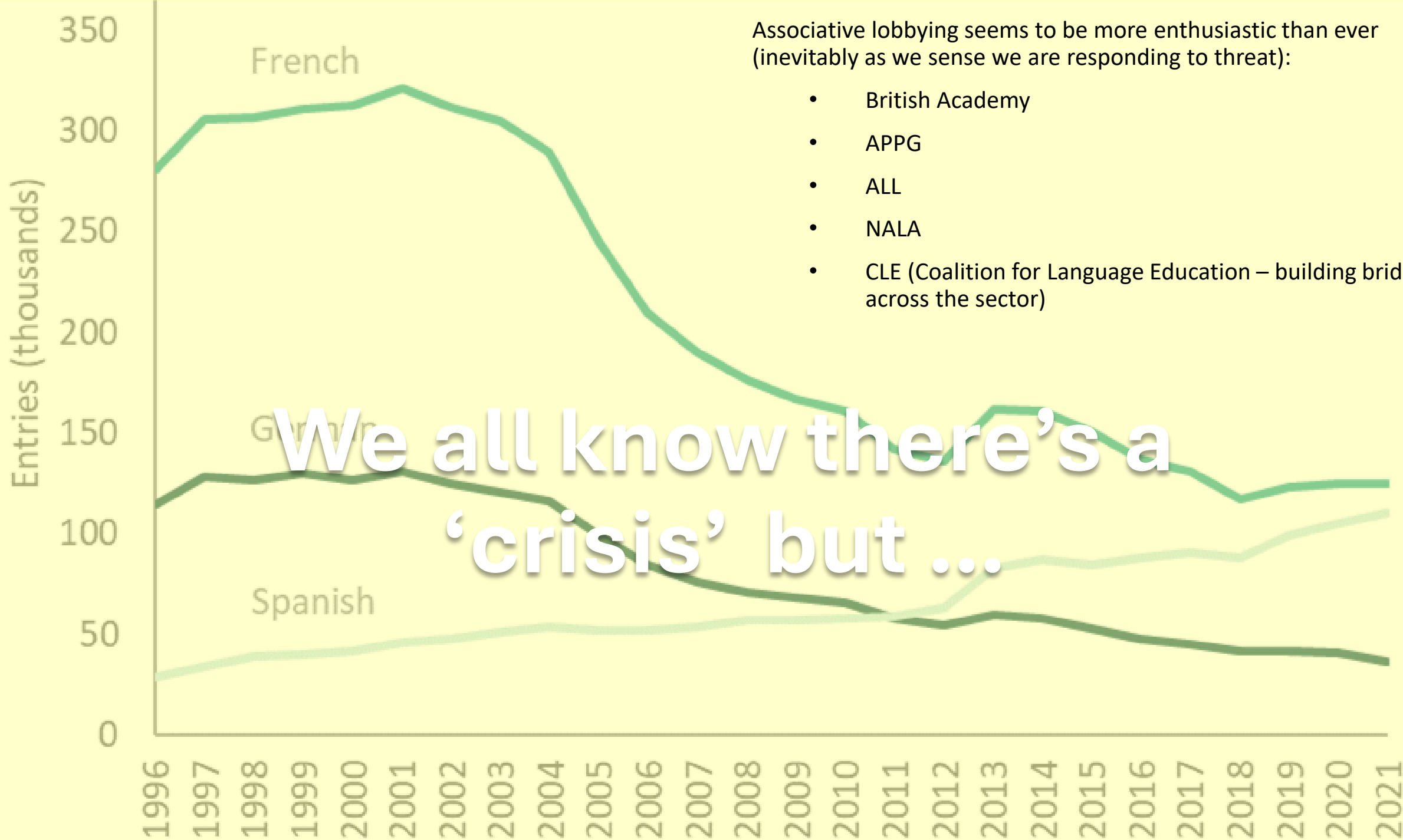


# ***Language People: Who Are We in 2026?***

**Simon Coffey**  
**King's College London**

**National Association of Language Advisers**  
***The craft of language teaching and learning to meet the needs of everyone***

**Nottingham 28/02/2026**



Associative lobbying seems to be more enthusiastic than ever (inevitably as we sense we are responding to threat):

- British Academy
- APPG
- ALL
- NALA
- CLE (Coalition for Language Education – building bridges across the sector)

We all know there's a 'crisis' but ...

