Modern Foreign Languages GCSE Subject Content

2015 and 2021 comparison

The aim of this task is to pinpoint key differences and similarities between the current (2015) GCSE Subject Content and the proposed Subject Content. Where possible, open both 2015 and 2021 Subject Content documents to do the comparison concurrently. Use *ctrl+F* to search for keywords to complete the table below. The document is editable! Add or substitute keywords. Allow 45-60 minutes.
Note: Try to draw out implications for GCSE assessment and teaching (the number of occurrences of each word is less important).

Keyword	Significance and implications for assessment and teaching		Further questions / observations
	2015	2021	
aims	[3] students should develop their ability and ambition to communicate with native speakers in speech and writing, broaden students' horizons and encourage them to step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world, prepare them for further language study and use in school, higher education or in employment	[2] provide a coherent, satisfying and worthwhile course of study, develop confidence in, and a positive attitude towards, MFL, provide a strong linguistic and cultural foundation for pupils who go on to study MFL develop their ability and ambition to communicate in speech and writing with speakers of the language for authentic purposes and about subjects which are meaningful and interesting to them broaden pupils' horizons, encourage them to step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world.	broad continuity of aims – ability and ambition to communicate, broaden horizons, step beyond familiar cultural boundaries, develop new ways of seeing the world, prepare for further study
purpose	[9] use language for a variety of purposes purposes of a GCSE specification … provide an appropriate foundation for A level study and a suitable preparation for higher education or employment adapting language for new purposes	[5] communicate…for authentic purposes range of audiences and purposes purposes of clarification (with reference to the grammar appendices) to express purpose after para que (Spanish grammar appendix)	both refer to a variety/range of purposes 2015 talks about *new* purposes – is this also in 2021 with different wording?

	to express purpose (para que) (Spanish grammar appendix)		2015 has more instances of the word but some repetition
knowledge	[17] The GCSE subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all GCSE specifications in a given subject. deepen their knowledge about how language works, acquire new knowledge, be encouraged to make appropriate links to other areas of the curriculum to enable bilingual and deeper learning, where the language may become a medium for constructing and applying knowledge, translate sentences and short texts from English into the assessed language to convey key messages accurately and to apply grammatical knowledge of language and structures in context GCSE students will be expected to develop and use their knowledge and understanding of grammar progressively throughout their course. Structures marked (R) signify that only receptive knowledge is required.	[7] The GCSE subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all GCSE specifications in a given subject. Pupils will be expected to apply their knowledge of the grammar specified appropriate to the task set and to the tier of entry. The requirements for knowledge about sound-symbol correspondences (SSCs) GCSE students will be expected to develop and use their knowledge of grammar throughout their course. Pupils will be required to demonstrate both receptive and productive knowledge of a sample of the grammar from the list. This sample will be representative of the whole list and will vary year on year.	Key area of difference – sound-symbol relationship is new to 2021 Subject Content Grammar knowledge references in both. Key differences: i) productive and receptive knowledge of the grammar listed is expected in 2021 (no R category) ii) explicit statement about sampling the grammar indicates that there is no redundancy on the grammar list – what is there is to be tested (albeit not everything every year) – much more specificity here
new	[5] new ways of seeing the world, acquire new knowledge, adapting language for new purposes, using and adapting a variety of structures and vocabulary with increasing accuracy and fluency for new purposes, Students entering higher tier assessments will be required to apply all grammar and	[2] new ways of seeing the world, they should be able to recall and use language in familiar and new situations	new situations = equivalent of new purposes from 2015

