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From Theory to Practice: Teaching Linguistics in English A Levels

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation highlights the relevance of disciplines such as linguistics and grammar in the English education system, specifically within the A Level curriculum. Based on a contrasted theoretical framework and an accurate curriculum analysis, the project explores the limited presence of linguistic and grammatical content at the pre-university stage—a deficiency at pedagogical level. The project also draws on recent academic studies that support the integration of linguistic and grammatical concepts into A Level classes, emphasising the educational value of adopting a descriptive and critical approach to language. Finally, a didactic proposal is presented, demonstrating that the inclusion of these disciplines in the current curriculum is not only feasible, but also beneficial in helping students develop a deeper understanding of language and better preparing them for the university.

Keywords: Linguistics, Grammar, A Level, Curriculum analysis, Language, Descriptive approach.

RESUMEN

Este Trabajo Fin de Grado pone de manifiesto la relevancia de disciplinas como la lingüística y la gramática en el sistema educativo inglés, concretamente dentro del currículo de A Level. Basándose en un marco teórico contrastado y en un análisis curricular minucioso, el proyecto explora la escasa presencia de contenidos lingüísticos y gramaticales en la etapa preuniversitaria, una carencia a nivel pedagógico. Asimismo, el proyecto se apoya en estudios académicos recientes que avalan la integración de conceptos lingüísticos y gramaticales en las clases de Nivel A, destacando el valor educativo de adoptar un enfoque descriptivo y crítico de la lengua. Por último, se presenta una propuesta práctica que demuestra que la inclusión de estas disciplinas en el plan de estudios actual no sólo es factible, sino también beneficiosa para ayudar a los estudiantes a desarrollar una comprensión más profunda de la lengua y prepararlos mejor para la universidad.

Palabras clave: Lingüística, Gramática, Nivel A, Análisis curricular, Lengua, Enfoque descriptivo

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1. INTRODUCTION

This final degree project focuses on exploring the presence and relevance of linguistics and grammar in English pre-university education, concretely on the A level system. These subjects, which are fundamental to a proper understanding and use of language and communication, have always been relegated to the background in English school curriculums. While it is true that both subjects are implicit in these curriculums, their full educational potential is not being exploited.

Linguistics as a discipline is a very broad concept, but it can be defined as the critical and analytical study of language. Currently, English students are assessed according to their practical language skills and abilities. This traditional approach is based on teaching learners correct production and understanding of morphology, while with a linguistics-based approach students are capable of analyzing morphology, understanding its origins, how it varies according to speakers and dialects, and understanding how it has changed, even evolved, over time (Sheehan et al., 2024). In essence, the linguistic approach is broader and more advantageous than the traditional approach. Moreover, the study of the linguistics of a language increases students' awareness of linguistic structures, linguistic variation, functions, appropriate use and context, as well as providing them with a rich metalanguage that facilitates metalinguistic reflection (Sheehan et al., 2024). In this regard, linguistics should be a key tool for learners to substantially improve their linguistic knowledge and benefit from it in other academic areas. Apart from this, having a linguistic basis for pedagogical grammar is very beneficial for teaching, especially when explaining complex concepts such as aspect, verb tense, or mood (Dominguez et al., 2017). This would change the highly prescriptive approach to teaching grammar in England, which promotes a rigid concept of language, thus limiting students' understanding of its richness and diversity (Sheehan et al., 2021).

This dissertation is structured as follows: to begin with, a justification of the chosen topic is provided. The Humanities at A levels in England are in sharp decline among the choices of its students; the idea of integrating linguistic and grammatical concepts may attract the interest of more students who want to learn more about the language and how it works. Then,

the general objective of the topic and a series of specific objectives that are aimed to be achieved with this research work are presented.

The following is the theoretical framework, which is divided into two chapters, and a practical proposal. Chapter one provides a historical perspective of the A level curriculum from its implementation in the English education system to the present day. It compares the most relevant curriculum of recent years, Curriculum 2000, with the current curriculum, Reformed A levels. It also compares the educational cultures of both periods. To conclude this chapter, a thorough analysis of the current A levels curriculum is displayed in order to find out if there is a lack of linguistic and grammatical concepts in it, and thus be able to subsequently elaborate a coherent practical proposal and didactic according to the needs of the students.

Chapter two discusses A levels and explores both their general curriculum and their Modern Foreign Language (MFL) curriculum. The focus is on the MFL curriculum, and its limitations are outlined. Additionally, the benefits to students and teachers of integrating linguistics and grammar into the curriculum are explored. To this end, professionals developed a revolutionary project: the "Linguistics in MFL Project".

To conclude with the achievement of this work, a didactic proposal has been elaborated with original and detailed activities. These contain linguistic and grammatical concepts that are missing in the current English curriculum and that would be of great pedagogical advantage if implemented.

2. JUSTIFICATION

The lack of linguistic and grammatical content in A levels is part of a widespread problem, not an isolated one: the declining prominence of Humanities in the English education system. Humanities have always been highly valued in England by A level students, but in recent years they have become less popular.

The English education system has suffered during many years the great crisis of humanities, especially at A levels. Since around 2014, A level students have opted for

choosing science subjects instead of humanities or arts (Adams, 2025). According to a report made by the British Academy and National Foundation for Education Research (NFER), the number of students that had decided combining humanities subjects such as English with sciences or mathematics has declined. The British Academy's director of policy warned that this decline would have negative effects on A level students, harming them in professional and personal areas. Furthermore, the data also reveals a crisis in the humanities; in the academic year 2014-2015, 7% of students chose only science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, while in 2021-2022 this number doubled to 14% of students. Another relevant fact that shows the crisis is the following: in 2015-2016, more than 50% of A level students chose one humanities subject, number that in 2021-2022 was reduced to 38% of students (Adams, 2025).

This current crisis in the humanities at A levels in England is very serious. One idea to resolve this conflict is the implementation of two of its key disciplines, linguistics and grammar, in the classroom. Gaining insight into the language and its functioning might capture the attention of students, thus making humanities interesting for them again.