## Key recommendations from Megan Bowler's 2025 report *The Languages Crisis: Arresting decline*.

- **Invest in languages:** Now is the time to expand rather than cut language education, as it provides strong economic and trade benefits for the UK.
- **Take action on teacher recruitment:** Increase support for language teacher recruitment, training, and professional development, including easing international teacher pathways.
- **Offer alternative qualification pathways:** Provide statutory entitlement to languages up to 18, vocational and applied qualifications, and CEFR-based proficiency options.
- **Revitalise language hubs:** Expand hub networks to deliver training, resources, and links across state schools, independent schools, and higher education.
- **Enhance recognition of multilingualism:** Support home and supplementary language learners through guidance, networks, and streamlined qualification pathways.
- **Support British Sign Language:** Implement a clear plan for BSL GCSE provision, staffing, and resources to improve awareness and accessibility.
- **Make languages a priority in higher education:** Protect and strengthen university language courses, including joint programmes and extracurricular offerings.
- **Improve oversight of higher education languages:** Introduce coordinated government support to safeguard instruction in strategic and less widely taught languages.
- **Targeted funding for higher education languages:** Allocate resources to prevent loss of key languages, reduce regional gaps, and support IWLP and outreach initiatives.
- **Design pathways for lifelong language learning and government leadership:** Create modular lifelong learning opportunities, applied language qualifications, and a dedicated governmental voice for language policy.

## To add to the wish list

- More timetable time (but that is unlikely)
- Less regulation, less prescription (again, unlikely)

So, what can we do in terms of content?

- More focus on area studies and cultural learning alongside language
- Communicative language *alongside* creative and literary language use.  
My personal view is that language study is too grammar-focused for too long.

# Epistemological isolation

And how to tackle it by building connections e.g.

Across languages and areas of the curriculum

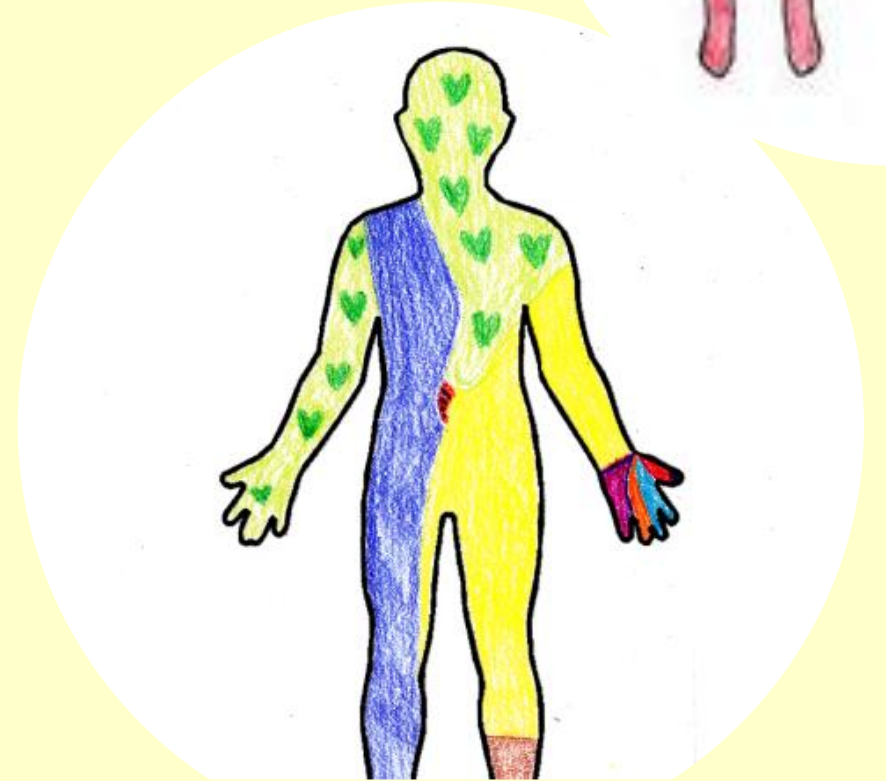
Across difference dome domains of experience

- Home-school
- Here-there
- Mind-body-feeling etc.



# Learner autobiographies

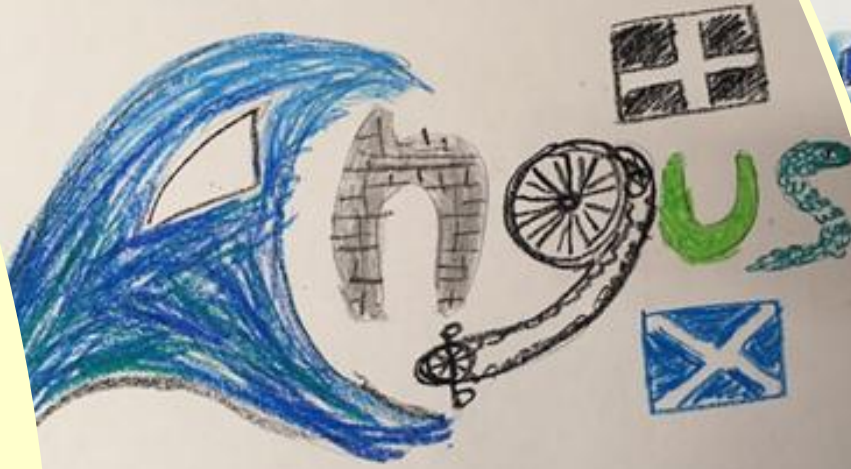
‘Emotional investment’ and creativity are connected to the concept of linguistic or ‘plurilingual’ repertoire



Coffey, S. (2015) Reframing teachers' language knowledge through metaphor analysis of language portraits. *Modern Language Journal* 99/3: 500–514.



