



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Report on the early enactment of Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages and Brief for the revision of the curriculum specification

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INTRODUCTION

In line with the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) the new subject specification for Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages (JC MFL), a common specification for French, German, Italian and Spanish, was introduced in schools in September 2017. An early enactment review was scheduled to be undertaken by NCCA when the first cohort of students had completed the course. Unfortunately, it was necessary to postpone the review until the 2022-23 school year due to the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the students and teachers who participated in this review had experienced the three years of the curriculum, they were not required to complete CBA 2 due to the assessment adjustments introduced to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the pandemic.

This early enactment review was completed in Q1, 2023 to gather feedback and explore:

- how well the specification gets to the heart of the learning aspired to within the subject and more broadly within the Framework for Junior Cycle
- the assessment elements within the subject, as experienced by students and teachers
- how teachers are exercising their professional judgement to mediate the new specification in their schools and classrooms.

This report commences with background information that helps to contextualise the review and an overview of the consultation conducted as part of the review, followed by insights into experiences in junior cycle Modern Foreign Languages. The findings of the review have been considered by NCCA in terms of potential implications arising for both the work of the NCCA and other stakeholders in the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The final section of the document sets out proposed next steps to respond to the findings arising from this early review.

Finally, the Brief for the revision of the JC MFL specification is set out in Appendix 1, which is designed to guide the work of the development group in revising and updating the specification based on the insights and recommendations that emerged from this review.

Background information

This section provides a brief overview of the curriculum specification, its intended assessment arrangements, the assessment adjustments introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the longitudinal research study on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle, all of which is important contextual information when considering the findings below.

Overview of specification

The specification for JC MFL is designed for a minimum of 200 hours of timetabled student engagement and is organised around three interconnected strands. These strands are each further broken down using eleven elements. The table below provides a summary of the strands and related elements. The learning outcomes associated with each element are outlined in the specification which can be accessed [here](#).

Table 1: Summary of Strands and Elements

Strands	Strand 1 Communicative competence is concerned with developing students' ability to communicate meaningfully in the target language (TL).	Strand 2 Language Awareness enhances the students' general awareness about languages.	Strand 3 Socio-cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness gives students access to new cultural dimensions and encourages them to reflect on their own culture.
Elements	Listening	Reflecting on how the target language works	Learning about relevant facts, people, places, and history about the country/ countries related to the target language
	Reading	Comparing the target language with other languages they know	Learning about traditions, customs and behaviours
	Spoken production	Reflecting on how they learn languages	Comparing their culture with that of the country/countries related to the target language
	Spoken interaction		
Writing			

The assessment of JC MFL comprises of two Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs), CBA 1: *Oral Communication* and CBA 2: *Student Language Portfolio* (SLP), an Assessment Task (AT) linked to CBA 2: *Student Language Portfolio* and a final examination. The AT and the final examination are assessed by the State Examinations Commission (SEC).

Adjustments to assessment arrangements introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic

The first cohort of students to study the JC MFL specification were due to complete their three years of study in June 2020. On April 29th, 2020, as part of the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic, all junior cycle examinations were cancelled. Over the next three years, alternative assessment arrangements were put in place to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the pandemic.

In the case of MFL, this meant that CBA 2 and the AT were cancelled from 2021 to 2023 and the first final examination, excluding the AT, took place in 2022. The first full range of intended assessments outlined above will not be experienced until the academic year, 2024–25 at the earliest.

Ongoing research on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle (FWJC15)

A longitudinal study on the implementation and impact of the FWJC15 commenced in late 2020. The four-year study, based on a nationally representative sample, is capturing the views of teachers, principals, students, parents, and wider educational stakeholders on the FWJC15. As a longitudinal study, the experiences of schools will be explored over a period of four years, in order to capture the complexity, challenges and successes in enacting the FWJC15. This mixed-methods, multi-dimensional research is being carried out by a team in the University of Limerick on behalf of NCCA. To date, two interim reports have been published and the third is due to be published in Spring 2024.

The findings of this study in conjunction with the findings of the series of early enactment reviews of subjects and short courses will be of great assistance in supporting schools' ongoing work with the FWJC15 and in informing NCCA's work in revisiting and updating the Framework, if and where needed, to support high quality teaching, learning and assessment. Furthermore, the study will also collect important subject specific information, which will be important to consider alongside the insights from this review when JC MFL is scheduled for redevelopment.

Ongoing developments in language learning and teaching

The Council of Europe has engaged in extensive work on language education since the 1970s. It launched the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages** in 2001. The CEFR has been used internationally for language education to:

- promote and support the learning and teaching of modern languages
- enhance intercultural dialogue, and thus mutual understanding, social cohesion and democracy
- protect linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe
- promote the right to quality education for all.

The learning outcomes of the JC MFL specification are broadly aligned to the CEFR (A1-A2). The CEFR was updated in 2018 with the launch of **the CEFR Companion Volume**. Following consultation and engagement from stakeholders across Europe, the final version of the CEFR Companion Volume was published in 2020. The terminology used in descriptors has been changed to be gender-neutral and modality-inclusive. Therefore, “listening” and “speaking” have changed to the more inclusive terms of “understanding” and “oral production” respectively. Changes were also made to certain descriptors to remove the idealised native speaker as a reference point for the competence of a language user/learner. While the learning outcomes of the JC MFL specification are broadly aligned to the 2001 CEFR and its descriptors, it is important to note that the CEFR Companion Volume was published after the specification was developed.

