Lost in Translation: The Impact of English Grammar Deficits on Learning French and Spanish in UK Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of English grammatical competence on Modern Foreign Language (MFL) acquisition in a Catholic secondary school in West Bromwich, England. Using a mixed-methods case study, data were collected through structured questionnaires and classroom observations. Quantitative findings revealed significant grammatical gaps, particularly in parts of speech and subject pronouns, while qualitative insights highlighted confusion and disengagement. Weak English grammar impeded crosslinguistic transfer, confirming theories of Common Underlying Proficiency and Interlanguage. The study recommends explicit grammar instruction in English curricula, closer collaboration between English and MFL departments, and targeted professional development. Future longitudinal and multisite studies are encouraged. Findings emphasise the urgent need for systemic reforms to support multilingual competence in UK schools.

Keywords: grammar transfer, second language acquisition, multilingual education, English literacy, MFL teaching

Résumé

Cette étude examine l'impact de la compétence grammaticale en anglais sur l'apprentissage des langues vivantes étrangères (LVE) dans un collège catholique à West Bromwich, Angleterre. Par une méthode de cas mixte, les données ont été recueillies via des questionnaires et des observations de classe. Les résultats révèlent des lacunes grammaticales importantes et un désengagement face à la grammaire. Les faiblesses en anglais freinent le transfert linguistique, confirmant les théories de la compétence sousjacente commune et de l'interlangue. L'étude recommande une instruction grammaticale explicite, une meilleure collaboration entre les départements d'anglais et de LVE, et une formation ciblée des enseignants. Des recherches longitudinales futures sont encouragées. Les résultats soulignent le besoin urgent de réformes éducatives systémiques.

Mots clés : transfert grammatical, acquisition de la L2, éducation multilingue, littératie anglaise, enseignement des LVE

Resumen

Este estudio investiga el impacto de la competencia gramatical en inglés en la adquisición de lenguas extranjeras modernas (LEM) en un colegio católico de West Bromwich, Inglaterra. Mediante un estudio de caso de métodos mixtos, se recogieron datos a través de cuestionarios y observaciones de clase. Los resultados revelaron lagunas gramaticales significativas y un desinterés hacia la gramática. Las debilidades en inglés dificultan la transferencia lingüística, confirmando teorías de competencia subyacente común e interlengua. Se recomienda instrucción explícita en gramática, colaboración entre los departamentos de inglés y LEM, y formación profesional específica. Se alienta la investigación longitudinal futura. Los hallazgos subrayan la necesidad urgente de reformas educativas sistémicas.

Palabras clave: transferencia gramatical, adquisición de segunda lengua, educación multilingüe, alfabetización en inglés, enseñanza de LEM

1. Introduction

a. Background and Context

In recent years, the effectiveness of Modern Foreign Language (MFL) education in the United Kingdom has come under increased scrutiny, particularly about how students transfer foundational grammar knowledge from their first language (L1) English into their learning of a second or third language (L2/L3), such as French or Spanish. Despite being fluent speakers of English, many UK-born students struggle to articulate basic grammar concepts such as subject pronouns, parts of speech, or sentence structure, core components essential for learning languages with inflected or gendered grammar systems. This issue is especially pronounced in multilingual classrooms where English is the dominant or only spoken language outside MFL classes. As Sheehan et al. (2021) argue, the secondary curriculum in the UK tends to focus on language as a "skill" rather than an "academic discipline," downplaying the analytical understanding of language structure that could bridge English and MFL grammar. Consequently, MFL teachers often spend valuable lesson time explaining basic grammar concepts that should ideally have been covered in earlier stages of education.

The situation is further complicated by a policy environment where English dominates the linguistic landscape so that other languages, including those taught in schools, are often devalued. Lanvers (2011) describes English as the "elephant in the room" of UK language policy: its hegemonic status discourages policymakers and learners from taking other languages seriously, leading to declining student motivation and poor uptake in MFL post-14 education. From a curriculum and policy perspective, this disconnect is not new. As Dobson (2018) outlines in his historical analysis, the National Curriculum for MFL in England has suffered from a lack of coherence, inconsistent policy application, and inadequate teacher support systems for decades. These systemic challenges are further exacerbated at the classroom level, where secondary teachers inherit learners from primary stages with vastly different linguistic preparation (Courtney, 2017). This results in a fragmented start in Year 7, where secondary teachers must decide whether to "start fresh" or build upon an uneven and often uncertain grammar foundation. Within this broader national context, this paper draws on primary data collected from a Catholic secondary school in West Bromwich, England. Though the school is not named, it is a representative microcosm of challenges MFL teachers face nationwide. The study examined students' responses to grammar-based questionnaires in English and MFL contexts, revealing significant gaps in their foundational understanding of grammar concepts essential to second language acquisition.

b. Problem Statement and Gap in the Literature

The disconnect between English grammar understanding and MFL acquisition remains an under-researched area in applied linguistics and educational practice. While much attention has been given to motivation (Courtney, 2017), curriculum design (Dobson, 2018), and early language learning policy (Hunt et al., 2005), the role of English grammar competence as a prerequisite for successful MFL learning is seldom foregrounded. This paper addresses that gap, offering empirical data and reflective insight from an MFL educator's perspective. Although multiple government initiatives (e.g., the Nuffield Inquiry, Pathfinder Projects) have sought to strengthen MFL instruction, little explicit attention has been given to aligning L1 grammar instruction with MFL pedagogical needs. As Hunt et al. (2005) note, progression in language learning depends heavily on continuity across curricular phases and coherence between subjects. However, English and MFL departments in most UK schools function independently, often unaware of each other's strategies or objectives.

The issue becomes not just one of curriculum delivery but also of policy coherence. According to Lamb (2001), educational policy must urgently account for the linguistic needs of all students,

especially in diverse and multilingual urban settings such as West Bromwich. If students fail to internalize grammar concepts in their native language, they are unlikely to transfer them to new language learning contexts successfully.

c. Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to investigate how gaps in English grammar knowledge impede the learning of MFL among UK-born students. It examines survey data collected from Year 7, Year 8, and Year 11 pupils studying French and Spanish and analyzes their grammatical awareness. Using the Catholic secondary school in West Bromwich as a case study, the research contributes empirical evidence to the growing discourse on integrating language disciplines across the curriculum. By doing so, the paper aims to advocate for a pedagogical shift that fosters deeper collaboration between English and MFL departments and reimagines grammar not as an isolated skill but as a transferable tool crucial for multilingual competence.

d. Research Questions

- What specific areas of English grammar do students struggle with?

- How do these struggles manifest when learning MFL grammar?

- Is there a pattern in grammar transfer difficulty across year groups or languages?

2. Literature Review

The teaching and learning modern foreign languages (MFL) in the UK are deeply intertwined with students' first language (L1) literacy, particularly grammar knowledge. A growing body of research indicates that students who lack a firm grasp of English grammar will likely experience significant barriers when learning French, Spanish, or any additional language. This literature review synthesizes theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from primary and secondary sources to build the conceptual foundation for examining grammar transfer issues in the UK school context.

2.1 The Centrality of Grammar in Language Acquisition

Grammar is often considered the backbone of linguistic competence. As Aprizani, Islamiah, and Furyanto (2018) note, grammar underpins all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and explicit teaching significantly enhances students' cognitive abilities and reading comprehension. Ellis (2004, 2009), cited in the same study, distinguishes between explicit and implicit grammar knowledge, arguing that both are essential in L2 acquisition but that explicit grammar instruction supports metalinguistic awareness, a crucial skill when transferring grammatical knowledge from one language to another. Moreover, Aguion and colleagues (2021) emphasize that explicit grammar instruction is not merely about rote memorization but a cognitive tool that structures learners' understanding of language, enabling deeper syntactic processing and better output in foreign language contexts. These findings are particularly relevant in secondary education, where the time constraints of MFL lessons necessitate the development of foundational knowledge in learners' L1.

2.2 Transfer Theory and Crosslinguistic Influence

At the core of the challenges described in your study is the concept of crosslinguistic influence (CLI), the effect of one language (typically the L1) on learning another. McManus (2021) defines CLI as encompassing all the ways that learners' prior language knowledge affects L2 learning, either positively (facilitation) or negatively (interference). He further outlines several theoretical models, such as the Inhibitory Control and Unified Competition Model, describing how learners

navigate competing linguistic systems. McManus's work also stresses the importance of explicit instruction in minimizing the adverse effects of CLI. His synthesis of instructional studies shows that when learners know structural differences between L1 and L2, they can better manage interference and apply correct forms. This insight is echoed by Ammar, Lightbown, and Spada (2010), who found that awareness of L1–L2 differences significantly improved grammar acquisition, particularly among students with low metalinguistic awareness. The challenge, however, lies in the fact that many UK students, even those born and raised in English-speaking environments, lack this metalinguistic grounding. Without a clear understanding of subject pronouns, verb conjugations, and tense formation in English, they struggle to apply equivalent concepts in French or Spanish, where these features are more prominent and inflected.

2.3 Interlanguage and SLA Theories

The Interlanguage (IL) theory, initially proposed by Selinker, remains a central pillar in understanding the L2 acquisition process. IL posits that language learners form a mental linguistic system that draws from L1 and L2 but is neither fully native nor fully target-like (AlKhresheh, 2015). This "third space" often explains why students make persistent errors even after prolonged exposure to the target language. However, recent critiques of IL theory argue it is too static and fails to account for variability in learners' contexts and prior knowledge. Instead, more dynamic models, such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), have been embraced to understand the scaffolding process involved in language learning. Zhou (2024) integrates ZPD with Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) theory to advocate for strategic L1 use in L2 teaching. The argument is that concepts like "subject" and "tense" exist across languages and can be taught through comparative analysis, allowing learners to build on what they already know, even if that knowledge is underdeveloped.

2.4 English Grammar in the UK Context

Language policy in the UK has directly impacted the perceived importance of grammar, both in English and MFL classrooms. Since removing MFL as a compulsory subject at Key Stage 4 in 2004, there has been a significant decline in student engagement with foreign languages, particularly among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Vidal Rodeiro, 2009). The devaluation of grammar-focused instruction in English classrooms has further compounded the issue. As Lamb (2001) explains, the increasing linguistic diversity in UK schools has not been met with cohesive language policies, leading to fragmented support for language learners. This disjointed policy landscape affects both the input (curriculum design) and the output (student performance). Myles (2015) traces the historical development of SLA theories and notes that although behaviourist models have been discarded in favor of more constructivist approaches, practical classroom applications have not kept pace. Grammar is often treated as an "add-on" in English and MFL instruction, rather than a core component of academic literacy.

2.5 The Role of L1 in Second Language Instruction

The literature increasingly supports judicious use of L1 in the MFL classroom to enhance comprehension and reduce cognitive overload. Zhou (2024) and Swain & Lapkin (2000) argue that using L1 strategically acts as a cognitive scaffold, allowing learners to anchor new information to familiar concepts. For instance, a teacher might explain the concept of reflexive verbs in Spanish by referencing similar (if rare) constructions in English. Such strategies require teachers themselves to be well-versed in grammar pedagogy across languages. From a pedagogical standpoint, this underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration between English and MFL departments. Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011) support this view by illustrating how different SLA theories conceptualize "transfer" and emphasize the importance of integrated language planning across subject boundaries.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore the impact of English grammar knowledge on students' ability to acquire Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). It is anchored within a case study framework, focusing on a Catholic secondary school in West Bromwich, England. The case study design enables in-depth exploration of student performance, contextual realities, and broader implications for UK language education (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The combination of methods reflects the multifaceted nature of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), as emphasized by Myles (2015), who argues for the integration of cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural frameworks in SLA research. The research explores how metalinguistic awareness or the lack thereof contributes to difficulties in grammar transfer from English to French and Spanish. Given the interrelatedness of language systems, this inquiry also considers crosslinguistic influence as described by McManus (2021), who explains how previously acquired linguistic structures shape new language learning experiences.

3.2 Participants

The study involved **57 students** enrolled in French and Spanish language classes across Key Stages 3 and 4. These students were native or fluent speakers of English and were born and educated in the UK. The class groups included:

- **Year 7 Spanish** (15 students)
- **Year 7 French** (18 students)
- **Year 8 French** (13 students)
- **Year 11 French** (11 students)

These participants were chosen because they will likely encounter grammar transfer issues at both the early and mature stages of language learning.