***What's in a name?***  
Illustrating names  
as autobiographical  
expressions of  
social and cultural  
identities



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9hR-LQ0xOE&t=6s>

# Drawing and sculpting sounds



Coffey, S., & Patel, D. (2023). Sparking the imagination: Creative language pedagogies as intersemiotic translation. *Language Learning Journal*, 51, 564–578.

# A model of language awareness

Eric Hawkins (1993) presented a model of Language Awareness in relation to three educational issues:

1. *How can curiosity about language be stimulated?*
2. *How can we bring together and integrate different kinds of language teaching, particularly mother tongue and second language teaching?*
3. *Can we empower students who are learning a second language by drawing on their explicit knowledge about language?*

(Hawkins, 1993:1933, Language awareness. In R. Asher and J. Simpson, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* Vol. 4., pp. 1933-1938. Oxford: Pergamon)

# *L'imaginaire des langues*

« Quand je parle de multilinguisme, quelqu'un aussitôt me dit 'Ah ! Oui, combien de langues tu parles ?' Ce n'est pas une question de parler les langues, ce n'est pas le problème. On peut ne pas parler d'autres langues que la sienne. C'est plutôt la manière même de parler sa propre langue, de la parler fermée ou ouverte ; de la parler dans l'ignorance de la présence des autres langues ou dans la prescience que les autres langues existent et qu'elles nous influencent même sans qu'on le sache. »

'When I speak of multilingualism, someone immediately asks me, "Ah! Yes, how many languages do you speak?" That is not the point. It is not a matter of speaking several languages. One may speak no language other than one's own. What matters rather is the *very way* one speaks one's own language, whether one speaks it in a closed or an open manner; whether one speaks it in ignorance of the presence of other languages, or with an awareness that other languages exist and influence us even without our knowing it.'



Édouard Glissant (2010: 7) *L'imaginaire des langues*.  
Édouard Glissant entretiens avec Lise Gauvin (1991-2009). Paris: Gallimard.

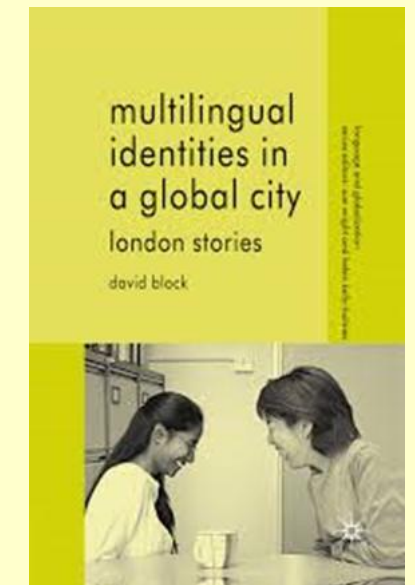
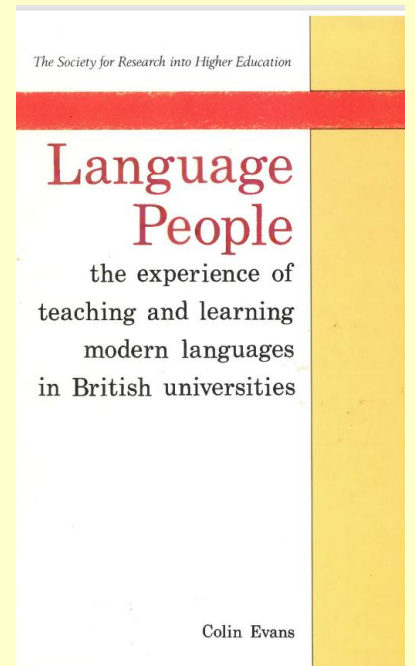
# Language people, language teachers

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Evans (1988), Block (2003)

Evans, C. (1988). *Language people: The experience of teaching and learning modern languages in British universities*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

- “It is not a matter of choosing between vocationality and personal development but of striking a balance. The perceived advantage of a discipline is not to be narrowly defined in terms of adult work”

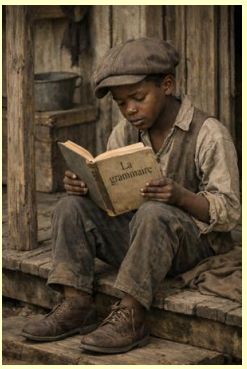


# Social mobility and cultural capital

- Sue (my case study): did bilingual secretarial course after school, then studied at home when a young mother through Institute of Linguists courses to get degree equivalence, and did a Cert Ed at the FE college, then started teaching adult education courses. Only did an MA and PhD later.
  - About her father, who had left school at 15 and become a plumber: *“my Dad – when I took German ‘O’ level – I just learnt it in the sixth form, and we sat our ‘O’ level together. So by the time I’d arrived at the upper sixth he sat his ‘O’ level. It was really sweet, yeah and we went to ‘A’ level evening classes the following year together, actually. ... he carried on and had private lessons and sat the Institute of Linguists’ exams and finally ended up teaching when he retired and – I mean he carried on with his German study and finally when he retired he started teaching adult education classes. I mean, completely – not entirely self-taught but a lot was self-taught so I always think that, when I think of people’s potential, the fact that my Dad came from a generation where he had to leave school and get an apprenticeship and he became a plumber. You know, there was no question about that, erm, but that clearly he had, you know, a real ability for learning languages.”*