Overview of the review process

One of the key purposes of the review process is to consult with teachers, students and stakeholders on their experiences of enacting the curriculum. Consultation is a key aspect of NCCA's work, where advice is shaped by feedback from consultations with the public, schools, settings, education interests and others (NCCA, 2022b). The following section presents an overview of the areas explored and the methodological approach employed during this consultation which is underpinned by the principles set out in [NCCA's Research Strategy \(2023 - 2026\)](#), and provides a summary of engagement during the consultation.

Areas explored during the review

The guiding areas and topics explored during the review are outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Areas and topics explored during the review

Area	Topics explored
Working with the specification	Course overview Working with learning outcomes Planning for learning, teaching and assessment
Assessment	Ongoing assessment Assessment for the Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings Insights into the use of examples of student work Final assessment
Feedback and Reporting	Ongoing reporting and using the Features of Quality
Other areas of discussion	Use of technology Time allocation Key skills Inclusion <i>Resources as Gaeilge</i> Transition to senior cycle

Methodological approach

This early enactment review was conducted in conjunction with the early enactment review of Junior Cycle Visual Art from February to March 2023 in line with a format agreed by the Council and Board for Junior Cycle for similar early enactment reviews of the junior cycle subjects in Phase 1 and 2 (English, Science and Business). Feedback was gathered in the following ways:

- school visits to capture the perspectives and experiences of MFL teachers and students from 2nd – 6th year
- regional focus group meetings in Limerick, Galway, and Dublin (24 participants)
- an online survey (57 responses)
- written submissions (5 submissions).

Consent was sought from students and adults aged 18 years and over for their participation in the consultation. Parental consent and student assent were sought for school visit participants under the age of 18. Data gathered through the school visits and online survey were anonymised and transcribed, and all data from the consultation was stored as digital files in line with NCCA’s Data Protection Policy (2020). The privacy of all participants has been maintained through anonymisation, except where an organisation has given explicit permission to be identified as contributing to the consultation through written submissions.

A thematic approach was used for data analysis, framed by a set of guiding themes used throughout the review. This helped identify and analyse themes within the data gathered. Quotes from participants and stakeholders are italicised throughout this report.

School visits

The schools selected for the visits were a stratified sample of seven schools chosen from those schools who responded to an open call to participate in the review. There were 126 responses to this open call, with the breakdown of selected schools shown in Table 3 below. Two schools had to withdraw from the process at very short notice. Due to the design of the review schedule, these visits could not be rescheduled to facilitate other schools from the list of interested respondees in time. The school visits comprised two focus groups involving students from 2nd to 6th year, and the MFL teachers.

Table 3: Breakdown of schools selected for the review

Breakdown of school type	National statistics (%)	Number of schools selected	Representative %
ETB	35%	2	28.5%
Voluntary Secondary School	50%	5	71.5%
Small (1 – 400)	38%	1	14.3%
Medium (401 – 800)	46%	4	57.2%
Large (801+)	16%	2	28.5%
DEIS	27%	2	28.5%
Mixed	70%	5	71.4%

(note: two schools had to withdraw due to unforeseen circumstances. These schools are included in the list above.)

The students selected for the focus groups were a randomised sample selected by the MFL teachers at that school. They were selected from a sample of classes from 2nd – 6th year, including Transition Year. The teachers participating in the focus groups during the school visits were

members of the MFL department of each school, with all four curricular languages represented (French, German, Italian, and Spanish) across the group of schools.

Regional focus group meetings

Attendees at the regional focus groups could self-select for the event they wished to attend by signing up through the website. These events were promoted through NCCA's social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn). Invitations were also sent to other educational stakeholders and partners. Attendees included MFL teachers and representatives from COGG Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG).

Survey

A survey was used to gather feedback from anyone who wished to share their experience of JC MFL. This was shared online via www.ncca.ie, and across NCCA's social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn). 57 responses to the survey were submitted. The breakdown of survey participants can be found below. Participants could select one or more answers.

Table 4: Breakdown of survey participants

Breakdown of survey participants	Number of participants
Post-primary teacher (French)	30
Post-primary teacher (German)	17
Post-primary teacher (Spanish)	14
Post-primary teacher (Italian)	2
Post-primary teacher (not teaching MFL)	1
Parent	12
Student	1
Teacher educator	1

Written Submissions

An open invitation for written submissions was made through www.ncca.ie, which was shared directly with our education partners. Written submissions were received from the following 5 stakeholders:

- An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)
- The Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) MFL Team
- The Department of Education (DE) Inspectors of Modern Foreign Languages
- The State Examinations Commission (SEC)
- Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI).

Feedback from the review

This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the review. The guiding areas of discussion used throughout the review (Table 2), framed the analysis of the feedback received. The majority of the feedback is presented thematically and, where this is the case, includes perspectives and insights from a wide range of participants. As many aspects of junior cycle are experienced in an integrated way by students and teachers, some overlap across the areas of feedback will be evident below.

Working with the strands, elements and learning outcomes

Most respondents reported that the learning outcomes were clear and represented what students should be able to achieve at the end of the three years of junior cycle. Some participants highlighted the opportunities that come with learning outcomes, which included a higher level of teacher autonomy and freedom to choose content that is relevant to their learners' context. As one teacher noted in this regard,

Each individual teacher can choose to prioritise different areas. I think overall they are appropriate learning outcomes for students to reach a level of pre-intermediate Spanish. (Teacher, Survey)

Overall, the learning outcomes approach to planning for learning, teaching and assessment align well with the communicative approach. They form a rationale which is an exciting departure which liberates planning and align well with highly effective practices for teaching approaches, assessment moments and fostering student ownership of learning. (Teacher, School Visit)

Teachers also reported a number of challenges in working with the learning outcomes of the MFL specification. Many participants reported that, although they are written in clear and accessible language, their broadness poses a challenge when planning for teaching and learning.

