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From Professional Development to Classroom Practice: Sustained Professional Learning as a Driver of Improvement in Modern Foreign Languages

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Abstract

Professional development in schools can become episodic, generating immediate engagement without producing sustained changes in classroom practice. This experience-based paper examines the first complete implementation cycle of a planned five-year improvement model for Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) across two contrasting secondary-school contexts within a multi-school Trust in England. The model connected shared curriculum architecture, evidence-informed professional learning, classroom enactment, common assessment and iterative adaptation. Its distinctive feature was a deliberate separation between ***curricular coherence and pedagogical conformity****: common progression, assessment expectations and exemplification established shared destinations and evidence, while teachers retained professional discretion over classroom enactment. Protected leadership capacity supported modelling, monitoring, professional dialogue and adaptation throughout the implementation cycle. Evidence included curriculum and assessment artefacts, professional-learning activity, internal evaluation and pupil outcomes. Several pupil-outcome measures improved during the first complete implementation cycle, although substantial variation between schools, teaching groups and attainment thresholds requires cautious interpretation. The practitioner case does not establish a causal relationship between the model and improved attainment; rather, it illustrates how sustained professional learning can function as a* ***connective mechanism between curriculum intent and classroom practice*** *when shared expectations, professional agency, evidence and iterative adaptation remain linked. Five practical principles are proposed: standardising expectations rather than pedagogy, making expected outcomes visible, embedding professional learning within implementation, using evidence recursively and protecting capacity for implementation. Longitudinal evaluation will examine whether these conditions and associated improvements can be sustained across subsequent cycles.*

Keywords: *Professional Learning; Modern Foreign Languages; Teacher Agency; Curriculum Coherence; School Improvement.*

1. Introduction

Professional development is a familiar feature of school improvement, yet participation in professional learning does not necessarily result in sustained changes to classroom practice. Effective professional development requires more than the transmission of new knowledge or techniques; it also requires conditions that support teachers to apply, refine and embed changes over time [1]. Similarly, implementation guidance emphasises the importance of treating change as a process rather than an isolated event, with attention to contextual factors, ongoing support and iterative evaluation [4].

This challenge is particularly relevant when improvement work seeks greater consistency across a subject department or multiple schools. Leaders may reasonably seek common curricular expectations, assessment standards and pupil entitlement, while teachers require sufficient professional agency to respond to their classes, contexts and expertise. Excessive prescription risks reducing professional learning to compliance; insufficient coherence risks creating significant variation in what pupils encounter and are expected to demonstrate. The challenge is therefore not simply how to make practice consistent, but **what should be made consistent**.

This experience-based paper reports the first complete implementation cycle of a planned five-year improvement model for Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) across two secondary schools within a multi-school Trust in England. The model combined common curriculum architecture, assessment and exemplification, supporting resources, professional learning and evidence-informed review, while deliberately preserving teachers' discretion over classroom pedagogy. Implementation was not uniform across the two schools, with differences in monitoring, local leadership and contextual conditions

affecting the extent and pace of enactment. Rather than attempting to standardise teaching, the approach sought to **standardise expectations and evidence**: establishing greater consistency in the destination while allowing professional autonomy over the route taken towards it.
The paper examines the design and enactment of this approach, the role of protected leadership capacity, and the use of assessment and evaluation to inform subsequent professional learning and curriculum adaptation. It considers variation in implementation and outcomes without attributing changes in attainment to a single intervention. The paper argues that sustained professional learning can act as a **connective mechanism between curriculum intent and classroom practice** when coherence, professional agency, implementation conditions and iterative evaluation are treated as interconnected elements of improvement.

2. Professional Learning and Implementation

Professional development is more likely to influence classroom practice when it incorporates mechanisms that support changes in teachers' knowledge, motivation, techniques and subsequent practice, rather than relying on initial input alone [1]. The Education Endowment Foundation's guidance identifies mechanisms including goal setting, feedback and revisiting prior learning, and emphasises designing professional development around how change is expected to occur [1].
The distinction between professional development as an event and professional learning as an ongoing process is central to the model examined here. Implementation guidance emphasises the interaction between implementation behaviours, contextual factors and a structured but flexible process through which change is explored, prepared, delivered and sustained [4]. Relevant contextual factors include systems and structures such as time, roles and data, alongside the people available to lead and enable change [4].
This has implications for professional agency. Priestley et al. conceptualise teacher agency ecologically, arguing that the extent to which teachers achieve agency varies according to conditions of possibility and constraint within particular contexts [5]. Common structures and professional agency need not therefore be inherently opposed; the relevant question is whether those structures enable informed professional judgement or unnecessarily constrain it.
Formative assessment provided an additional influence on the approach. Black and Wiliam foregrounded the use of assessment evidence within teaching and learning [2], while Wiliam and Leahy subsequently developed practical approaches through which formative-assessment principles could be embedded in classroom practice [3]. These ideas informed aspects of assessment design, feedback and responsive adaptation within the present model but did not constitute the intervention itself.
Taken together, these perspectives provide the conceptual basis for examining **professional learning, implementation and teacher agency as interconnected rather than separate concerns**. Shared structures can establish coherence, professional discretion can enable contextual enactment, and evidence from implementation can inform subsequent reflection and adaptation.