# Diversity and inclusion: is MFL for the white middle classes?



- Swing back to privilege across the arts and humanities
- “since 2014, 17 post-1992 universities have lost their modern languages degrees, bringing the total closures to 28 and leaving modern languages in just 10 ...
- the percentage of Year 11 pupils studying a language for GCSE is 20 percentage points lower in poorer areas than affluent ones (69% versus 46-47%)” (Bowler, 2025: 8)

*“And so thoroughly did he learn the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism, and the ideals of material prosperity, that the picture of a lone black boy poring over a French grammar amid the weeds and dirt of a neglected home soon seemed to him the acme of absurdities.”*

W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*.  
Chicago: A. C. McClurg

# Professional development and professional integrity, a question of trust

- What has happened to CPD in MFL?

Current research shows that benefits of INSET days are variable, being “much better at meeting Head Teachers’ and Senior Leaders’ needs than those of classroom teachers and middle leaders” (Allen et al, 2024: 11). The same report found that “the most commonly referenced areas were safeguarding and behaviour” (p. 8). As the report concludes “Teachers want autonomy over CPD” (p. 26)

- In “secondary schools there is a particularly marked absence of subject specific professional development” (Allen et al, 2024: 7)

# Some structural fissures post-2010

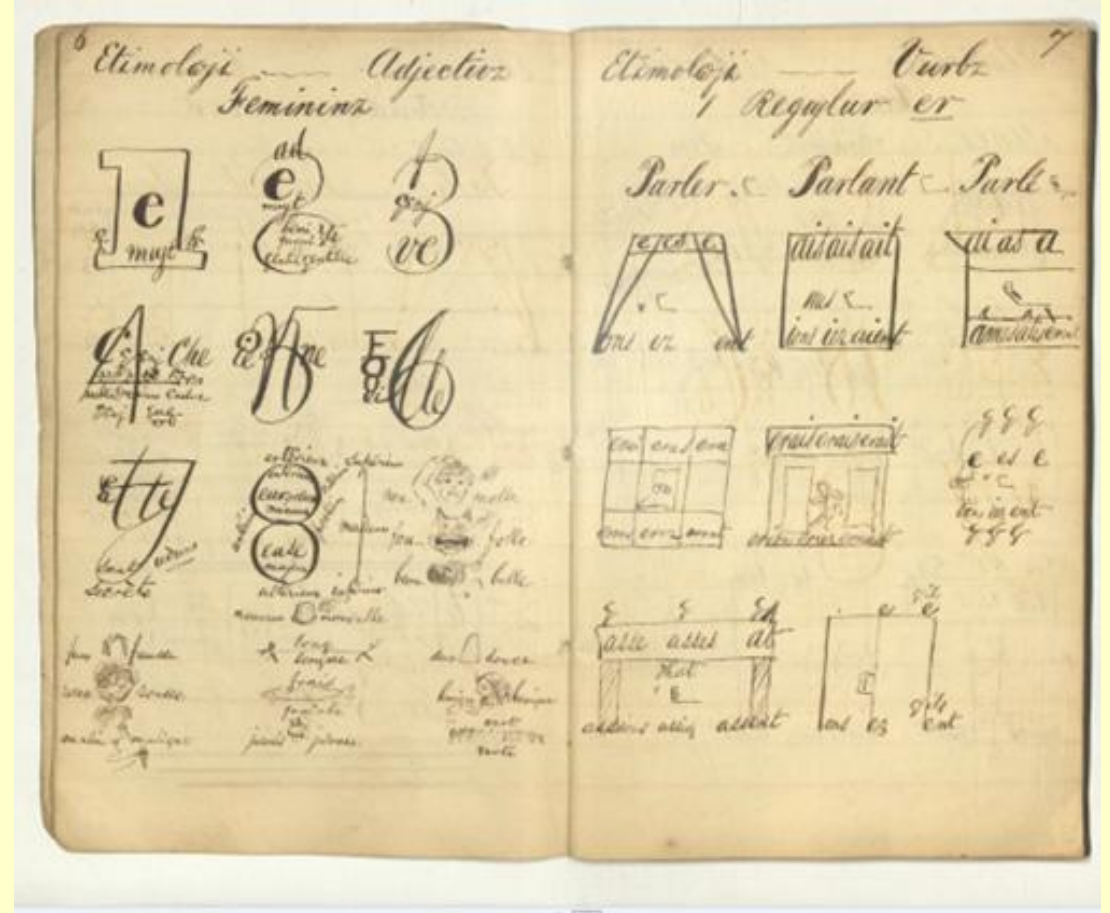
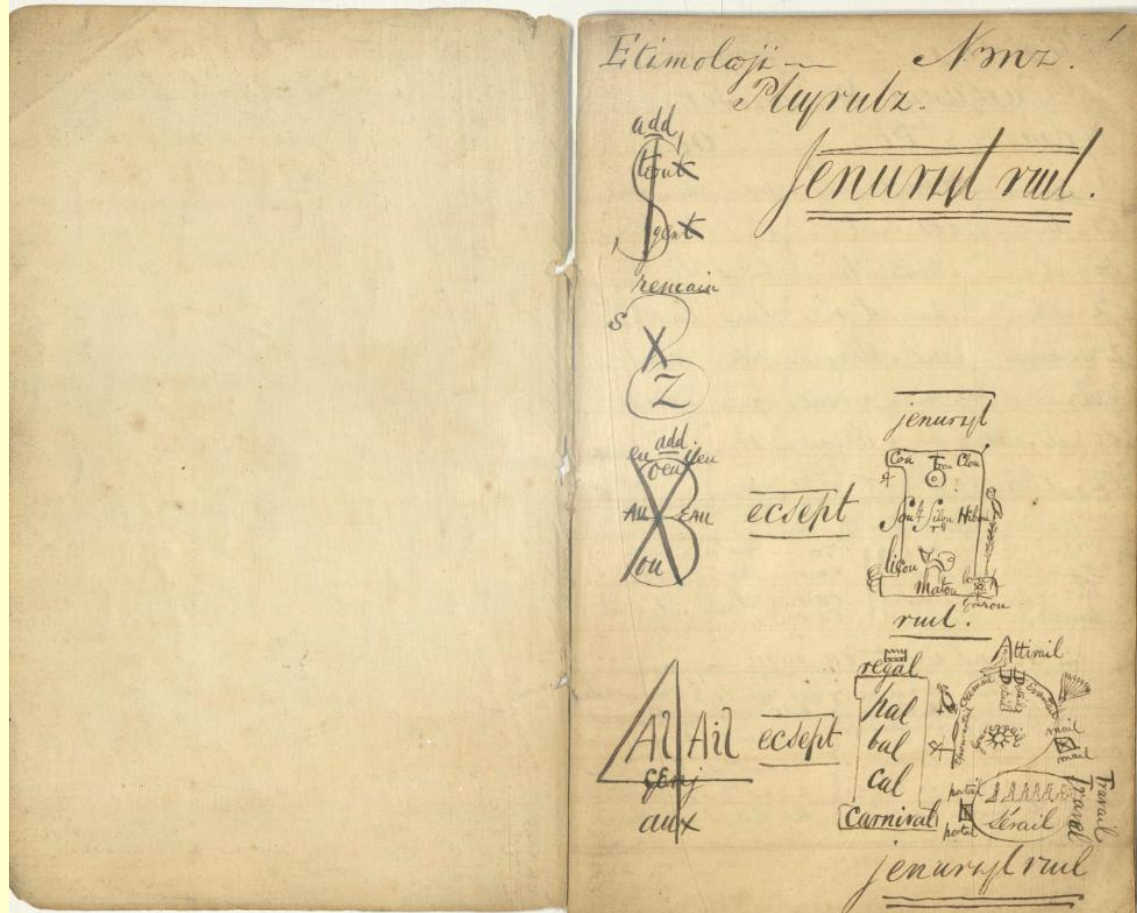
- de-funding schools having specialist language college status;