Some respondents pointed to the need to clarify certain keywords such as “*familiar topics*”, “*strategies*”, “*digital technologies*”. Some teachers expressed the view that there may be too many learning outcomes. Other participants referred to some of the “*action verbs*” in the learning outcomes as unclear or potentially too difficult for students.

Generally, teachers felt that the integrated nature of the specification was very important, and useful for teaching a language in a communicative way. At the same time, they reported that they found this to be one of the most challenging aspects of working with the specification.

Most teachers were familiar with the terminology used for the elements in strand 1, as these elements refer to language skills. However, some teachers questioned a perceived lack of consistency in the structure of the JC MFL specification and its apparent deviation from the structure of the CEFR Companion Volume and the new Leaving Certificate language specifications.

I would rather that the specification was aligned directly with the CEFR. I see no reason why there are differences. (Teacher, Survey)

Although teachers' feedback was very positive about strand 3 in general and they valued the development of sociocultural knowledge and intercultural awareness, many teachers admitted that they focused more on learning outcomes in strand 1, especially when they felt they were under time pressure. Some teachers noted that the learning outcomes of strand 3 could be sometimes given less attention because they were not assessed in the final examination.

The exam is listening and reading comprehension and there is no reward for any of the other strands in it. (Teacher, School Visit)

This sentiment was echoed by students, who reported differing levels of classroom engagement with the learning outcomes from strand 3, compared to those in other strands. They also expressed some frustration that there wasn't a greater emphasis on assessing these learning outcomes in the final examination.

The view that the learning outcomes in strands 2 and 3 were difficult to assess was reinforced by the State Examinations Commission, whose written submission suggested that some of the learning outcomes would need to be amended to facilitate assessment in a written examination.

While outcomes in strand 2 and 3 contribute indirectly – through the intended integrated nature of the learning activities and otherwise to achievement in the examination, they are not directly targeted. A rewording of some of the L.O.s in Strands 2 and 3 would lend more easily to their assessment in the final examination.. (Written submission, State Examinations Commission)

Many teachers felt that the learning outcomes were a useful tool for reflection. As well as reflecting on their own practice, many teachers reported using them with students to reflect on what students were able to do at a particular point in time during the three years of junior cycle. They reported using the learning outcomes as reference points when discussing student progress with parents, with many teachers reporting that it had helped them in giving students formative feedback.

Planning for Teaching, Learning and Assessment

The JC MFL specification is a common specification across French, German, Italian and Spanish. Even though the Junior Certificate (and Leaving Certificate) syllabus for French, German, Italian and Spanish had been identical since the 1980s, each language had their own syllabus document. The move to a common specification has received positive as well as negative feedback. Teachers reported a more collaborative approach to planning across different languages, which was seen as a welcome development by most teachers. This sentiment was echoed by the Department of Education Inspectorate which commented that

Subject inspection reports make mention of the development of an MFL department as well as the development of an overall MFL subject plan. This is a positive step, especially in schools with a small number of language teachers, as it supports collaborative planning and discussion. (Written submission, DE Inspectorate)

Confidence and competence in using the specification to plan lessons was often linked to the level of collaborative practice within the school's MFL department. Teachers who reported a high level of engagement with the learning outcomes also reported that their level of confidence in planning had increased over time.

Many teachers commented on the benefits of increased collaboration such as professional discussion and sharing resources and expertise. For many teachers, the main challenge is finding the time to plan effectively. Due to the new common specification and an increased need to plan collaboratively across languages, teachers reported a reduction in language-specific planning, which was seen as a challenge. Many teachers reported that a collaborative approach to planning for all MFLs was too rigid and inflexible and did not allow for teacher autonomy. These teachers saw the value in an MFL department approach to some aspects of planning but felt that there was not enough focus on individual planning that could be more responsive to student needs.

*Units need to be designed in response to student learning and student needs. However, there may be different need in French vs in German classes. How do we collaboratively plan for experiences that are broad enough to meet the needs of all?
(Teacher, Survey)*

Teachers suggested that further clarity was required about the role of individual and collaborative planning for individual language teachers and MFL departments.

When discussing the reference point from which teachers plan their lessons, some participants viewed the learning outcomes as helpful in this regard, while others noted that the final examination and their chosen textbook was their reference point for planning and that they continue to teach the topics and themes they had always taught.

When participants were of the view that the specification should be more prescriptive, there tended to be a greater importance placed on the final examination in terms of setting boundaries for the learning. There was a strong sense from all participants that the content of the final examination has a strong influence on how they plan and teach. Others also expressed how difficult it can be to know when a learning outcome is 'covered' or what is examinable.

Teachers expressed a need for more clarity and guidelines on using learning outcomes for planning for teaching, learning and assessment. Many teachers felt that the approach followed during CPD events focussed largely on collaborative planning, but teachers expressed the need for more language specific CPD to support them in using learning outcomes in a flexible and autonomous way. There was a strong consensus that clear guidelines or examples of planning along with a more flexible approach to planning as an MFL department would help them to plan more effectively.

Assessment

Ongoing assessment

There was strong evidence in the review across all modes of engagement that the implementation of the FWJC15 has had a positive impact on ongoing assessment in JC MFL with more varied

assessment practices being used regularly. As noted above, teachers reported using learning outcomes with students to reflect on their learning.

