



**NCCA**

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

# Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Leaving Certificate Modern Foreign Languages

September 2025

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## Introduction

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The Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report (NCCA 2022a) was published in March 2022 following the response from the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, TD. Actions outlined in the Advisory Report include a review of existing curriculum components - subjects, modules, and programmes. In March 2022, the Minister for Education requested that NCCA undertake a series of actions to support the realisation of her vision for a redeveloped senior cycle as set out in [Equity and Excellence for All](#) (Department of Education, 2022.) One key action set out in this plan was that a schedule of senior cycle subjects and modules for redevelopment be prepared for approval by the Minister.

NCCA subsequently prepared a schedule of subjects for review, which was organised into a number of tranches. While the redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Arabic was included in Tranche 1 as work was already advanced on this subject before the Minister's announcement in March 2022, the remaining Leaving Certificate modern foreign languages specifications were scheduled for Tranche 4 (French, German, Italian, Spanish) and Tranche 5 (Japanese, Lithuanian, Mandarin Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian). In May 2025, NCCA Council approved the redevelopment of the suite of these Leaving Certificate Modern Foreign Languages (LC MFL) specifications under a common MFL curriculum framework approach. An overarching LC MFL Development Group will be convened as part of Tranche 4 redevelopment work and tasked with the development of a LC MFL framework and the review and redevelopment of ten LC MFL specifications scheduled for review in Tranches 4 and 5, supported by language task groups to provide the expertise in each modern foreign language. The redevelopment of LC MFL will span Tranche 4 and Tranche 5 redevelopments.

This paper provides a context for the review of LC MFL and has been informed by the views of teachers, school leaders and students gathered through school visits conducted in a representative sample of schools. It begins by considering the background of MFL with Section 1 presenting an overview of the current context, including consideration of relevant policy developments. Section 2 presents how MFL are currently provided for within the Irish curriculum before focusing in more detail on key insights regarding subject learning and assessment for certification. Section 3 provides an overview of the insights gained through the school visits conducted and the lived experience of school leaders, teachers, and students. Section 4 considers similar education opportunities internationally and presents an overview of six different jurisdictions. Section 5 draws on the previous three sections to categorise and briefly discuss some issues identified for consideration in the redevelopment of LC MFL before finally setting out a proposed brief for this work in Section 6, which will guide the work of the development group.

## Section 1: Background and Context

This section sets out some of the significant developments related to LC MFL since their initial introduction, before focusing on the education and broader policy landscape which are important contextual considerations for the review and redevelopment of LC MFL. Figure 1 provides a timeline showing the introduction and/or most recent redevelopment of LC MFL curricula in the context of important national and international developments in the area of language education.

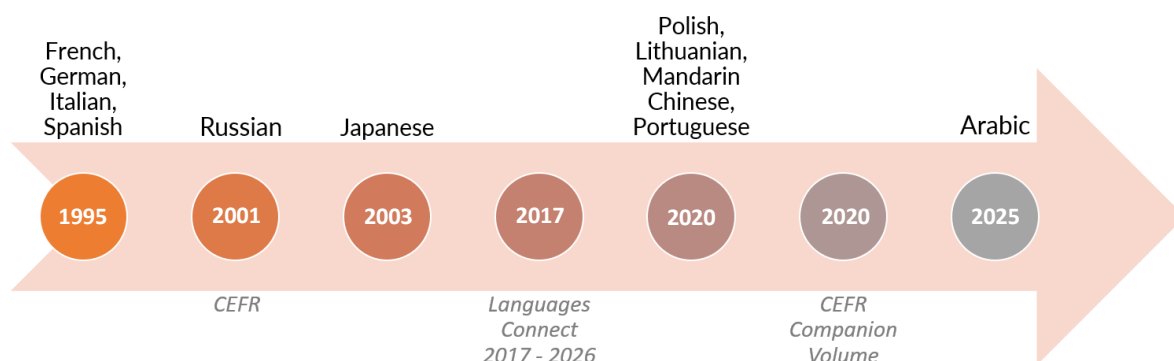


Figure 1 Timeline of introduction or most recent LC MFL curricula and relevant national and international developments

The current syllabi for Leaving Certificate French, German, Italian and Spanish were developed using a common syllabus framework and were introduced in schools in 1995. The development of Leaving Certificate Japanese and Russian followed this common syllabus framework with Leaving Certificate Russian introduced in 2001 followed by Leaving Certificate Japanese in 2003. More recently, curriculum specifications for Leaving Certificate Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese and Mandarin Chinese were developed using an updated framework approach. Leaving Certificate Arabic, which was originally introduced in 1995 was recently redeveloped as part of the Tranche 1 subject reviews.

### International developments in MFL education

The introduction of the above MFL syllabi occurred against a backdrop of significant international developments in MFL education, driven in no small part by extensive work done by the Council of Europe's Language Policy Programme to promote transparency and coherence of national policies across member states as well as effective language learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design. This work culminated in the publication of the [\*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment\*](#) (CEFR) in 2001, a competency framework which provides a basis for language syllabi, curriculum guidelines, and examinations across the Council of Europe's 46 member states and beyond. Since its publication, research and collaboration have continued and led to the publication of the [\*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment: Companion Volume\*](#) (CEFRV) in 2020, updating and extending the original framework and replacing the original with a more user-friendly text.

In addition to the work of the Council of Europe, The Council of the European Union adopted a [\*Recommendation on eight key competences for lifelong learning\*](#) in May 2018 which identifies multilingual competence and cultural awareness and expression as key competences essential to citizens for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship

and social inclusion. Most recently, EU Ministers' Deputies adopted the new [Recommendation to member states on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture](#) on 2 February 2022. It emphasises the vital role of plurilingual and intercultural education in fostering democratic culture, social inclusion, and human rights and urges member states to implement inclusive language policies that value linguistic diversity, promote the learning of multiple languages, and integrate intercultural competencies across all levels of education. It calls for the recognition of home and minority languages, the use of digital tools to support language learning, and the development of assessment methods aligned with the plurilingual and intercultural aims and principles outlined in the CEFR and CEFRCV.

### **Educational aims and principles of the CEFRCV**

The CEFRCV promotes the teaching and learning of languages as a means of communication and its *“action-oriented approach acknowledges that the development of language proficiency is not a linear progression through language structures or a pre-determined set of notions and functions.”*<sup>1</sup> Instead of viewing growing language proficiency in terms of moving from simple to complex grammatical structures, its approach recognises the complexity of the process of language learning and language use. As communication is influenced by the situational context as well as the people involved in the communication, language learners need to acquire general competences as well as communicative language competences to manage effective communication.

The CEFR transformed language education. It places communicative ability in real-life contexts at the heart of learning, teaching, and assessment. The CEFR uses descriptors across six proficiency levels (A1–C2). These levels describe communicative language skills, activities, and strategies. The framework also covers plurilingual and intercultural competencies, along with general competences typical for language learners at different stages. Broadly speaking, language learners and users at the A1-A2 (Basic user) level manage to communicate at a basic level in familiar contexts and areas of immediate relevance. As they move into the B1-B2 (Independent user) level, language learners can communicate for general purposes and in areas of special interest, whereas language users at the C1-C2 (Proficient user) level can manage general communication in everyday contexts as well as increasingly precise and specialised language in vocational or academic contexts. These descriptors aim to guide both classroom and formal assessments, facilitating consistency and transparency across languages.

The CEFRCV emphasises a student-centred approach to language learning, viewing the learner as a social agent who takes initiative and collaborates on meaningful, action-oriented tasks. As social agents, learners engage in mediation by constructing and conveying meaning, helping others understand and connect ideas. Their plurilingual repertoires—built from diverse linguistic experiences—are valued as essential tools for fostering intercultural competence, supporting linguistic diversity, and preparing them to be active global citizens. To reflect the student-centred ethos of the CEFR, the Council of Europe developed the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to help learners track their progress and document their language proficiency across multiple languages, including their mother tongue, school languages, and additional languages, creating a detailed plurilingual profile. Many local versions have since been developed, including in Ireland where more recent MFL curricula now integrate the use of a language portfolio in learning, teaching and assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> CoE, 2020, CEFRCV, p.28

## National developments in MFL education policy

In December 2017, [Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026](#) was published with a vision to 'enable learners to communicate effectively and improve their standards of competence in languages.' (Languages Connect Strategy, p.7). The strategy outlined four key goals: improving language proficiency, broadening participation, raising awareness of the value of language learning, and strengthening employer involvement in the use of trade languages (ibid, p.8). A further outcome was the adoption of the CEFR by both the education sector and employers (ibid, p.12). As part of the implementation strategy and to support a greater understanding and transparency of language competence across all levels of the education and training system, an indication of the range of CEFR achievement levels to be expected at the end of different key stages of learning are provided in the strategy as well as the goal that 'all examinations in foreign languages will be aligned with the CEFR'. The recently published [Languages Connect Interim Review Report](#) (DE, 2024) seeks to continue work in this area including the broad alignment of any new specifications and curricula with the CEFR. (Languages Connect Interim Review Report, p. 43)

In addition to specific MFL developments, the [Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027](#) recognises the potential of digital technologies within the curriculum. It places an emphasis on the role of digital technology in supporting and enhancing teaching, learning and assessment. In the context of MFL education, appropriate use of digital technologies has the potential to enhance language learning and assessment, provide access to authentic materials and create opportunities for closer connections with target language communities.