3. OBJECTIVES

3.1 General objective

The main goal of this paper is to highlight the limited presence of grammar and linguistics in the English pre-university curriculum, specifically in the A-level system. It also aims to determine that students between the ages of 16 and 19 approach the language in a mechanical and decontextualized way, without asking questions about its history, function, use, etc. These facts limit students' critical thinking, thus hindering the development of good metalinguistic awareness and analytical skills, which are key aspects for their academic future at university.

3.2 Specific objectives

The specific objectives of this work include the following:
1. Investigate the evolution of the English curriculum and evaluate its influence on the current A Level system.

2. Analyze the structure and content of the current English A Level curriculum, determining whether there is a presence or absence of explicit grammar and linguistics.

3. Explain the structure of the A Level system within the general English curriculum.

4. Describe the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) A Level curriculum and study its limitations.

5. Explore the pedagogical benefits of integrating linguistics and grammar into the A Level MFL curriculum from a descriptive approach.

6. Present and evaluate the "Linguistics in MFL Project" as a real, innovative and viable initiative for curriculum improvement.

7. Analyze how students improve their metalinguistic skills and critical thinking through the implementation of grammar and linguistics.

8. Design a series of activities to implement grammar and linguistics in English A Level classrooms in a didactic and playful way.

4. FEASIBILITY OF INTRODUCING GRAMMAR AND LINGUISTICS INTO THE EXISTING CURRICULUM

In this chapter, the current and the previous English curriculums from A levels are analyzed attending to their key points and reforms. Afterwards, a possible introduction of grammar and linguistics in these curriculums is revised. To achieve this, a series of innovative activities focused on the teaching learning process of a group of students between sixteen and nineteen years old that would study the A levels in England have been designed.

4.1 The curriculum 2000

Since the establishment of the A Levels in 1951 (Priestley, 2003), there had not been such a significant reform in the post-16 education, traditionally called Sixth Form, of A Levels in England as was the implementation of Curriculum 2000. The post-16 education were students from sixteen to nineteen years of age, and the reform was established in September 2000 (Hodgson & Spours, 2005). It had a clear goal: to radically change an obsolete system. However, it caused much controversy. This reform received great criticism,

mainly for its structural deficiencies and for failing to modify the A Levels as originally intended (Hodgson & Spours, 2001). Moreover, in 2001 and 2002 there were problems with the examinations already taken under this new curriculum. Despite all these issues, the intentions of implementing Curriculum 2000 were too ambitious yet it resulted in a key turning point in the development of post-16 education of A Levels (Priestley, 2003).

4.1.1 Historical and politic context

The Curriculum 2000 reform took place within a political and historical context that marked its whole development. From 1951 to 2000, three crucial periods can be identified.

The first period goes from the outset of A levels in 1951 to 1979 (Priestley, 2003). During these early years, A levels were approved by the political class as being suitable for students aged 16-19; however, minor modifications to these approved A levels were attempted, but failed. Later on, according to Gillard (2010), in 1976 the contemporary Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, delivered "The Great Debate". This discourse instigated the government to intervene much more in the English public education curriculum, and this was done. (Priestley, 2003).

The second period was between 1979 and 1991. Here, the A level system was subjected to constant attempts at reform and polarized debates between advocates of modernization or traditionalists (Priestley, 2003). In spite of all such efforts, A levels gained the name of "gold standard" of academic excellence as they did not suffer any remarkable modification (Young & Leney, 1997).

According to Priestley (2003, p. 241) "the final period between 1991 and the election of the Labour government in 1997 is one of dynamic conservatism and reactive policies". Rising unemployment rates and an increase in the number of students wanting to continue their education after the age of 16 were faced by the various Secretaries of State for Education. Afterwards, the Labour government decided to reverse the coursework and the modular syllabi, some previous A level educational reforms; this meant that the idea of a unified framework (Finegold et al., 1991) faded away. In addition, the 1991 White Paper (DfE, 1991) established a three-way system that provided post-16 students with the option of choosing between A levels, the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) and

the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ). In conclusion, as Hodgson and Spours (1997, p. 11) said, "this clearly demonstrated the government's explicit aim of restricting access to A Levels and developing a clear vocational alternative for those who wished to participate in full-time post-sixteen study".

4.1.2 Impact on the AS levels

Hereafter, the Curriculum 2000 was the "key plank of New Labour's education reform programme" in accordance with Priestley (2003, p. 243). They had a clear idea: the A levels had to be the fundamental basis of the post-16 education. Apart from this, the Labour government also tried to extend the key skills at the more advanced levels; to fulfil this premise, the government decided to split A levels into two academic years. The first year was called Year 12, while the second year was called Year 13. In addition to this, the A levels were divided into two courses: the AS levels and the A2 qualifications. The AS levels were taken by the students in Year 12, whereas the A2 were taken in Year 13. If the students completed both courses, they would pass the A levels (Priestley, 2003). With this division of the A level system the government tried to reduce the traditional academic-vocational dichotomy, introducing smaller units of study as were the AS levels, where students were asked to mix qualifications and subject types. According to the DfEE (1997, p.6) "we want to encourage learners to take broader, but coherent programmes of study, including the Key Skills. Too many have narrowed down their studies at too early an age. In particular we want to see more young people of all abilities taking the opportunity to broaden their studies by combining general (academic) studies with more vocational options". But, as it was mentioned in the introduction, there were some troubles with the examinations in the years 2001 and 2002, corresponding with the AS and A2 level exams respectively; the students abandoned faster than expected and those who completed the entire A level, reduced their breadth of study. This clashed with the initial objectives, which were intended to improve permanence and broaden participation in more subjects (Hodgson & Spours, 2001). At the end, with the creation of the new AS levels, attempts to get sixth formers to study a wider range of subjects have been just relatively successful (The Guardian, 2003).

4.1.3 "Learn it, forget it" culture

As previously noted, Curriculum 2000 was an attempt by the government to address the inefficiency, narrowness and traditionalism that characterized the former A levels (Spours et al., 2000, p.1). The reforms that were introduced to modernize A levels were very voluntarist, as schools could choose the qualifications they offered to students and students could choose which subjects to combine. They could also choose whether to combine academic and vocational routes (QCA, 1999). As also mentioned above, there were many implementation problems and the reforms proposed by the government were not as successful as expected. These problems meant that far from modernizing the A level system, the initial reforms destabilized it (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). Additionally, with the introduction of the AS levels in Curriculum 2000, a pedagogical and curricular extension was sought. For this purpose, new syllabuses were implemented, which mainly affected negatively the AS level, as they had practically no influence on the A2 level. Consequently, a new educational culture began to be appreciated in the classrooms, which became known as "learn it, forget it" (Fisher, 2007).