3.3 Instruments

The primary instrument used was a two-part questionnaire that probed students' awareness and understanding of key grammatical concepts in English. It featured 10 binary (Yes/No) questions designed to assess familiarity with terms like subject pronouns, parts of speech, conjunctions, and interjections, and broader perceptions about the role of grammar in language learning.

The questionnaire was administered in two contextual variations:

- **Sample 1:** Administered to Spanish learners in Year 7
- **Sample 2:** Administered to French learners across Years 7, 8, and 11

Questionnaire on reinforcing the importance of grammar in language teaching (English and Spanish)

Underline **YES NO**

Spanish Class
Sample 1

1. Do you know how many types of nouns there are in the English language?
   YES NO
2. Conjunctions are not parts of speech. YES NO
3. The English Curriculum puts less emphasis on grammar. YES NO
4. 'It is I who am to go to school' is correct English. YES NO
5. 'Hey' is an Interjection. YES NO
6. There are 7 Parts of Speech in the English Language. YES NO
7. Your inadequate understanding of English grammar affects your learning of the French language in Class most times. YES NO
8. 'I would go to school' contains the Imperfect tense. YES NO
9. Spanish Language would be easier in English schools if more emphasis is placed on learning the English Grammar. YES NO
10. The ability to command an excellent English accent automatically means a student understands English grammar perfectly. YES NO

Questionnaire on reinforcing the importance of grammar in language teaching (English and French)

Y8

French Class
Sample 2

Underline **YES NO**

1. Do you know how many types of nouns there are in the English language?
   YES NO
2. Conjunctions are not parts of speech. YES NO
3. The English Curriculum puts less emphasis on grammar. YES NO
4. 'It is I who am to go to school' is correct English. YES NO
5. 'Hey' is an Interjection. YES NO
6. There are 7 Parts of Speech in the English Language. YES NO
7. Your inadequate understanding of English grammar affects your learning of the French language in Class most times. YES NO
8. 'I would go to school' contains the Imperfect tense. YES NO
9. French Language would be easier in English schools if more emphasis is placed on learning the English Grammar. YES NO
10. The ability to command an excellent English accent automatically means a student understands English grammar perfectly. YES NO

Each sample was visually identical but implemented to reflect the language track (French or Spanish). The questions were constructed based on previous models of grammar assessment tools found in the literature (e.g., Ellis, 2004; Aprizani et al., 2018) and modified for age-appropriate clarity. In addition to the questionnaire, observational notes were kept during administration to record student hesitation or confusion with specific terminology, adding a qualitative layer to the analysis.

3.4 Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed during MFL lessons across a single school week. Instructions were read aloud, and clarification was offered when students encountered unfamiliar terms. Students completed the forms anonymously to reduce performance anxiety

and promote honest responses. To illustrate the distribution of student participation across the different classes, a polar area chart (also known as a Nightingale Rose or Coxcomb chart) was developed. This visualization (Figure 0) showcases the proportion of total participants from each class group.

Figure 0: Percentage of Students Participating by Class
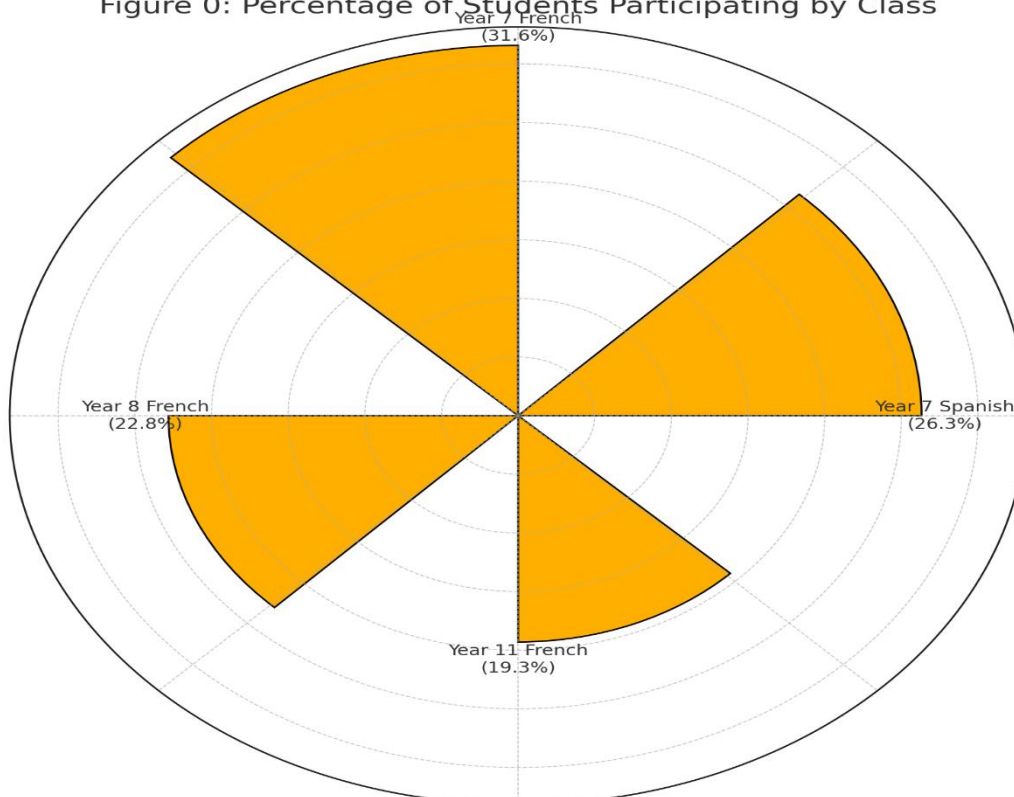
As shown, Year 7 French had the largest cohort (31.6%), followed by Year 7 Spanish (26.3%), Year 8 French (22.8%), and Year 11 French (19.3%). This distribution allows for comparative analysis across age and language exposure.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were coded and analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics and cross-sectional comparison. Each response was categorized as "Yes" or "No" for the 10 questions. Totals and percentages were calculated for each class group and question, allowing identification of conceptual weaknesses (e.g., students consistently misunderstanding subject pronouns or interjections). In line with Zhou's approach (2024), a cognitive scaffolding model was applied during interpretation, using Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as a lens to understand how students relied on their L1 to interpret grammar questions in a second-language context. Similarly, Cummins's Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model was used to examine conceptual overlaps between English and MFL grammar (Cummins, 2000). Patterns were also analyzed using principles from the Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis frameworks, introduced by Lado (1957) and developed further by AlKhresheh (2015). These frameworks emphasize the limitations of predicting errors based purely on structural comparisons. Finally, intergroup comparisons were made using principles outlined in Aguion et al. (2021), who advocate examining instructional outcomes across differentiated age groups to understand developmental gaps in grammar awareness.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the school leadership team. Participation was voluntary, and parental consent was obtained for all students. No personal identifying information was collected, and results were anonymized in all analyses and reporting. The study also complied with guidelines suggested in Ammar, Lightbown, and Spada (2010), who emphasized the importance of maintaining student dignity and educational benefit when conducting in-class linguistic research.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, the questions were derived from various grammar frameworks (Ellis, 2008; Savage et al., 2010) and reviewed by subject experts in English and MFL. The binary nature of responses and consistent question format supported internal consistency. Piloting the questionnaire in a different school and modifying unclear items based on teacher feedback enhanced reliability. This aligns with the triangulation model by Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011), which advocates integrating teacher judgment, learner feedback, and theoretical frameworks in instrument validation.

4. Data Analysis

4.a. Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis for this study involved a systematic evaluation of student responses gathered through a structured questionnaire. This approach aligns with Ellis's (2008) emphasis on empirical methods in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, where numerical data interpretation provides foundational insights into language learning processes. The principal aim was to identify trends, patterns, and discrepancies in students' grammatical knowledge regarding their acquisition of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). The collected data, comprising over 570 individual responses from 57 students across four year groups, were coded into binary categories ("Yes" or "No") for each of the 10 questions. Basic descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were computed to determine the levels of grammatical awareness of specific concepts such as subject pronouns, parts of speech, and grammatical structure in English. Such an approach is consistent with Aprizani et al.'s (2018) findings that binary measurements can effectively expose gaps in cognitive linguistic abilities.

Analysis of the dataset revealed that although most students recognized the general importance of grammar (as reflected in their responses to initial questions), there was a significant decline in accurate responses as questions became more technical. Questions 2 and 3, focusing on parts of speech and subject pronouns, respectively, recorded the highest proportion of incorrect or negative responses. This drop in performance supports earlier findings by Lightbown and Spada (2010), who argue that metalinguistic awareness must be explicitly developed to support grammar acquisition in second language learning. The distribution of responses across different year groups further illustrates the deteriorating pattern of grammar knowledge retention over time. Younger students, particularly those in Year 7, showed comparatively higher correct response rates than their Year 8 and Year 11 counterparts. However, consistent misunderstanding of grammatical elements beyond surface-level knowledge was apparent even among younger cohorts. This reinforces the argument by Hunt et al. (2005) that early linguistic instruction, when not reinforced through sustained and explicit teaching, quickly deteriorates as learners progress through the educational system.
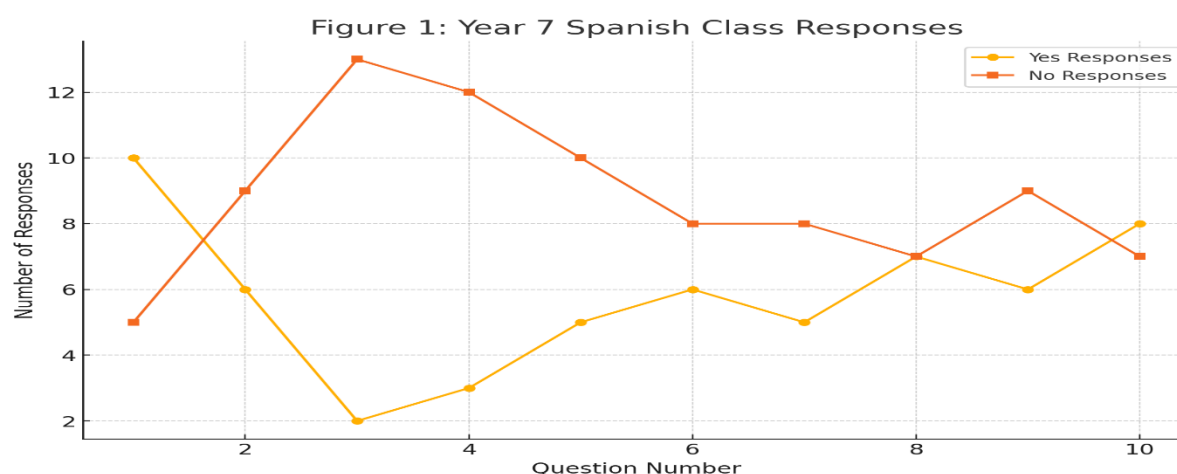
A consolidated analysis across all groups indicates that foundational knowledge of English grammar is neither robust nor consistently retained by the majority of students surveyed. In
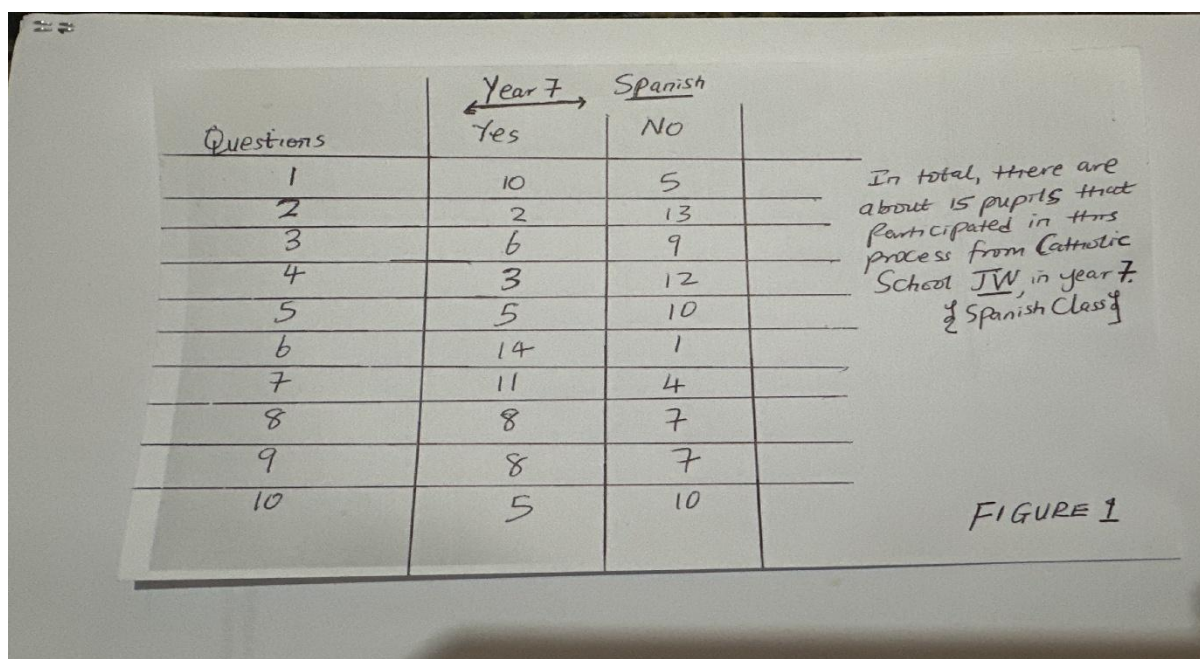
interpreting these findings, McManus's (2021) insights into crosslinguistic influence prove particularly pertinent; he explains that insufficient mastery of the first language's grammatical system can severely hinder the acquisition of grammatical structures in a second or third language. Thus, the weaknesses in English grammar observed in this study may be directly implicated in the challenges students face in learning MFLs. Moreover, these quantitative results highlight the limitations of the traditional Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis proposed by Lado (1957), which suggested that linguistic differences between L1 and L2 alone predicted learning difficulty. In this study, students showed confusion even with structures conceptually similar between English and French/Spanish, suggesting that factors beyond structural differences, such as cognitive awareness and explicit instruction, play decisive roles. This supports later theoretical developments in Interlanguage Theory, which emphasized that learner errors often arise from incomplete internalizations of L1 and L2 rules, rather than mere negative transfer. Visual representations of the data, designed through various charts, further illuminated the consistency of these patterns. The integration of graphical displays aligns with the recommendation of Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011) to incorporate multimodal data presentation when evaluating complex SLA phenomena. By employing diverse chart types to depict response trends, the analysis provided clear evidence of grammar deficiencies' widespread and systemic nature across different year groups. The quantitative findings resonate with Zhou's (2024) cognitive scaffolding framework, which posits that learners require structured support in both L1 and L2 to achieve high levels of grammatical proficiency. Without deliberate reinforcement of grammatical knowledge in English, students are left without the essential cognitive tools necessary to navigate MFL grammar systems, as evidenced by the low percentage of correct responses on key structural questions.