3. Context and Approach

The model was developed following the author's appointment as Trust Leader of Languages in April 2024 and was designed for implementation from September 2024 as the first phase of a planned five-year improvement model across two secondary schools within the same multi-academy Trust. The schools differed substantially in size, age range, socio-economic context and prior attainment: one was a larger 11–18 school serving a comparatively advantaged community, while the other was an 11–16 school serving a community experiencing greater socio-economic disadvantage. The aim was to establish greater consistency in pupils' curricular entitlement and expectations across these contrasting contexts.
Preparation between April and September 2024 included the development of shared learning journeys, assessment plans, model answers and exemplification, grammar and vocabulary support, independent-learning materials and classroom resources. These provided common curricular destinations and reference points rather than prescribed lesson sequences. Professional learning supported teachers' familiarity with the materials and their underlying purposes, while staff feedback informed subsequent changes to learning journeys, model answers and supporting resources.
Implementation was supported by protected leadership capacity. During the first cycle, the author's timetabled teaching commitment at the 11–16 school was 12 hours per fortnight, with remaining role capacity supporting work across the Trust. Activity included direct support for GCSE and A-level

provision at the second school, professional learning, monitoring pupil progress, curriculum and resource development, and adaptation in response to practitioner feedback and assessment evidence. This capacity enabled professional development to remain connected to classroom implementation, monitoring and review.

Implementation was not uniform across the two schools. Differences in local leadership, monitoring and contextual conditions affected the pace and extent to which individual elements became established, with more complete implementation during the first cycle at the 11–16 school. These differences are treated as part of the case, providing an opportunity to consider the conditions under which a common improvement model is enacted across contrasting settings.

The paper draws on contemporaneous curriculum and assessment artefacts, professional-learning materials and activity, internal evaluation and pupil-outcome data from the first complete implementation cycle. The author occupied multiple roles as model designer, Trust leader and classroom teacher, including responsibility for one of the GCSE Spanish classes considered in the outcome data. The analysis is therefore presented as an experience-based practitioner case rather than an experimental evaluation. No control group was established, implementation conditions differed between settings, and changes in pupil outcomes cannot be attributed to the model in isolation. Evidence is used instead to examine implementation, associated changes and variation, and to inform subsequent cycles of the five-year programme.

Pupil learning outcomes were examined principally through GCSE attainment data and internal school assessments. Internal assessment placed particular emphasis on written language production, including the application of taught vocabulary and grammatical structures. Reading, listening and speaking were also assessed at points across the curriculum, but results for these competencies were not systematically disaggregated for the present evaluation.

4. Coherence Without Conformity

The distinctive feature of the model was not any individual resource, assessment strategy or professional-development activity, but the way these elements were configured around a deliberate distinction between **curricular coherence and pedagogical conformity**. Greater consistency was sought in what pupils were entitled to encounter, the progression expected across the curriculum, the standards they were expected to demonstrate and the evidence through which progress could be evaluated. Equivalent consistency was not required in the classroom methods through which teachers enabled pupils to reach those destinations.

In practice, this distinction was expressed through a shared architecture. Learning journeys made curriculum progression and assessment points visible; common assessment plans established expected outcomes; model answers and exemplification provided reference points for standards; and supporting resources offered additional routes through which knowledge and skills could be developed. These materials reduced ambiguity about curricular destination without becoming prescribed lesson sequences. Teachers retained discretion over explanation, modelling, practice, classroom interaction, resource selection and adaptation in response to the pupils they taught.

This balance between structure and professional discretion reflected an existing practitioner philosophy in which structured and repeated practice, feedback and secure foundations were understood as enabling subsequent adaptation and ownership [6]. Shared structures therefore provided common reference points within which experienced professionals could exercise judgement rather than conditions through which autonomy had to be earned. This is consistent with an ecological conception of teacher agency, in which agency is achieved through interaction between individuals and the structural, cultural and material conditions within which they work [5].