## Recent MFL curriculum developments in senior cycle

The Languages Connect Strategy prompted the development of new curriculum specifications for Leaving Certificate Polish, Lithuanian, and Portuguese, which were developed using a framework approach and introduced in 2020. All three curriculum specifications are broadly aligned to A2/B1 level of the CEFR. An early enactment review of Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese was conducted in Q2 2025. Insights gained from this review highlighted the benefits of a framework approach and welcomed the broad alignment with the CEFR. The feedback from the review also underlined the potential of the student language portfolio to support student learning and the importance of alignment between the curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment. In 2020, an ab initio curriculum specification for LC Mandarin Chinese was introduced that is based on a framework approach for educational aims and principles, and corresponds to Pre A1-A1 levels of the CEFR.

Leaving Certificate Arabic was originally introduced in 1995 as part of an inter-governmental agreement to facilitate Libyan students who chose to study medicine in Irish universities. Initially aimed at native Arabic speakers, this syllabus did not include any spoken components. The redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Arabic began in 2020 but was paused in May 2022 to allow for further research on curriculum development and assessment, arising from the publication of the [Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report](#) (NCCA, 2022). On completion of this research the redevelopment of the [Leaving Certificate Arabic curriculum specification](#) was completed in 2024, as part of Tranche 1 of senior cycle redevelopments. The redeveloped curriculum specification is broadly aligned to CEFR level A2/B1 and its structure, format and assessment approach follows that of Leaving Certificate Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese.

## Section Summary

- Syllabi for Leaving Certificate French, German, Italian, and Spanish (introduced in 1995), Russian (2001) and Japanese (2003) share a common syllabus framework.
- The CEFR (2001) was published by the Council of Europe to standardise language education and updated in the CEFR Companion Volume (CEFRCV), published in 2020.
- The Languages Connect Strategy 2017-2026, published in 2017, aims to improve language competence and align modern language curricula with the CEFR.
- New LC MFL curricula were introduced in 2020, including Polish, Lithuanian, and Portuguese (broadly aligned to CEFR A2–B1) and Mandarin Chinese (broadly aligned to Pre A1–A1). An early insights review of Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese was conducted in 2025 and welcomed the use of a framework approach and the clarity provided through broad alignment with the CEFR.
- The redeveloped Leaving Certificate Arabic curriculum (CEFR A2-B1) will be introduced in schools in September 2025.



## Section 2: MFL in the curriculum

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This section provides an overview of the opportunities for learning related to MFL currently available to students within both the junior cycle and senior cycle programmes. It then focuses on the participation rates in MFL outlining the uptake of MFL and explores the most recent Chief Examiner's reports and inspection reports from the State Examinations Commission and the Department of Education and Youth respectively.

### MFL in junior cycle

In line with the [Framework for Junior Cycle \(2015\)](#), a new curriculum specification for Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages (JCMFL) was introduced in schools in September 2017. The ab initio specification, designed for a minimum of 200 hours, was developed using a common approach across the four junior cycle languages French, German, Spanish and Italian. In response to challenges identified in an [Early Enactment Review](#) (NCCA, 2023), the specification for JCMFL has been revised. The [revised specification](#) was published in 2025 and will be introduced to first year students in September 2026. The JCMFL specification is built around three interconnected strands focused on developing communicative competence, enhancing language awareness and fostering socio-cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness. In addition to the JCMFL specification, schools may offer 100-hour short courses as part of their junior cycle programme. NCCA developed a [short course for Chinese Language and Culture](#), while Post Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) have developed short courses for Japanese, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian and Russian. Schools may also develop their own 100-hour short courses in line with NCCA guidelines.

### MFL in senior cycle

During the optional Transition Year Programme schools have autonomy to offer students the option to study a modern foreign language but there is no set curriculum. Students of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme study two language modules but may also take elective modules in other languages<sup>2</sup>. Following on from the [Minister's announcement regarding senior cycle redevelopment in 2022](#), students following the LCA programme may also choose to study a modern foreign language offered as part of the Leaving Certificate Established Programme, but this will be in addition to the LCA programme's two language modules.

Leaving Certificate Established offers a wide range of MFL, designed for a minimum of 180 hours of student engagement. French, German, Italian, and Spanish are commonly taught in mainstream schools from junior to senior cycle, beginning at ab initio level in junior cycle and progressing onto intermediate level in senior cycle. Arabic, Japanese, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese and Russian are available at intermediate level in senior cycle and Mandarin Chinese is offered ab initio in senior cycle. To support students who cannot access certain languages as a Leaving Certificate subject in their school, Saturday classes and online classes are provided by [Languages Connect](#). These classes are funded by the Department of Education and Youth and are free of charge for students.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All four sign language modules may be taken by deaf students instead of modern languages and Irish.

<sup>3</sup> <https://languagesconnect.ie/language-classes/>

## Non-curricular languages

In addition to curricular MFL, students from EU countries may also opt to sit ‘non-curricular’ languages <sup>4</sup>for state examinations. Although these languages are not part of the published school curriculum, students can opt to be examined in one non-curricular language subject if they meet [certain criteria](#). The model for the non-curricular language examination papers is based on the First Foreign Language final written paper of the European Baccalaureate (EB) which is aligned to B2 level of the CEFR. It is important to note that these examinations only assess reading and writing skills and do not assess spoken language proficiency.

## Syllabus structure and content

MFL syllabi introduced between 1995 and 2003 follow a common syllabus framework<sup>5</sup> and share a common structure and organisation which comprises behavioural objectives in communicative proficiency, language awareness and cultural awareness. Behavioural objectives are grouped into broader general activities/themes and include performance targets. Behavioural objectives for the communicative proficiency component<sup>6</sup> also include specific linguistic skills and examples of target language vocabulary and grammar including reference to specific expressions and verbal tenses. There are some minor differences in objectives, performance targets and themes between the syllabi for French, German, Italian, and Spanish, and those for Russian (2001) and Japanese (2003). In most cases, these variations are organisational in nature with some performance targets being reorganised into different objectives or themes. A small number of performance targets were either removed or newly added in the more recent syllabi. Despite this consistency across behavioural objectives, considerable variations exist in the linguistic skills and target language structures and vocabulary specified across languages. Differences also exist in the cultural awareness component: despite common performance targets related to literary texts, optional literary texts are only prescribed for Leaving Certificate Italian and Spanish. These syllabi are not aligned to CEFR proficiency levels, however “*Ordinary and Higher level candidates typically perform in the range A2 – B1, with a minority of candidates achieving elements of B2.*” (Languages Connect strategy, p.20).

The curriculum specifications for Leaving Certificate Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, and Mandarin Chinese (introduced in 2020), share a common structure with learning outcomes organised in two interrelated strands: Communicative Language Competence (divided into reception, production, interaction, and mediation) and Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence (grouped into plurilingual and pluricultural elements).

## MFL in focus

This section explores participation rates in Leaving Certificate examinations for MFL drawing on statistics from [the State Examinations Commission](#) (SEC) and provides an overview of assessment for certification and insights from SEC/DEY reports.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2025, the non-curricular EU languages examined were Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian, Danish, Dutch, Hungarian, Latvian, Modern Greek, Romanian, Slovakian, Swedish, Ukrainian

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-subjects/french/>

<sup>6</sup> Examples of behavioural objectives include “buying goods and services, engaging in discussion, facilitating, encouraging or impeding a course of action”.

## Student participation

Table 1 provides a comparison of student participation in Leaving Certificate examination in curricular MFL at Higher Level (HL) and Ordinary Level (OL) in 2019 and 2025. In 2019, a total of 56,071 students sat the Leaving Certificate examination with 60,937 students sitting the examination in 2025 ([SEC, 2025](#)). While participation has increased in some languages, particularly Spanish and Russian, overall participation has declined, with French and German examinations seeing the biggest reduction in numbers.

