages programme, and The Languages Gateway – and an outward-looking commitment to closing the gap between (much of) current provision and the realities of contemporary communication can be found across a range of CAR submissions from individual subject associations.

Looking at 'Languages and Policy' in a practical document that builds on discussion with civil servants about the links between academics and central government, Wendy Ayres-Bennett also calls for collaboration between '[r]epresentative bodies from all parts of the languages ecosystem … to produce and promote to wider society clear, aligned messages about the value of languages' (2024:3). As part of this,

> [r]esearchers should apprise themselves of the different ways to engage with the UK and devolved parliaments and keep abreast of calls for evidence from select committees and other opportunities to shape policy … . Language researchers should familiarize themselves with the ARIs [Areas of Research Interest] as the primary route through which government departments and agencies communicate their research priorities in order to inform their policies and help close the evidence gap (2024:4).

But this is not at all straightforward: 'One of the difficulties of engaging is the high turnover in staff in government departments and weak institutional memory … Academics and civil servants also have different ways of working and different time scales' (2024:10). Indeed, Ayres-Bennett's top recommendation is for the creation of '[m]ore shared spaces and channels for dialogue between languages researchers and policymakers … to help establish trusted partnerships' (2024:3).

The DfE's current Curriculum & Assessment Review (2024–2025) looks like one such space, covering all of education 5–19, not just languages. A torrent of over 7000 submissions to its 54 questions indicates the strength and urgency of concern about education, and in our Coalition's response to the Review's Interim Report, we propose that:

> systematic means must be found to engage stakeholders beyond DfE with ongoing cycles of curriculum review and development, e.g. through the establishment of an independent body with responsibility for designing and overseeing an overall curriculum and assessment strategy (CLE Response to Interim Report 2025)

It would take a great deal more discussion to work out exactly what shape an independent body of this kind should have,[8] but plainly, in spite of Ayres-Bennett's sound practical advice on how to make the best of it, direct contact with central government departments is too narrow a channel to do justice to the breadth and depth of stakeholder interest. Instead, if the volume of responses to CAR is anything to go by, there is a widely felt need for a stable, properly resourced organisation at arm's length from central government that not only engages in collaborative problem-solving but is also receptive to the discussion of problems formulated in different places (Eacott 2011).

We will need to wait and see whether or not the formation of a new body like this becomes a possibility. But even if it were to be established with trusted partnership-building central to its brief, there would of course still be a vital place for other groupings committed to the development of a language education fit for our times, operating as 'policy actors' across a range of different levels. What other forms of cross-sectoral collaboration can support this?

The 'Cities of Languages' initiative (also sometimes referred to as the 'Multilingual Cities Movement') illustrates one possibility (https://www.all-languages.org.uk/cities-of-languages/). It is explicit in aligning with the Coalition tenets in Section 1, and it aims to break down 'language hierarchies and divisions between 'foreign', 'second' and 'heritage' language learning', recognising 'the vitality and value of work carried out in the community-based complementary school sector' (Anderson 2025). But it goes further than education alone, building on local networks and physical proximity to support multilingualism and the development of languages in 'community life in cities more generally including libraries, museums, places of worship, amenities for leisure and play, health services, catering and other businesses as well as civic celebrations and events' (Anderson 2025). Local universities also play an important role, and there is good scope for actors in these grassroots alliances to involve local government, which necessarily attends more closely to the multilingualism of its electorate than national politicians. And there is also now robust material for action-oriented exploration of possibilities and pitfalls in texts like Matras' first-hand account of the pioneering 'Multilingual Manchester' programme (Matras 2023, 2024).

Whether or not they participate in a City of Languages project, non-profit/third sector organisations are another set of important policy actors for language education, often working in tandem with universities. Their lack of state funding can lead to precarity, but it gives them more freedom to do things differently, and in collections like Lytra et al 2022 and Cooke & Peutrell 2019, there are good examples of very innovative practice in complementary heritage language schools and third-sector adult ESOL classes. The collaboration between non-profit organisations and universities can also have a very wide impact.[9] For example, in the absence of any coordinated mainstream support for EAL students at school, the Bell Foundation worked with academics to design a suite of freely available EAL assessment tools, and during 2019, this programme reached 10,230 EAL pupils directly, there were 13,000 + downloads of the EAL Assessment Framework, and the Welsh Government recommended the Assessment Framework to schools as part of its statutory guidance (see Leung et al 2021).

