

The Assessment of A Level Modern Foreign Language

Summary of Exploration of Assessment Quality



Teachers and other stakeholders have questioned the grading of A levels in modern foreign languages (MFLs). In particular, concerns have been raised about how few students achieve top grades and the difficulty of the MFL A levels compared to other A level subjects. Teachers also tell us that the best students do not always receive the best grades.

In response to these concerns we have conducted an in-depth analysis of the validity of all exam boards' A level French, German and Spanish assessments; specifically the design and working of the exam questions, papers and mark schemes. This investigation has involved scrutiny of the assessment materials by subject experts and analysis of mark data. The technical report detailing the analyses and conclusions can be found on our website.¹ The result of this work is a set of recommendations to exam boards for the improvement of the assessments. We will ensure that changes to the exams are made before the summer 2015 exams are sat and that the new specifications to be developed as part of the upcoming reforms also reflect these findings. Changes to spoken language assessments will be required after summer 2015. Students' grades will not suffer due to these changes.

What we found:

- In many of the assessments, there was a large number of questions where the level of difficulty was not well targeted to students' ability. This means that those questions were not effective in differentiating between students of different abilities, especially between the most able.
- The marks that students were awarded for speaking were very high. All exam boards had speaking assessments for which most students scored well above half marks. This suggests that differentiation between students of different

¹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/exploration-assessment-quality-issues-level-modern-foreign-languages-technical-report

speaking abilities was poor. The relationship between the marks students achieved in different speaking assessments was also generally weak suggesting variability in these marks. This may be a reflection of the lack of differentiation between students or may be related to inconsistent marking.

- This issue did not only arise in the speaking assessments. In a number of instances, the relationships between marks that students achieved on the other elements of the exams (such as listening and writing) were surprisingly weak. While there may be other factors that influence this relationship, it suggests that problems may exist with the design of some questions or with the quality of marking of some elements.
- In some instances, the questions that did not differentiate well between students were concentrated in a single skill (e.g. listening). This means that students' abilities in this area did not contribute to their overall grade to the extent that was intended when the specifications were designed.
- In general, the difficulty of the exams was ineffectively targeted meaning that they were more effective at measuring the abilities of students achieving the lower grades (D and E) and less effective at measuring the abilities of students at the top of the grade scale.
- Problems were sometimes identified with the mark schemes. Expert reviewers found a number of instances where the principles for deciding what did or did not constitute a correct answer in the mark scheme were unclear. Marking rules were also identified that did not have a sound basis and appeared to be actively reducing the differentiation between students.

Exam boards will be required to address issues with the design of the written exams in time for the summer 2015 exams. This includes designing exam questions that facilitate better differentiation between the more able students in addition to revisiting the principles behind, and appropriately redesigning, the mark schemes. More detailed recommendations are made in the full technical report. These seek to address inconsistencies in the ranking of candidates and to achieve a better quality of marking.

Students' grades will not suffer due to these changes. The setting of grade boundaries will account for any change in design of the exams and results will be protected to ensure that overall standards are maintained. Indeed, some of the technical evidence produced as part of this analysis suggests that the percentage of students receiving an A* may, if anything, increase as a result of the changes outlined here.

Delivery of these recommendations will result in greater fairness for students. They will provide greater assurances that the better students are, more consistently, awarded higher grades than the less able students. We will monitor the changes made by exam boards to deliver against these recommendations and the effectiveness of those changes in realising this aim.