Table 1: Number of students sitting LC MFL in 2019 and 2025

Language	Student numbers in 2019				Student numbers in 2025			
	HL	OL	Total	% of total	HL	OL	Total	% of total
French	15654	7707	23361	41.7%	14124	4016	18140	29.7%
German	6247	2297	8544	15.2%	5575	1287	6862	11.2%
Spanish	5646	2065	7711	13.8%	9348	2315	11663	19.1%
Italian	361	112	473	0.84%	506	63	569	0.9%
Lithuanian <sup>*7</sup>	177	n/a	177	0.32%	314	19	333	0.54%
Polish*	780	n/a	780	1.39%	1336	49	1385	2.3%
Portuguese*	116	n/a	116	0.21%	281	0	281	0.46%
Mandarin Chinese	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	429	0	429	0.7%
Arabic	168	24	190	0.33%	303	35	338	0.55%
Russian	458	12	470	0.84%	1035	27	1062	1.74%
Japanese	208	66	274	0.49%	224	39	263	0.43%
<b>All MFLs</b>	<b>29813</b>	<b>12283</b>	<b>42096</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>33475</b>	<b>7850</b>	<b>41325</b>	<b>67.8%</b>

## Assessment for certification

Assessment for certification in Leaving Certificate French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Spanish assesses the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Assessment for all MFL is at Ordinary and Higher level, with differentiation achieved through task complexity and the weighting of language skills, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Weighting of MFL assessment components

Assessment Component	1995 – 2004 syllabi		2020 – 2025 specifications	
	HL	OL	HL	OL
Oral Examination	25%	20%	30%	25%
Listening Comprehension	20 %	25 %	25%	30%
Reading Comprehension	30%	40%	25%	30%
Written expression	25%	15%	20%	15%

<sup>7</sup> 2019 statistics for Lithuanian Polish and Portuguese refer to these languages examined as non-curricular languages before the introduction of the curriculum specifications for Leaving Certificate Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese introduced in 2020.

The format and content of assessment components share some common features as well as individual differences across languages, described in more detail below.

## Oral examination

The oral examination for all MFL currently takes place during the Easter holiday period in 6<sup>th</sup> year, with 15 minutes allotted per student. Table 4 provides an overview of the structure and content of the oral examination for each curricular modern foreign language. All examinations include a general conversation with additional optional elements in some languages, such as personal projects. With the exception of Japanese and Russian, oral examinations in all MFL include the option of discussing a literary text.

Table 4: Overview of LC MFL oral examination

<p>French (1995): 1 part with an optional 2<sup>nd</sup> part:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) a general conversation based on the syllabus content</li> <li>(b) optional project relevant to the syllabus content.<sup>8</sup></li> </ul>
<p>German (1995) 3 parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) general conversation, based on the syllabus content</li> <li>(b) one of these options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. A project<sup>9</sup> relevant to the syllabus content</li> <li>II. A picture sequence: story narration and brief discussion of issues arising</li> </ul> </li> <li>(c) a role-play situation.</li> </ul>
<p>Italian (1995) 3 parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) general conversation, based on the syllabus content</li> <li>(b) a role-play situation</li> <li>(c) picture sequence</li> </ul>
<p>Spanish (1995) 2 parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) a general conversation, based on the syllabus content; a role-play situation (1 chosen at random from 5 options, issued by the SEC in advance).</li> </ul>
<p>Russian (2001) 3 parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) A general conversation on a range of syllabus topics.</li> <li>(b) A conversation about a chosen cultural awareness topics.</li> <li>(c) Optional project or picture sequence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Project: the student speaks for 2 minutes, followed by 2-3 questions, followed by a wider discussion on the project. Picture sequence: the student speaks for 2 minutes, followed by 2-3 questions, followed by a wider discussion</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Japanese (2003) 3 parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) A general conversation. Students are asked questions from a range of syllabus topics.</li> <li>(b) Presentation and discussion of a prescribed topic</li> <li>(c) A description and discussion of a picture</li> </ul>
<p>Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, (2020), Arabic (2025), 2 parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) A general conversation</li> <li>(b) A discussion of a sample of texts from their language portfolio</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> Students also have the option of answering questions on an article from a newspaper or magazine, a picture, a project, a literary work. Candidates who avail of this option will be required to bring the material into the examination room. Texts in languages other than French will not be acceptable. (<https://www.examinations.ie/?l=en&mc=sc&sc=ox>, 2025)

<sup>9</sup> Candidates who take the project option will be required to show to the oral examiner appropriate evidence of their project (poster/wall chart, picture, scrapbook, videotape, audio cassette, ...). They will also bring it with them to the examination and hand it to the examiner but may point or refer to parts of it during the examination. (<https://www.examinations.ie/?l=en&mc=sc&sc=ox>, 2025)

## Written examination

The written examination for all MFL is 2.5 hours long and takes place in June. It assesses both reading comprehension and written production. On the same day as the written examination, students also complete a 40-minute listening comprehension test, also referred to as the aural examination. The stimulus material for the aural examination is common for Higher Level and Ordinary Level, with differentiation achieved through task complexity and weighting of marks. The format is similar for all MFL and includes 4-7 sections with a variety of spoken texts that may include announcements, dialogues, descriptive passages, news items, and weather forecasts. Questions are typically asked in the language of schooling, with the exception of the German, Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese examinations, which include questions in the target language and the language of schooling.

The Higher Level written examination<sup>10</sup> tests reading comprehension and written production with language awareness and cultural awareness tested indirectly in most languages, with the exception of Japanese, Russian and German examinations which contain a distinct language awareness or applied grammar section. Text types, genres and themes are similar across languages and generally include 2–3 journalistic, literary, or narrative texts, with the exception of Japanese, which includes shorter texts such as website content, personal profiles and diary entries. Spanish and Italian uniquely offer the option to respond to an extract from a prescribed novel. Written production tasks vary across languages. In all MFL examinations, students complete a number of functional writing tasks including diary entries, emails, letters, speeches, narratives, dialogues, and/or short discussions. With the exception of Japanese, students complete at least one opinion piece on contemporary social issues and/or cultural awareness themes. Typically the format remains the same for each language each year although themes may vary.

The Ordinary Level written examination includes 2–5 reading comprehension tasks per language, typically 100–250 words (or characters for Japanese), covering informative, narrative, and/or cultural content. Written production tasks vary and typically include informal writing tasks such as letters, emails, forms, diary entries, notes, messages, and/or simple stories with word counts between 40 and 100 words, or 30–50 characters in the case of Japanese. Students may be asked to complete gap-filling activities, write short sentences, and/or reorder texts.

## Insights from Chief Examiner's Reports

The most recent [Chief Examiner's Reports](#) (SEC, 2016) for Leaving Certificate French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish highlight key trends in student performance and engagement with optional components. The oral examination emerged as the component with the highest levels of student performance across all six languages, with particularly strong performances by students taking the Russian examination, demonstrating near native fluency. However, an overreliance on memorised responses and difficulty with spontaneous interaction were the most commonly reported challenges, especially in role-plays and picture sequences. While strong communicative ability was referenced as a key factor in high performance in the oral examination, feedback on the written examination placed much greater emphasis on linguistic accuracy and precision. The written component posed the greatest difficulty for students with grammatical accuracy, coherence, and task interpretation reported as common challenges. In the listening comprehension, students struggled with vocabulary gaps and had difficulty with details

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<sup>10</sup> Examples of text types are illustrative and refer to the 2025 Leaving Certificate examination papers.

and context. Feedback on cultural awareness was mostly linked to optional oral projects where performance was strongest among students who engaged with authentic texts or had exposure to the target language culture.

Engagement with optional components varied with chief examiners reporting good engagement with optional oral projects in French, German and particularly Russian, which saw 31% of students prepare an optional project. Engagement with literary options in the oral exam was very rare. In the written examination, over 50% of students of Italian engaged with tasks related to the prescribed literary texts, while in Spanish, only 3% of students chose the reading comprehension task on the prescribed novel. Chief examiners' key recommendations across all languages emphasise the need to support authentic, spontaneous communication, deeper cultural engagement and consistent grammar and vocabulary development.

### Insights from inspection reports

For the purpose of this paper, recent [inspection reports](#) for French, German and Spanish<sup>11</sup> were examined to identify some common key issues for consideration in the redevelopment of LC MFL. Reports consistently referred to learning experiences being most effective where the target language was the principal means of communication during classroom activities. Where room for improvement was observed, feedback often highlighted the need for an increase in students' use of the target language and more opportunities for oral interaction in the target language. Student engagement was highest when authentic materials and student-centred teaching methods were used, including enquiry-based grammar teaching that fostered curiosity and language awareness. Strengthening connections with target-language countries and communities was also recommended to enhance intercultural awareness.