Teachers at AS level became dissatisfied with the way they were teaching their classes. They saw that they were teaching in a rushed manner, doing little practical work with their students and focusing on didactic and instructional teaching. Moreover, students also found the AS level courses superficial and rushed to correspond with the first academic year of A levels (Fisher, 2007). On top of this, the new curricula included too much content for students. This made Curriculum 2000 uninspiring for them, encouraging pragmatism over creativity or experimentation (Hodgson & Spours, 2003). Due to the volume of content and subject matter, the AS level teachers could not dedicate time to practice. They complained that their students could no longer analyze practical situations or apply theory, as they lacked the time to do so. Teachers could not move away from the syllabus, which was mostly theoretical. Furthermore, teachers began to notice a lack of interest in their students as the academic year progressed. They felt that the new curriculum was tiring and boring for their learners. It was about passing the exam, not learning anything new. AS level teachers described all these difficulties as "lack of learning space" and stated that the previous A level system was more open. Both teachers and students had more time to research new topics

outside the syllabus and to apply in a practical way what had been taught in class (Fisher, 2007).

It was very difficult for AS teachers to adapt to Curriculum 2000, its new curricula and the new way of teaching in their classes. They felt frustrated and demotivated, as they could not move away from the syllabus. Additionally, due to the heavy content load that students had to cope with in AS levels during the first academic year of A levels, many of them dropped out and did not go on to the next level, A2. This situation demoralized teachers, who felt that their efforts were worthless (Fisher, 2007).

As a result, the educational culture known as "learn it, forget it" was in evidence during the time Curriculum 2000 was implemented in England. The learners had to study the contents of the syllabus in order to pass the exams or, if it was possible, to acquire the best mark. As a consequence of this, the students did not learn or understand the contents and, due to the lack of time, they were not able to review and reflect on what they had seen in class. Therefore, students quickly forgot after the exam what they had studied. The term "learn it, forget it" was coined by a Head of History at AS levels, who defined it as: "the 'learn it, forget it' culture reflected a shift from a more liberal, open and exploratory model of learning to a prescriptive and what they considered pedagogically impoverished approach." (Fisher, 2007).

4.2 Reformed A levels

The current curriculum used in England focused on the A level system is called "Reformed A Levels". It was gradually implemented in 2015. The post-16 students were able to attend both reformed and unreformed A level subjects in the same course, but in 2018 the unreformed subjects ceased to be taught giving rise to the curriculum that is currently in force. However, the subjects reformed in 2015 for first teaching accounts for most of examination entries (UCAS, 2019).

4.2.1 Reforms and structural changes in the A level system

The Reformed A level Curriculum has suffered various modifications in comparison with Curriculum 2000. Firstly, in terms of structure the current curriculum lasts two years and has linear qualifications with students having final exams at the end of the academic

course, meaning that the coursework, or non-assessment exams, have decreased (UCAS, 2019). In Curriculum 2000 the qualification was modular, with the A levels divided in two courses, AS and A2 levels, that had to be completed in two years. With this model, students could share their final marks between the coursework and the exams, while with the actual reform students must put more emphasis on final examinations.

Following this, another key reform was in the evaluation area; the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) allowed the students to collect points during the exams they realized all along the course, but this scale has been deleted (UCAS, 2019). In contrast, under the Curriculum 2000, if the students wanted to accumulate points for their final mark, they could repeat the AS and A2 qualifications. Under the current Reformed A levels, students only have a final exam where they get their final grade. Moreover, the grading scale is the same in both study plans; students can get from A to E, or unclassified. Nevertheless, exam boards may give an A* for those students who achieve academic excellence (UCAS, 2019).

4.2.2 Impact on the AS levels

The Reformed A levels also have had notorious consequences in the AS level qualifications. The AS level marks do not have any impact on the A level final grade; both qualifications have been decoupled. The AS level, if a student completes it, it is certified separately (UCAS, 2019). Instead, with the Curriculum 2000 students could attend the first year of A level and afterwards decide if they wanted to study A2, but the grade obtained in the AS counted towards the A level final grade.

However, colleges and schools can still offer the AS level subjects, but it is becoming less common. In the academic year 2016/17, 36% of colleges did not offer the AS levels, while in 2017/18 this figure grew to 55% in accordance with the survey conducted by UCAS (2019). Therefore, there is an increasing number of colleges that are not too clear about how AS levels are used in higher education admissions (UCAS, 2019). Presently, universities do not have the grades of AS level students, only the grade of a final exam. In this way, universities can no longer measure the real performance of students, as they did previously by looking at the grades for the whole course at AS level.

4.2.3 High-stakes assessment culture

High-stakes testing has been established in English schools for quite time. This, coupled with the consolidation of standardized assessment, has led to an educational culture known as "high-stakes assessment". This term is based on policy technologies: managerialism and marketisation. These policies began their rise in 2003, which means they post-date Curriculum 2000; in 2010, with the election of the Coalition government in England, they intensified (Stevenson and Wood, 2013). Therefore, the high-stakes assessment of educational culture within managerialism and marketisation remain standing in the current curriculum.

The high-stakes assessment is an educational culture where students take high stakes tests from age 11 through post-16 education (West, 2010). Consequently, English students are daily observed, and their academic performance is constantly monitored, so they are under great pressure to achieve the best academic results (Stevenson and Wood, 2013).

Furthermore, the high-stakes assessment, as previously mentioned, is based on managerialism and marketisation. Talking about managerialism, it is a form of management focused on the private sector. Its crucial concepts are the review of performance, the setting and achievement of objectives and the use of incentives and sanctions, to reward or punish as appropriate. It mainly affects teachers and students. Then, marketisation in education is a process where schools compete with each other to be the best at an institutional level. In markets, the threat of failure is intended to encourage improvement, since failure carries serious consequences. Namely in England, an educational quasi market has been created where schools compete for students, funding and prestige (Stevenson and Wood, 2013).