When describing how their learning was assessed in JC MFL, students demonstrated that they were very familiar with the language of formative assessment, they showed some familiarity with the Features of Quality (FoQs) associated with CBAs, and they were very familiar with the descriptors of the level of achievement in CBAs, as well as the grade descriptors for the final examination. When asked about typical ways in which their learning was assessed, many referred to a variety of assessment methods. All had experienced tests, exams, and CBAs, as well as tasks, project work, informal checks on their learning during language lessons as well as homework. A small number of students mentioned their portfolio as a form of assessment. Where students used a portfolio, some also referred to how it helped them in their exam. Some students also completed oral exams with their teachers throughout JC.

Classroom-Based Assessments

It is important to note that most teachers and students have very limited experience of CBA 2, as this has not been completed since 2021. Therefore, most of the feedback relating to CBAs refers to CBA 1 Oral Communication.

CBA 1 Oral Communication: Overview

The purpose of CBA 1 is to develop and enhance students' skills of oral production and interaction. In completing this CBA students choose between an interview, role-play, presentation, or conversation in response to stimulus material. This is followed by a number of simple, unscripted questions appropriate to the age and stage of language learning, by the teacher.

Feedback on CBA 1

The feedback in relation to CBA 1 was overwhelmingly positive. Most respondents saw this as one of the most positive aspects of the new course. They referred to increased confidence in speaking the target language, learner autonomy, increased creativity, heightened student engagement as well as the development of the Junior Cycle Key Skills. Many participants reported that this CBA had a positive effect on teaching and learning as it has increased the focus on oral communication from 1st year and this has led to increased confidence and improved oral proficiency as well as students' increased motivation to speak the target language. Many teachers reported that the skills developed during CBA 1 were very useful for lifelong learning.

Enhancing students' confidence, emphasis on spoken production and interaction which I think is great. More meaningful communication. Common level is great for mixed ability classes. Overall, I feel students are more confident as language learners. (Teacher, Survey)

Many teachers also commented on the potential of CBA 1 as an inclusive assessment, particularly when students played a part within a group.

Students' enjoyment of CBA 1 was often linked to the level of choice and creativity they had when completing their CBA. Both students and teachers who integrated CBA 1 into their everyday classroom practice spoke positively about the experience. When students had the

freedom to choose the format and topic, they experienced the CBA as an opportunity to use the language and develop their research and oral presentation skills. Students reported less engagement and enjoyment of the process when their choice and autonomy was limited. Some students reported feeling frustrated because they saw the purpose of their CBA solely as an assessment of language skills. These students reported that they performed their CBA for their teacher and there was no engagement from their classmates, and they tended to view CBA 1 as something of little value.

Similarly, when teachers viewed CBA 1 as an opportunity to be creative, autonomous and enjoy the language learning experience, they reported high levels of engagement and considered CBA 1 a very positive experience. They often commented that CBA 1 supports the development of many, if not all, of the JC Key Skills and found it a valuable experience.

When teachers reported reducing the element of choice for students to reflect what had been covered in class, they felt that, even though their students were better prepared to use the language they had learned in class, the experience overall was less positive, and students were less engaged.

The CBA process also presented some challenges for participants. The main challenges identified were increased levels of stress and anxiety and a perceived lack of reward for students' efforts. Furthermore, there was strong consensus that the language proficiency of students at the end of 2nd year is not advanced enough for an oral communication task of 3-4 minutes, especially when students are encouraged to research topics of interest.

It is important to note here that many teachers reported that the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions had a negative impact on students' confidence and their classroom practice as oral communication was hugely affected by online learning and by protective measures such as social distancing and mask wearing in schools.

While it was still reported that CBA 1 was having a positive impact on oral proficiency, teachers and some students lamented the absence of an externally assessed oral examination. When probed about the potential of CBA 1 as an assessment of oral language skills, students often commented that they viewed CBA 1 as a different type of assessment, which was very enjoyable and important, but did not replace the need for a formal oral examination.

Classroom-Based Assessment 2: Student Language Portfolio (SLP): Overview

Over the three years of junior cycle, each student develops a language portfolio. The student language portfolio focuses on the process of language learning and places the learner at the centre of teaching, assessment, and learning. The second Classroom-Based Assessment requires students to choose three pieces from those compiled over time and to present them for assessment. (MFL specification, p21)

Feedback on CBA 2

It was very clear from the feedback that, due to the cancellation of CBA 2 because of Covid, many teachers had not used SLPs over the course of studying the subject. The teachers who reported using the SLP as a pedagogical tool to develop language awareness, socio-cultural knowledge and

intercultural awareness valued it highly and spoke about the positive impact it has on students' overall development as language learners. One teacher noted that:

Students' positive engagement and their creativity. Keeping a log of their own learning is very encouraging for them. Also, this is a wonderful way to review their expansion in vocabulary and progress in their mastery of the language. (Teacher, Regional Focus Group)

While there was consensus that the SLP has significant potential for students to take ownership over their learning and can support a student-centred approach to language learning and teaching, the practices associated with portfolio learning have not been embedded into normal classroom practice.

Two themes emerged from the feedback regarding the challenges of developing a SLP. Firstly, teachers reported a lack of clarity about the concept of a SLP, which may originate in the naming of CBA 2 as *Student Language Portfolio*. This means that the term Student Language Portfolio has two meanings in the specification: the assessment moment at the end of term 1 in third year, as well as the process of creating a portfolio over the three years of JC MFL. Many teachers also believed that students are expected to draft and redraft their pieces of work during a three-week window associated with CBA 2. This echoes a concern articulated in the written submission below:

One of the first challenges encountered by teachers for Classroom-Based Assessment 2: The Student Language Portfolio was confusion caused by the portfolio, the Student Language Portfolio, and the Classroom-Based Assessment both having the same name, and this continues to persist. Teachers conflate the two and it has also served to be reductive to practices around portfolio learning in Modern Foreign Languages as, for a large volume of teachers, the purpose of the Student Language Portfolio is to provide a repository to store pieces of work for the Classroom-Based Assessment moment. (Written submission, JCT)

Some participants in the review reiterated their concern around over-assessment and suggested removing CBA 2 completely, while others suggested that CBA 2 could be redesigned to be an oral interview based on work from students' portfolios, serving to strengthen perceptions around the portfolio and reinforce the communicative approach.