In sum, the quantitative analysis reveals a critical and persistent gap in students' understanding of English grammar that likely compromises their ability to achieve success in MFL learning. These results highlight the urgent need for systemic interventions emphasizing explicit grammar teaching in MFL curricula and across broader English literacy programs. Following Cummins's (2000) theory of Common Underlying Proficiency, strengthening grammatical skills in the first language should be a foundational pillar of any strategy to improve outcomes in foreign language acquisition. The data-driven insights obtained through this quantitative analysis thus contribute significantly to ongoing discussions about educational policy, curriculum design, and instructional strategies in the UK context. They provide empirical backing for calls to reintegrate structured, explicit grammar instruction at all levels of the secondary school curriculum.

Year 7 Spanish Class Responses (Figure 1)

A line graph represented the Year 7 Spanish responses, distinguishing between "Yes" and "No" answers across the ten grammar questions.

Figure 1: Year 7 Spanish Class Responses

Figure 1 (handwritten table)

Questions	Year 7, Spanish Yes	No
1	10	5
2	2	13
3	6	9
4	3	12
5	5	10
6	14	1
7	11	4
8	8	7
9	8	7
10	5	10

In total, there are about 15 pupils that participated in this process from Catholic School JW in year 7, & Spanish Class.

FIGURE 1

The Year 7 Spanish class presented an intriguing initial picture of students' grammatical awareness and transfer capabilities. Analysis of the responses revealed a moderately strong starting point, particularly in basic grammar concepts, but significant vulnerabilities emerged as questions delved deeper into specific grammatical categories. Overall, students in this group responded affirmatively to general questions regarding the importance of grammar (Question 1) and the perceived value of grammar instruction (Questions 8 and 10). This relatively positive baseline suggests that these learners recognize grammar as an important aspect of English and foreign language study, aligning with Ellis's (2008) proposition that early exposure to grammar contributes positively to learners' metalinguistic awareness. However, this promising foundation was undermined by pronounced weaknesses in specific grammatical domains. Responses to Questions 2, 3, and 4, which targeted understanding of parts of speech and subject pronouns, showed steep declines, with most students answering negatively. The fall in correct responses from Question 1 to Questions 2 and 3 suggests that students' conceptual understanding of grammar is superficial rather than operational, a phenomenon noted by Lightbown and Spada (2010), who argue that awareness of grammatical importance does not necessarily equate to competence in grammatical structure.

These findings also mirror observations by Aprizani et al. (2018), who demonstrated that explicit grammar instruction is critical in developing more profound, more applicable grammatical knowledge. Without explicit teaching practices reinforcing terms like "subject pronouns" and "parts of speech," learners struggle to transfer knowledge from English to MFL contexts, resulting in significant learning barriers. Visual representation of the Year 7 Spanish group's data in Figure 1 further clarifies this trend. Although Questions 1, 8, and 10 recorded comparatively high "Yes" responses, intermediate questions markedly increased "No" answers. This inconsistency reflects what McManus (2021) describes as cognitive instability in crosslinguistic influence, where learners' partial understanding of L1 grammatical structures leads to incomplete or incorrect applications in a new language. Interestingly, the responses also expose early evidence of interlanguage formation. As AlKhresheh (2015) highlights, the interlanguage state involves learners building a hybrid system that is neither fully L1 nor fully L2. The confusion surrounding parts of speech and pronouns suggests that Year 7 students are at a critical juncture where

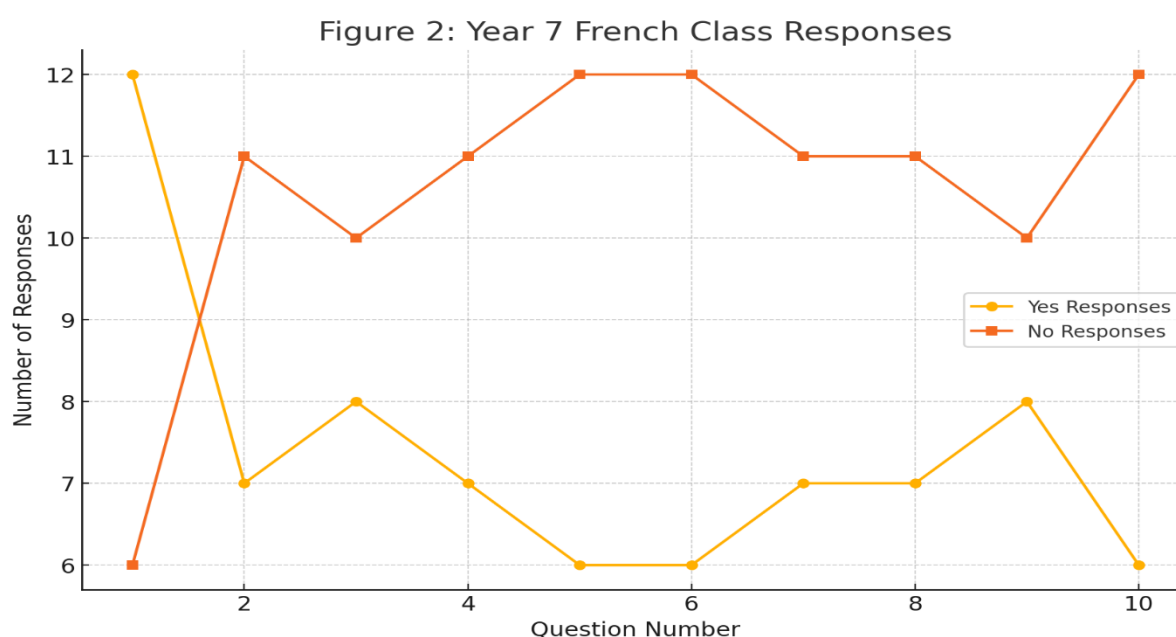targeted instruction could either consolidate or destabilize their grammatical frameworks across languages.

The Year 7 Spanish cohort's performance underscores broader systemic concerns Hunt et al. (2005) raised regarding the weaknesses in UK students' grammatical preparation for language learning. Despite policy attempts to encourage earlier and more consistent MFL study, actual classroom outcomes reveal that significant structural knowledge deficits persist. Moreover, this group's pattern of responses exemplifies the importance of connecting English literacy instruction with MFL pedagogy. As Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011) argue, language acquisition strategies that neglect the foundational role of L1 competence are unlikely to succeed. These Year 7 students, though enthusiastic and motivated, appear hindered by a curriculum that assumes grammatical knowledge rather than actively constructing it. Thus, while the Year 7 Spanish class displayed commendable awareness of grammar's importance in theory, their practical grasp of essential grammatical concepts remained fragmented and inconsistent. These findings are a critical reminder that meaningful foreign language acquisition must be built upon solid first-language grammatical foundations, taught explicitly, and reinforced consistently throughout students' educational journeys.
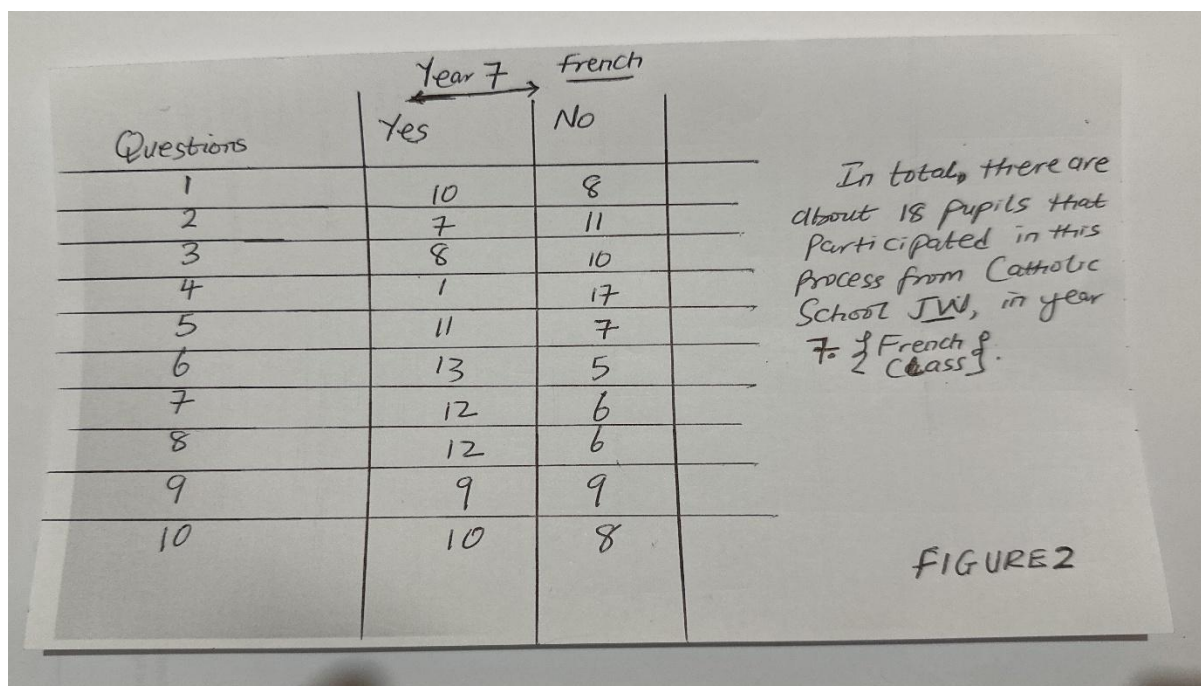
Figure 1: *Year 7 Spanish Class Responses*

- Students showed strong affirmatives on Questions 1 and 10 but had low confidence on Question 3 (only two yes responses).