- withdrawing the United Kingdom from the European Union including the Erasmus international exchange programme (recently partially reinstated);
- closing our National Centre for Languages (CILT England);
- ending UK membership of the European Centre for Modern Languages;
- ending financial support for languages in primary schools;
- closing down the National Languages Strategy and de-funding local authority advisers.

# Is MFL boring?

- Why don't people keep their French exercise books?

Historical analysis shows that the tension between practical application of language study (communicative) and the more rigorous intellectual linguistic training of a liberal education has always been there. So, how do we combine these?

# Alice Southern's French exercise book, 1844



# Language models as social models

What content are we teaching in MFL?  
How are we positioning the learner as a 'language person'?



160 SOIXANTE-QUATRIÈME LEÇON—SUBSTANTIF

I.—Le Substantif déterminé par l'Article défini, pp. 44, 45.

A. 1. Quels sont les principaux métaux ?	L'or, l'argent, le mercure, le cuivre, le fer, le plomb, l'étain et le zinc.
2. Le latin est-il difficile ?	Oui, mais il n'est pas si difficile que le grec.
3. Quel est le symbole de la sagesse ?	C'est le sel, et le lys (s soundé) est le symbole de l'innocence.
4. Que préférez-vous, le café ou le thé ?	Ni l'un ni l'autre, je préfère le chocolat.
5. L'Italie n'est-elle pas un beau pays ?	Sans doute ; néanmoins je voudrais plutôt rester en Angleterre.
6. Le général Wolsley n'a-t-il vaincu le pacha Arabi ?	Oui, il l'a battu à plate couture.