	structures listed for foundation tier in addition to the new grammar and structures listed for higher tier.		
translate	[2] translate a short passage from the assessed language into English translate sentences and short texts from English into the assessed language	[5] translate in writing vocabulary items and short sentences or texts, from the language to English and vice versa using a range of the vocabulary and grammar specified for each tier. In this context, translation means an appropriate and sufficient rendering of the meaning of the original English. For example: French 'rester' (verb) and 'le reste' (noun); Spanish 'viejo' (adjective) and 'vejez' (noun); German 'Regen' (noun) and 'regnen' (verb) all require separate listings in the vocabulary lists as they are different parts of speech. An important exception to this that a nominalised use of a verb that translates directly as the English gerund (e.g., 'étudier' (to study/studying) '(das) schwimmen/Schwimmen' (to swim/swimming) will be listed as one single item. However, where there is a different translation in English for the nominalised verb (e.g. 'essen' (to eat) and 'das Essen' (food, meal), the words will be listed separately with their different English translations.)	One (perhaps unintended?) consequence of the 2015 Subject Content was that it was not permitted to assess anything at word level, meaning that the entry question on the writing exam had to be at sentence level. This is a change for 2021 proposed content. The 2021 content has a higher level of specificity about the vocabulary. The 2018 Higher Tier Spanish reading paper expected students to deduce the meaning of the noun 'vejez' – old age - (not listed on the vocabulary list) from its adjective form 'viejo', as its meaning was not readily inferable from the context.
complex	[9] involving some more complex language, recognising the relationship between past, present and future events Listening: deduce meaning from a variety of short and longer spoken texts, involving	[8] Texts will comprise defined vocabulary and grammar for each tier and will be of limited complexity at foundation tier. Complexity of language: Spoken and written language (for comprehension and	Complexity has not previously been clearly defined. Teachers have had to guess what might be meant.

	some complex language and more abstract material Speaking: make appropriate and accurate use of a variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures, including some more complex forms Speaking: make creative and more complex use of the language Reading: deduce meaning from a variety of short and longer written texts from a range of specified contexts, including authentic sources involving some complex language and unfamiliar material Writing: make accurate use of a variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures, including some more complex forms, to describe and narrate with reference to past, present and future events make independent, creative and more complex use of the language	production) will be of limited complexity at foundation tier. At higher tier pupils will be expected to understand (in listening and reading) and produce (in speech and writing) language at a higher level of complexity. The complexity of the language will be in both cases appropriate to the level of study. Complexity in this sense means the extent to which a text uses features such as multi-clause units (e.g. relative clauses), pronouns, especially multiple pronouns, multiple verbs in one sentence or clause, long sentences, syntax or word order which is very different to English. The (grammar) lists are written from the point of view of English-speaking learners of the language, and so include some reference to certain cross-linguistically complex relations with English.	The 9 uses of complex in the 2015 Subject Criteria translated into 32 instances in the AQA Spanish Specification, including in the assessment criteria for production in every Higher Tier band except the lowest (1-2 points). None of these was defined or exemplified. In the 2021 Subject Content we have a definition, which gives specific examples, and the all- important reference to cross-linguistic difficulty.
authentic	[7] Listening/Reading: understand and respond to a rich range of authentic spoken and written material, adapted and abridged, as appropriate, including literary texts Listening: recorded material from authentic sources and the media Listening/Reading: deduce meaning from… authentic material addressing a	[1] pupils should develop their ability and ambition to communicate in speech and writing with speakers of the language for authentic purposes and about subjects which are meaningful and interesting to them	Authentic material was given prominence in 2015 Subject Content. Widely welcomed from a teaching perspective, teachers were concerned about how it would translate into assessment, and many would now say the concerns

	wide range of relevant contemporary and cultural themes		were justified.
litera*	[4] Students will be expected to understand different types of written language, including relevant personal communication, public information, factual and literary texts, appropriate to this level Literary texts can include extracts and excerpts, adapted and abridged as appropriate, from poems, letters, short stories, essays, novels or plays from contemporary and historical sources, subject to copyright recognise and respond to key information, important themes and ideas in more extended written text and authentic sources, including some extracts from relevant abridged or adapted literary texts	[0]	Literary texts were new to 2015 Subject Content. Copyright has proved an area of difficulty, constraining the choice of texts, and this then probably caused problems with the vocabulary included in the texts'
accura*	[7] Speaking/Writing: conveying what they want to with increasing accuracy Speaking: make appropriate and accurate use of a variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures Speaking: use accurate pronunciation and intonation such as to be understood by a native speaker Writing: write short texts, using simple sentences and familiar language accurately to convey meaning and exchange information Writing: make accurate use of a variety of	[7] L/S/R/W: Learn and be able to use the grammar specified to understand and produce meaning accurately, in oral and written modalities, and to speak with increasing fluency. L/W: undertake dictation exercises from short spoken extracts, with credit for accurate spelling W: write text in the language in a lexically and grammatically accurate way, based on simple and familiar stimuli. L/S/R/W: The list which follows specifies key differences in sound-spelling	Both refer to accuracy with vocabulary and grammar 2015 collocates accuracy and complexity, and also accuracy and fluency 2021 puts emphasis on understanding the grammar, not just producing it Accuracy is not collocated with fluency