### Section Summary

- MFLs are optional in JC and SC; common languages are widely taught, with less common ones mainly offered outside mainstream schools. Participation in examinations fell from 75% (2019) to 67.8% (2025), with French and German declining most, numbers in lesser-taught languages remaining stable and Spanish participation increasing.
- LC MFL syllabi (1995–2004) focus on communicative proficiency, language, and cultural awareness, and newer specifications (2019–2025) aligned with CEFR, emphasise Communicative and Plurilingual/Pluricultural Competence.
- The 2016 Chief Examiner's Reports highlight strong oral performance across MFL, especially in Russian, but note challenges with rote learning and spontaneous communication, writing accuracy, and vocabulary. Cultural awareness was strongest in optional oral projects, but uptake of literary options was low.
- Chief Examiner's reports recommend more authentic communication, consistent language awareness and deeper cultural engagement while recent inspection reports recommend more target language use, teacher collaboration, student-centred methodologies and authentic materials to increase engagement.

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<sup>11</sup> In the academic year 2024-25, 54 subject inspection reports on French, German and Spanish were published.

## Section 3: Insights from school visits

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School visits were conducted as part of the scoping work for this Background Paper. A representative sample was selected from the 79 schools<sup>12</sup> that expressed an interest in becoming involved in MFL curriculum developments. Eight schools were selected using criteria relating to DEIS status, gender, school size, type and MFL offered. As one school had to withdraw at short notice, seven schools were visited in May 2025. The visits involved focus group meetings with 144 senior cycle students, 38 teachers of French, German, Italian and/or Spanish, and 18 school leaders. French is taught in 7 schools, German and Spanish are each taught in 6 schools, and Italian is taught in 2 of the schools visited. Analysis of the data provided revealed three overarching themes: student engagement, provision of uptake of MFL in senior cycle and modes of assessment. These themes highlight some of the key issues to be considered in the redevelopment of MFL in senior cycle and are described in more detail below.

### Student engagement

Participants widely regarded MFL as useful, engaging, and enjoyable subjects. Students described language learning as a vital life skill to enable travel, cultural understanding, and meaningful connections with people from other countries. They particularly valued real-life applications, especially through cultural content such as films, music, and popular culture. Cultural elements such as customs, festivals, historical events, and opportunities for cultural comparison were perceived as underrepresented and participants called for them to be more explicitly embedded in teaching, learning and assessment. There was broad agreement that full-length literary texts were overly demanding, and participants recommended replacing with shorter literary extracts and a wider range of text types including films, TV programmes, songs, poetry, news articles, and social media to better reflect everyday language use and student interests. Flexibility and student choice were recurring themes when discussing the study of texts, with a preference for suggested rather than prescribed text lists to ensure fairness and flexibility. The use of digital technologies was also noted as a way to increase motivation and engagement, given students' familiarity with digital media and the importance of developing digital literacy.

Speaking the target language was consistently identified as the most enjoyable and rewarding aspect of the subject. Many students who had travelled to countries where the language is spoken reported increased confidence and motivation as a result of these experiences. Participants stated that the curriculum placed too much emphasis on exam preparation, which narrowed learning and reduced enjoyment. Both students and teachers strongly advocated for a greater focus on oral communication and a significant increase in the weighting of the oral examination to better reflect the importance of spoken language proficiency and align with additional assessment components (AACs) in other subjects. It was suggested that this could improve student uptake, engagement and enjoyment of MFL learning. The potential of a portfolio-based approach to support intercultural engagement was widely welcomed especially if such an approach supports the development of oral texts and is integrated into classroom practice. However, concerns were raised about time constraints and the lack of value placed on portfolios in junior cycle.

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<sup>12</sup> Expressions of Interest per language were as follows: 27 French, 25 German, 2 Italian, 25 Spanish.



## Provision and uptake of MFL in senior cycle

There is a strong tradition of offering MFL in the schools visited. The rationale for offering these subjects included the desire to offer a broad curriculum and to ensure students can satisfy the entry requirements for specific Higher Education Institutes/courses. School leaders in all schools reported that students are strongly encouraged to study a MFL in senior cycle to keep all their 3<sup>rd</sup> level options open. Some schools have a local policy in place which makes studying a MFL compulsory. Schools typically offered between two and four MFL, with most offering three. French was taught in all the schools visited. Some schools also introduced ab initio courses in Mandarin Chinese and Italian during Transition Year. However, none of the schools offered any of the other curricular MFL.

Students generally selected their MFL in 1<sup>st</sup> year and continued with the same language through to 6<sup>th</sup> year. While the option to study more than one MFL existed in some schools, uptake was reported to be very low. Factors influencing language options and choice often reflected local contexts, school traditions and students' individual interests. Many students reported choosing their MFL based on prior exposure to that particular language at home or in primary school, family relationships with the language community or through previous or planned travel experiences. Despite the strong support for offering a broad range of MFL to facilitate student choice, school leaders reported significant challenges due to variations in student uptake across different languages and a general decline in uptake at senior cycle in recent years. However, they expressed strong support for MFL and stated that initiatives including funding for language assistants, school exchanges and themed events to celebrate language learning have a positive impact on uptake.

## Assessment

Participants were invited to share their views on what is working well in current assessment arrangements and what could be improved in redeveloped LC MFL curricula. Feedback was also sought on the potential structure and format of additional assessment components (AACs). As described above, current assessment arrangements for LC MFL vary despite the common weighting, format and broad structure of assessment components across languages. Participants' feedback on their experience of MFL assessment and its impact on the overall learning experience reflected these variations.

All participants expressed strong support for retaining the oral, aural, and written assessment components, referring to all elements as essential in developing overall language proficiency. There was a strong call among participants for assessment and reporting to be more consistent across languages to ensure equity and transparency. The majority of teachers and a significant number of students were familiar with CEFR levels, and a number of students had experience of international assessments such as the *Diplôme d'Etudes en Langue Française* (DELF) exams for French or the Goethe exams for German. Teachers expressed strong support for aligning MFL curricula and assessment with the CEFR to improve consistency, clarity, and progression across languages, frequently referencing the International Baccalaureate (IB) as a good practice example of assessment which shows clear and transparent alignment with the CEFR.

### Oral assessment component

Participants viewed the oral assessment component as crucial, and there was widespread support for increasing its weighting in line with other subjects. Students and teachers agreed that oral



language proficiency should be prioritised throughout teaching and assessment, arguing that current practices focus too heavily on rote learning rather than authentic communication. Varied feedback on the structure and individual components of the oral examination highlighted that even small variations in assessment design such as the inclusion of role plays, picture sequences and optional projects can have a significant impact on students' learning experiences. While some considered role plays and picture sequences helpful for preparation, they were heavily criticised for encouraging rote learning over spontaneous communication. The possibility of introducing a portfolio was met with cautious support, with concerns relating to a lack of clarity on the role of the portfolio and increased workload.

### Aural assessment component

The aural examination was viewed as integral to language assessment but there was broad support for reducing its length and weighting, aligning it more closely with the Irish aural examination. The exam was described as unpredictable and heavily focused on passive listening, requiring students to identify specific vocabulary across a wide range of topics. Teachers expressed concern that English-language questions reduced target language exposure, limiting opportunities for authentic communication. Both students and teachers reported that classroom activities focused heavily on exam preparation and called for the inclusion of audiovisual materials and more authentic and interactive listening tasks reflective of real-life language use.

### Written component

Overall, the written examination was reported to strongly influence classroom practice. Its structure was criticised for creating an artificial separation between language skills and encouraging topic-specific preparation rather than fostering genuine communicative competence. Students expressed dissatisfaction with the exam-driven approach to reading comprehension, which prioritises information retrieval and rote vocabulary learning at the expense of overall comprehension and strategy use. Both students and teachers called for the inclusion of a broader range of texts such as audiovisual and multimodal texts and emphasised the need for integrating reading and writing tasks to reflect real-life communication, including online interaction. The dominance of essay writing was widely criticised, with participants advocating for more functional and interactive writing tasks.

## Section Summary

- MFL are widely regarded as engaging and valuable, with cultural content such as films, music, festivals, and customs especially appreciated.
- Uptake of MFL at senior cycle is in decline with schools citing a number of reasons or contributory factors.
- Participants called for oral communication and real-life language to be prioritised in all assessment components.

## Section 4: International trends in MFL education

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To inform the redevelopment of senior cycle education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) examined the provision of senior cycle subjects in international jurisdictions. A review of MFL curriculum provision in six international jurisdictions illustrates approaches to provision, organisation and content as well as assessment of MFL curricula internationally. The six jurisdictions France, the Netherlands, Ontario, Spain, Scotland and Victoria were selected as they are plurilingual contexts with multiple national, indigenous or regional languages.