High-stake tests not only determine the professional future of students, but also that of teachers and schools (West, 2010). With regard to schools, league tables are published for parents to look at their rankings and choose the best possible school for their children. So, these English schools compete within their educational quasi-market. To move up the rankings and have a good institutional position, the schools notoriously support students who are on the borderline of the key performance thresholds. If these students maximize their performance, the school will obtain better statistics and, therefore, a better valuation. However, this pressure to perform means that, occasionally, schools make drastic and

questionable decisions, such as excluding certain students who do not get good grades in order to maintain their status in the quasi-market ranking. Concerning teachers, they are subject to managerialism. Their work is tied to the setting of professional performance targets, which they must achieve, and to data collection systems that schools have in place to assess the standard of their work. All these factors deprive them of pedagogical autonomy. Moreover, teachers constantly monitor the academic performance of their students, which creates a coercive environment in schools and a demotivating environment for teachers. The management of schools has become very demanding, and the standards of performance are too high for both students and teachers; this means that neither can deviate from the focus on results (Stevenson and Wood, 2013).

In conclusion, managerialism and marketisation completely govern the working lives of students and teachers, as well as the management of English schools at today's Reformed A levels. The culture engendered by these policies places high pressure on everyone in the education system, and advocates results rather than process. Therefore, the current curriculum should be better adapted to the high stakes examination system and vice versa, as at the moment in English education there are only winners and losers (Stevenson and Wood, 2013).

4.3 Analysis of the English curriculum

In order to carry out this section, the English A level curriculum have been analyzed by looking at the most up to date provision published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) in 2025 and to see whether linguistics and grammar are present in the A levels. AQA is an educational charity which is responsible for delivering a range of qualifications in the UK, like A levels and General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs). It also provides professional support to teachers and students (AQA, 2025). Likewise, the AQA is directly supervised by another organization called Ofqual, which is the official regulator of examinations, assessments and qualifications in the UK (Ofqual, 2025).

Reviewing the AQA, it can be stated that the disciplines of grammar and linguistics do not appear in most of the wide range of subjects offered by the specification. However,

there are three subjects which act as exceptions: A Level English Language, A Level English Language and Literature and A Level Modern Foreign Languages.

The overall objective of A level English Language, according to AQA, is that students develop their ability of language analysis. To achieve this goal, they use grammatical and linguistic notions. Grammar and linguistic notions are present in this course. Grammar is used as a tool to improve language analysis and text writing. On the other hand, linguistics has a greater place in this specification. Key aspects of linguistics such as language discourses, language development in children or linguistic change are dealt with (AQA, 2025).

Onwards, analyzing the subject of A Level Language and Literature, students develop their analytical skills to study the connections between literary and non-literary texts. As in the previous subject, grammar is used as a tool for text analysis; the difference is that it is used in literary texts, which implies a greater knowledge of the associated terminology and a more formal written expression. Instead, the specification integrates advanced literary and linguistic concepts that help students to interpret texts, examine narratives or differentiate literary genres (AQA, 2025)

In A Level Modern Foreign Languages, students should develop language skills in order to understand the culture and society of the countries where the target language is spoken. The study of the context and influences of the target language is considered fundamental. In this subject, grammar plays a key role, as grammatical accuracy is required in both oral and written examinations. Therefore, students study the grammar of the target language explicitly. In contrast, linguistics is used as a communicative approach to language, but it has almost no place in the specification (AQA, 2025).

After examining the presence and relevance of linguistics and grammar in the syllabuses of three specific A Level subjects offered by the AQA specification, it can be concluded that they are dealt with in a superficial way. First, the focus of both is functional rather than theoretical; grammar, except in Modern Foreign Languages, is not explicitly addressed as a discipline and is used as a means to achieve other objectives, such as improving writing or analyzing texts. Afterwards, language is analyzed, but in no case with

a focus on formal linguistics. All the linguistic concepts that are presented are for application, none of them theoretical.

5. A LEVELS

5.1 A Levels in the English general curriculum

The Advanced Level qualifications, commonly known as A levels, are a UK subject-based qualification for the post-16 education; (i.e., students between sixteen and nineteen years old usually). These students attend the A levels for two years; if they complete this qualification, they will be able to access the university or similar higher institutions in the UK. These institutions often require a minimum of three subjects taken and completed to access. There are no compulsory subjects, and students tend to choose freely depending on their academic and professional objectives, which subjects are most useful for them in order to gain access to their chosen university degree. Moreover, the A levels are a suitable entry qualification in lots of universities around the world, not just in the UK (McEwan, 2019) as for example the University of California (University of California, n.d.).

5.2 A Levels in the Modern Foreign Language curriculum

The new A-level curriculum called Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) is described by the Department for Education as an "integrated study focusing on language, culture and society" (DfE, 2016, p.4). Paradoxically, there are almost no topics in it related to language, let alone linguistics, which is conspicuously absent from the MFL offer of English schools. By contrast, in the general A level curriculum, the English language subject does include aspects of modern linguistics. The DfE stresses for the MFL qualification that students should develop critical and analytical skills in relation to the culture, language and society of the country where the language is spoken, not just high-level language skills (Sheehan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, grammar does have a more relevant role in this MFL qualification, however, it is taught from a purely prescriptive perspective. This means that learners acquire a set of grammatical constructions to apply, but without analyzing them or understanding why they are used in one context or another.

This difference between content and competence is clearly seen in the qualification criteria published by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation for MFL A levels. In accordance with these criteria, 80% of the final mark depends on the use of the language, while only 20% of the final mark depends on understanding the language and having a broad knowledge of it, as well as having a critical and analytical response to the various cultural aspects of the countries where the language is spoken. Summarizing, the MFL A levels are focused on high skills; with a language (including grammar) as instrument approach (Sheehan et al., 2021).

5.2.1 Limitations of the current MFL A Levels curriculum

The Department for Education (DfE, 2016) defines the A level MFL Curriculum as an "integrated study focusing on language, culture and society". Even though, there exist still impediments that prevent a correct integration of linguistic and grammatical content. Both students and teachers have been affected by these limitations.