	vocabulary and grammatical structures, including some more complex forms, to describe and narrate with reference to past, present and future events Writing: manipulate the language, using and adapting a variety of structures and vocabulary with increasing accuracy and fluency for new purposes, including using appropriate style and register Writing: translate sentences and short texts from English into the assessed language to convey key messages accurately and to apply grammatical knowledge of language and structures in context	correspondences between French and English which pupils will need to learn at GCSE to be able to read and transcribe with sufficient accuracy at this level.	Additional to 2021 is the sound-writing relationship; students will demonstrate 'sufficient accuracy' in transcription and read aloud
fluen*	[1] Production: express and develop thoughts and ideas spontaneously and fluently Writing: manipulate the language, using and adapting a variety of structures and vocabulary with increasing accuracy and fluency for new purposes, including using appropriate style and register	[1] Speaking: Learn and be able to use the grammar specified to understand and produce meaning accurately, in oral and written modalities, and to speak with increasing fluency.	In 2015 spontaneously and fluently appear together for speaking, and accuracy and fluency appear together for writing 2021 – students understand and produce meaning accurately (L/S/R/W) but separately 'speak with increasing fluency' The implication here is that the spoken production that focuses on accuracy will not simultaneously focus on fluency.

spontaneous*	[2] Production: express and develop thoughts and ideas spontaneously and fluently Speaking: speak spontaneously, responding to unexpected questions, points of view or situations, sustaining communication by using rephrasing or repair strategies, as appropriate initiate and develop conversations and discussion, producing extended sequences of speech	[0]	What have been the consequences of the requirement for spontaneity? For AQA it has meant a 6-mark category in the speaking exam (Spontaneity and fluency), which in itself contains a misapprehension about what spontaneous communication is. What do we understand is meant by spontaneity in the current specification? Do teachers teach for spontaneous communication or for fluent delivery of pre-learnt material, with an air of practised spontaneity (or not even that, given that it's only 6 marks) Which questions are truly unexpected in the current GCSE? How can an awarding body **really** test for spontaneity? (the RP, where we often see a dramatic difference in proficiency from other elements of the speaking exam)
unfamiliar	[1] deduce meaning from a variety of short and longer written texts from a range of specified contexts, including authentic	[0] though five references to familiar. Note there is a reference to 'new situations' but the language can still be familiar	The reference to 'unfamiliar' in 2015 had the consequence of requiring the awarding bodies to include unlisted content

	sources involving some complex language and unfamiliar material		(i.e., not on the vocabulary list) in listening / reading questions
deduce/infer	[2] Listening/Reading: deduce meaning from a variety of short and longer written texts from a range of specified contexts, including authentic sources involving some complex language and unfamiliar material Reading: draw inferences in context and recognise implicit meaning where appropriate	[0]	The requirement to infer meaning has been a source of discontent for many teachers, giving the slipperiness of the concept, and the concurrent mystification of the mark schemes 1/ that it likely tests something other than the foreign language itself – that students' capacity to infer meaning is a higher level comprehension skill that is probably closely related to their first language comprehension skills. So, the validity of the test as a test of foreign language, for this level of learner, is questionable. 2/ It is difficult to test because inference by definition is quite subjective (this is probably why the mark schemes are mystifying…!) An anecdotal example: Listening passage: Lima es la capital de Perú. Question (T/F/NIT): Lima is the most important city in Peru.