### France

#### MFL curriculum provision

In France, at least one modern foreign language, known as *langue vivante*, is mandatory in all Baccalauréat programs, with some tracks requiring two or three. Students can choose from a variety of MFL such as Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian. Additionally, regional languages like Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Creole, Occitan, and Tahitian are available, along with Latin, Greek, and French Sign Language for certain options. France also incorporates foreign languages into the teaching of other disciplines. For example, students in the Technological Baccalauréat study technological subjects in a foreign language.

#### Curriculum Organisation and Content

France has a common curriculum framework for all MFL in the general and technological Baccalauréat, and a separate framework for the vocational track. All modern foreign language curricula are based on the CEFR and define communicative competence through linguistic, socio-linguistic, and pragmatic components, consistent with the CEFR's action-oriented approach. Achievement targets and assessment grids are aligned to CEFR levels across the domains of reception, interaction, production, and mediation. The target level varies depending on the Baccalauréat pathway and whether the language is the student's first (CEFR Level B2), second, or third modern foreign language (CEFR Level B1).

#### Assessment

In France, 40% of the overall Baccalauréat mark is derived from continuous assessment in compulsory core subjects and two specialist subjects. For MFL, this accounts for 6% of the total 40% over the final two years. The remaining 60% of the Baccalauréat mark comes from external examinations, which include written exams in French (10%), philosophy (8%), a cross-disciplinary 'grand oral' (10%), and two specialist subject exams worth 16% each. Students who choose MFL as their specialist subject must also complete an external assessment. This consists of a 3.5-hour written examination, comprising a summary of a text and a translation or transposition task, and a 20-minute oral examination, which includes a 10-minute presentation followed by a 10-minute discussion.

### The Netherlands

#### MFL curriculum provision

In the Netherlands, MFL, known as *Moderne vreemde talen* (MVT), are integral to education. English is mandatory as the first modern foreign language in all pathways, and some pathways also require a second modern foreign language. The languages available for study include English, German, French, Arabic, Chinese, Italian, Spanish, Russian, and Turkish.

## Curriculum organisation and content

In the Netherlands, the study of MFL is closely linked to the CEFR through a series of core objectives and attainment targets across the domains of Communication, Language Awareness, and Cultural Awareness. Expectations are set out in terms of language skills aligned to CEFR levels. Attainment levels vary by language skill and individual foreign language, with generally higher expectations for receptive skills and for English and German, which are typologically related to Dutch. Additionally, shorter ab initio programmes in Arabic, Chinese, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish are available at lower proficiency levels to reflect the shorter time allocation for the subject.

## Assessment

In the Netherlands, assessment for MFL is evenly divided between school-based and external components. School-based assessment accounts for 50% of the final mark and covers a broad range of skills. These assessments are designed by individual schools, approved by the Inspectorate, and may include oral, written, digital, or practical tasks. The remaining 50% of the assessment is based on an externally administered reading comprehension test developed by the Dutch National Testing Institute (CITO).

## Ontario

### MFL curriculum provision

Ontario's curriculum includes MFL, referred to locally as *International Languages*, and also supports teaching other subjects through a foreign language. Students can choose among 78 languages available for study toward optional credits for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

### Curriculum organisation and content

The Ontario Curriculum for Classical and International Languages, originally developed in 1999 and revised in 2017, aligns with the principles of the CEFR in its language, pedagogical approach, and overall vision, but does not reference it explicitly. It promotes CEFR-consistent competencies and integrates broader educational outcomes. Curriculum organisers and expectations guide both learning and assessment.

### Assessment

In Ontario, all assessment for MFL is school-based and aligned with established content and performance standards. The final grade and credit score are composed of two components: 70% is allocated to ongoing coursework, which may include tasks, projects, and essays completed under teacher supervision to ensure fairness and consistency; the remaining 30% is based on a final evaluation.

## Spain

### MFL curriculum provision

In Spain, a modern foreign language, known as *lengua extranjera*, is a compulsory core subject in all *Bachillerato* pathways. Students can study any available modern foreign language. In autonomous communities with official regional languages, students may also choose to study Basque, Catalan, Valencian, Galician, and Occitan. Spain supports the use of CLIL across all educational levels, with a focus on oral comprehension, expression, and interaction.

## Curriculum organisation and content

In Spain, the *Bachillerato* curriculum's approach, levels, and competencies are based on the CEFR. The curriculum adopts the CEFR's action-oriented approach, encouraging teachers to design interdisciplinary, contextualised, and meaningful learning tasks that promote learner agency. While the terminology used reflects CEFR activities and competencies, attainment targets are not explicitly aligned to specific CEFR level descriptors.

## Assessment

In Spain, assessment for the *Bachillerato* is entirely school-based and continuous, with no external assessment component. Grades are determined by the subject teacher, and assessment grids are based on the CEFR. However, students who do not pass a subject may take an extraordinary exam, the timing of which is determined by the local educational administration.

## Scotland

### MFL curriculum provision

MFL are one of eight core learning areas of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Under the 1+2 language policy, all pupils begin a first additional language (L2) from Primary 1 (age 5+) and a second additional language (L3) from Primary 5 (age 9+).

### Curriculum organisation and content

The CfE emphasises developing skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, understanding how language works, and using language for learning, work, and life. Modern foreign language education in Scotland aligns with the CEFR. By the end of Secondary 3 (around age 15), most students are expected to reach Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Level 4, equivalent to CEFR A2 (basic user). Scottish Highers (SCQF Level 6), which are one-year courses and the standard entry requirement for higher education, correspond to CEFR B1 (independent user), while Advanced Highers (SCQF Level 7) align with CEFR B1/B2 levels.

### Assessment

Assessment includes both school-based and external components. School-based assessment accounts for 16.7% of the total marks and consists of a writing assignment which is set by schools following guidelines provided by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), conducted under supervision, and externally marked by the SQA. The remaining 83.3% of the marks come from external assessments, which include a two-hour exam to assess reading (30 marks) and directed writing (20 marks), a 30-minute listening test (20 marks) and a 10-minute oral exam (30 marks) focused on discussion.

## Victoria

### Curriculum provision

In Victoria, schools must provide a MFL programme for students until the age of 16. Students aged 16 and over can then choose to study a modern foreign language for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). A wide range of languages can be studied as a first language, second language, or other language. For example, students who have Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese as their first language can study that language as a first language, while these languages are also available to study as a second language.

## Curriculum organisation and content

Victoria differs from other jurisdictions in that its MFL curricula follow individual study designs rather than a common framework. Each study design is structured into four units completed over two years. These units are organised around prescribed themes and topics and are framed by outcomes in three areas of study: interpersonal communication, interpretive communication, and presentational communication. Each unit is also guided by cross-study specifications, including communication, understanding languages and cultures, and the five macro-skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing.

## Assessment

In Victoria, MFL assessment is evenly split between school-based and external components. School-based tasks (50%) include three graded assignments assessed against learning outcomes. External assessment includes a 2-hour 15-minute written exam (37.5%) covering listening, speaking, and reading, and a 15-minute oral exam (12.5%) featuring a conversation and topic discussion.

## Observations on international jurisdictions

Learning a modern foreign language is compulsory in France, the Netherlands, and Spain, but optional in Ontario, Scotland, and Victoria. Language options vary by region, reflecting local and global contexts, and include world, regional, and minority languages. MFL learning is promoted in all jurisdictions through national strategies, digital tools, distance learning options, teacher guidance, professional development, and high-quality resources. With the exception of Victoria, all jurisdictions have used the CEFR in the development of their MFL curriculum frameworks. The approach to CEFR alignment varies across jurisdictions as the CEFR is contextualised to suit the local context. While key terminology and approaches are typically linked to terminology and approaches outlined in the CEFR, broader competencies and curriculum goals often vary as they are specific to the local context. Across the various jurisdictions, alignment with the CEFR may include alignment of learner outcomes to CEFR proficiency levels, alignment of examinations to CEFR proficiency levels, and/or alignment with CEFR in principles, approaches and key ideas without explicitly aligning curriculum goals to CEFR proficiency levels.

## Section summary

- MFL is compulsory in upper secondary in France, the Netherlands, and Spain, and optional in Ontario, Scotland, and Victoria. Some jurisdictions also teach other subjects through a foreign language (e.g. CLIL, Technological Baccalauréat).
- Languages offered reflect local needs, including world, heritage, and regional languages. Most use a common framework approach aligned with the CEFR, with outcomes expressed as language competencies linked to broader educational goals.
- Assessment includes school-based components (e.g. coursework, internal exams) across all jurisdictions. France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and Victoria also use external assessments, usually including written and spoken components.
- Most international jurisdictions align MFL curricula with the CEFR in various ways, adapting it to suit local contexts.