Professional agency also extended beyond classroom delivery. Teachers' experience of the shared materials generated feedback through which learning journeys, model answers and supporting resources were adapted. Trust-level design therefore provided an initial common architecture, while practitioner experience contributed to its continuing refinement. Commonality was maintained through professional dialogue and evidence rather than secured solely through initial prescription.

Shared assessment provided common evidence without requiring common pedagogy. Differences in pupil performance across classes, groups and assessment components could inform subsequent curriculum decisions and professional learning, connecting **shared expectations, professional enactment, common evidence, collective analysis and adaptation**. The distinctive contribution of the model therefore lies in this configuration: standardising curricular expectations and evidence while

deliberately preserving professional discretion over classroom enactment, with shared evidence subsequently used to adapt both curriculum and professional learning.

5. From Professional Learning to Classroom Practice

The model was implemented through a recurring cycle connecting curriculum design, professional learning, classroom enactment and subsequent evidence. Initial plans were introduced before the end of the 2023/24 academic year, including the proposed curriculum structure and a whole-class feedback approach designed to make expectations visible while limiting unnecessary teacher workload. At the beginning of the implementation year, staff were introduced to the first half-term sequence and invited to observe the model being taught in practice. Teachers could experiment with their own resources and approaches while working towards shared grammatical expectations and modelled outcomes.

Professional learning took several forms rather than being confined to formal training. Department time supported shared planning, questioning and discussion of pupil responses; classroom modelling demonstrated approaches to developing increasingly complete and extended answers; and guided learning walks enabled teachers to observe and discuss practice. Pupil work was shared between classes, while student voice provided additional evidence about how the curriculum and its supporting structures were experienced. Professional learning therefore occurred alongside implementation rather than preceding it as a separate phase.

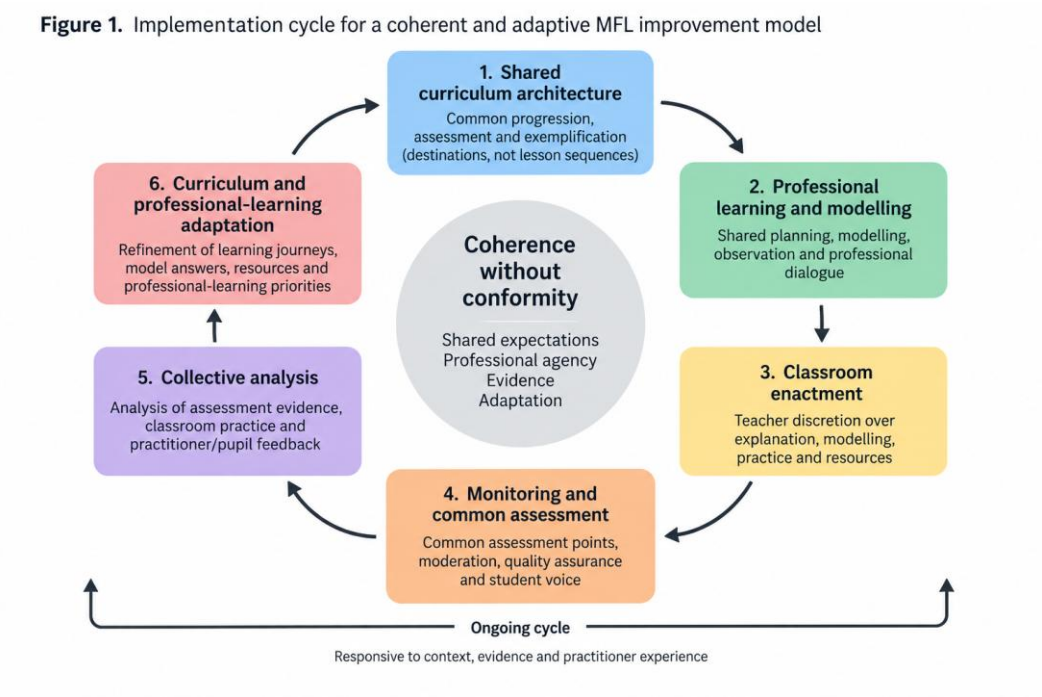
Common assessment provided a recurring point around which this activity was organised. Each year group completed the same topic-specific assessment during a common assessment period each half term. Model answers were available from the beginning of each topic to make expected outcomes explicit and demonstrate how new learning built upon prior knowledge. The resulting assessment evidence provided a common basis for moderation and subsequent analysis.