			Candidate thinks: well, it's the capital but not all capital cities are necessarily the most important city in a country, so answers NIT.
speed/pace	[1] listen to and understand clearly articulated, standard speech at near normal speed	[1] understand spoken extracts comprising the defined vocabulary and grammar for each tier which are delivered at a pace which is no faster than a moderate pace, where each word is clearly discernible, and which do not contain extraneous distractions or interruptions	
cultur*	[5] encourage them to step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world develop awareness and understanding of the culture and identity of the countries and communities where the language is spoken language contexts will be organised in a specified number of broad themes, addressing relevant matters relating to: o identity and culture authentic material addressing a wide range of relevant contemporary and cultural themes	[3] should also provide a strong linguistic and cultural foundation for pupils who go on to study MFL at a higher level post-16 encourage them to step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world. …an appreciation of the culture, history, geography and working environments of these countries and communities is an integral part of a well-designed language course and is likely to be motivating and interesting for pupils. Such contexts will be referenced in assessment tasks as appropriate.	Culture appears to continue to be of importance and sits prominently within the aims. Did the exams that flowed from 2015 Subject Criteria reflect these aims? If not, why not? Could it be because specifying the themes led awarding bodies to retain familiar topics too easily? It is also very hard to actually test cultural content, unless you resort to facile questions about geography or history. "73.1% said that they did not think that GCSE topics were necessary for effective language learning" (NALA, 2020) NALA survey: The

			Languages Curriculum and disadvantaged students.
theme / topic	[5] a specified number of broad themes (Identity and culture, local, national, international and global areas of interest, current and future study and employment) authentic material addressing a wide range of relevant contemporary and cultural themes recognise and respond to key information, important themes and ideas in more extended spoken text, including authentic sources Awarding organisations may however use any flexibility to increase depth, breadth or context within the specified topics or to consolidate teaching of the subject content.	[2] Themes and topics: Because vocabulary specified in this content is informed by the frequency of occurrence in the language it will be well suited to communication about a wide range of common themes and topics, and for different purposes (see paragraphs 5-8 above).	"73.1% said that they did not think that GCSE topics were necessary for effective language learning" (NALA, 2020) NALA survey: The Languages Curriculum and disadvantaged students. What are the implications of i) not specifying topics whilst ii) specifying the vocabulary? Example of word 'silos' within the topic approach. Foundation Writing (French) 2018. les professeurs, les matières, les repas, les batîments Why is the current exam so unpredictable (and not in a good way)?
context	[14] Awarding organisations may however use any flexibility to increase depth, breadth or context within the specified topics or to consolidate teaching of the subject content. GCSE specifications will require students to understand and use language across a	[9] It is important that pupils should be taught the language in the context of the countries and communities where the language is spoken. As they learn the language, pupils should become familiar with aspects of the contexts of the countries and communities in which the language is spoken.	So, for 2021 we note that the tests should present language and questions that are embedded in interesting contexts (enriching) but actual knowledge of culture won't be tested, as is the case

	range of contexts draw inferences in context and recognise implicit meaning where appropriate	Pupils should be able to use the language they are learning both receptively and productively, in spoken and written forms, for a range of audiences and purposes, in different genres and in formal and informal contexts which are relevant to their current and future needs and interests, having regard to the likely experiences of a wide social range.	with the current 2015 Subject Content.
rubrics/questions	Questions for the majority of modern foreign languages may be set in the assessed language or English, as appropriate to the task. They should be set in the language in which the candidate is expected to respond. Listening: 20-30% questions set in TL Reading: 30-40% questions set in TL	[1] Question types: Where questions are designed to test comprehension of written and spoken texts in the assessed language, these comprehension questions will be in English. Other types of question will be in English or the assessed language as appropriate to the task. Rubrics will be in English.	In 2015, this statement led to the speaking prompts for the role play having to be set in the target language, despite the concerns of teachers and awarding bodies
vocabulary	[5] enrich their vocabulary in order for them to increase their independent use and understanding of extended language in a wide range of contexts They will also build on the foundation of core grammar and vocabulary outlined in the programmes of study for key stages 2 and 3, increasing the level of linguistic and cognitive demand. make appropriate and accurate use of a variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures, including some more complex forms, with reference to past, present and future events manipulate the language, using and	[109] They will build on the foundations of grammar, vocabulary and linguistic competence envisaged by the programmes of study for key stages 2 and 3, increasing the level of linguistic and cognitive demand. Learn, and be able to recall readily and use, the range of vocabulary required for the level at which they are studying. The parameters for specifying the vocabulary to be learnt are set out in paragraphs 13-21 of this document.	