## Section 5: Issues for Consideration

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This section sets out a number of issues for consideration in the redevelopment of LC MFL. These arise from the nature of the MFL itself, in addition to drawing on themes emerging in the previous sections of this background paper.

### A coherent LC MFL curriculum framework

A key priority in redeveloping LC MFL is the establishment of a coherent, consistent, and transparent framework for teaching, learning, and assessment of LC MFL. While Ireland adopted a common approach to MFL curriculum development as early as 1995, the staggered development of individual language syllabi has led to inconsistencies, particularly in assessment. This paper has highlighted that even subtle differences in assessment, such as optional components in oral and written examinations or variations in task types are perceived to significantly influence student engagement, enjoyment and outcomes. Key considerations in the design of this LC MFL curriculum framework include:

- how a LC MFL framework could provide guidance on an overarching plurilingual approach to MFL education which is coherent and consistent across all languages while remaining open and flexible to support and value each of the curricular languages and language communities equally.
- how a LC MFL Framework could support the development of a consistent approach to assessment and reporting of student achievement, which is comparable across all languages.

### Pitch and CEFR alignment

A key consideration in the redevelopment of LC MFL is the appropriate pitch of the individual curricular language specifications. Currently, most LC MFL specifications are pitched at an intermediate proficiency level, requiring a basic language proficiency to access the curriculum. An exception is Leaving Certificate Mandarin Chinese, which is pitched at ab initio level. To promote equity and fairness, it is worth considering whether all language specifications should aim for a common proficiency level or whether proficiency levels should depend on specific criteria. International comparisons reveal varied approaches: some jurisdictions specify higher proficiency levels for the first compulsory MFL and lower levels for additional languages, while others, such as the Netherlands, specify higher proficiency levels for languages similar to Dutch, while setting lower proficiency levels for linguistically distant languages and optional shorter ab initio courses. Although it is difficult to quantify the relative difficulty of learning a particular MFL, research suggests that linguistically similar languages sharing the same script as students' or schools' L1 generally require less time and effort to learn than those with significant linguistic differences, including the use of a different script.

Closely linked to the issue of pitch is the alignment of LC MFL specifications with the CEFR CV. As reported in this paper, current Leaving Certificate syllabi for French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish predate the publication of the CEFR. CEFR alignment is a stated goal in Ireland's *Languages Connect* strategy, and more recently developed curriculum specifications have been broadly aligned with the CEFR. This paper has highlighted that CEFR alignment is common internationally and broadly supported among MFL teachers. In redeveloping LC MFL specifications key considerations regarding pitch and CEFR alignment include:

- exploration of CEFR proficiency levels for senior cycle MFL specifications considering parity of esteem, equity and progression between educational stages.
- consideration of how proficiency levels, along with the educational aims and principles of the CEFR might inform the development of learning outcomes and provide the basis for teaching, learning, and assessment practices.
- how CEFRCV alignment might support linguistic diversity as well as progression and continuity, allowing for the recognition of language proficiency gained in as well as outside of traditional educational settings.

## Opportunities for real-life language application

A further key issue for consideration is the need to prioritise real-life applications of modern foreign language learning in learning, teaching and assessment. The CEFRCV advocates for an action-oriented approach to language learning which focuses on real-life language use. During school visits participants consistently highlighted the importance of real-life applications in modern foreign language education, viewing them as essential for making language learning meaningful, engaging, and relevant. Students particularly valued opportunities to connect language learning with everyday experiences, through cultural content such as films, music, and popular culture. They expressed a strong desire for more authentic cultural elements like customs, festivals, and historical events to be embedded in the curriculum. While full-length literary texts were considered overly demanding, participants advocated for shorter literary extracts and a wider variety of text types, including digital media, to better align with student interests and everyday communication. Flexibility and choice in the selection of texts were repeatedly emphasised, with a preference for suggested rather than prescribed lists to ensure fairness and relevance. Furthermore, learning from the early insights review for Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese underlines the potential of the student language portfolio in terms of student ownership of learning and their own personal language acquisition.

Key considerations in redeveloping LC MFL curricula will include:

- how to strengthen the focus on communicative proficiency, especially spoken language proficiency through teaching, learning and assessment.
- how to enhance student ownership and learner autonomy through embedding and supporting opportunities for student-centred learning including the potential of a student language portfolio,
- how to promote engagement with authentic texts to ensure that course content is relevant, stimulating, and meaningfully connected to the real-life experiences of target language communities, and how this might be supported by the use of digital technologies

## Aligning learning, teaching and assessment

Insights from Chief Examiner and inspection reports referenced in this paper highlight an ongoing tension between promoting real-world communicative proficiency and preparing students for external examinations, which continues to dominate the LC MFL learning experience. Inspection reports consistently recommend placing greater emphasis on using the target language as the main medium of communication in classrooms. While the oral examination prioritises communicative ability, the written examination remains focused on linguistic accuracy and



detailed vocabulary knowledge. Feedback from school visits indicated that exam preparation drives much of the learning throughout senior cycle, with students and teachers often treating reading, listening, and writing as separate skills, reflecting how they are assessed. This compartmentalised approach contrasts with the action-oriented principles of language learning and assessment outlined in the CEFR CV, which promote integrated communicative ability and real-life language use.

Engagement with optional literary and cultural components in assessment also remains limited. Full literary texts are rarely used in classroom practice, and cultural content is often confined to optional project work, which many students do not complete. Combined with the prioritisation of linguistic precision over communicative ability in the written and aural assessment components, this focus can restrict the scope of language learning and may limit students' broader educational experience. Therefore, it will be important to consider how the curriculum can be designed to support and encourage approaches to learning, teaching and assessment which reflects both real-world use and meaningful cultural engagement. In this context, some questions to consider include:

- how the design of the specification can support and promote an integrated action-oriented approach to language learning which focuses on communicative proficiency, meaningful cultural engagement and real-life language use
- how approaches to assessment can build on communicative proficiency and real-life language use and be consistent and comparable across each language specification.

## Section Summary

Arising from key issues addressed in this paper, a number of key considerations for the redevelopment of LC MFL emerge:

- How to establish a coherent and consistent framework for teaching, learning, and assessment of LC MFL that promotes equity across languages, fosters student engagement, supports progression, and reflects the broader benefits of language learning.
- How to provide clarity on alignment of LC MFL curricula with the CEFR CV to ensure consistency, support for continuity and progression, and to foster linguistic diversity.
- How to promote real-world communicative proficiency and cultural engagement in teaching, learning and assessment of LC MFL
- How to promote alignment of teaching, learning and assessment and how to ensure that assessment can be consistent and comparable across each language specification.



## Section 6: Brief for the review of LC MFL

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In order to ensure a coherent approach to senior cycle language curriculum development, the ten language specifications will be developed across Tranches 4 and 5 of senior cycle redevelopment, as outlined below.

NCCA has established a development group to undertake the task of developing a curriculum framework and the redevelopment of curriculum specifications for LC MFLs.

The work of the Development Group is, in general terms, agreed by the NCCA Board for Senior Cycle and by the Council in the form of the brief set out below.

This brief is designed to provide the basis for redeveloping the framework approach and curriculum specifications for LC MFL. While the brief is derived from the key insights and issues for consideration identified in the previous sections of this paper, it is also guided by the Report on the Early Enactment of Leaving Certificate Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese, and the parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 4 Subjects (Appendix 1). It may also extend to responding to the actions arising from the Early Rapid Review of LC Arabic, which will be undertaken in the coming years

The specifications will be student-centred and outcomes-based and in general terms, the specification should be broadly aligned with levels 4 and 5 of the National Framework of Qualifications. It will be available at both Higher and Ordinary level, and it will be designed to be taught and assessed in a minimum of 180 hours.

The specifications will align to the template, agreed by Council, for curriculum specifications as set out in the Technical form of curriculum specifications for subjects and modules in a redeveloped senior cycle (NCCA, 2023). The Senior Cycle Key Competencies will be embedded in the learning outcomes. The specifications for Latin-script languages will be completed for Q2 2027 and the specifications for non-Latin-script languages will be completed for Q2 2028.