Initially, there is a lack of linguistic variation. Students are used to learning and using prescribed constructions, but never to analyzing their underlying structure or investigating how this structure varies along spatial, temporal or social dimensions. Moreover, students do not investigate the variations of language among speakers, they simply learn constructions. Afterwards, in the UK there is an absence of conceptual and analytical approach as students are not encouraged to learn this type of content. Instead, they are promoted to acquire basic language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening (Sheehan et al., 2021). Taking all the above into consideration, according to Sheehan et al., (2021, p,5) "MFLs are therefore portrayed to students as fixed monolithic objects to be mastered, contrary to the DfE's stated aim to introduce students to 'the language, culture and society of the country or countries where the language is spoken'." Therefore, the current curriculum consists of rigid rules that do not encourage students to explore and learn the fluidity of language due to social and cultural variations. This greatly limits students' appropriate use of language in real-life contexts.

Nevertheless, the limitations of MFL A levels also have consequences for teachers. These have declared that they have little time to integrate new content into their classes. For

instance, teachers try to follow the current curriculum guidelines in the content of examinations, but they are unable to supplement them with other materials that teachers consider relevant for their students. Moreover, there is a severe lack of linguistic content in undergraduate and teacher training courses, which will pose an additional problem for the claims of including linguistics in English schools. Another issue of concern for teachers is that they feel they teach their subjects in an overly prescriptive approach, namely, in a very pragmatic way in which their students will be assessed in exams following parameters that are very close to the standard language. They believe that a more descriptive approach to content should be considered in their classes (Sheehan et al., 2024).

5.2.2 Benefits of introducing linguistics in the MFL A Levels curriculum

Presently, the MFL curriculum for A levels in England comprises several languages that will really benefit from a proper inclusion of linguistics in them.

As previously stated, 80% of the final mark in the A level qualification is the mastery of basic language skills. Improving learners' metalinguistic awareness will reinforce these skills. Besides, students will be introduced to the Scientific Method. This method will promote new analytical skills that will fit in with those already developed by the students through cultural study and literary analysis. Thirdly, linguists very commonly criticize the prescriptive ideology of the standard language, since deviations from the language are regarded as errors. With the introduction of linguistics in modern foreign language classrooms, students will be much more critical of this prescriptive ideology and change their attitudes towards language. Additionally, knowing and understanding the linguistic variations of a language will help learners to deal better with real-life situations, i.e. conversations or dialogues, and to interact authentically with the target language. This way, students will become intellectually engaged with languages attending to their social context, internal structure or their history, among other aspects. The attractiveness of languages will increase, and it will make many students more interested in studying foreign languages, a necessary issue in the UK (Sheehan et al., 2021).

To wrap, in agreement with Sheehan et al., (2024) "linguistics reduces the gulf between the knower and the 'non-knower' and therefore increases the wish to learn, by

bringing in observable, fascinating details that everyone can partake in. It makes languages come alive, be a multi-faceted tool for human understanding that is part of everyone's history. Linguistics is a leveler, and a formidable skill to learn." Hence, integrating linguistics into foreign language teaching will foster more inclusive and accessible learning for a wide range of students.

5.2.3 Linguistics in MFL Project

In the Modern Foreign Languages curriculum at A levels, a series of deficiencies have been detected, particularly in the area of linguistics, which prompted the Linguistics in MFL Project. The main aim of this project was to investigate the feasibility of integrating linguistic content into the current MFL curriculum in English schools. The research was divided into two phases, which will be detailed below.

The first phase focused on finding out and assessing whether modern foreign language students at A levels and their teachers will find the idea of introducing linguistics into their languages of study appealing and attractive. It also tried to determine whether this introduction of linguistics will affect their view of the target language and their confidence in using it. To achieve these goals, the researchers designed three mini introductory courses on linguistics for learners of Spanish, French and German. These mini courses lasted four hours each and consisted of four one-hour sessions. They covered all the main areas within linguistics: phonetics and phonology, historical linguistics, morphosyntax and sociolinguistics of the target language. Furthermore, several of the MFL teachers who were involved in this project subsequently went on to teach these mini courses in various English schools´ A levels. In the end, over 300 MFL learners taking Spanish, German or French participated in the research all over the country (Sheehan et al., 2021).

The second phase of the research focused on the teachers´ experiences participating in the Linguistics in MFL Project and its possible pedagogical benefits. During this phase of the project, sets of materials were designed for use in Spanish, German and French A-level classes; these materials were primarily for teaching and learning. They were created by several specialist teams for each language, as each of the teams consisted of two academic linguists and two MFL teachers with secondary school experience and major language

expertise. This co-creation process proved to be a success. The academic linguists cooperated directly with the participating practicing teachers. While the linguists had constant access to the project and how the research was being carried out to have a solid basis for the development of the materials, the teachers were able to assess the feasibility of these materials in real classrooms, thanks to their high pedagogical knowledge and experience in foreign language teaching. This combination of the teachers' expertise and the linguists' knowledge was key to the Linguistics in MFL Project. As a result of this collaboration, four 1-hour lessons were established for each of the Spanish, German and French classes of A levels. These classes had worksheets, PowerPoint slides and prompts for the teachers. Additionally, the co-created material followed three main pedagogical principles. The first was called teacher-led; teachers guided the pedagogical approach because of their first-hand classroom experience. Another principle was known as coalescent; it adapted the new materials to the current MFL A levels curriculum. Apart from this, the materials were interactive with student-focused and task-based activities aimed to encourage critical debate and analytical skills among students. Moreover, basic concepts of linguistics such as language change or descriptivism were included in the lessons, as well as topics such as comparative analysis, non-standard variation, language attitudes or historical relatedness (Sheehan et al., 2024).

Lastly, the Linguistics in MFL Project did not remain just in the classrooms. The researchers of this project decided to create an open-access Manifesto for linguistics in language teaching (Sheehan et al., 2023). It was opened to the whole UK. It was also strongly supported by both sectoral institutions and academic societies to promote the project model that had been achieved (Sheehan et al., 2024).

5.2.4 Results and impact of linguistics on students

Hereafter, the results and the impact that the Linguistics in MFL Project has had on students across various English schools will be presented. Generally, after analyzing the whole data, researchers determined that, although the students had some knowledge of linguistics before beginning the research, this was rather superficial. Learners were used to reading general sources like blogs or websites, but not academic texts that could offer them

a greater rigor. However, they also concluded that the students were familiar with the discipline of linguistics.