Students who had experience of CBA 2 generally saw it as a positive assessment. They particularly liked the element of choice and the fact that they could play to their strengths.

Good to have choice in the portfolio to get the best mark that you can. (Student, School Visit)

They also saw their portfolio as a helpful revision tool for the final examination, although students also commented that there should be a closer link between their portfolio and the final examination.

Annotated examples of student work

Since the publication of the MFL specification in 2017, NCCA have worked with teachers and students to create annotated examples of student work to support teachers in their understanding of standards and expectations. These examples are available to teachers on www.curriculumonline.ie. All teachers who participated in the review reported having used the examples of student work at some point and there was broad consensus that the examples were a very useful support for teachers. Some teachers reported being frustrated at a perceived lack of consistency in the standards and expectations across the four languages. Many teachers reported the need for more examples and for the examples to be of equal standard across the four languages. There was some frustration among teachers when it came to the examples in the “exceptional” band, as they seemed unrealistic and unattainable for most students and did not reflect the language used in the FoQ.

Some teachers reported having built their own bank of similar examples of students’ work which they now show to students, reporting that this works very well to exemplify CBAs.

Subject, Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) Meetings

Teachers were overwhelmingly positive about SLAR meetings, highlighting them as one of the most positive changes to emerge from the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle. They appreciated the time for professional dialogue, sharing practice as well as the opportunity to discuss standards of student work. The challenges around SLARs were largely from a manageability perspective, particularly for one-teacher-departments where there were no other teachers of the same language in the locality.

I am the only German teacher in my school. Having to find a colleague from outside my school to do the SLAR meeting with, is far from ideal, esp. if the schools have a different background (e.g., DEIS vs voluntary school). If there is just one teacher their professional judgement on the descriptors should suffice, esp. if they are oral examiners for the Leaving Certificate and used to assess students' work. (Teacher, Survey)

Some teachers suggested that SLARs could take place as an MFL department to avoid having to arrange a SLAR with different schools. They reported that additional guidance could be included in the Assessment Guidelines to advise on how schools with only one teacher of a language can conduct a SLAR meeting.

The Assessment Task

Students complete a formal written Assessment Task (AT) to be submitted to the SEC for marking along with the final examination for MFL. It is allocated 10% of the marks used to determine the grade awarded by the SEC. As the key purpose of the Assessment Task is to encourage student reflection on the process of language learning, the questions and answers are in the language of schooling.

The feedback on the AT was very limited as students have never completed an AT which was marked by the SEC. Students only experienced completing the AT in 2020, when the final exam was cancelled.

Although some teachers suggested that it helped students improve their ability to reflect on their work, the vast majority of participants expressed negative views about the AT. Concern was expressed that the AT is to be completed in the language of schooling, which assesses students' literacy in English, rather than their language proficiency. It was suggested that this can create a negative 'backwash effect' in the classroom, with the need to speak English rather than the target language to develop the skills to complete this task. Many teachers reported that this AT is inequitable with EAL students and that students with low literacy levels are at a particular disadvantage.

The Final Examination

Many teachers and students reported having limited experience of the final examination as it has only been conducted once, although teachers also reported feedback on the sample exam paper which was published in 2020.

Students reported that the exam was accessible, and they liked that the written questions were quite broad. Students further reported that they found the listening comprehension the most challenging component, although they agreed that this was a worthwhile part of the exam. When probed how this could be improved, students suggested that they would like to focus more on this during class, so that they could get used to different accents and different speakers, which would enhance their comprehension skills.

Many teachers spoke positively about the introduction of questions in the target language and the accessibility of the exam, which allowed all students to achieve at some level. There was broad consensus that the use of the target language for comprehension questions was a positive improvement on the Junior Certificate examination. However, for many teachers this did not go far enough, and they suggested that more questions, if not all, should be in the target language. Teachers again highlighted the use of questions written in English as inequitable for EAL students and students with low literacy levels in English.

The common level exam was viewed by many teachers as being theoretically more inclusive. However, in practice, it posed many challenges for teachers as they found that students who struggle with MFL find aspects of the exam very difficult while students who excel at MFL are not challenged enough within the exam. Teachers suggested that this could be improved.

The concept of the common paper is great for inclusivity, but it doesn't challenge the better students. The paper needs to show this. (Teacher, Survey)

Some teachers reported that the grade bands in the final examination were too broad, particularly the 'Merit' band, claiming that it does not give enough information on the student's achievement, and that this was demotivating for students. Students echoed these feelings to some extent.

Another significant concern raised by respondents was the perceived lack of consistency between languages. Teachers were frustrated by the differences in expectations for different languages, with many reporting that the exam in some languages was more difficult than others.

Teachers report that the difference of standard and structure between the 4 exams is exceptionally frustrating. They feel the MFL exams should all be of similar length

and level, but that at the moment they differ significantly, which is unfair, despite all four having a common subject specification. (Written submission, JCT)

There was a consensus that the final examination as experienced to date does not sufficiently reflect the learning outcomes across the three strands of the specification. Many teachers reported a disconnect between the creativity, the rich socio-cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness that the specification aims to develop, and the final examination.