	adapting a variety of structures and vocabulary with increasing accuracy and fluency for new purposes, including using appropriate style and register	…understand written texts in the language. Texts will comprise defined vocabulary and grammar for each tier and will be of limited complexity at foundation tier. …understand spoken extracts comprising the defined vocabulary and grammar for each tier which are delivered at a pace which is no faster than a moderate pace, where each word is clearly discernible, and which do not contain extraneous distractions or interruptions; undertake dictation exercises from short spoken extracts, with credit for accurate spelling. …translate in writing vocabulary items and short sentences or texts, from the language to English and vice versa using a range of the vocabulary and grammar specified for each tier. In this context, translation means an appropriate and sufficient rendering of the meaning of the original English. …read aloud, using clear and comprehensible pronunciation, short sentences from the written form of the language and demonstrate understanding of them (for example by answering questions); undertake role play simulating a context such as a social conversation where instructions are unambiguous and there are no unexpected questions; answer questions	

		about a visual stimulus such as a photograph. For these activities pupils will have time for preparation (without access to reference materials), and vocabulary and grammar expected will be from the defined content for each tier. Pupils will be expected to know 1,200 lexical items for foundation tier, and a further 500 lexical items for higher tier. Because no vocabulary is specified for KS2 or KS3, the vocabulary list proposed for GCSE must be comprehensive and should make no specific assumptions about vocabulary previously taught. The vocabulary which pupils will be expected to know, for both comprehension and production, will be compiled with close and explicit reference for each item on the list to frequency of occurrence in the language. At least 90% of words selected must be from the 2,000 most frequent words occurring in the most widely used standard forms of the language. At higher tier pupils are expected to read texts that may include a small number of words outside the vocabulary list defined by the awarding organisation. English	

		meanings of such words must be supplied adjacent to the text for reference. No more than 2% of words in any given higher tier text may be glossed in this way. Words will be listed in the basic form commonly found in dictionaries. Where different parts of speech are derived from a single root, each part of speech will be listed separately. Further derived and inflected forms of each part of speech should not be separately listed, provided that the defined grammar covers their formation. Inflected and derived forms which follow no regular pattern should be listed as separate items under a section called 'Highly irregular inflected forms'. Words with multiple meanings but with the same part of speech (e.g., the French noun 'histoire' that can be translated by the different English words 'story' and 'history') will be listed as one item in the vocabulary list. All English equivalents that could be tested (e.g., in questions that require working from English to the target language) must be explicitly provided.	
Gramma*	GCSE students will be expected to develop and use their knowledge and understanding of grammar progressively throughout their course. The grammar requirements for GCSE are set out in two tiers: foundation and higher. Students will	Learn and be able to use the grammar specified to understand and produce meaning accurately, in oral and written modalities, and to speak with increasing fluency. The grammar to be learnt in each	In the 2021 Subject Content the overarching statement gives a little more in terms of what students are expected to do with the grammar – i.e. understand meaning, and also

	be required to apply their knowledge and understanding of grammar, appropriate to the language studied and to the relevant tier of entry, drawing on the relevant lists.	language is set out in annexes 1-3 of this document.	produce meaning, in speaking and writing Beyond this the big differences are to be found within the appendices themselves, where there is a far higher degree of specificity than previously, and elements that were vocabulary have been relocated within vocabulary
Sounds	use accurate pronunciation and intonation such as to be understood by a native speaker	Know and be able to apply the principles by which spelling represents sounds in standard or widely used forms of the language, and use clear and comprehensible pronunciation when speaking the language. The specific sound-spelling links are listed in an appendix: The list which follows specifies key differences in sound-spelling correspondences between French and English which pupils will need to learn at GCSE to be able to read and transcribe with sufficient accuracy at this level.	This element was absent from 2015