

Guidance for Using the Curriculum Time Calculator

Note: We only recommend use of the tool after having read this guidance.

Purposes of the calculator

This calculator can be used to inform decisions about MFL curriculum time allocation in KS3 and 4 classes. Ensuring sufficient curriculum time is particularly relevant, and perhaps more feasible, now there is a clearly defined GCSE subject content for French, German, and Spanish ([DfE, 2022](#)). In terms of vocabulary knowledge, the new subject content now stipulates that Awarding Organisations will be able to test GCSE students' receptive and productive knowledge of 1,200 lexical items for foundation tier, and a further 500 lexical items for higher tier. In addition, the Awarding Organisations' vocabulary lists can contain: i. up to 30 short phrases that are multi-word units and ii. up to 20 items to refer to relevant geographical or cultural places/events, thus totalling up to 1,250 items for foundation and 1,750 for higher tier.

Being able to model curriculum time in this way could be one advantage of having the new, more clearly defined subject content. Clearer goal posts can help provide one objective (albeit simplistic) way of informing curriculum allocation decisions. For example, using the tool could enable conversations around the potential consequences of having anything less than the curriculum time shown by the calculator. Such consequences may include not being able to prepare higher tier students adequately to achieve the top levels, or students' vocabulary knowledge remaining insecure due to a lack of sufficient 'revisiting' (or 'recycling') of the words in different contexts.

This calculator could be used to alert educators to when curriculum time allocation seems insufficient. If, for example, a school only provides 2 x 40-minute lessons per week in KS3 or 2 x 60-minute weekly lessons in KS4, the tool will provide evidence to support requests a) for more curriculum time and/or b) steps to mitigate the loss of curriculum time (see suggestions below).

The calculator could also be used to model different 'dual linguist' time allocation configurations, to ascertain the likelihood of dual linguists retaining 1,750 words in either language.

The need for curriculum time allocations to allow sufficient revisiting of vocabulary

Understanding the importance of **revisiting** is the first step to determining conclusions about the amount of practice needed for word retention. There is strong agreement among vocabulary researchers that a great deal of revisiting is needed for words to be retained, for example:

- Multiple exposures and use are important to consolidate knowledge and develop fluency, anywhere between 5 – 20 encounters (Nation, 2001:81).
- “If learners encounter unknown words ten times in context, sizeable learning gains may occur. However, to develop full knowledge of a word more than ten repetitions may be needed.” (Webb, 2007:46)
- “Recycling is necessary, and if it is neglected, many partially learned words will be forgotten, wasting all the effort [...]. Recycling has to be consciously built into vocabulary learning programs, and teachers must guard against presenting lexical items once and then forgetting about them, or else their students will likely do the same.” (Schmitt, 2008:343)

If students are to achieve **both receptive and active use of the vocabulary**, it is important to think systematically about useful and realistic goals given the **curriculum time** available, the need to **practise the many elements of word knowledge**, and the importance of **regular revision of the words in different kinds of sentences**.

How many words can you know by GCSE?

- A common scenario experienced by many schools is that curriculum time available = 168 weeks (36 weeks/year over 5 years, minus one term in year 11).
- Students can learn about - on average - 4 words per lesson and, critically, **retain** these in the long term (e.g., Schmitt 2004).
- Based on **retaining** approximately **10 new words/week** i.e., 4/5 words per lesson, means that under optimum learning conditions, **1,680 words** could be learned, if all are retained sufficiently well to be both understood and produced.
- This broadly aligns with the stipulation in the new GCSE subject content that a maximum of **1,750 items can be listed on** higher tier word lists.

It is crucial to understand that, **knowing all** 1,750 word families really well, including being able to produce them with different grammar and in different kinds of sentences, would mean that a candidate could get the best marks in *any* year that they took the exam.

How (and to what extent) could one mitigate fewer curriculum hours being available?

- Dual linguists may be **selected** on the basis of existing aptitude in another foreign language and therefore possess enhanced language learning capability transferable to an additional language.
- Students who have come through a robust primary school scheme of learning and have **proven robust knowledge of relevant language** on their arrival at secondary may be able cope with fewer hours at secondary school – the amount would depend on the extent and relevance to the GCSE of their pre-existing knowledge.

- With the required financial resources and available personnel, a twilight offer could be timetabled, to make up the short fall of hours in the school day. This scenario would more likely suit highly motivated students who have opted for the language.

We would recommend that any such measures would need to be evidence-based (e.g., prior aptitude and year 7 knowledge are clearly evidenced) and only put in place by a school where it is absolutely not possible to secure the necessary curriculum time, where all avenues to make this possible have been exhausted.

These measures would not compensate for an allocation of curriculum time which is a) unrealistic in terms of what students are expected to achieve or b) unpalatable and thus affects student motivation.

Caveat about using the calculator

We are making this curriculum time calculator available given that the tool has proved useful to school-based MFL educators who have tried it in order to inform decisions about different models of curriculum time allocation. However, note that this calculator can only provide one source of information, out of many others, that could be used to inform curriculum planning. We obviously do not recommend seeing curriculum or progression purely in these terms ('words learnable in time available'). There are many things to consider in individual contexts, and learning a foreign language is so much more than learning lexical items. For example, we do **not** recommend use of this tool to make unevidenced claims that 'higher tier students should be expected to learn more than five words per lesson', and that therefore less curriculum time is needed. Such a claim is not supported by research and should be avoided.

References

- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N. (2004). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N. (2008). Review Article. Instructed second language vocabulary learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 12(3), 329–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168808089921>
- Webb, S. (2007). *The effects of repetition on vocabulary knowledge*. *Applied Linguistics*, 28 (1), pp. 46-65.