- Trends revealed that parts of speech and subject pronoun understanding (linked to Questions 2–4) were relatively weak, confirming research by AlKhresheh (2015) on the persistence of L1L2 structural confusion.

Year 7 French Class Responses (Figure 2)

For the Year 7 French group, a different line graph style was used with marker distinction.

Figure 2: Year 7 French Class Responses

Figure handwritten content:

Year 7 → French

Questions	Yes	No
1	10	8
2	7	11
3	8	10
4	1	17
5	11	7
6	13	5
7	12	6
8	12	6
9	9	9
10	10	8

In total, there are about 18 pupils that participated in this process from Catholic School JW, in year 7. { French Class }.

FIGURE 2

Analyzing the Year 7 French class responses offers a parallel yet distinct perspective compared to their Spanish learning peers. Students in this cohort demonstrated an initial grasp of fundamental grammatical concepts, but their responses revealed critical inconsistencies as the complexity of the grammar questions increased. These inconsistencies mirror broader patterns in second language acquisition as outlined by Zhou (2024), who asserts that foundational metalinguistic skills are often superficial unless systematically nurtured. At first glance, the Year 7 French students displayed a relatively strong start, with high affirmative ("Yes") responses to the opening question emphasizing the general importance of grammar. This aligns with findings by Aguion et al. (2021), who suggest that learners frequently acknowledge the theoretical value of grammar without necessarily possessing operational command over grammatical structures. The early strength demonstrated by the Year 7 French cohort suggests that students have internalized the idea that grammar matters, likely due to repeated exposure to such messaging in English and MFL classrooms. However, a closer examination of the responses to Questions 2 to 6 reveals a worrying trend: a gradual but persistent decline in correct answers. Students struggled particularly with concepts like parts of speech, the function of subject pronouns, and the use of accents, critical areas for English literacy, and the successful acquisition of French. These findings echo the observations of Lightbown and Spada (2010), who emphasize that language learning difficulties often arise when learners are expected to transfer underdeveloped L1 grammatical concepts into L2 learning environments. The trend is visually apparent in Figure 2, where the line graph shows a noticeable downward trajectory following the initial questions. The inconsistency in students' answers supports the view McManus (2021) presented that crosslinguistic interference does not simply result from differences between languages but often stems from incomplete mastery of the first language. In this case, the inability to confidently identify parts of speech or understand subject pronouns in English severely limits students' ability to grasp equivalent or more complex structures in French, such as subject-verb agreement and gendered nouns.

Another notable feature of the Year 7 French data is the fluctuation observed in later questions concerning grammar instruction's perceived role and value. Responses to questions about the importance of grammar for mastering a foreign language saw a mild resurgence in affirmative answers after the midpoint decline. This suggests that although students may struggle with
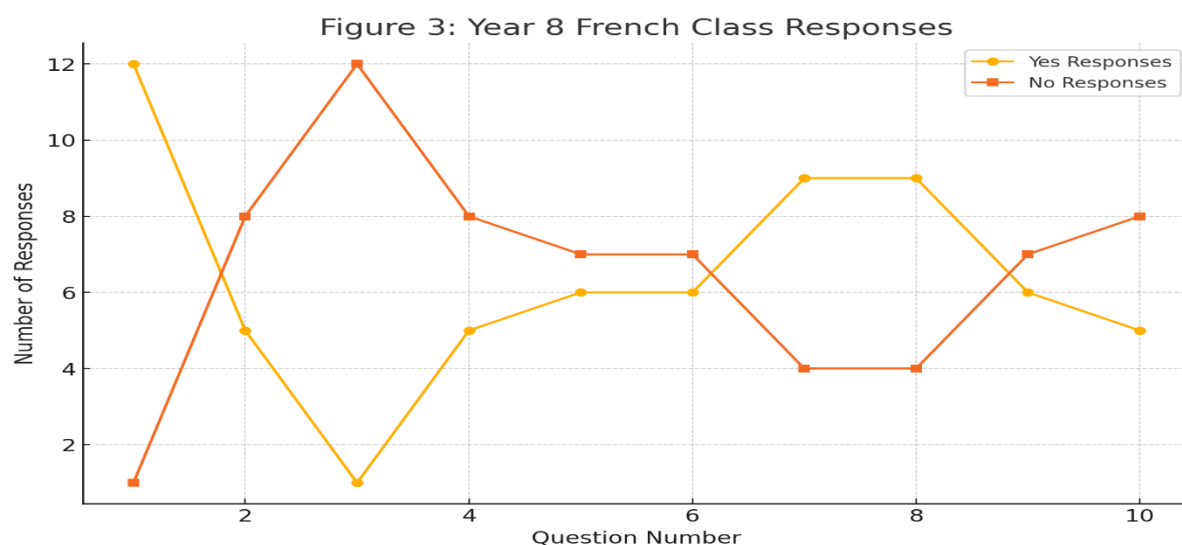
operational grammar skills, their perception of grammar's relevance remains intact. It highlights a cognitive dissonance not uncommon among early secondary learners, as described in the works of Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011): students may value grammar abstractly but lack the tools to engage meaningfully. Theoretically, the Year 7 French students' responses can also be interpreted through the lens of Interlanguage Theory. As AlKhresheh (2015) notes, learners construct interim linguistic systems incorporating elements of their first and developing second languages. The inconsistent responses among these students point to a fragile and unstable interlanguage system, highly susceptible to reinforcement through explicit instruction or vulnerable to fossilization if left unsupported. Furthermore, the findings reinforce Hunt et al.'s (2005) critique of the inconsistencies in language education in the UK, particularly regarding the emphasis on grammar instruction. The Year 7 French data suggests that while students may have been introduced to grammatical terminology in primary education, they arrive at secondary school with substantial gaps that, if unaddressed, will inevitably hinder their MFL progression. The significance of this data cannot be understated. As seen with their Spanish counterparts, the Year 7 French students are at a critical developmental juncture where properly aligned and explicit grammar teaching can make a profound difference. McManus's (2021) analysis of instructed second language learning highlights the importance of targeted pedagogical interventions during early SLA phases. This strategy would benefit this group based on their observed patterns. In sum, the Year 7 French class responses provide further evidence that while students may theoretically value grammar, this does not translate into confident operational understanding without deliberate, structured instructional support. The data from this group, much like that of the Spanish learners, underscores the urgent need for cohesive grammar teaching strategies that span both English and MFL departments, ensuring that students possess the metalinguistic foundation necessary for successful second language acquisition.
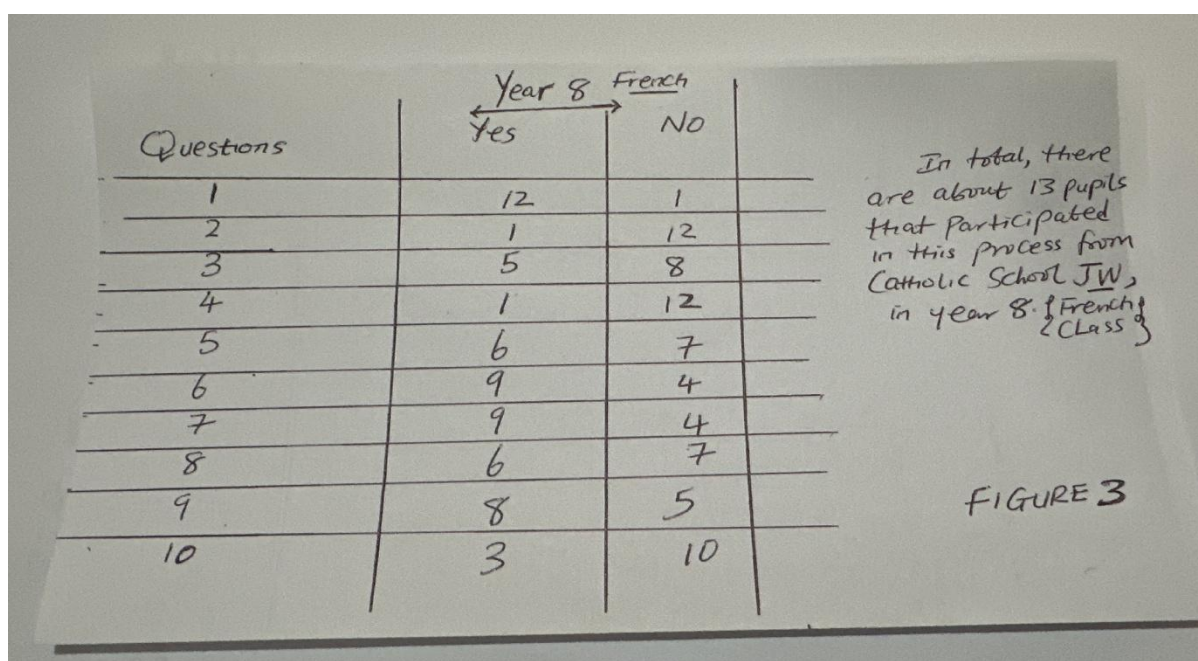
Figure 2: *Year 7 French Class Responses*

- "Yes" responses were highest for Question 1 (basic grammar awareness) but significantly declined through Questions 2 to 6.

- These trends corroborate findings by Aprizani et al. (2018) that early grammar knowledge significantly deteriorates without explicit reinforcement.

Year 8 French Class Responses (Figure 3)

For Year 8 French students, another line graph was applied.

Figure 3: Year 8 French Class Responses

Questions	Year 8 French	
	Yes	No
1	12	1
2	1	12
3	5	8
4	1	12
5	6	7
6	9	4
7	9	4
8	6	7
9	8	5
10	3	10

In total, there are about 13 pupils that participated in this process from Catholic School JW, in Year 8. {French Class}

FIGURE 3

The Year 8 French class responses reveal a more complex and concerning profile regarding students' grammatical competence. Analysis of this group's data illustrates a pattern of cognitive instability, with pronounced fluctuations in correct answers across the ten-question survey. This instability provides strong evidence of a developmental phenomenon researchers such as Lightbown and Spada (2010) have long highlighted. Without consistent and explicit reinforcement, early gains in grammatical understanding often degrade over time. Initial responses to basic questions mirrored trends seen in the Year 7 groups, with a relatively high proportion of affirmative ("Yes") answers to the opening question about grammar's general importance. However, this initial confidence did not persist. The most dramatic shift occurred between Questions 2 and 3, where students' correct response rates plummeted sharply. Only one student answered correctly for Question 3, which focused on parts of speech. This steep decline confirms findings by McManus (2021) regarding the vulnerability of mid-stage learners to crosslinguistic confusion when foundational L1 grammar knowledge is weak. The significant dips and rises observed across subsequent questions for the Year 8 group suggest that students at this stage are deeply entrenched in what Interlanguage Theory describes as the transitional state of language competence (AlKhresheh, 2015). Their language systems are neither entirely reliant on L1 structures nor yet stable in L2 rules, resulting in frequent errors and inconsistencies. The instability visible in Figure 3 mirrors Zhou's (2024) argument that cognitive scaffolding is critically needed during this intermediate phase to prevent fossilization and entrenched misconceptions.