Assessment evidence was considered alongside moderation, quality assurance, classroom observation, professional dialogue and student voice to inform subsequent changes. For example, some higher-level grammatical structures were repositioned when classroom evidence indicated that pupils' prior exposure did not provide a sufficiently secure foundation. Model answers were refined following practitioner and pupil experience, while feedback processes were streamlined to reduce teacher workload while maintaining opportunities for pupils to respond to and improve draft work.

The cycle operated differently across the two schools. At the more completely implemented site, the author's regular presence enabled closer connection between modelling, classroom enactment, monitoring, assessment and subsequent adaptation. At the second school, competing local teaching-and-learning expectations and less consistent monitoring affected implementation of some elements. Access to common materials alone was therefore insufficient to secure equivalent enactment where opportunities for modelling, monitoring, professional dialogue and feedback differed.

The process can be represented as a recurring implementation cycle:

Figure 1. Implementation cycle for a coherent and adaptive MFL improvement model



Protected leadership capacity supported this cycle by providing time to design, model, monitor, analyse and respond. Professional learning was therefore not treated as an intervention in isolation, but as the connective mechanism through which shared curriculum architecture, classroom enactment and subsequent adaptation remained linked.

6. Evidence of Impact

The outcome evidence reported below is primarily a measure of assessed attainment rather than a comprehensive measure of language proficiency. GCSE grades and Subject Progress Index (SPI) values provide overall attainment indicators, while internal assessments focused particularly on written production. Although the curriculum included assessment of reading, listening and speaking, this evaluation did not analyse each skill separately. Accordingly, improvements in overall examination outcomes should not be interpreted as evidence of equivalent improvement in every language skill, or as direct measures of communicative or intercultural competence.

Evidence from the first complete implementation cycle indicates improvement on several pupil-outcome measures, although outcomes varied between schools, classes and attainment thresholds. At the 11–16 school, where implementation was more complete, GCSE Spanish outcomes continued an existing upward trajectory and showed substantial improvement following the first full cycle. The Subject Progress Index (SPI), a Sisra measure comparing pupils' subject performance with peers with the same Key Stage 2 prior attainment, moved from -1.15 in 2023 and -0.77 in 2024 to +0.32 in 2025. On England's 9–1 GCSE grading scale, grade 4 represents the standard pass threshold, grade 5 a stronger pass and grade 7 a high-attainment threshold. Over the same period, the proportion of pupils achieving grade 4 or above increased from 32.4% to 53.6% and 65.4%; grade 5 or above increased from 27.0% to 45.4% and 53.8%; and grade 7 or above increased from 10.8% to 14.4% and 21.2%. Cohort sizes also varied substantially across the period, partly reflecting changes in option-setting policy through which earlier cohorts had been directed more extensively towards particular subjects.

Table 1. GCSE Spanish outcomes at the 11–16 school

Measure	2023	2024	2025
Pupils	37	97	52
Grade 4+	32.4%	53.6%	65.4%
Grade 5+	27.0%	45.4%	53.8%
Grade 7+	10.8%	14.4%	21.2%
SPI	-1.15	-0.77	+0.32

The positive department-level trajectory did not remove variation within the 2025 cohort. The GCSE Spanish class taught by the author recorded an SPI of +0.52, compared with -0.13 in the second teaching group. Given the author's simultaneous roles as model designer, Trust leader and classroom practitioner, this difference cannot be interpreted as evidence of the model's effectiveness. Instead, it illustrates that common curriculum architecture and assessment expectations coexisted with substantial variation between teaching groups, reinforcing the need to consider classroom enactment and implementation conditions.

At the 11–18 school, where implementation was less complete, contemporaneous departmental examination analysis comparing 2024 and 2025 outcomes also recorded improvement on several measures. French SPI improved from -0.34 to -0.13 and Spanish SPI from -1.65 to -1.27. Across the department, grade 5+ increased from 52.5% to 61.3%, while grade 7+ increased from 16.3% to 19.8%. In Spanish specifically, grade 5+ increased from 20% to 34%. Outcomes nevertheless remained uneven, particularly in Spanish, with subgroup and examination-component analysis identifying areas requiring further attention.

Outcome analysis subsequently informed curriculum and professional-learning priorities. At the 11–16 school, these included maintaining improvement at grade 4+ while strengthening conversion at grades 5+ and 7+, alongside examination-component analysis to identify areas requiring further intervention. At the 11–18 school, priorities included moderation of speaking and writing, greater attention to accuracy, targeted support for disadvantaged pupils and further professional development related to assessment. Assessment evidence therefore functioned not only as an outcome measure but as an input into the next cycle of curriculum adaptation and professional learning.