Obs.—Notion (1) French Def. Art., = English Indef. Article :—  
Dix francs la livre (weight, measure). Ten francs a pound.  
(2) French par, = Engl. Indef. Article :—  
Deux fois par jour. Un franc par tête. Twice a day. One franc each.  
(3) Fr. Def. Art. + Noun + Prepos. Adj., = Engl. Adverb. Adj. + Noun :—  
Il a les yeux bleus, les cheveux blancs. He has blue eyes, fair hair (lit. He has the eyes blue).

SOIXANTE-CINQUIÈME LEÇON—PLURIEL 161

Pluriel des Substantifs et des Adjectifs, pp. 48-51.

A. 1. Avez-vous lu les détails de cette malheureuse expédition au Soudan ?	Oui, je les ai lus dans les journaux du soir ; j'en ai le cœur navré.
2. N'admirez-vous pas ces beaux tableaux du Corrège ?	Oui, ce sont de vrais chefs-d'œuvre.
3. Vos sieurs ne sont-ils pas originaires de la Grèce ?	Si ; ils comptent des héros parmi leurs sieurs.
4. Avez-vous mal aux yeux ?	Non, mais j'ai froid aux mains.
5. Votre frère cadet n'a-t-il pas une collection de timbres-poste de tous les pays ?	Oui, il en a des Pays-Bas, des Etats-Unis, du Mexique et même de la Nouvelle Zélande.
6. Où trouve-t-on ces minéraux précieux ?	On tire tous ces métaux des entrailles de la terre.

DEUX : Give the Plural of (1) mon cher ami ; leur beau cristal ; votre ancien château ; le moindre détail ; ce jeune Anglais ; son œil bleu ; le corail rouge ; du fromage de Hollande ; de l'eau douce ; son bijou précieux ; le travail assidu.  
(2) un \* nouveau timbre-poste ; le bel arc-en-ciel ; votre beau-frère ; un \* vrai chef-d'œuvre ; le gentilhomme anglais ; son bijou ; le vice-roi de l'Inde ; l'avant-courier de la maison ; le chef-lieu du canton ; le ver-a-soie indigène ; son vieux porte-manteau.

178 QUATRE-VINGT-TROISIÈME LEÇON—ADVERBES

Apprenez les Adverbes, pp. 77-80.

A. 1. Vous avez placé cela trop haut ?	Et moi qui croyais l'avoir placé trop bas !
2. Pourquoi ces œufs sentent-ils mauvais ?	Parce qu'ils ne sont pas frais pondus.
3. Cette plante est-elle rare ?	Oui, on la trouve assez rarement dans cette contrée.
4. Sa conduite n'est-elle pas inconsidérée ?	Oui, je trouve qu'il a agi très inconsidérément.
5. Ces écoliers sont-ils attentifs ? Vous prêtent-ils l'oreille ?	Je crois que oui, du moins ils semblent écouter très attentivement.
6. Les nôtres ne se sont-ils pas montrés très courageux dans cette affaire ?	Oui, ils se sont battus fort courageusement ; ils ont complètement démonté les ennemis.
7. Ces demoiselles ne sont-elles pas fort bien ?	Oui, l'aînée n'est pas mal du tout ; elle a le teint frais.
8. Comment dit-on en français pour <i>The more the merrier</i> ?	"Plus on est de fous, plus on rit."
9. Que veut dire le proverbe : "Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien" ?	Il veut dire que quand on est bien, il faut s'y tenir : <i>Let well alone!</i>

Ten exercises est bon, il est bien écrit. Your exercise is good, it is well written.  
Cet élève est un effluve. Il est un effluve. This man is better than his letter.

QUATRE-VINGT-QUATRIÈME LEÇON—NÉGATIF 179

Pronoms indéfinis et Adverbes employés négativement, pp. 76, 78, 79.

A. 1. Pourquoi Alexandre le Grand adopta-t-il les coutumes des Perses ?	Pour leur prouver qu'il voulait être pour eux un roi, et non pas un conquérant despote.
2. Il faut faire de nécessité vertu, n'est-ce pas ?	Oui, il faut vouloir ce qu'on ne peut empêcher.
3. N'est-ce pas en 390 avant J.C. que les Gaulois s'emparèrent de Rome ?	Oui, et peu s'en fallut qu'ils ne détruisissent presque à son berceau la future maîtresse du monde.
4. Ne savez-vous pas qu'on ne doit pas disputer des goûts ?	D'accord ; mais cela n'empêche pas qu'il n'y ait un bon et un mauvais goût.
5. Cet homme n'est-il pas très dédaigneux ?	En effet ; il ne croit que ce qu'il voit.
6. N'avez-vous pas un peu embelli le joli conte que vous venez de nous débiter ?	Non, je ne retranche ni n'ajoute rien aux histoires que je raconte.
7. Personne oserait-il nier cela ?	Je doute que personne s'avise de se refuser à l'évidence.