More specifically, the development of the new curriculum specifications for Modern Foreign Languages will address:

- How the specification aligns with the guiding principles of senior cycle and the vision for senior cycle education.
- How a MFL curriculum framework can facilitate a coherent approach to curriculum development across all curricular MFL yet recognise and acknowledge each individual modern foreign language and its language communities.
- How a MFL curriculum framework can support horizontal coherence in the design of the structure of each individual modern foreign language specification, including strands, elements, learning outcomes and provide guidance on teaching and learning approaches that align with the educational aims and principles of the CEFRCV.
- How an overarching vision, rationale and aim for LC MFL can make an inclusive, plurilingual approach to language learning more explicit and more achievable and can make this transparent and evident to students, teachers, and parents.

- How to develop a consistent and equitable approach to assessment and reporting across all MFL, clearly defining CEFR CV alignment and providing clarity on expected proficiency levels at key points in learners' language learning journey.
- How the specifications can support continuity and progression, including how to connect with and build on related learning at junior cycle, transition year, and in other senior cycle subjects and modules in addition to prior language learning, while also supporting future learning in life, study, entrepreneurship, further education and training, higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships, and the world of work.
- How student engagement, ownership and learner autonomy could be fostered through the integration of a student language portfolio.
- How the modern foreign language specifications, in their structure, presentation and language register, can be student-centred and have a clear focus on how students will develop and demonstrate their language learning and support teachers in planning for teaching, learning and assessment.
- How the MFL specifications can embrace and embed the potential of digital technology and technological advances in teaching, learning and assessment making the subject more engaging, relevant and accessible for students.
- How the assessment of LC MFL will align with the parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 4 subjects and modules (Appendix 1).
- How the specification could support the development of a range of student key competencies and the development of a range of literacies, numeracy and digital skills relevant to future life, work, and study.

The work of the overarching LC MFL Development Group will be supported by individual language task groups. The work of the Development Group will be based, in the first instance, on this brief. In the course of the work and deliberations of the Development Group, elaborations of some of these points and additional points may be added to the brief.

# Appendix 1: Overarching parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 4 subjects.

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## Background

The Minister for Education announced an update on September 20, 2023, on the approach to be taken to the introduction of new and revised subject specifications including how assessment would be addressed in those specifications. Specifically, the announcement indicated that:

- Each subject shall have an assessment component in addition to the final written examination.
- This assessment component (an AAC) will be worth at least 40% of the total available marks.
- Each subject is to have one written examination; typically marks for the written examination will be 60%.
- Typically, there should be two assessment components: One written examination and one other assessment component (an AAC).

More than one AAC or written examination may be justified in exceptional circumstances and after extensive consideration of the overall assessment load on students. Such exception, however, would be based on strong, clear evidence that a second AAC or a second written paper in the final examination is essential to assess student learning which cannot be achieved through a single AAC and a single written examination paper.

## Introduction

This document outlines the overarching assessment arrangements and parameters to guide the design of specifications for all Tranche 4 subjects which include:

- Art
- Economics
- French
- Gaeilge
- German
- Italian
- Politics and Society
- Spanish
- Technology.

This advice is informed by ongoing work with Tranche 2 and 3 subjects and will be amended, as appropriate, for future tranches which may take account of their subject areas and existing assessment arrangements.

The arrangements as detailed here reflect the policy direction issued by the Minister of Education that all subjects will have an assessment component, to be in a form that is not a traditional written examination, for those components to be set and assessed by the SEC and thereby lead to a reduced emphasis on final examinations in June of 6<sup>th</sup> year.

Specifically, the arrangements for all assessment components as outlined in this document are framed by the Minister's announcement(s) on March 29, 2022, and subsequently on September 20 2023. Underpinned by the following understandings, the assessment components:

- will not take the form of traditional written examinations
- will be set and marked by the SEC
- will be subject to SEC arrangements for their completion, authentication, and submission.

In developing the arrangements outlined below, the following rationale for moving towards all subjects having another assessment component beyond written examinations is central. This rationale is informed by deliberations on research commissioned by the NCCA and the SEC, and on the assessment literature more generally. From this work, it is evident that these components have the potential to:

- **Reduce dependence** on written summative examinations and therefore provide for a **broader assessment system**; written examinations have an important role but can be seen as a 'snapshot' of learning and can lead to teaching and learning having an excessive focus on examination preparation; other forms of assessment can mitigate the potential for this narrowing of learning by assessing aspects of student learning better and/or more comprehensively than written examinations alone can do; or assess learning that is not readily assessable through written examinations.
- Support and enhance teachers' understanding and assessment of **key competencies** by contributing to a greater understanding of how students' knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions are assessed.
- Provide opportunities for students and teachers to **reflect on student learning**, boost students' motivation to learn and enhance opportunities for formative feedback practices.
- Extend the range and diversity of assessment opportunities; including **spreading the assessment load** over the course of the last two years of senior cycle and thus contribute to a reduction in or spreading of pressure on students.
- Build and develop **teachers' assessment skills and assessment literacy** as teachers support students in working through the assessment activities as detailed within assessment briefs or guidelines.
- Generate student assessment data which can help reduce the vulnerability of the system to future unprecedented or unexpected system shocks such as COVID.
- Allow for assessment opportunities that are more **authentic** than a system relying on terminal written examinations solely.

It is also important to note that a review of the assessment literature more generally also indicates that when introducing other assessment components, it is necessary to consider how to mitigate risks, for example, of:

- over-assessment of students
- over-rehearsal of assessments
- the assessments becoming overly structured, compartmentalised, repetitive, and routine.

As is already the case where other forms of assessment apply, the new assessment arrangements will be guided by the overarching principles of equity, fairness, and integrity.

In addition, at a programme wide level (i.e. taking account of all subjects and modules implemented across schools), it is necessary to have regard to the overall assessment load on students primarily as well as on schools more generally. Whilst it can be expected that SDGs might focus on the approach to assessment in their own subject initially, they are encouraged to be mindful of the overall assessment load across all subjects and modules. Such programme level considerations will also include the methods of assessment being undertaken. As stated above more than one AAC or written examination may be justified in exceptional circumstances and the following section outlines the process for such cases.

### **Process**

This section sets out the process through which a variation to the parameters defined in this document will be considered and decided upon; for example, an additional AAC or a second final written examination.

1. Following extensive discussion by the SDG and after exploration of a range of options for a single suitable AAC/single written examination for the subject, the NCCA Executive generates a written note setting out the strong, clear case being made by the Development Group.
2. The written case is agreed and signed off by the Subject Development Group.
3. The written case is discussed with the Board for Senior Cycle.
4. The written case is discussed with the Council. On foot of this discussion, the Council decides whether or not to send the case forward to the Department.
  - a) Having considered the importance of managing and spreading the assessment load for students, if the Council decides that the case isn't sufficiently strong to merit consideration by the Department, the Council requests the Development Group to work on the basis of the previously set-out parameters in this document applicable to the subject concerned.

OR

- b) Having considered the importance of managing and spreading the assessment load for students, if the Council decides that the case is sufficiently strong to merit consideration by the Department, the Council agrees to send the case forward to the Department of Education.
5. In the case of 4b, the written case is sent to the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Programme Management Office (SCRPMO) in the Department of Education for consideration and response.
6. The Department may convene the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Implementation Group (SCRIG) to support its consideration of the request for a variation. The SCRIG is a Department-led structure established to provide oversight and support the co-ordination of work across the key agencies/organisations contributing to the redevelopment of senior cycle. Its members include senior officials from the Department (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, Inspectorate, Teacher Professional Learning [TPL]), NCCA, SEC and Oide.
7. The Department decides to support or decline the request for the variation sought and communicates its decision in writing to the NCCA in a timely manner.

8. The Subject Development Group progresses its work in line with the Council's response (arising from 4a) or the Department's response (arising from 4b and 7).

### Timelines

The process outlined above will require time. Such time, if involving a number of weeks, could have significant implications for the timeline for specific stages of work on the subject specification and/or the overall completion of the specification ahead of sending it to the Department for consideration. This time factor may necessitate NCCA organising additional online meetings of the Subject Development Group, the Board for Senior Cycle and the Council in order to ensure the development work remains within the overall timelines.

Table 1 below sets out the general parameters and processes to guide the work of the subject development groups (SDG) as they consider the most appropriate assessment for each subject. The specific parameters for each of the Tranche 4 subjects are set out in Table 2.