There could be more openness for students. It could be more imaginative; it seems to be dealing with the same themes. It can be interpreted by teachers that they can just teach the same as before when there is so much opportunity to be creative in the course. (Teacher, Regional Focus Group)

Some teachers reported the negative impact this has on learning and teaching. This sentiment was echoed by many students who reported that they really enjoyed learning about the countries and cultures associated with the target language but reporting that this was not reflected appropriately in the examination.

Students reported that the exam had a strong impact on the way they learned, particularly in 3rd Year. Many reported that rote learning paragraphs, completing exam papers and weekly tests were a normal part of classroom practice. Some reported that this was useful preparation for the exam, while others reported that they would have liked to learn more about the culture of the target language country and complete more project work.

Although most students reported that experiential learning and project work were more enjoyable and engaging, they also appreciated being prepared for the final exam. They felt that tests and practice exams helped them reduce the anxiety around the final examination and were helpful for tracking progress.

Feedback and Reporting

There was broad consensus across all modes of engagement that the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle has had a positive impact on the language of reporting. Teachers reported using more detailed feedback in their reporting which they considered a positive change. Many reported incorporating the language of the learning outcomes as well as the FoQ in their feedback and reporting to students. They also noted that although this may have been difficult in the beginning, they are now more comfortable with this language.

As noted earlier, there is evidence that students are very familiar with the language of formative assessment. Some students reported getting regular oral and written feedback from their teacher that helped them improve their work. Others reported that they received helpful feedback in their school reports, but they would benefit from this type of feedback on tasks and homework. Teachers reported an increase in their use of formative assessment since the introduction of the new specification. They reported an increase in the use of learning intentions and success criteria as well as an increase in their use of bespoke feedback to students on their learning. Many teachers reported that this was helpful, although some commented that providing feedback in this way takes a lot more time. Many teachers commented on using more learning-focused feedback

in reports and parent-teacher meetings, with some referring directly to the language of the learning outcomes to support them in framing their feedback.

Features of Quality (FoQ)

Many respondents noted the role of the FoQ for CBAs in enhancing feedback to students. It was suggested that they were useful and clear and helped teachers in their assessment of CBA 1 as well as in providing feedback associated with the work completed by students. Teachers reported using the language of the FoQ with students and in reporting achievement to parents.

*I think the Features of Quality are a very useful and positive aspect of the CBA.
(Teacher, Survey)*

*[Features of Quality are] the best part of the CBAs I think and the training that
went with them was exceptional. (Teacher, Survey)*

Some participants found the FoQ challenging to apply, in particular their broad nature. This was seen mostly as a negative aspect for teachers who were concerned with inter-school equity. Some reported that the assessment of CBA 1 and the awarding of descriptors varied between schools, and teachers found this difficult when explaining or awarding descriptors to students.

Teachers raised two specific concerns about the wording of the FoQ for CBA 1. Firstly, the FoQ don't sufficiently discriminate against a student who reads directly from a script. It was suggested that a reference to the use of written prompts in the FoQ would be helpful. Secondly, teachers expressed the view that the FoQ did not sufficiently discriminate in favour of creativity and authentic communication.

*Should creativity be in the features of quality because in my SLAR my colleagues'
students will have better descriptors. This is not fair when they have been drilled on
three topics. (Teacher, Regional Focus Group)*

When discussing the awarding of the level of achievement for CBA 1, some teachers struggled to differentiate between work that is deemed "Above expectations" and work described as "Exceptional". They felt that the differences described in the FoQ were very small, but the language of the descriptors did not always reflect that. Some were not comfortable with the descriptors "In line with expectations" and "Yet to meet expectations" and felt that this language was harmful to the self-esteem of young people. One of the concerns raised by teachers and students was the lack of familiarity that parents had with the new terminology including the language of descriptors, and this was sometimes a difficulty.

Many participants have very limited experience of the JCPA, and the general consensus was that this needs more time to embed. They reported that parent-teacher meetings were particularly helpful to explain the assessment arrangements to parents but that the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on face-to-face parent-teacher meetings and parents would need more time to get used to the changes.

Students also expressed frustration with the time delay in getting their JCPA. They mostly reported that by the time they received their JCPA they had forgotten about their CBA, and it didn't really have much value. Other students reported getting their descriptor after the teachers'

SLAR meeting and this was viewed as positive as they still remembered their CBA and found the feedback useful.

Some concerns were expressed about aspects of the final examination arrangements, including a perceived difficulty in students attaining the 'Distinction' grade, and a sense that other descriptor bands were too broad.

Use of technology

Different perspectives were offered regarding technology, depending on the digital resources available in schools. There was a clear sense that technology can offer immense opportunities for language learning and assessment, and that Covid-19 has had a positive impact in this area. However, there continues to be a need for CPD support in the use of digital technologies.

There are many opportunities to integrate the best elements of technology into the students learning which would make their learning more engaging. (Teacher, Survey)

Time allocation

Many teachers expressed a desire for an increase in the time allocation for their subject. They report that the current allocation often requires them to skip aspects of certain learning outcomes. Where this happens, teachers reported that they tend to concentrate on knowledge and skills that are needed for the final examination at the expense of the development of oral proficiency and socio-cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness.