These findings indicate **association rather than causal impact**. Cohort sizes and characteristics varied between years, implementation differed between schools, and no control group or counterfactual comparison was established. Nevertheless, improvement across several measures during the first complete implementation cycle, alongside variation within and between settings, is consistent with the proposition that sustained professional learning can contribute to improvement when connected to curriculum, classroom enactment, assessment and iterative review.

7. Discussion

The findings suggest that the value of sustained professional learning may lie less in individual professional-development activities than in the implementation system connecting them to classroom practice. In this case, professional learning operated alongside curriculum, assessment, modelling and evidence-informed adaptation rather than as a separate intervention. This is consistent with evidence that effective professional development requires mechanisms through which changes in knowledge and practice can be supported over time [1], and with implementation guidance emphasising iterative processes, contextual responsiveness and sustained attention to implementation conditions [4].

A central implication concerns the relationship between coherence and professional agency. Common curricular and assessment expectations coexisted with teacher discretion over classroom enactment,

suggesting that consistency need not require pedagogical uniformity. The learning journeys specified progression, grammatical expectations and increasingly demanding modelled outcomes without prescribing individual lesson sequences or teaching approaches. Common structures can therefore provide conditions within which professional judgement operates rather than functioning solely as constraints upon it, consistent with an ecological understanding of teacher agency [5].

Variation in outcomes is equally important. Improvement at department level coexisted with differences between teaching groups, while the less completely implemented school showed more modest improvement on several measures. These differences cannot be attributed to implementation alone: teacher effects, cohort characteristics, prior attainment and other contextual factors cannot be isolated within this practitioner case. They nevertheless indicate that common resources and expectations are not sufficient in themselves to secure consistent enactment, and that implementation conditions—including opportunities for modelling, professional dialogue, monitoring, feedback and adaptation—also warrant attention.

Protected leadership capacity appears significant within this process. Time was required not only to design curriculum and professional learning but to observe implementation, analyse assessment evidence, engage with practitioner and pupil feedback, and respond to what was learned. Leadership capacity can therefore be understood as part of the implementation infrastructure rather than simply administrative support for it. For schools seeking to develop similar approaches, this raises the practical question of whether sufficient capacity exists to sustain the feedback loop beyond initial design and professional-development activity.

Finally, the 2024/25 outcomes represent the first annual outcome point within a planned five-year improvement model rather than a definitive judgement of effectiveness. Subsequent implementation has occurred under changing conditions, including staffing changes, curriculum restructuring, qualification reform and reduced leadership capacity. Future evaluation should therefore examine pupil outcomes alongside implementation stability, the development of teacher capacity and the extent to which shared expectations become sustainable without continued dependence upon the model's original designer. **The longer-term test of the model is consequently not only whether outcomes improve, but whether coherence, professional agency and evidence-informed adaptation can become embedded and sustainable across contrasting contexts.**

A further limitation concerns the specificity of the outcome measures. The principal quantitative findings reflect overall GCSE attainment, supplemented by internal assessment evidence with a particular emphasis on writing. They cannot establish which individual language competencies improved most, nor demonstrate changes in broader communicative or intercultural competence. Future cycles should, where comparable evidence is available, examine reading, listening, speaking and writing separately alongside overall attainment.

8. Conclusion and Practical Principles

Five practical principles emerge from this first implementation cycle. First, **standardise expectations rather than pedagogy**: shared curriculum progression, assessment and exemplification can establish common entitlement while preserving professional discretion over classroom enactment. Second, **make expected outcomes visible**: clear destinations and exemplification can show teachers and pupils how knowledge and complexity develop over time. Third, **embed professional learning within implementation**: modelling, collaborative planning, observation, feedback and professional dialogue should accompany classroom enactment rather than operate as isolated training events. Fourth, **use evidence recursively**: common assessment, moderation, quality assurance, practitioner feedback and student voice can inform both judgements about implementation and subsequent curriculum and professional-learning decisions. Finally, **protect capacity for implementation**: sustained improvement requires time to design, support, monitor, analyse and adapt, not simply time to introduce an initiative.

These principles remain provisional rather than a claim of causal effectiveness. Longitudinal evaluation across the remaining implementation period will examine whether shared expectations become increasingly embedded across contrasting contexts, whether professional capacity develops beyond dependence upon the original designer, and whether improvement can be sustained under changing implementation conditions.

The central proposition is therefore one of **coherence without conformity**. Sustained professional learning may be most valuable not when it seeks to make teachers teach alike, but when it provides the connective infrastructure through which common expectations, professional agency, classroom evidence and continuing adaptation can operate together.

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