**Table 1: Assessment parameters and processes – general application to tranche 4 subjects**

Considerations	Parameters to guide the work of the development group.
<b>Nature</b>	<p>The purpose and nature of the assessment component will be clearly outlined in the subject specification and accompanying guidelines to support the completion of the assessment. Details will be provided on the nature of the component. Existing examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• research project/extended essay</li> <li>• oral assessment</li> <li>• performance assessment</li> <li>• portfolio assessment</li> <li>• creation of an artefact</li> <li>• field study</li> <li>• experiment/ proof of concept/ practical investigation.</li> </ul> <p>The subject specification and the accompanying guidelines will articulate clearly what the students are required to do, the form(s) in which it can be carried out and submitted, and the workload expectations associated with the assessment. The alignment of the assessment component to a particular set of learning outcomes from the subject specification will be provided, as well as details on which key competencies and associated learning outcomes will be assessed. This does not preclude the same LOs from being assessed in the final examination.</p>
<b>Weighting</b>	The assessment component in each subject will be worth at least 40% of the total available marks.
<b>Timing</b>	The SDG will advise on the time required for the carrying out of the assessment component across the course of study.
<b>Completion and Submission</b>	<p>While the SDG may suggest when this may occur (as referenced above having regard to the assessment load on students in particular), a final decision will be made by the SEC following consideration of the overall schedule of completion dates for all assessments across all subjects. This will be finalised by the SEC following engagement with the NCCA and DE.</p> <p>The dates for final completion and/or submission of the assessment component by the student will be published by the SEC and this detail will not be included in the subject specification.</p>

<b>Design</b>	<p>The majority of assessment components will result in a completed item that is materially different to a traditional written examination and which tests different competencies being transmitted to the SEC and assessed by the SEC.</p> <p>In some instances, the design of the assessment may require examiners to visit schools to conduct the assessment but manageability at school and system level will need to be considered.</p>
<b>Guidance</b>	<p>Guidelines to support the assessment components will be specific to each subject. These guidelines will be developed collaboratively by the NCCA and SEC. They will be informed by the deliberations of the SDG during the development of the specification and will detail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the purpose of the component concerned i.e., what it is intended to assess.</li> <li>• the nature of the assessment component/activity.</li> <li>• descriptors of quality in the form of a graduated rubric and details on assessment standards at higher and ordinary levels if deemed necessary by the assessment method.</li> <li>• details on the timing of the assessment (its duration and when it could happen).</li> <li>• guidance on the processes that may be used for the administration of the assessment.</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Parameters for assessment arrangements for each Tranche 4 subject**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Current arrangements</b>	<b>Parameters for new assessment arrangements</b>
<b>Art</b>	<p><i>Practical coursework: 50%</i> (completed over 12 weeks); In December Year 6 SEC issue a sketchbook and brief with 3 themes and students choose 1. They must create 2 artefacts in 2 distinct areas of practice. 1 artefact is completed in this period and they must engage in planning for the second artefact to be produced in the practical exam.</p> <p><i>Practical Examination: 20%</i> (5 hours); invigilated exam. Takes place 10 days after completion of practical coursework (above). The focus is the completion of the second artefact. Planning for this assessment is included in the sketchbook.</p> <p>SEC visit the school to assess both artefacts and the sketchbook.</p> <p><i>Written examination: 30%</i> (2.5 hours)</p>	<p>Written examination: minimum of 30% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum of 60% weighting in response to a brief issued by the SEC.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p>

<b>Economics</b>	<p>Written examination is 2.5 hours duration for higher level and ordinary level students and is awarded 400 of the 500 marks available (80%).</p> <p>Coursework is an individual student research project which is done in response to a common brief from SEC and is worth 100 marks (20%). It is based on the learning outcomes from the specification. The common brief is graded in line with the standards that apply to the level at which the candidate sits the written examination.</p>	<p>Written examination: 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a brief.</p>
<b>French</b>	<p>Oral examination: HL: 25% OL: 20% Listening Comprehension: HL: 20% OL: 25% Reading Comprehension: HL: 30% OL: 40% Written Expression: HL: 25% OL: 15%</p> <p>Oral examination is approx. a 15-minute conversation conducted over the Easter period Reading and Writing assessment completed during a 2.5-hour exam in June Listening Skills assessment during a 40-minute examination following the reading and writing assessment.</p> <p>No prescribed text.</p> <p>Focus of oral assessment is a general conversation based on the syllabus content and may include a literary work or a project the student has worked on.</p>	<p>Written examination: min 45% weighting.</p> <p><b>Assessment components:</b></p> <p>Oral assessment: minimum 20% weighting Aural assessment: minimum 20% weighting</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p>
<b>Gaeilge</b>	<p><b>Higher and Ordinary Levels</b></p> <p>Written examination with 2 papers:</p> <p>Paper 1: HL 2 hr 20; OL 1 hr 50 (160 marks) Aural (60 marks) Composition (100 marks)</p> <p>Paper 2: HL 3 hr 5; OL 2 hr 20 (200 marks) Reading comprehension (HL and OL: 100m) Prose (HL 30m; OL 50m)</p>	<p>Written examination (inclusive of aural, composition and comprehension): minimum 50% weighting</p> <p>Oral assessment: minimum 40% weighting</p>



	<p>Poetry (HL 30m; OL 50m) Additional Literature (HL 40m)</p> <p>Oral Examination: 240 marks</p> <p>For HL and OL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Introduction: 5m</li> <li>▪ Poetry reading: 35m</li> <li>▪ Conversation: 120m</li> <li>▪ Picture sequence: 80m</li> </ul> <p><b>Foundation Level</b></p> <p>One written paper: 2 hr 20 (360 marks)</p> <p>Aural (120m) Reading Comprehension (150m) Writing (90m)</p> <p>Oral examination: (240 marks)</p> <p>This is divided into 4 blocks as follows:</p> <p>Block 1: Family and Home Block 2: School Matters Block 3: Pastimes Block 4: Holidays, time, weather and work.</p>	
<b>German</b>	<p>Oral examination: HL: 25% OL: 20% Listening Comprehension: HL: 20% OL: 25% Reading Comprehension: HL: 30% OL: 40% Written Expression: HL: 25% OL: 15%</p> <p>Oral examination is approx. a 15-minute conversation conducted over the Easter period Reading and Writing assessment completed during a 2.5-hour exam in June Listening Skills assessment during a 40-minute examination following the reading and writing assessment.</p> <p>No prescribed text.</p>	<p>Written examination: min 45% weighting.</p> <p><b>Assessment components:</b></p> <p>Oral assessment: minimum 20% weighting Aural assessment: minimum 20% weighting</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p>

	<p>Oral has 3 parts:  A: General conversation based on the syllabus content  B: Discussion of project or picture sequence  C: Role play situation</p>	
<b>Italian</b>	<p>Oral examination: HL: 25% OL: 20%  Listening Comprehension: HL: 20% OL: 25%  Reading Comprehension: HL: 30% OL: 40%  Written Expression: HL: 25% OL: 15%</p> <p>Oral examination is approx. a 15-minute conversation conducted over the Easter period  Reading and Writing assessment completed during a 2.5-hour exam in June  Listening Skills assessment during a 40-minute examination following the reading and writing assessment.</p> <p>Option of studying a prescribed text.</p> <p>Oral has 3 parts:  A: General conversation based on the syllabus content  B: Role play situation  C: Picture sequence</p>	<p>Written examination: min 45% weighting.</p> <p><b>Assessment components:</b></p> <p>Oral assessment: minimum 20% weighting  Aural assessment: minimum 20% weighting</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p>
<b>Politics and Society</b>	<p>Written examination is worth 80% of the total marks available, and the exam is 2 hour 30 minutes in duration.</p> <p>Coursework is a report on a Citizenship project and is allocated the remaining 20%.</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a brief.</p>
<b>Spanish</b>	<p>Oral examination: HL: 25% OL: 20%  Listening Comprehension: HL: 20% OL: 25%  Reading Comprehension: HL: 30% OL: 40%  Written Expression: HL: 25% OL: 15%</p> <p>Oral examination is approx. a 15-minute conversation conducted over the Easter period</p>	<p>Written examination: min 45% weighting.</p> <p><b>Assessment components:</b></p> <p>Oral assessment: minimum 20% weighting  Aural assessment: minimum 20% weighting</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p>

	<p>Reading and Writing assessment completed during a 2.5-hour exam in June</p> <p>Listening Skills assessment during a 40-minute examination following the reading and writing assessment.</p> <p>Option of studying a prescribed text.</p> <p>Oral has 2 parts: A: General conversation based on the syllabus content with the option of discussing a literary work B: Role play situation</p>	
<b>Technology</b>	<p>Written examination at both higher and ordinary levels is worth 200 marks (50%). The higher-level written examination is 2.5 hours in duration and the ordinary level written examination is 2 hours in duration.</p> <p>Coursework at both higher and ordinary levels is worth 200 marks (50%). The coursework differs with separate briefs set for higher level and ordinary level. Briefs are issued around 1st October (Year 6) with a completion date of 30th March approx.</p>	<p>Written examination: 50% weighting. Assessment component: 50% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a brief.</p>

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