Key Skills

The inclusion of key skills in the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 was seen as a positive development by many respondents. The development of these key skills was seen as critical to enabling students to improve their confidence and to prepare for life after post-primary school. Many respondents considered that there was an appropriate alignment of Key Skills of JC with the JC MFL specification. Many pointed to the key skills of Communicating, Being creative and Working with others, highlighting the importance of the SLP, problem-solving and reflection most frequently. Many also mentioned the CBAs as providing useful opportunities to develop and demonstrate key skills. Some teachers suggested that the link between JC MFL and Key Skills of JC may need some further clarification, and that further support was required for teachers in developing these skills in the MFL classroom.

Inclusion

Responses to questions around inclusion were mixed. The theme of inclusion was often interpreted through the lens of the final examination, with comments most frequently referring to the course and the examination in an interchangeable way. Some respondents were very positive about the MFL specification and inclusion, suggesting that the common level specification is very suitable for mixed ability classes. Some teachers reported that the learning outcomes were by their nature inclusive. Other teachers referred to large class sizes and time constraints as barriers

to creating an inclusive environment. Teachers expressed the need for more targeted support and concrete resources that can be used in the MFL classroom to support inclusion.

Others were not in favour of a common specification and would prefer to revert to two levels, frustrated by the lack of support provided in this area.

Mixed ability teaching v difficult (...) I'm unfortunately back to teaching the old course and the old way. Gets results. (Teacher, Survey)

When asked about the experiences of the Level 2 Learning Programme, most participants reported having had no experience of this programme.

Teachers of students who follow a L2LP and study aspects of the MFL specification at Level 3 highlighted the planning process and the lack of resources available as the biggest challenges. Some teachers indicated that they still found it very difficult to understand the L2LP. This sentiment is echoed in a written submission by PPLI suggesting that examples of success and practical guidelines for MFL teachers and other stakeholders in schools could be helpful in this regard.

Supports as Gaeilge

Teachers who teach in Irish-medium schools expressed a desire for further support through the Irish language. This sentiment was echoed in the written submission from COGG who argued that additional supports are needed in the country's L1 and L2 schools to implement the specification effectively and embed it better in the context of Ireland's bilingual setting.

Transition to Senior Cycle

There was a strong feeling that the impact of Covid-19 cannot be underestimated for students who have recently completed JC MFL. Teachers reported a gap in knowledge and skills required for senior cycle. Others reported misalignment of students' MFL learning in the junior cycle and that in the senior cycle stage. It was noted that there is now a strong focus on student-centred learning in JC, and this is not reflected at SC where the focus remains on the terminal exam.

Early insights, recommendations, and next steps

NCCA would like to acknowledge and thank the teachers, students and other stakeholders who contributed to this review. Their feedback was very insightful into how the JC MFL specification has been enacted and experienced.

This section of the report considers the feedback from the review to identify key insights and recommendations. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge that curriculum change is a complex process that takes time to achieve; and neither teachers nor a single cohort of students experienced the curriculum and assessment arrangements as intended due to the disruption caused by the pandemic. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the extraordinary effort made by MFL teachers to support student engagement with the new curriculum during very challenging circumstances.

The feedback is explored under two headings:

- feedback directly related to the JC MFL
- feedback related to the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015).

Feedback directly related to the JC MFL

Reflecting on the feedback collected during the review, there is evidence of successful enactment of the specification and that classroom practices and student experiences continue to evolve. The review indicated that:

- students, teachers, and wider stakeholders have responded positively to key features of the specification, including the increased focus on oral proficiency, creativity, and the development of sociocultural knowledge and intercultural awareness
- teachers have broadened their approach to assessment and now include more varied assessments, including practical tasks and projects, which is viewed positively by students
- teachers are providing greater levels of formative feedback to their students, which is appreciated by students
- students are enjoying opportunities provided by CBA 1, including the freedom to explore their own interests and to present their own work
- teachers have engaged meaningfully with collaborative planning and are very positive about the SLAR process.

The feedback outlined in this report will inform future curriculum development of JC MFL.

Table 5: Challenges identified and recommended responses

Challenge identified	Recommended response
Some aspects of language and terminology used in the specification are not aligned with up-to-date developments in the CEFR	Review and update the specification to improve alignment and consider the inclusion of a glossary of terms in the MFL specification to explain key terms.
The exponents in the specification do not reflect an action-oriented approach as advocated now in the CEFR	Review and update the exponents in the specification and consider the development of guidance material to support planning with learning outcomes.
More clarity is needed on the role of individual languages within the MFL specification and what this means for collaborative and individual planning	Add clarification on the rationale for a common MFL specification and explain what this means for planning for teaching, learning and assessment in each individual language.
The clarity of some learning outcomes could be improved.	Review and update the specification to improve the clarity of learning outcomes, especially those identified during the review as being challenging to plan for teaching and learning and challenging to assess.
A reference to creativity and authentic communication, as well as the use of written prompts is needed in the FoQ for CBA1.	Review the language used across the Features of Quality for CBA 1 to improve clarity.
There is some confusion between the role of the student language portfolio (SLP) for teaching and learning and the role of the SLP in CBA2.	Change the name of CBA 2 from “Student Language Portfolio” to “Showcasing the Student Language Portfolio”. Develop and publish portfolio guidelines to support the development of the SLP from 1 st Year.
The oral language proficiency required for CBA 1 is very challenging after only 1.5 years of language learning.	Reconsider the order of CBA 1 and CBA 2. Clarify the role of creating oral texts for the SLP and in CBA 2 and advise on how they can be used in the development of oral proficiency over the course of JC.

Additional examples of student work are required to support teachers in engaging with CBAs and in SLAR meetings.

Work with schools and stakeholders to develop, quality assure and publish a wider range of examples of student work across all levels of achievement.

Clarify the purpose of these examples in the Assessment Guidelines and on curriculumonline.ie.