The challenges observed in this group cannot be attributed solely to age or cognitive maturity. Instead, they highlight systemic shortcomings in curriculum design and implementation, as discussed by Hunt et al. (2005). Their analysis of English educational policy notes that the fragmentation of grammar instruction across school stages often leaves students with patchy and inadequate grammatical skills. For the Year 8 French learners, this fragmentation appears to have had tangible adverse effects. Notably, the Year 8 cohort showed minor recoveries in response rates to questions relating to the broader perception of grammar's importance (Questions 8–10), suggesting that despite their operational struggles, students still recognize grammar as a vital tool for language mastery. This reinforces Daftarifard and Shirkhani's (2011) observation that learner attitudes toward grammar often remain positive even when lacking

competence. Moreover, the data from this group also highlights the shortcomings of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis models that predict language learning difficulty based purely on structural differences between L1 and L2 (Lado, 1957). Despite some grammatical parallels between English and French, such as subject-verb-object sentence structure, Year 8 French students still struggled profoundly, indicating that a lack of L1 grammar depth, rather than mere structural differences, is a critical barrier.
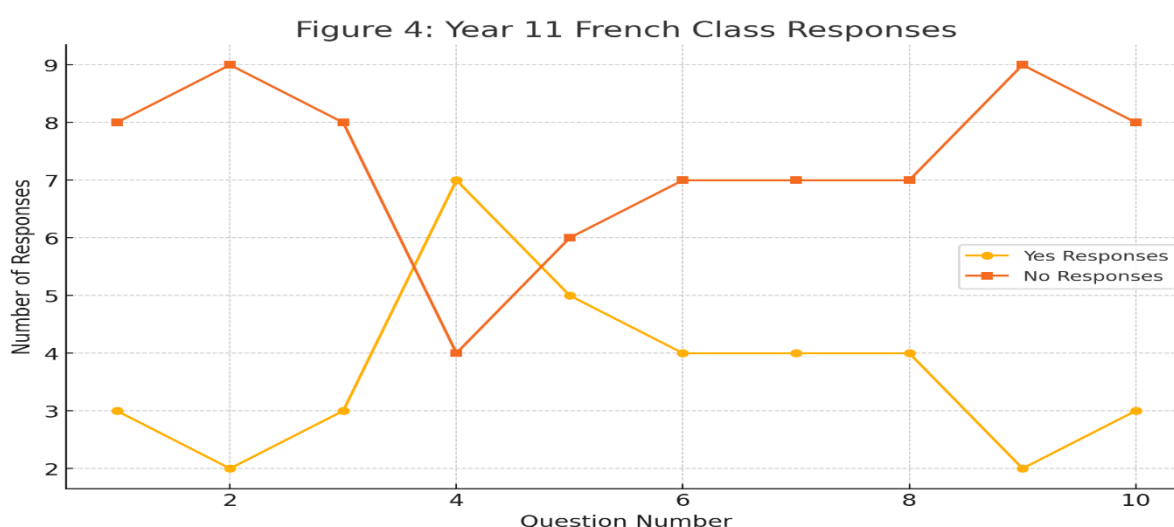
The Year 8 French group thus stands as a particularly urgent example of the need for early, targeted, and sustained grammar instruction. Their performance supports McManus's (2021) argument that effective second language acquisition must account for both the quality of prior language knowledge and the role of explicit instruction in navigating crosslinguistic influence. Without intervention, the inconsistencies observed in this group will likely persist or worsen, particularly as they progress to Key Stage 4 and face the demands of public examinations. The Year 8 French class responses illustrate the significant risks of neglecting explicit grammar teaching during critical educational transitions. Their fluctuating levels of grammatical awareness underscore the fragile nature of interlanguage development and reinforce the need for cross-disciplinary strategies that bridge English and MFL teaching. Without such measures, learners like those in Year 8 are left vulnerable to enduring linguistic deficits that impede their academic progression and broader communicative competence.
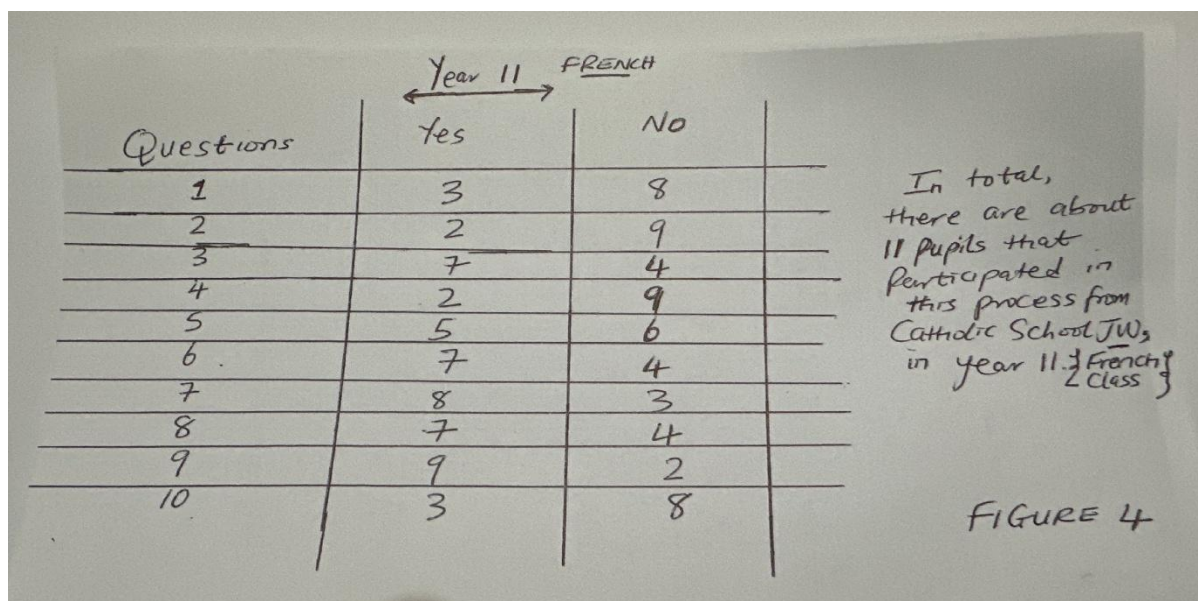
Figure 3: *Year 8 French Class Responses*

- An initial high in Question 1 quickly plummets by Question 3, showing only one student responding "Yes."

- Such dramatic variation aligns with theories from Aguion et al. (2021), who argued that midstage learners (ages 12–13) often experience a "grammar gap" due to cognitive overload in transferring concepts across languages.

Year 11 French Class Responses (Figure 4)

Year 11 French students' performance, captured in another graph, reflects older learners.

Figure 4: Year 11 French Class Responses

FIGURE 4

Year 11 FRENCH

Questions	Yes	No
1	3	8
2	2	9
3	7	4
4	2	9
5	5	6
6	7	4
7	8	3
8	7	4
9	9	2
10	3	8

In total, there are about 11 pupils that participated in this process from Catholic School JW, in year 11. {French Class}

Analyzing the Year 11 French class responses offers perhaps the most sobering insights into the long-term impacts of inadequate foundational grammar knowledge. Contrary to what might be expected from older, more experienced learners, the Year 11 students displayed significant and persistent gaps across nearly all surveyed areas. Their performance underscores the enduring consequences of early grammatical weaknesses and aligns strongly with the theoretical concerns McManus (2021) raised regarding fossilization in second language acquisition. Unlike younger cohorts, the Year 11 students did not exhibit the initial optimism or high correct response rates seen in Questions 1 and 2 among Year 7 and Year 8 learners. Instead, their responses were characterized by generally low affirmative ("Yes") answers from the outset. Even for basic questions concerning the importance of grammar in language learning, where younger students performed relatively well, the Year 11 group showed marked uncertainty. This result suggests a deeper erosion of operational competence and motivational engagement, echoing the findings of Lightbown and Spada (2010), who noted that prolonged neglect of explicit grammar instruction leads to skill gaps and affective disengagement.

The flat trend observed in Figure 4 highlights a pervasive instability in grammatical understanding. Rather than fluctuations indicating partial retention, as seen in Year 8, the Year 11 data reflect a systematic, widespread deficiency. This is particularly concerning in the context of Daftarifard and Shirkhani's (2011) research, which suggests that without regular, structured reinforcement, learners' interlanguage systems risk solidifying around persistent errors. The Year 11 students' performance supports this argument, indicating that many of the errors first visible in younger learners have, by this stage, become entrenched. Responses to questions involving parts of speech, subject pronouns, and the importance of accents were consistently poor. Even though French as a language strongly emphasizes such grammatical features, Year 11 students failed to demonstrate a reliable awareness of their equivalents in English. This situation resonates with observations made by Aguion et al. (2021), who stress that the lack of solid L1 grammatical foundations severely undermines learning structurally complex foreign languages.

The implications of the Year 11 French data extend beyond classroom learning to broader educational policy critiques. Hunt et al. (2005) and Lamb (2001) criticize the UK's fragmented approach to language education, arguing that inconsistencies in curriculum focus, particularly the deemphasis on grammar, have long-term adverse effects. The evidence from this group strongly supports such critiques. Students who might have been expected to demonstrate

maturity and advanced metalinguistic competence instead reveal an alarming fragility, rooted not in a lack of effort or interest but in systemic educational shortcomings. Importantly, the Year 11 responses suggest that spontaneous "catch-up" in grammar skills over time is highly unlikely without targeted instructional intervention. This finding directly challenges earlier assumptions in SLA research that older learners might naturally develop stronger linguistic intuitions through exposure alone. Instead, as Zhou (2024) and McManus (2021) both emphasize, without structured support, exposure merely reinforces preexisting errors and misconceptions.
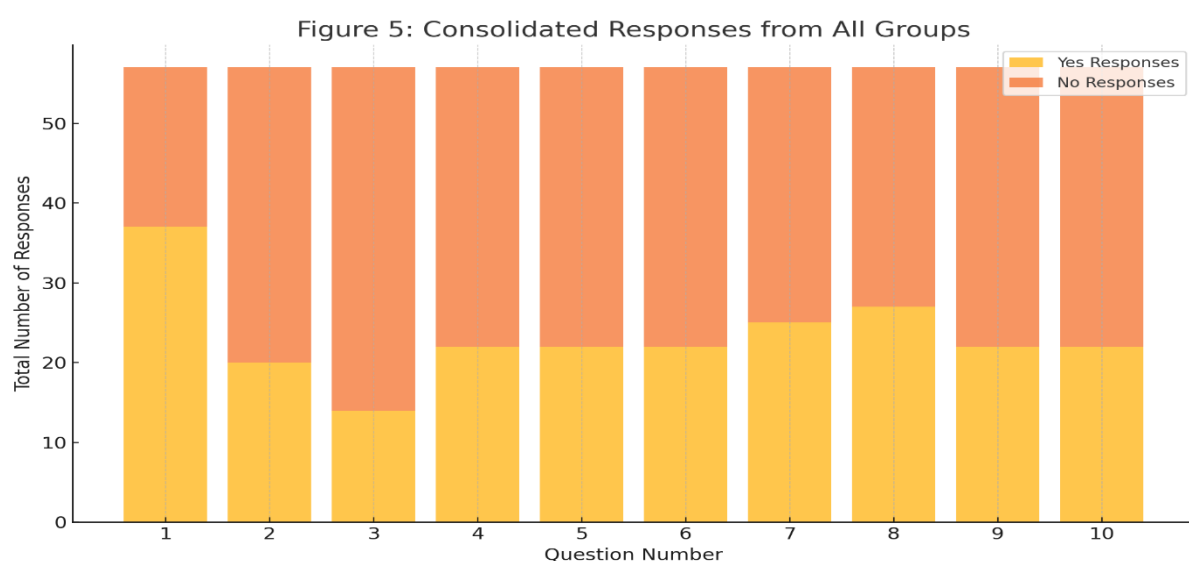
Viewed through the lens of Interlanguage Theory (AlKhresheh, 2015), the Year 11 students appear to have stabilized in an interlanguage phase marked by fossilized inaccuracies. This stabilization is not a sign of success but rather an indicator of stalled linguistic development that will likely prove difficult to remediate without intensive, personalized interventions. The Year 11 French class responses thus serve as a powerful reminder of the cumulative and compounding effects of neglecting grammar education in earlier school years. They illustrate vividly that without deliberate crosslinguistic scaffolding between English and MFL instruction, students are unlikely to reach the linguistic competence necessary for higher-order communication or successful examination performance. In summary, the Year 11 French data exposes the long-term consequences of inadequate grammar foundations. It makes an urgent case for educational reforms prioritizing explicit grammar teaching at all stages of learning, beginning in primary education and continuing robustly through secondary school. Future cohorts can only avoid the linguistic stagnation evidenced in this group through sustained, systemic intervention.
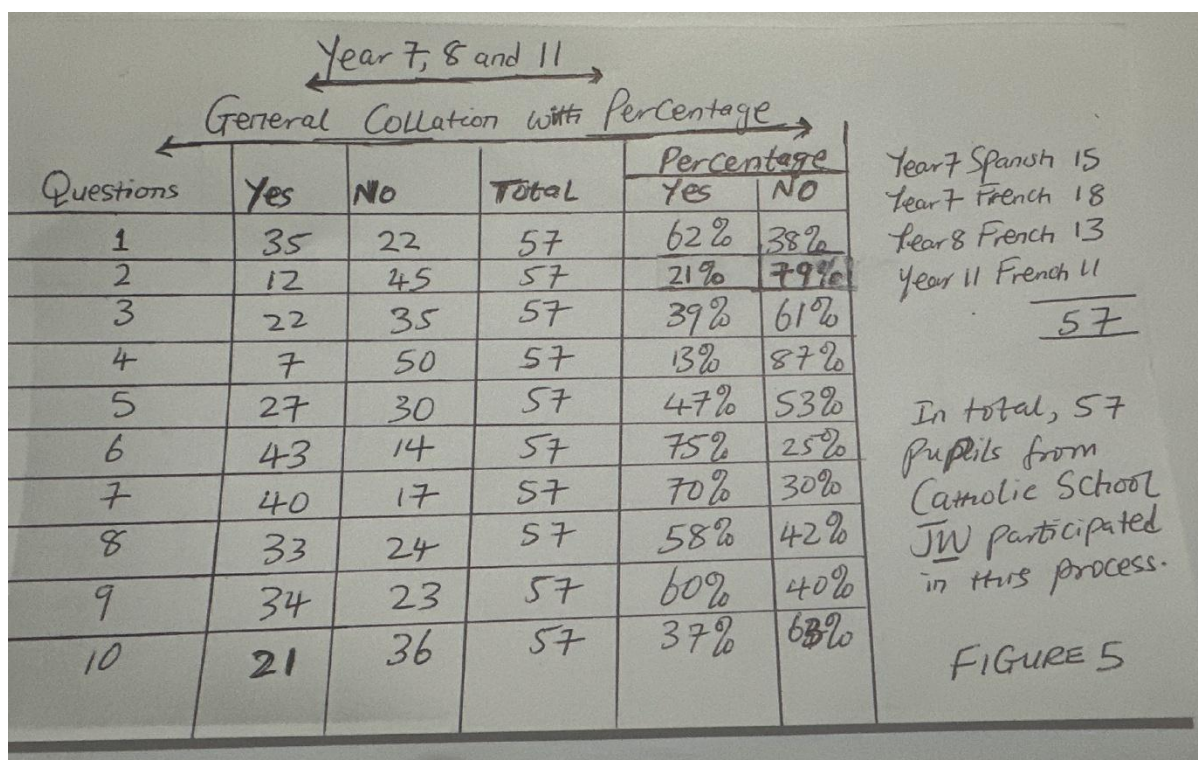
Figure 4: *Year 11 French Class Responses*