# Pupil voice ... a snapshot of pupils' views

## Language Learning for real communication

Imagine you didn't have to study the prescribed GCSE course and you could choose any aspect of the French language/knowledge about the French speaking world in your lessons, what would you want to learn and why?

More general conversational, like if I went to France what I would need to communicate.

Imagine you didn't have to study the prescribed GCSE course and you could choose any aspect of the French language/knowledge about the French speaking world in your lessons, what would you want to learn and why?

How to order food, or how to book a hotel and how to have basic a basic conversation with someone about their interests.

What would you like to achieve with your knowledge of French either now or in the future?  
To go to France and be able to speak with the locals.

What would you like to achieve with your knowledge of French either now or in the future?  
I would like to be able to hold a conversation in French and ask for directions.

## Curriculum Content

I have to teach the prescribed content for GCSE - both grammar and themes. What do you think of the content?

It's fine - celebrity culture feels a bit silly - I feel like some of the things in it could be more interesting e.g. of obstacles in theme 1, problems they face etc could be in media or technology.

more colloquial French  
learning more French literature to get a better more conceptual understanding of the culture + language (e.g. customs, festivals, why the words are borrowed from other languages)

think of the content:  
→ I like most of it, apart from celebrity culture

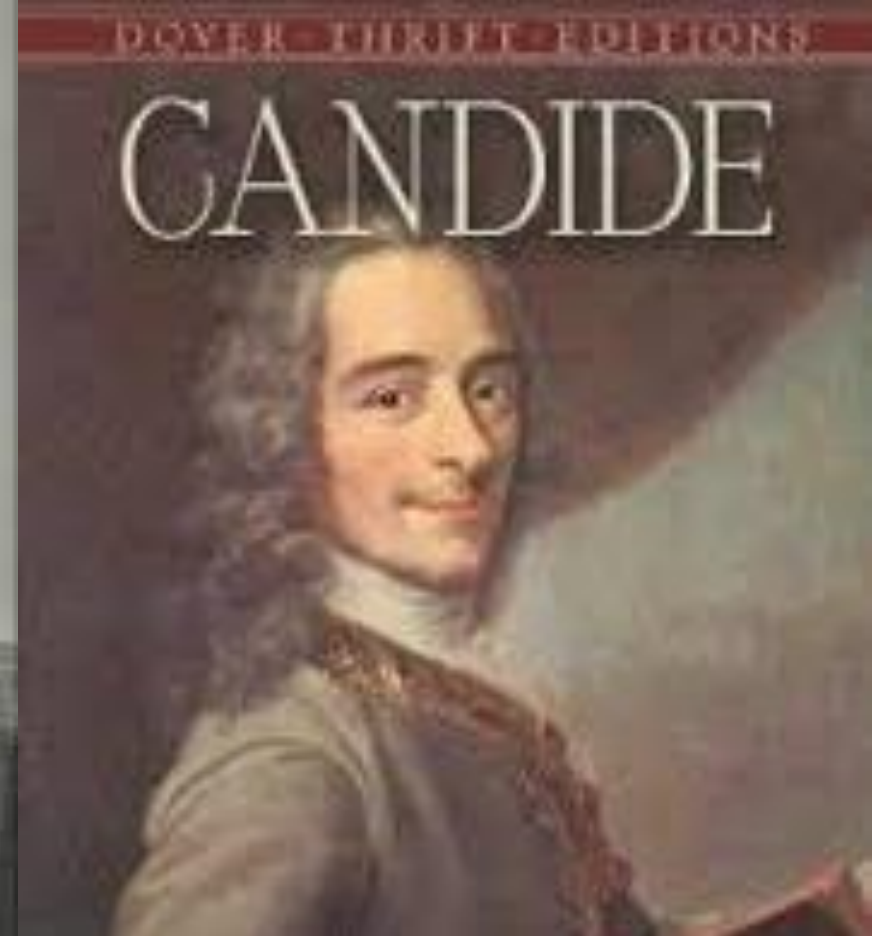
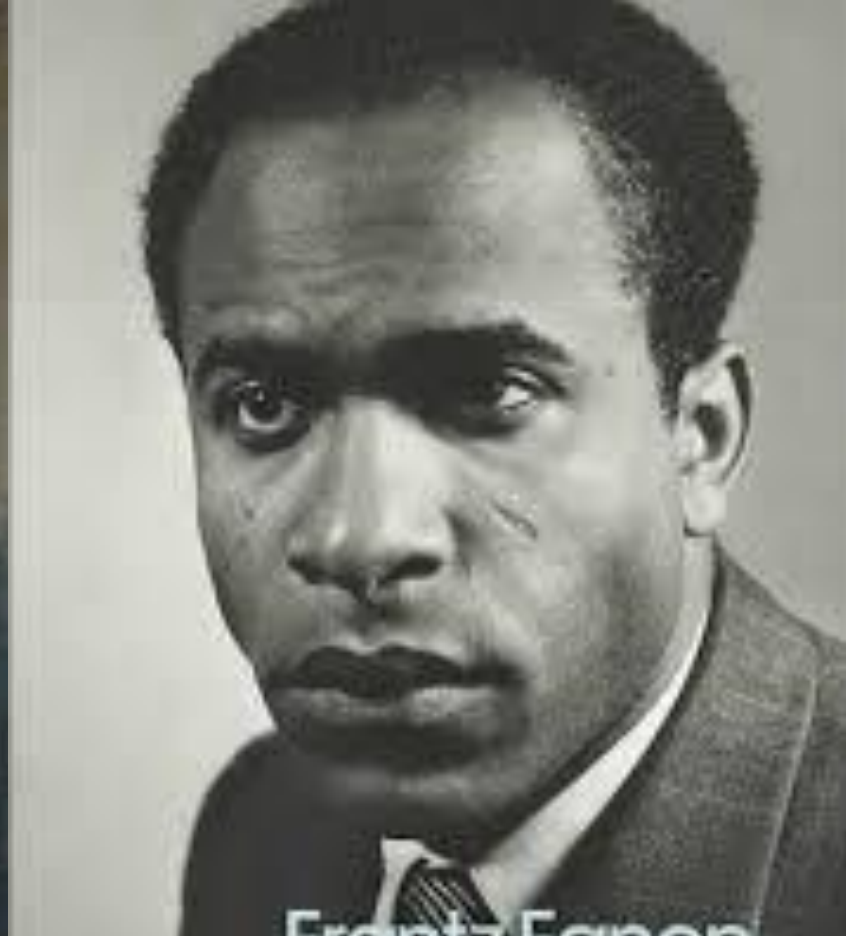
I have to teach the prescribed content for GCSE - both grammar and themes. What do you think of the content?  
I like most of the topics studied at GCSE, I think units like media and technology are useful, but I would like to learn more about French culture. I wish there was more of that in the content.