The students who took part in the project found linguistics attractive and useful for foreign language acquisition and learning. It opened their minds to a new approach to language study, resulting in linguistics being of interest beyond the classroom. In addition, most of the topics covered in the mini courses appealed to the students, but the debate between historical linguistics and linguistic variation proved to be of great interest. Due to the success of these two content topics within the mini courses, the researchers suggested that these should be the primary topics to be included in the new MFL curriculum and advised that any linguistic materials to be developed for modern foreign languages should include historical linguistics and linguistic variation.

Furthermore, the learners stated that they felt more confident with their language skills after these mini courses and they also felt self-confident in their pronunciation and grammatical skills. They also significantly improved their ability to distinguish sounds and structures between their native language, English, and the target language. Besides, students found linguistics to be a motivating factor not only for studying foreign languages, but also for applying it in wider social contexts. This will mean that introducing language content into the MFL A level curriculum will appeal to a wider range of learners. Another aspect that the researchers were pleased to note was that, in general, the students did not consider any of the topics presented in the mini courses to be their least favorite. It is true that some grammar-related topics, such as learning grammatical terminology or having to memorize grammatical structures, were not as enjoyable as other linguistic topics. Nevertheless, the students agreed that grammar was very helpful, which led to grammar also being highly rated in the project (Sheehan et al., 2021).

5.2.5 Results and impact of linguistics on teachers

As well as the students, teachers were also evaluated on the impact of the Linguistics in MFL Project on their classes. It should be recalled that the teachers co-created the mini courses material together with academic linguists while they were teaching in the classrooms.

The teachers involved in this project stated that the materials co-created were perceived as useful, innovative and helpful for foreign language learners at English A levels. Various teachers also commented that their students' previous perspectives on language and linguistic variation were changed for the better. As a result, students gained a more subtle understanding of linguistic description in the target language at different levels, which was very beneficial for their learning. In addition, one teacher, in particular, told the researchers a remarkable aspect: his students were able to approach language critically after the linguistic intervention, which enabled them to acquire a greater appreciation and awareness of language and its functioning in several contexts.

Furthermore, the teachers felt that the new project materials enriched the lessons and the curriculum. They observed that their students no longer focused on one aspect of language; the students broadened their minds and had a greater perspective on the study of foreign languages. Some examples given by the teachers were the following: i) the students were better able to choose the right vocabulary for each context, ii) they thought more about the register of the language, and iii) they reinforced the teachers' lessons, as they gradually became more familiar with the target language. A teacher also stated that linguistics reinforced the idea of thinking critically about what a mistake in the language is. In other words, linguistics showed students that not everything that could deviate from the strict language standard should be considered an error. Another crucial fact observed by the teachers is that the mini courses and their contents made the classes more inclusive; linguistics attracted the attention of a more diverse group of students who felt part of the classes.

Apart from this, the great majority of teachers reported that they had learnt new concepts through their teaching. The most relevant things they learnt were aspects related to foreign languages such as linguistic diversity in French or the various differences and similarities between Old English and High German. But not only that, they also admitted having understood and learnt about linguistics. Despite the positive aspects for both the teachers themselves and their students, the teachers also noted aspects of the Linguistic in MFL Project that could be improved. For instance, several stated that they did not have enough time to deliver all the required content, referring to their normal classes and to extras

such as these mini courses. The tension between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches was also a drawback, as the descriptive approach was a novelty in the way linguistics and language were taught (Sheehan et al., 2024).

5.2.6 Conclusions reached

Overall, foreign language learners had a broad but superficial knowledge of linguistics before the implementation of the Linguistics in MFL Project. However, after the intervention the students were able to talk and discuss advanced linguistic concepts with accuracy, suggesting that they developed an implicit metalinguistic awareness that they did not have before. Then, the researchers concluded that, after the linguistic intervention, students quite needed more exposure to the language as they still had prescriptive attitudes and must develop a more descriptive perspective towards it. However, they also saw huge positive aspects. Their proposal to include linguistics in the new modern foreign language curriculum had succeeded in making students see how harmful prescriptive beliefs and standard language ideology were to their learning. According to the researchers, this will be a big step towards a more inclusive discipline. In addition to this, researchers concluded that the students who participated in the Linguistic in MFL Project improved their language skills, engagement and accuracy, which is synonymous with a very positive intervention (Sheehan et al., 2021).

5.2.7 Final justification

Regarding the rationale as to why it will be beneficial to introduce linguistics into the modern foreign language curriculum at English A levels, the conclusions of both teachers involved in the project and the researchers will be presented hereafter. In general, all teachers agreed that the approach chosen for linguistic intervention (i.e., a critical, analytical and highly descriptive approach), was attractive and helpful for their students. Moreover, the teachers also agreed that this approach was more inclusive for multilingual students, which favored a multilingual classroom context and environment. Following this, teachers stated that they felt very comfortable teaching the materials they helped to create and also said that these materials were perfectly compatible with those already existing in A levels (Sheehan et al., 2024).

The data collected shows that the linguistic topics chosen to be taught in the mini courses as part of the Linguistics in MFL Project are suitable to be introduced into the Modern Foreign Language curriculum of English A levels without altering the current one (Sheehan et al., 2024). The researchers also observed that linguistics had a strong attractiveness for new MFL students, as it blends language skills with cultural and social aspects, something that does not occur in the current curriculum (Sheehan et al., 2021). In addition, researchers called on both universities and schools in the UK to start working together in order to teach and encourage learners to study linguistics and, if possible, become linguists. They supported the co-creation model they had used to achieve this purpose of promoting linguistics in universities and schools (Sheehan et al., 2024).

6. DIDACTIC PROPOSAL

6.1 Justification and contextualization

Throughout this paper it has been demonstrated that the explicit presence of linguistics in the English curriculum at A levels is scarce and not enough emphasis is given to grammar given that various studies have proven its outmost importance (Sheehan et al., 2021). In the following section, named as "Activities from the Didactic Proposal", a series of solutions will be proposed to this problem existing in the English educational system through the inclusion of practical activities. The main objective of this section is to enable students to develop their analytical skills, necessary for an academic and professional future, while respecting the communicative approach of the current curriculum.