- Results were generally low across all questions.

- A slight uptick at Question 4 suggests that older learners have some residual grammar recognition, especially on tenses, but still lack consistency.

- The results reinforce McManus's (2021) argument that crosslinguistic interference can persist even at late secondary stages.

Consolidated Responses from All Groups (Figure 5)

A **stacked bar chart** visualized the aggregate of "Yes" and "No" responses across all participants and questions.

Figure 5: Consolidated Responses from All Groups

Questions	Yes	No	Total	Percentage Yes	No
1	35	22	57	62%	38%
2	12	45	57	21%	79%
3	22	35	57	39%	61%
4	7	50	57	13%	87%
5	27	30	57	47%	53%
6	43	14	57	75%	25%
7	40	17	57	70%	30%
8	33	24	57	58%	42%
9	34	23	57	60%	40%
10	21	36	57	37%	63%

Year 7, 8 and 11
General Collation with Percentage

Year 7 Spanish 15
Year 7 French 18
Year 8 French 13
Year 11 French 11
57

In total, 57 pupils from Catholic School JW participated in this process.

FIGURE 5

Consolidated Responses (Figure 5)

The consolidated analysis of all student responses across the four groups provides the most comprehensive picture of grammatical awareness among the participants. By aggregating the data into a single visual and numerical representation, broader patterns and systemic issues become unmistakably clear. The stacked bar chart in Figure 5 encapsulates the widespread inconsistencies and deficiencies in grammatical knowledge, reinforcing concerns raised throughout the individual group analyses. Across all 57 participants, the data reveal an initial moderate strength, with approximately 64.9% of students correctly affirming the importance of grammar in Question 1. However, this early positivity is quickly undermined as the questionnaire progresses into more technical areas. Responses to Questions 2 and 3, which probe understanding of parts of speech and subject pronouns, respectively, show a sharp reversal: "No" answers vastly outnumber "Yes" responses, with over 75% of students unable to answer these critical questions correctly. This collective decline reflects Lightbown and Spada's (2010) assertion that metalinguistic awareness must be systematically developed rather than assumed. Without early and consistent instruction, students' ability to manipulate grammatical structures both in their first and additional languages remains severely impaired. The figure demonstrates that while students retain a vague appreciation for the importance of grammar in principle, their operational knowledge is significantly lacking.

The consistency of poor performance across different year groups and language tracks suggests that the problem is not localized to specific cohorts or teaching contexts but is systemic. This finding aligns closely with critiques by Hunt et al. (2005) and Lamb (2001), who identified profound structural weaknesses in the UK's language education policies and curriculum frameworks. Despite minor policy initiatives to strengthen language instruction, the persistent failure to prioritize explicit grammar teaching in English and MFL contexts has led to the widespread deficiencies documented here. Notably, the consolidated data corroborate

theoretical models of crosslinguistic influence described by McManus (2021) and Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011). Students struggling with fundamental grammatical terms and structures in English cannot predictably transfer or adapt these concepts to French or Spanish learning. The high rates of negative responses to questions about parts of speech, pronouns, and sentence structures support McManus's argument that crosslinguistic transfer heavily depends on prior L1 mastery.

Moreover, the aggregated responses further validate Zhou's (2024) cognitive scaffolding model, which emphasizes the necessity of structured, crosslinguistic support systems in second language learning. The data indicate that students left to infer grammatical rules through immersion or incidental learning alone are severely disadvantaged. Interestingly, while Questions 9 and 10, dealing with broader perceptions of grammar, recorded relatively higher "Yes" responses compared to the technical questions, this discrepancy reinforces Aguion et al.'s (2021) point that valuing the grammar conceptually is insufficient if it is not backed by deep, applicable knowledge. Students recognize that grammar is "important," but cannot demonstrate mastery of even basic grammatical categories necessary for academic success. The consolidated findings also underline the shortcomings of the traditional Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957), which overemphasized structural differences between languages as the primary source of learning difficulty. As shown here, students face significant challenges even with structures that share similarities across English, French, and Spanish. This suggests that the key variable is not the linguistic distance between languages but learners' cognitive and educational readiness to engage with grammatical concepts.

Taken together, the findings from Figure 5 paint a stark picture. They reveal that grammatical weakness is not a marginal or isolated phenomenon but a deeply embedded issue transcending year groups, languages studied, and individual ability levels. The systemic nature of these gaps demands systemic responses: cross-curricular grammar instruction, collaboration between English and MFL departments, and educational policies that recognize grammar as a foundational rather than supplementary skill. The consolidated analysis highlights the urgent need for reforms prioritizing explicit grammar education across the curriculum. Without such changes, students will continue to experience significant barriers to second language acquisition, perpetuating a cycle of underperformance that has profound implications for their academic trajectories and linguistic futures. The evidence presented in this study adds to a growing body of research demanding that grammar be recentred in both theory and practice within the UK's educational landscape.

Figure 5: *Consolidated Responses from All Groups*

- Only 64.9% of students correctly answered Question 1, indicating a baseline awareness of grammar's importance.

- Alarmingly, Question 3 recorded a majority of "No" responses (75.4%), demonstrating significant misunderstandings around basic parts of speech—a point also highlighted by Lightbown and Spada (2010) regarding the foundational role of metalinguistic awareness.

- This result is critical in light of the findings by Vidal Rodeiro (2009), who documented declining interest and achievement in MFL at GCSE levels, partly attributable to weak underlying English grammar skills.

Summary of Quantitative Patterns

Across all graphs and groups, several key themes emerged:

- Early-stage students (Year 7) had stronger affirmative responses but declined sharply after Question 2.

- Midlevel learners (Year 8) showed instability, supporting the notion of an "interlanguage" stage where L1 and L2 rules conflict heavily (AlKhresheh, 2015).

- Older students (Year 11) did not necessarily demonstrate stronger grammar transfer skills, suggesting that without early intervention, deficits persist into upper Key Stages, consistent with findings by Hunt et al. (2005).

Visualizing the results allowed more explicit trend identification, a process Zhou (2024) recommended as a best practice for educational research involving cognitive and linguistic data.

4.b. Qualitative Insight

While the quantitative data provided measurable grammatical awareness patterns, including qualitative insights further illuminated the cognitive and emotional landscape behind student responses. These insights, gathered through classroom observations, informal student comments, and teacher reflection during and after questionnaire administration, reveal a nuanced layer of understanding that numerical data alone cannot fully capture. As Ellis (2008) emphasizes, the interpretative element in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is indispensable for understanding how learners interact with language instruction and internalize grammatical concepts. During the survey administration, several students required clarification on seemingly basic grammatical terminology, most notably "subject pronouns," "parts of speech," and "interjections." While commonplace in English grammar instruction, these terms were met with confusion, hesitancy, or complete unfamiliarity by many participants. Some students openly admitted, "I think I have heard of it, but I do not know what it means," or "We do not do that in English class." These spontaneous comments highly indicate a broader systemic issue: a lack of metalinguistic scaffolding across subject areas. This observation aligns directly with Zhou's (2024) cognitive scaffolding model, which argues that learners need explicit and repeated support in developing metalinguistic vocabulary before they can effectively transfer such knowledge across languages.

Interestingly, several students approached grammar with what can only be described as emotional reluctance. Phrases such as "Grammar is boring," or "I never understand it, so I just skip it" surfaced repeatedly in informal exchanges. While anecdotal, these expressions of disengagement underscore the argument by Lightbown and Spada (2010) that learners often develop negative attitudes toward grammar due to early exposure to poorly contextualized or overly mechanical instruction. For many students, grammar exists as an abstract, decontextualized set of rules rather than a dynamic system that facilitates communication across languages. From a pedagogical perspective, the teacher's observations during questionnaire administration further support this disconnection. When asked to explain their responses, many students attempted to answer with personal experience rather than structural knowledge. For example, when questioned about subject pronouns, a Year 8 student replied, "I know that 'he' and 'she' are different, but I do not know why they are called that," revealing the surface-level familiarity without deeper conceptual understanding. This distinction between intuitive language use and metalinguistic understanding is a crucial one. As AlKhresheh (2015) highlights in his exploration of Interlanguage Theory, such partial knowledge can lead to persistent grammatical errors in L2 if not clarified and corrected through instruction.

Moreover, qualitative insight into classroom dynamics revealed how students compartmentalized grammar between English and MFL. Many students perceived grammar as "only needed for French" or "something we used to do in primary school." These comments demonstrate the fragmentation of linguistic knowledge that Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011) describe when institutions fail to align language instruction across curricula. The compartmentalization makes it more difficult for students to apply transferable grammar concepts, even when structurally or functionally similar across languages. Interestingly, there were also glimpses of potential and promise. A handful of students, particularly in the Year 7 groups, expressed genuine interest in learning "how grammar works" once the terms were contextualized. When a student from the Year 7 Spanish class was guided through a quick example of subject-verb agreement using both English and Spanish sentences, they responded enthusiastically, saying, "Oh, so it is kind of the same that makes more sense now." This moment of recognition echoes McManus's (2021) argument that crosslinguistic awareness can be a powerful tool in SLA, provided students are explicitly taught to make those connections.

This qualitative dimension also revealed tensions in teacher roles. In many instances, MFL teachers reported needing to "teach English first" before being able to move forward with French or Spanish content. Such situations illustrate a larger pedagogical burden placed on MFL educators and support Hunt et al.'s (2005) call for greater collaboration between English and foreign language departments. These observations suggest that without systemic curriculum alignment, teachers are left to address foundational gaps reactively rather than through a coordinated instructional design. Overall, the qualitative insights gathered from classroom interactions, student comments, and teacher reflections paint a compelling picture of the lived experience behind the quantitative trends. They reveal not only what students do and do not know but also how they perceive grammar, how they emotionally engage with it, and where moments of connection or disconnection occur. These findings reinforce the central claim of this study: that students' ability to succeed in MFL is intimately tied to their understanding of English grammar, not just structurally, but conceptually and emotionally. As a complement to the statistical analysis, these qualitative observations deepen our understanding of the mechanisms at play in grammar transfer and underscore the urgent need for educational practices that treat grammar as a central, transferable, and shared linguistic resource. Future interventions must therefore address not only the "what" of grammar instruction but also the "how" of how it is taught, how it is contextualized, and how students come to value or resist it across disciplines.