Review and update Assessment Guidelines to include advice on timetabling SLARs for single teacher schools.

Feedback related to the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)

It is worth noting that the insights from this review that relate to the wider implementation of FWJC15 echo many of the insights that emerged from the reviews of other junior cycle subjects. In addition, these insights also resonate with some of the themes emerging from the longitudinal study on the implementation and impact of the FWJC15. However, they also offer a subject-specific perspective that provides additional information on some of the themes emerging from that study.

The insights set out below are reported for consideration by all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle.

Professional time and planning

Professional time for teachers was introduced to support schools in their enactment of the Framework for Junior Cycle. This time is valued by teachers in supporting planning for teaching, learning and assessment. More time for planning, and guidance on how to plan for teaching, learning and assessment, including the integration of learning outcomes across all three strands and the integration of key skills, would be welcomed by teachers of JC MFL.

Assessment and reporting

The broader approach to assessment in Junior Cycle, although welcomed by teachers, is not without challenges.

The shift to a common level examination has been somewhat challenging for teachers. It may be helpful to provide a clearer explanation for the rationale for moving from two levels (higher and ordinary) to common level.

The use of different language to describe the level of achievement in CBAs and the Final Examinations was questioned, and the narrow Distinction band was criticised as it reduces the numbers of students awarded the highest level of achievement.

Feedback on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement suggests the need for JCPAs to be issued earlier and that further supports are required to explain its relevance to parents.

SLAR meetings

The timetabling of SLAR meetings can be difficult, particularly for schools with a single teacher in a particular MFL who would benefit from additional advice and support to organise and timetable SLAR meetings with teachers from their own or another school(s).

Support for Parents/ Guardians

An information campaign for parents to support them in understanding the new assessment approaches and grading system for both CBAs and the final examination would be welcome.

Next Steps

Based on the insights and recommendations presented above, and cognisant of the limitations of this early insights review, the following next steps are proposed:

- Convene a JC MFL Development Group to progress the proposed responses set out in the Brief appended to this report
- The feedback from the review will be shared with all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the FWJC15
- The Executive, in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders, will revise and develop guidance and supports as outlined in Table 5 above.

Appendix 1: Brief for the revision of JC MFL

Arising from the Early Enactment Review of Junior Cycle MFL (2023), a development group will be convened to undertake the task of revising the curriculum specification for Junior Cycle MFL (2017) in response to the insights and recommendations in this report.

This Brief is derived from the recommendations in Table 5 that directly relate to the curriculum specification and is designed to provide the basis for revising the JC MFL curriculum specification. The development group's work will align with the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) and the technical form for curriculum specifications, as outlined below.

The specification will be at a common level.

It will be designed to be taught in a minimum of 200 hours and will include the following sections:

Table 5: Features of junior cycle curriculum specifications

Section		What it will contain
1	Introduction to junior cycle	This will be common to all specifications and will summarise the main features of the <i>Framework for Junior Cycle</i> .
2	Rationale	This will describe the nature and purpose of the subject as well as the general demands and capacities that it will place on, and require of, students. The text will, as appropriate, aim to draw attention to challenges and any access issues associated with study of the subject for students with specific needs or disabilities.
3	Aim	A concise aim for the subject will be presented.
4	Links with Statements of learning, Key skills and the six indicators of Wellbeing	How the subject is linked to central features of learning and teaching at junior cycle will be highlighted and explained.
5	Course Overview	An overview of the subject will illustrate how it is organised and will set out the learning involved in strands and learning outcomes. This section also highlights continuity and progression from earlier phases of education and progression to senior cycle. In addition, this section outlines some approaches to teaching and learning that teachers may find helpful when enacting this specification.

6	Expectations for students	Each strand should include a brief outline of the essence of the strand. The learning outcomes will outline the knowledge, understanding, skills and values students should be able to demonstrate having studied modern foreign languages in junior cycle. The Key Skills of Junior Cycle, as appropriate, will be embedded in the learning outcomes of the specification. The learning outcomes should be broad enough to allow all learners to achieve but should provide enough specificity to ensure that, for the most part, they can be measured and assessed.
7	Assessment and reporting	This section refers to both formative and summative assessment. It outlines the assessment component/s through which students will present evidence of learning on an ongoing basis, and for the purposes of recording achievement for the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA). This description of assessment is supplemented by separate assessment guidelines.
	Appendices	As required.

Amendments and updates will be made to sections 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the JC MFL curriculum specification (2017), as well as the appendices in line with the recommendations set out in this report.

More specifically, the revision of the specification will consider and address the following:

Table 6: Amendments and updates to the JC MFL specification

Terminology and language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take account of recent developments in the terminology used in the CEFR CV • Include a glossary of terms in the MFL specification to explain key terms • Review the exponents in the specification to reflect an action-oriented approach.
Classroom-based Assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider renaming CBA 2 from “Student Language Portfolio” to “Showcasing the Student Language Portfolio” • Reconsider the order of CBA 1 and CBA 2 and in doing so, explore ways in which CBA 1 can further enhance, support and improve students’ oral proficiency.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify the role of creating oral texts and advise on how they can be used in the development of oral proficiency over the course of JC.
Elements and learning outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and update the elements and associated learning outcomes in strand 1 to reflect changes to the CEFR CV • Improve the clarity of specific learning outcomes identified in the review.

The work of the Junior Cycle MFL Development Group will be based, in the first instance, on this Brief. In the course of its work and discussions, refinements to some of these points and additional points may be added to the brief. The updated specification will be presented to Council in Q4, 2024 for approval for publication.

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