This practical proposal is aimed at a Year 12 class (their first year of A Levels) in an English secondary school. There will be 18 students, all aged 16-17, currently studying both English Language and Spanish as a Modern Foreign Language. Although these students are in the initial stage of A Levels, they already have the necessary communicative base in both languages (language analysis, text writing, language discourse or critical thinking, among others) to be able to work on the linguistic contents that will be presented. For this reason, the elements of grammar and formal linguistics, focusing not only on the use of real language, but also on the syntactic or morphological structures of sentences, are introduced in a way

that is accessible, contextualized and guided by the teachers. Additionally, the teachers will provide the necessary feedback throughout the process.

6.2 Activities from the Didactic proposal

6.2.1 Think Critically, Speak Smartly

The first activity for the English Language course is an argumentative debate with grammatical constraints. It is called "Think Critically, Speak Smartly".

The teachers have previously selected the topics to be debated in the classroom, as it can be seen in Appendix 1. They will aleatory assign them to pairs of students. One member of the pair must defend a position in favor of the topic and the other member against it. The students will be required to have a formal register of speech. Moreover, the debate will last approximately 5-7 minutes. Then, when the time is up, each member of the pair must write an essay with the ideas that their partners have expressed, with the added difficulty that they must use at least 5 intransitive verbs, 5 transitive verbs, 5 copulative verbs and 1 verb of verbal regime (which requires a preposition).

With this activity, the students' critical thinking is encouraged, since they have to think and reflect on actual topics and use recurrent arguments and counterarguments to defend their position during the debate. Furthermore, active attention is also encouraged, since each student writes what their classmate has said. Apart from this, grammatical content is introduced explicitly in an A level class, since students need to be aware of verbal transitivity, copula verbs and syntactic functions. They also may adapt their speech to the formal language that this activity requires.

6.2.2 Hidden Words

The next activity for the English Language course consists of a morphological analysis challenge. It is called "Hidden Words".

The teachers will hand out to the students some sentences, as seen in Appendix 2, that they have already prepared in which linguistic items (prefixes and suffixes) have been consciously hidden. Students will have to perform several tasks: locate and point out the hidden element, identify whether it is a suffix or a prefix and classify them in two categories:

derivational (creates a new word) or inflectional (changes verb tense). Furthermore, students will explain the function or effect that these hidden elements produce on the original word and provide a new example with the same pattern.

This activity encourages students to analyze derivational and inflectional morphology, thus exploring the formation and internal structure of words. These are key aspects of formal linguistics. In addition, this activity also promotes grammatical awareness, since students should know how prefixes and suffixes modify a word, even changing its grammatical category. By examining how some linguistic items affect the structure and meaning of a word, students reason critically about language. To sum up, "Hidden Words" is a complete activity for students to develop their analytical skills.

6.2.3 Narrating the Past

The next activity will be for the Spanish as a Modern Foreign Language course, and it is called "Narrating the Past."

The desks in the classroom must be organized into a circle, so the students know after whom they are going to follow the story. The students will agree on a topic, real or invented, and from there they will start the story thread in turns, creating a story only using Spanish. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental rule: only the past tense can be used. These verb tenses that can be used are the following: simple preterit, compound perfect preterit, imperfect preterit and pluperfect preterit.

The story must follow a common thread: introduction, body and end. The teachers will be able to intervene in a timely manner to ensure that this pattern is followed throughout the story. The students will have between 20-25 minutes to complete the task. Besides this, the teachers will write on the board all the verb tenses used by the students. When the task is completed, the students will check the tenses used and correct any possible errors with the teachers' help.

With this exercise, students of Spanish as a Foreign Language will be able to use oral and grammatical production within a communicative context throughout a dynamic practice. It also encourages active attention and spontaneous linguistic expression, a crucial aspect of learning a foreign language.

6.2.4 Translator´s Trap

The last activity proposed for Spanish as a Modern Foreign Language is called "Translator's Trap".

This task focuses on the critical analysis of grammatical errors in the production of L1 English speakers who are learning Spanish, as it can be seen in Appendix 3. Teachers will give students a series of deliberately disarranged Spanish sentences. They must rearrange them but considering several requirements: the learners may reconstruct the sentence following a logical grammatical order and identify agreement errors (such as subject-verb agreement and words that are misplaced or overlapping). Besides, students might be able to recognize interference errors from one language to another; these often occur when attempting to apply English grammar directly to Spanish structures. After this, they may find out if the sentence they have rearranged is correct and give an explanation. If it is not correct, they might be able to see the errors, explain what type they are and propose a valid version of the sentence.

For instance, one example of interference errors within the activity is the following: "yo/ bailar/ gusto". The student would order this sequence and obtain the sentence "Yo gusto bailar"; ungrammatical in Spanish, but in English its literal translation would be "I like to dance", grammatically correct. In this situation, the Spanish learner should be able to identify the structural error, the need for a pronoun such as "Me" instead of "Yo" for the sentence to be correct and so rephrase it to "Me gusta bailar".

In view of the above, this activity works on several aspects of formal linguistics such as morphology, syntax or sentence agreement, as well as grammatical aspects and structural differences between English and Spanish.

6.3 Closing reflections

All the activities presented expose formal linguistics and explicit grammar content in the A Levels curriculum in a progressive and attractive way, through contextualized activities, such as discussions with formal register and grammatical constraints for the subsequent writing, identification of morphological patterns, collaborative creation of stories in the past tense, or the analysis of common interlanguage errors. These activities promote

an approach to language that not only integrates reflection on structure, but they also focus on the practical use of both languages.

7. CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper the role of linguistics and grammar in the current English education system, particularly in the A-level system, has been explored. The purpose of this project was to achieve a well-established theoretical basis, a thorough curriculum analysis and a meaningful and innovative teaching proposal that was also pedagogically relevant. These three combined elements were intended to reflect both the limitations of the English education system at the pre-university stage and the potential benefits of integrating linguistic and grammatical knowledge into it.