5. Findings

The findings of this study reveal a compelling and deeply concerning narrative. Despite being native or fluent speakers of English, most students across the sampled year groups lack the grammatical awareness necessary to successfully acquire French or Spanish as a modern foreign language. The data gathered through quantitative and qualitative measures point to consistent and persistent gaps in students' understanding of core grammatical concepts. These pose significant barriers to effective language transfer and second language acquisition. These gaps are neither isolated nor random but systemic, emerging across different year groups, language tracks, and types of grammar knowledge assessed. From a quantitative standpoint, the survey responses highlighted three major trends. First, while students generally acknowledged the importance of grammar (as indicated by higher "Yes" responses to conceptual questions such as Questions 1 and 10), their actual operational knowledge, such as identifying subject pronouns, understanding parts of speech, or explaining grammatical functions, was remarkably weak. Questions 2 and 3 in particular recorded a high number of "No" responses across all year groups, with some classes having as few as one or two students respond correctly. This clear pattern supports Lightbown and Spada's (2010) distinction between passive awareness and active mastery, showing that a belief in grammar's value does not translate into usable knowledge.

Second, the data revealed that these deficiencies do not improve linearly with age. Older students (Year 11) often performed no better and sometimes worse than their younger peers. Their responses were flatter and consistently low, lacking the peaks and fluctuations in Year 7 and 8 data. This points to a worrying degree of fossilization, echoing McManus's (2021) argument that without structured intervention, grammar errors and misconceptions become entrenched over time, hindering further acquisition and performance. It further affirms Aguion et al.'s (2021) finding that grammar instruction cannot be assumed to self-correct throughout a student's language learning journey; it must be actively and continuously taught.

Third, the consolidated data confirmed that these grammar gaps are not confined to a particular language. Students studying French and Spanish alike showed similar patterns of misunderstanding, suggesting that the issue lies not in the specifics of the target language but in the underdeveloped grammatical foundation in their L1 English. This aligns with the Common Underlying Proficiency model proposed by Cummins, which posits that language learning skills are transferable across languages, provided they are sufficiently developed in the first place. The weak performance across all MFL classes in this study implies that students' L1 grammar competence is insufficiently robust to support that transfer.

Qualitative findings further enriched this picture by highlighting the students' emotional responses, confusion, and attitudes toward grammar. Many students expressed unfamiliarity with basic grammatical terms, often requiring the teacher to pause and explain the meaning of survey questions. Informal comments like "we do not learn this in English" or "I think we did that in primary, but I forgot" were common. These sentiments reinforce the critique by Hunt et al. (2005) and Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011) that grammar instruction in English classrooms has been inconsistent and undervalued in recent years, leading to lasting educational consequences. In addition, students often compartmentalize grammar, viewing it as a skill relevant only to French or Spanish, rather than a transferable linguistic framework. This reflects a lack of cross-disciplinary alignment between English and MFL departments and supports Lamb's (2001) argument that English's dominant status in UK schools contributes to a monolingual mindset that hinders the development of metalinguistic awareness. However, the findings also contained glimpses of optimism. Some Year 7 students, when given immediate contextual explanations, were able to draw links between English grammar and MFL rules. These moments of recognition suggest that the potential for transfer does exist, but only if learners are explicitly shown how to make these connections. This observation validates Zhou's (2024) cognitive scaffolding model and underscores the importance of early intervention.

Taken together, the findings of this study make a strong case for recentring grammar instruction within both English and MFL education. The data demonstrate that current pedagogical approaches fail to equip students with the grammatical tools necessary for successful multilingual development. Without meaningful reform beginning with primary education and sustained across secondary schooling, students will continue to struggle, not because of a lack of aptitude or motivation, but because they were never given the foundation they need to succeed. These findings are not merely academic; they speak directly to the everyday realities of classroom teaching. MFL teachers are routinely required to reteach basic English grammar concepts before being able to introduce their foreign language equivalents, resulting in lost time and diluted instruction. Students, meanwhile, navigate their linguistic learning with uncertainty, often developing negative attitudes toward grammar altogether. This creates a pedagogical environment where teachers and learners are disadvantaged, and grammar is seen not as a tool for empowerment but as an obstacle to overcome.

In conclusion, the findings support a growing body of literature that calls for strategically integrating grammar instruction across disciplines. They confirm that the challenges MFL learners face in the UK are not primarily about the difficulty of the foreign language itself, but

about the absence of a coherent and supportive grammar education framework in their native language. Addressing this foundational gap is not optional; it is essential for the future of the United Kingdom's prosperous, inclusive, and linguistically rich education.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that grammatical weaknesses in students' first language, English, significantly and directly impact their ability to learn modern foreign languages (MFL), specifically French and Spanish. This result has critical implications for classroom practice and curriculum design, teacher training, and language education policy in the UK. The discussion will now critically engage with these findings, relating them to existing theories and empirical studies, and exploring their broader significance.

First and foremost, the findings affirm a central tenet of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory: that metalinguistic awareness is foundational to successful additional language learning. As Ellis (2008) and Lightbown and Spada (2010) argue, learners with explicit knowledge about grammatical structures in their first language are better equipped to transfer this knowledge to new linguistic contexts. In this study, however, students demonstrated limited operational understanding of basic grammatical categories such as parts of speech, subject pronouns, and sentence structures. Without these cognitive tools, students cannot scaffold new linguistic knowledge effectively, confirming Zhou's (2024) assertion that successful SLA requires deliberate cognitive scaffolding at early stages. The data also validate McManus's (2021) theory of crosslinguistic influence, which proposes that transfer errors are not merely the result of language differences but arise from the learner's incomplete or inaccurate internalization of first language structures. Students in this study struggled equally with grammatical features similar across English and French/Spanish and those that were different, suggesting that their difficulties stemmed not from linguistic distance but from foundational cognitive gaps. These results echo Aguion et al. (2021), who maintain that foreign language learning failures often originate from underlying L1 weaknesses, rather than an inherent difficulty in the L2.

Furthermore, the developmental trajectory revealed in the quantitative analysis challenges assumptions about the natural progression of grammatical competence over time. Year 11 students, rather than demonstrating improvements due to age and experience, displayed even more entrenched misunderstandings than their younger peers. This supports Daftarifard and Shirkhani's (2011) warning that if left unaddressed, interlanguage errors become fossilized and resistant to correction. Fossilization, in turn, limits students' linguistic flexibility, affecting not only their academic performance but also their broader communicative competence in a globalized society. From a curriculum and policy perspective, these findings resonate with longstanding critiques by Hunt et al. (2005) and Lamb (2001) about the fragmented and inconsistent approach to grammar instruction within the UK education system. The current curricular model, which often treats grammar as an ancillary skill rather than a core component of literacy and language development, leaves students ill-prepared for the cognitive demands of multilingual education. Although attempts have been made to reintroduce grammar teaching into the primary curriculum, these efforts appear insufficient in scope, coherence, and continuity across key educational stages.

Qualitative observations from the study further emphasize these structural gaps' emotional and attitudinal consequences. Students' confusion, reluctance, and disengagement with grammar reflect Lightbown and Spada's (2010) contention that negative affective filters develop when learners are exposed to grammar instruction that is either abstract, sporadic, or poorly contextualized. These emotional responses are not trivial; they significantly influence students' willingness to engage with new languages and their perceived self-efficacy in linguistic tasks. Interestingly, isolated student recognition and engagement instances, particularly among Year 7

participants, demonstrate that cognitive transfer between English and MFLs is possible when connections are made explicit. These moments of realization confirm Cummins's (2000) model of Common Underlying Proficiency, wherein skills developed in one language can support the acquisition of another, provided that learners are explicitly guided to recognize and utilize these skills. The pedagogical implication is clear: teachers must deliberately and systematically draw attention to linguistic parallels and divergences across languages, helping students to develop a coherent, transferable grammatical framework. Moreover, the role of teachers in this dynamic must not be overlooked. MFL teachers' need to "reteach" English grammar before advancing in French or Spanish instruction illustrates a significant inefficiency and inequity in the current educational system. As Lamb (2001) and Myles (2015) argue, meaningful language learning requires integrated curricular planning and interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly between English and MFL departments. Without this collaboration, responsibility for bridging foundational gaps falls disproportionately onto MFL teachers, often without adequate training or resources.

Another critical dimension this study exposes is the risk of grammar being perceived as an isolated, unrelatable set of rules rather than a living, communicative tool. Students' comments revealed a common perception of grammar as "boring" or irrelevant, a view likely shaped by years of compartmentalized or decontextualized instruction. This perception presents a significant obstacle to developing lifelong linguistic competence and cultural literacy, two increasingly vital outcomes in today's multilingual and multicultural world. In discussing these findings, it is necessary to acknowledge the broader sociolinguistic context of England, where English's global dominance often discourages investment in learning other languages. As Lanvers (2011) aptly describes, English functions as the "elephant in the room" of UK language education policy. This monolingual bias likely contributes to the marginalization of grammar instruction as a transferable cognitive tool, further weakening students' preparation for successful multilingualism.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest that addressing grammar deficits requires more than simply adding grammar content to English and MFL syllabuses. It demands a systemic shift toward viewing grammar as a cross-curricular competency that underpins language learning, literacy, critical thinking, and global citizenship. Initiatives must be taken to ensure that grammar instruction is explicit, consistent, and contextualized across all stages of schooling. Without such reforms, the same patterns of failure, disengagement, and linguistic limitation will continue to be reproduced yearly. The discussion of these findings reaffirms the central argument of this research: English grammar competence is not an optional accessory to successful MFL learning; it is its foundation. Until this reality is reflected in classroom practice, teacher education, and national policy, the barriers to effective language learning in UK schools will remain stubbornly high. The task now is to move from diagnosis to action—developing teaching strategies, curricula, and policies that recognize, reinforce, and reward the central role of grammar in multilingual education.

7. Recommendations

The findings of this study make clear that the challenge of weak grammatical understanding among students in secondary MFL classrooms is not an isolated instructional concern but a systemic issue rooted in curriculum design, teacher preparation, and the marginalization of grammar within the broader educational discourse. The following recommendations are proposed to address these interconnected challenges. They are designed to inform policy, guide school-level intervention, and reshape pedagogical practice to foster long-term, sustainable English and modern foreign language (MFL) education improvements.

Reintegrate Explicit Grammar Instruction into the English Curriculum Across All Key Stages

The evidence from this study strongly suggests that many students arrive at secondary MFL classrooms without a solid grasp of basic grammatical concepts in English. To prevent the need for remedial instruction during MFL lessons, grammar must be systematically reintroduced and reinforced in English classes throughout Key Stages 2–4. Grammar should be taught not as a rigid, decontextualized list of rules but as a flexible and transferable tool for understanding language more broadly. This approach aligns with the Common Underlying Proficiency model (Cummins, 2000), which emphasizes that skills learned in one language support the development of others. As Lightbown and Spada (2010) argue, explicit grammar instruction enhances metalinguistic awareness and prepares learners to better engage with the grammatical systems of new languages.

Foster Cross-Curricular Collaboration Between English and MFL Departments

The disconnect between what is taught in English and what is required in MFL classrooms was evident in student responses and teacher experiences. English and MFL departments should work together to align key terminology, concepts, and expectations around grammar. For example, if English classes introduce parts of speech in Year 7, MFL teachers can simultaneously use the same terms when discussing French or Spanish sentence structure. This integration facilitates knowledge transfer and reinforces consistency in students' learning experience. As Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011) note, interdisciplinary alignment is critical for coherent linguistic development across multiple languages.

Embed Grammar Awareness into MFL Pedagogy Through L1–L2 Comparisons

While this study makes a case for strengthening grammar instruction in English, it also highlights MFL teachers' role in bridging linguistic knowledge gaps through strategic comparison between English and the target language. Lessons should highlight similarities and differences in structure, syntax, and grammatical functions between L1 and L2. This practice, supported by McManus (2021), can reduce crosslinguistic interference and help learners consolidate grammar knowledge through meaningful contrastive analysis. Rather than avoiding English in the MFL classroom, teachers should be encouraged to draw upon it to enhance conceptual clarity.