Imagine you didn't have to study the prescribed GCSE course and you could choose any aspect of the French language/knowledge about the French speaking world in your lessons, what would you want to learn and why?

the history of the francophone world  
and study the countries histories

Imagine you didn't have to study the prescribed GCSE course and you could choose any aspect of the French language/knowledge about the French speaking world in your lessons, what would you want to learn and why?

Maybe to have on the history in France e.g. modern problems, problems vs. the past?



## Pupils want more ...

The Francophone Women Writer's Reading Group and French Thinkers' Group are examples of excellent initiatives to stimulate a passion for French and Francophone cultural studies (thanks to Catherine Ames, Grey Coat Hospital School)

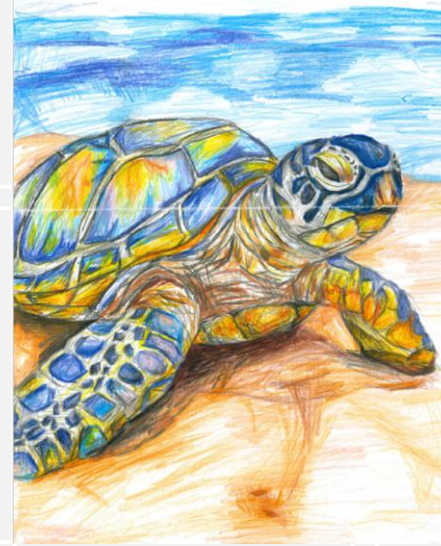


# Creativity in language lessons

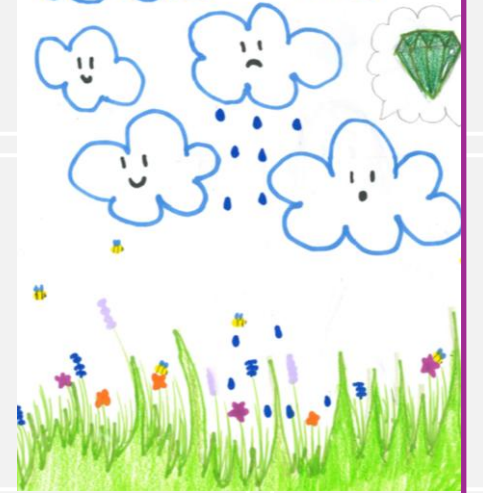
*Chaleur*, Anna de Noailles (1876-1933)

Tout luit, tout bleuit, tout bruit,  
Le jour est brûlant comme un fruit  
Que le soleil fendille et cuit.  
Chaque petite feuille est chaude  
Et miroite dans l'air où rôde  
Comme un parfum de reine-claude.  
Du soleil comme de l'eau pleut  
Sur tout le pays jaune et bleu  
Qui grésille et oscille un peu.  
Un infini plaisir de vivre  
S'élance de la forêt ivre,  
Des blés roses comme du cuivre.

lent comme une forme qui mar  
sur la plage



"L'herbe humide  
miroite comme  
une émeraude  
dans le soleil"



**merci**

شكراً

**gracias**

謝謝

**Danke**

תודה

**grazie**

ありがとう

**takk**

**спасибо**

நன்றி

**bedankt**

**Dziękuję**