The theoretical foundation of this project was focused on providing the most recent history of the A level curriculum in order to understand what kind of changes have occurred during its evolution and how pre-university students and teachers have been affected by these variations, both academically and personally. Building on this background, a curricular analysis of the current English A level specification was carried out. After a thorough study and research of the Assessment Qualifications Alliance (AQA), it was concluded that both linguistics and grammar play a secondary and superficial role in the English education system. In essence, these disciplines do not have the relevance they should despite having considerable pedagogical benefits.

These findings are supported by recent studies. Sheehan et al. (2021) found that exposure to linguistic concepts, even if limited, allowed students to develop descriptive, reflective, and critical understanding of language. The researchers also found that students were more motivated to continue learning facets of the language and increased their confidence in using it. In addition to this, students had a greater awareness of identity and linguistic variation. Besides, in a more recent study, Sheehan et al. (2024) highlighted the relevance of using linguistics not only as a tool for language analysis, but also for promoting analytical thinking and metalinguistic awareness. Apart from this, approaching grammar from a descriptive perspective, as proposed by the researchers, allowed learners to understand grammatical variation according to context and speaker, not just memorize a set of rules and

use them. As a whole, both studies concluded that a linguistic and grammatical approach was beneficial for both learners and teachers of A levels.

In the final section of this paper, a didactic proposal was developed with the main objective of integrating linguistics and grammar in English A level classrooms. This proposal contains a series of activities designed not only to align with the current curriculum, but also to foster critical thinking, the application of formal linguistics and the analysis of grammatical structure among pre-university students. All the tasks have a common goal: to give students a real understanding of language (i.e., grammar and linguistics). Moreover, the contents exposed in the proposal are pedagogically enriching, and intend to help the learners be better prepared for the university. In essence, the didactic proposal demonstrates that it is possible to integrate linguistics and grammatical concepts in an accessible and dynamic way into the classrooms of A levels.

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APPENDIX 1:

Debate list for Activity 1-Think Critically, Speak Smartly:

THINK CRITICALLY, SPEAK SMARTLY!

DEBATE TOPIC LIST

1. Teaching should be entirely online .

2. Social media negatively affects interpersonal relations.

3. Artificial intelligence is harmful for students.

4. Censorship in art is necessary in specific cases.

5. The legal voting age should be lowered.

6. Private cars should be banned in big cities.

7. School uniforms should be banned.

8. English should be the official global language.

9. Exams reflect true learning.

Self-elaboration
Created with Canva

APPENDIX 2:

Worksheet for students and key for Activity 2- Hidden Words:

HIDDEN WORDS

Read each sentence carefully and identify the hidden
linguistic element within (e.g., a prefix or suffix).
Then, classify it: Is it derivational or inflectional? What effect have these
linguistic items in the word?

○ **We were unaware of the change in policy.**

○ **That idea simply reappears in every essay.**

○ **He disapproved of the new method quickly.**

○ **The teacher offered assistance immediately.**

○ **They misunderstood the main concept.**

○ **A disagreement occurred during the session.**

HIDDEN WORDS   KEY:

○ **We were unaware of the change in policy.**

un- → derivational prefix (negation)

○ **That idea simply reappears in every essay.**

re- → derivational prefix (repetition)

-ly → derivational sufffix (forms an adverb)

○ **He disapproved of the new method quickly.**

dis- → derivational prefix (opposition/negation)

-ed → inflectional suffix (marks verb past tense)

-ly → derivational suffix (forms an adverb)

○ **The teacher offered assistance immediately.**

-ed → inflectional suffix (past tense verb)

-ly → derivationall suffix (forms an adverb)

○ **They misunderstood the main concept.**

mis- → derivational prefix (incorrect action)

○ **A disagreement occurred during the session.**

dis- → derivational prefix (negation)

-ment → derivational suffix (forms a noun)

-ed → inflectional suffix (marks verb past tense)

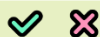Worksheet for students and key for Activity 4-Translator´s trap:

TRANSLATOR´S TRAP 🔍

Rearrange the mixed words to form a logical Spanish sentence. Then decide whether the sentence is grammatically correct. If not, correct it and explain why the original version doesn't work, especially considering typical English–Spanish interference.

1. yo / bailar / gusto   ✔ ✖

2. los / me / gustan / libros   ✔ ✖

3. tú / vas / que / importante / es   ✔ ✖

4. él / vi / lo / en / calle / la / yo   ✔ ✖

5. fin / semana / el / fútbol / juegan / en / mis amigos   ✔ ✖

TRANSLATOR´S TRAP
ANSWER KEY 💡

1. yo / bailar / gusto ➡ Yo gusto bailar   ✔ ⊗

- **Correct version:** Me gusta bailar
- **Explanation:** This is a direct translation from English ("I like to dance"). In Spanish, the verb gustar works differently: the subject is the activity (bailar), and the person who likes it is an indirect object (me). Saying yo gusto implies "others like me," not "I like."

2. los / me / gustan / libros ➡ Me gustan los libros   ⊘ ✖

- **Correct version:** Me gustan los libros
- **Explanation:** This is correct. The verb gustan agrees in number with the plural subject los libros, and me is the appropriate indirect object pronoun.

3. tú / vas / que / importante / es ➡ Es importante que tú vas   ✔ ⊗

- **Correct version:** Es importante que tú vayas
- **Explanation:** After impersonal expressions like es importante que, Spanish requires the subjunctive mode. The use of vas (indicative) reflects English interference, where no mode distinction exists in this context.

4. él / vi / lo / en / calle / la / yo ➡ Yo lo vi en la calle   ⊘ ✖

- **Correct version:** Yo lo vi en la calle
- **Explanation:** The subject pronoun él is redundant and ungrammatical here. Spanish often omits subject pronouns when the verb already makes the subject clear (vi → yo). Overusing subject pronouns is a common English interference.

5. fin / semana / el / fútbol / juegan / en / mis amigos ➡ Mis amigos juegan fútbol en el fin de semana   ✔ ⊗

- **Correct version:** Mis amigos juegan al fútbol el fin de semana
- **Explanation:** In Spanish, when talking about playing sports, the correct construction is jugar a + deporte → jugar al fútbol. This structure doesn't exist in English (play football), so learners tend to omit the preposition.