Develop and Distribute Cross-Departmental Grammar Resources

To ensure consistency in grammar instruction and reduce teacher workload, schools should invest in creating or acquiring shared grammar teaching materials that both English and MFL departments can use. These resources could include glossaries of terms, comparison charts, grammar-focused warmup activities, and visual aids illustrating concepts across languages. These tools would support students in developing a unified understanding of grammar, enhance curriculum cohesion, and support teachers in delivering grammar instruction confidently and efficiently.

Invest in Professional Development Focused on Metalinguistic Pedagogy

Teachers across departments need time, training, and support to deliver high-quality grammar instruction in a way that is both accessible and engaging. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs should include workshops on grammar pedagogy, strategies for building metalinguistic awareness, and techniques for integrating grammar into communicative language teaching. As Lightbown and Spada (2010) point out, teacher confidence in grammar instruction is directly linked to student outcomes. Such training would particularly benefit newer teachers, many of whom may not have received extensive grammar education due to curricular shifts over the past two decades.

Encourage Early and Sustained Grammar Instruction at the Primary Level

Several students in this study expressed that grammar was something they "used to do in primary school," suggesting that grammar instruction may be either absent or forgotten by the time they reach Key Stage 3. This disconnect underscores the importance of early, meaningful grammar education that does not disappear as pupils progress. National curriculum designers and primary educators should ensure that grammar is taught in ways that build understanding, not just rote terminology, and that this foundation is actively bridged into secondary-level work. The work of Hunt et al. (2005) and the Department for Education's primary frameworks advocate for this, yet implementation remains uneven.

Review National Language Policy to Reflect the Importance of L1 Competence in MFL Success

At the policy level, curriculum authorities and government agencies must recognize that MFL teachers alone cannot solve the decline in MFL uptake and performance. Language education must be viewed holistically, with English grammar competence as a prerequisite for L2 success. As Lanvers (2011) and Lamb (2001) argue, policy must resist the marginalization of linguistic skill-building in favor of superficial communicative fluency. An integrated approach to literacy and multilingualism is essential to reversing current trends in disengagement and underachievement. The recommendations outlined above address the immediate pedagogical needs observed in the classroom and the structural issues embedded in the wider education system. They are intended to create a learning environment where grammar is no longer a source of confusion or fear, but a shared language across subjects that empowers students to engage with English and foreign languages confidently and competently. Implementing these strategies will require collaboration, training, and commitment, but the potential benefits for linguistic equity, student outcomes, and broader educational success are profound.

8. Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between English grammar competence and second language acquisition in a UK secondary school context, several limitations must be acknowledged. Recognizing these limitations is essential for framing the findings accurately and guiding future research efforts.

First, the study was conducted within a West Bromwich, England, Catholic secondary school. Although the school serves as a representative case study, its particular demographic composition, institutional ethos, and educational practices may limit the generalizability of the findings to other school types, regions, or educational contexts. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) highlight, case study research provides depth but often at the expense of breadth, making cautious extrapolation necessary. The specific socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic background of the student population at this school may have influenced the students' experiences with English grammar and foreign language learning in ways that differ from more diverse or urban schools.

Second, while the sample size (57 students across four-year groups) is adequate for a focused case study, it remains relatively small when considered against the wider population of secondary students in the UK. Larger-scale studies would provide a more statistically powerful basis for confirming the trends observed here, particularly regarding cross-group comparisons and long-term developmental patterns.

Third, the questionnaire instrument itself, although carefully designed and piloted, relied on binary ("Yes" or "No") response options. While this allowed for precise quantitative analysis, it may have oversimplified complex aspects of students' grammatical understanding. Students may have nuanced partial knowledge or varying confidence levels that a binary response format

cannot fully capture. Lightbown and Spada (2010) suggest that grammatical competence exists along a continuum rather than as an absolute state; thus, future research might incorporate scaled or open-ended response formats to reflect the gradations of student understanding better.

Additionally, the study relied in part on informal observations and spontaneous student comments to gather qualitative insights. While these qualitative data provided valuable depth and context to the findings, they were not gathered through structured interviews or focus groups. More formal qualitative methodologies, such as thematic interviews or stimulated recall tasks, could have yielded richer and more systematically comparable insights. As Zhou (2024) emphasizes, triangulating data sources strengthens the validity of educational research findings. Another limitation concerns the potential influence of teacher-student dynamics during questionnaire administration. Although care was taken to minimize leading language and provide neutral support, the mere presence of the teacher-researcher could have affected students' willingness to admit confusion or gaps in knowledge. This limitation is well documented in educational research, where social desirability bias can distort responses, particularly when students feel evaluated (Ellis, 2008). Moreover, the study focused exclusively on grammatical awareness as the gateway to MFL acquisition. While grammar is undoubtedly foundational, other factors such as vocabulary knowledge, cultural competence, learning strategies, and motivation also play significant roles in second language success. Aguion et al. (2021) note that a holistic understanding of language learning requires attention to multiple domains. Thus, the narrow focus on grammar, though appropriate for the study's specific research questions, may not capture the full range of influences on MFL achievement.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. As such, it simultaneously provides a snapshot of students' grammatical competence rather than tracking how their knowledge develops or deteriorates over multiple years. A longitudinal design would offer stronger evidence about the persistence of grammar gaps and the effectiveness of various instructional interventions over time, as McManus (2021) suggested. While this study sheds light on an urgent and underexplored dimension of language education in the UK, its findings must be interpreted within these methodological and contextual limitations. Future research addressing these limitations could enhance the conclusions' generalizability, depth, and applicability, ultimately leading to more effective solutions for improving grammar competence and foreign language learning outcomes.

9. Future Research

The findings and limitations of this study suggest several important avenues for future research that could deepen understanding of the relationship between English grammar competence and the acquisition of modern foreign languages (MFL) in the UK context. Given the significant challenges identified and the systemic nature of the issues uncovered, a more expansive research agenda is necessary and timely.

First, future studies should consider adopting a longitudinal research design to track the development or stagnation of grammatical competence over time. Following cohorts of students from primary school through to Key Stage 4 would allow researchers to identify critical periods for grammar instruction and the long-term impacts of early intervention or neglect. As McManus (2021) and Zhou (2024) argue, understanding language development as a dynamic, cumulative process is essential for effective pedagogical design.

Second, larger, multisite studies encompassing diverse school types, regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds are needed. By expanding beyond a single-site case study, future research can provide a more representative picture of grammar competence across England. Such studies could explore variations in grammar transfer linked to broader sociocultural factors,

as highlighted in comparative education studies like those by Ehigie and Braimoh (2024), examining secularization and education reforms.

Third, research should be directed at investigating the specific mechanisms of L1–L2 grammatical transfer. Building on the work of Daftarifard and Shirkhani (2011) and recent studies on subjunctive acquisition challenges in L2 French learners (Braimoh, 2020; Braimoh, 2022), future experimental designs could test targeted interventions, such as crosslinguistic grammar modules or contrastive analysis tasks. Such designs would elucidate how explicit metalinguistic knowledge in English supports or hinders grammatical accuracy in French and Spanish.

Moreover, future studies should integrate qualitative methodologies to capture student perceptions, emotional reactions, and their cognitive strategies when engaging with grammar. Structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom ethnographies would provide richer, more nuanced insights, building on techniques outlined by Zhou (2024) and applied in crosslinguistic studies like those by Ehigie et al. (2024). This qualitative depth would help to identify not only what students know, but also how they process and apply grammar in real-world contexts. An important yet underexplored area concerns teacher knowledge and instructional practices. Research should systematically investigate English and MFL teachers' grammatical competence and attitudes towards grammar teaching. Braimoh's (2022) work on pedagogical strategies for mastering complex French grammar structures suggests that learner acquisition is significantly impaired without teacher confidence and contextualized instructional methods. Future studies could evaluate professional development programs to enhance teachers' metalinguistic pedagogical skills.

Future research should also examine technology-mediated grammar instruction in light of technological advancements. Interactive platforms, grammar games, AI-driven feedback tools, and mobile applications offer new possibilities for improving grammatical competence outside the traditional classroom. Studies could explore the effectiveness of these tools compared to conventional instruction, especially among students who demonstrate high digital literacy but low grammatical awareness. Furthermore, another promising direction is investigating cultural and communicative sensitivity in grammar teaching and translation. As Onomejoh et al. (2024) showed in their study on navigating cultural sensitivity in translation, effective language teaching increasingly requires understanding grammar use's social and cultural contexts. Future research could explore how intercultural communication frameworks enhance grammar instruction, particularly when preparing students for real-world multilingual interactions.

Additionally, studies should consider the intersection between grammar instruction and broader sociopolitical influences on language education. As the secularization of education in early 20th-century France affected linguistic instruction (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024), contemporary educational policies and cultural shifts also shaped grammar teaching in England. Comparative policy analyses could uncover how different national approaches to literacy and multilingualism impact grammar acquisition and MFL learning success.

Finally, future investigations could explore interlinguistic comparative models. For example, the comparative analysis of tense and aspect in French, Bini (Edo), and Gungbé (Ehigie et al., 2024) demonstrates how structural linguistic comparisons can inform effective grammar pedagogy across diverse language families. Extending such interlinguistic research to English, French, and Spanish triads could reveal patterns of ease or difficulty in grammatical transfer, aiding curriculum designers in targeting high-risk structures. While this study provides foundational insights, a broad and dynamic range of future research pathways remains open. Longitudinal, multisite, multimethod, interdisciplinary studies that embrace sociolinguistic, cognitive, cultural, and technological dimensions will be critical in advancing our understanding of

grammar's role in multilingual education and informing the systemic changes needed to support students' linguistic success.

10. Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the impact of English grammatical competence on the acquisition of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), specifically French and Spanish, among secondary school students in a Catholic school in West Bromwich, England. A mixed-methods case study approach, combining structured questionnaire data with qualitative insights from classroom observations, has provided strong empirical support for the argument that insufficient English grammar knowledge is a critical barrier to effective second language learning. The quantitative analysis revealed widespread and persistent gaps in students' understanding of core grammatical concepts, regardless of age or stage. Even among older students, whose experience might have been expected to compensate for early weaknesses, grammatical knowledge remained shallow and inconsistent. These findings resonate with the theoretical frameworks advanced by Lightbown and Spada (2010), McManus (2021), and Zhou (2024), all of whom stress the centrality of explicit grammatical awareness for successful language acquisition. They also reinforce Cummins' (2000) Common Underlying Proficiency model, highlighting the transferability and fragility of linguistic knowledge across languages when foundational skills are underdeveloped.

Qualitative insights enriched this understanding by exposing the emotional and attitudinal dimensions behind the statistical trends. Students' confusion, reluctance, and occasional disengagement from grammar instruction point to cognitive deficits and systemic failures in how grammar is taught and valued within English education. These findings echo longstanding critiques by Hunt et al. (2005) and Lamb (2001), who warned that a marginalization of grammar instruction in the national curriculum would have lasting negative consequences. Moreover, this research has situated the grammar acquisition problem within a broader sociopolitical context, drawing parallels to international cases, such as the secularization of French education explored by Ehigie and Braimoh (2024), and the challenges of cultural sensitivity in language instruction discussed by Onomejoh et al. (2024). The English educational environment, shaped by the dominance of the English language globally (Lanvers, 2011), has led to a devaluation of multilingual competence and, by extension, a neglect of the grammatical foundations that such competence requires.

The study's limitations, particularly its single-site, cross-sectional design and binary response instrument, are acknowledged, yet the findings align consistently with broader research trends and policy critiques. They suggest that the observed challenges are not isolated but symptomatic of systemic patterns within the UK education system. They also open multiple avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies, multisite comparisons, teacher knowledge investigations, and technology-enhanced grammar learning explorations. Ultimately, this study argues that if England is to reverse the decline in MFL uptake and proficiency, grammar must be recentred as a core educational priority across English and foreign language teaching. Grammar is neither a relic of outdated pedagogy nor an exam skill; it is the architecture of language competence and multilingual capability. Without strong grammatical foundations in the first language, students are left ill-equipped to meet the challenges of learning additional languages in an increasingly interconnected world. Addressing this issue will require coordinated action at multiple levels: curriculum reform to reassert grammar's importance, cross-departmental collaboration within schools, targeted teacher professional development, and a national educational vision that sees grammar not as an obstacle but as a bridge to literacy, multilingualism, and global citizenship. The evidence presented here clarifies that the time for such action is not in the distant future but now.

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