As with university/civil service links, there are institutional differences between universities and non-profits that complicate their interaction (compare Ayres-Bennett 2024 with Rampton & Cooke 2021). 'Service' and local engagement figure prominently in university mission statements, but they are often projectised and pursued in high profile, 'showcase' challenges and competitions that can be very different in spirit from the long-term, low-key conversations which build trust and sustainability, holding university/third sector collaborations together. If managers really want to embed this kind of cross-sectoral collaboration in university departments, there are a number of relatively simple steps they can take: for example, giving it workload recognition; valuing activities like third sector trusteeship, occasional consultancies etc in staff assessment; making it a departmental commitment, so that it is, e.g. a standing item on agendas etc. (see Rampton & Cooke 2021: 4 & §7 for details).

The language teacher associations regularly bring teachers, teacher educators and researchers together, and they are another set of vital players in the languages ecosystem – bodies like, e.g. ALL (Association for Language Learning), NALDIC (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum) and NATECLA (National Association for Teaching English & Community Languages to Adults). They facilitate interaction between teachers outside their workplaces, provide a bridge between classroom practice and research, and formulate collective responses to government (which should indeed do all it can to encourage teachers to join these organisations). As already noted, many of their CAR submissions show a commitment to improving education along lines that match the Coalition's,[10] and to consolidate their participation in a widening cross-sectoral conversation, maybe associations should establish 'Inter-Association Liaison Officers' on their committees, also creating formal conference and journal slots for dialogue with one another.

This account of ways and places to institutionalise the cross-sectoral dialogue required to reset language education is of course far from exhaustive.[11] Educational change often happens slowly, and the arguments, constraints and possibilities encountered in different sites are sure to vary, along with the paths and rates of progress. But across this multiplicity, the Coalition's six tenets in Section 1 can serve as broad orientation points, pointing an overall direction for incremental developments. Because they run against the grain of a lot of language education in its current form, these tenets are unlikely to meet with universal agreement. But there is a solid backing for the facts, principles and values that they articulate. Indeed, recognising the tenets' pedigree as well as the substantial coalition of groups and individuals that support them may bring new confidence to initiatives that have felt isolated hitherto, and add weight to what we say in conversations with the institutional and government policy-makers responsible for legislation and large-scale funding.

Notes

1. Spurred by the prospect of a change of government, it began with an exploratory consultation over the summer of 2023, putting three key questions to c. 50 individuals closely involved in language education: (a) How could the existence of a broad coalition of associations, institutions and individuals in language education help you to further your work? (b) How could it help to influence language education policy? (c) What do you currently see as the main obstacles to effective language education in your field? The responses are reported in detail in Rampton 2023, and there is sketch of what we have been doing since then at the start of §3 below.
2. The language fields are: English, English as an Additional Language in schools (EAL), English for Academic Purposes at university (EAP), English to adult Speakers of Language Other than English (ESOL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Home, Heritage & Community Languages (HHCL), British Sign Language (BSL), and Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). For simplicity's sake in what follows, I will use the term 'cross-sectoral' to refer to these language fields as well as to the different sectors of education.
3. As well as individuals, the signatories include subject associations, research units, university groups and departments – see https://coalitionforlanguageeducationuk.com/signatories/.
4. A great deal of relevant research can be found in the 19 submissions to the DFE's Curriculum & Assessment Review assembled at https://clie.org.uk/2024-ca-review/#submissions. Rampton et al 2001 and 2020 review language education policy development in England since the 1970s, covering linguistics research as well.
5. See, for example, *EAL Journal* (NALDIC), *Language Issues* (NATECLA), *Language Learning Journal* (ALL), and *English in Education* (NATE), as well as numerous edited collections.

6. See Eggar, T. 1991. Correct use of English is essential. *Times Educational Supplement.* 28 June.
7. There is one example of these, together with further discussion of their importance, in Section 3.2 (pp.12–14) of Rampton 2023.
8. There are a range of examples to consider. Some cover both the whole of education in England (e.g., the Schools Council (1964–1984), the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority/the Qualifications & Curriculum Development Agency 1997–2011), and others focus on language in particular (in London, CILT/National Centre for Languages (1966–2006); SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages and NICILT, the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching & Research).
9. There are significant historical precedents as well. Bernard Coard's 1971 pamphlet *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal* was funded by community groups and written for parents, but it was a major catalyst for the development of multicultural education in the 1970s and 80s (Carby 1982; Rampton et al 2020:4).
10. A number have also signed the Coalition's Founding Statements. As of 5.7.25, the language teaching association signatories are: ALCS (Association for Low Countries Studies), ALL, BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes), NALA (National Association of Language Advisers), NALDIC, NATECLA, NATESOL (Northern Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), RaPAL (Research & Practice in Adult Literacies) and UKALTA (Association for Language Testing & Assessment) – see https://coalitionforlanguageeducationuk.com/signatories/ (retrieved 5.7.25).
11. We have said nothing about crucial issues like teacher pay, the falling uptake of languages at secondary school, and the closure of university language departments.

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