BAAL Conference 2026: CLE Round Table on Language in the school curriculum

The Department for Education is expected to consult on draft programmes of study for the new national curriculum, though the consultation had not opened at the time of writing. The gaps most likely to persist are multilingualism, EAL, languages beyond French, German and Spanish, and the linguistic dimensions of AI. These were kept front and centre at a ninety-minute BAAL round table, run in three half-hour sessions: two combining short presentations with discussion, and a final general discussion on ways forward led by Ros Mitchell.

1. **Multilingualism and interdisciplinarity**

Language education in the UK is fragmented along institutional and subject lines that rarely match how people actually use language. That was the starting point set out by Ben Rampton, introducing the Coalition for Language Education and its six tenets. The Coalition brings together 12 subject associations and 15 organisations, departments, schools and groups, plus 44 individual signatories, working across BSL, EAL, EAP, EFL, ESOL, heritage and community languages, and modern foreign languages. A consensus had already emerged across 19 submissions to the Curriculum and Assessment Review, and it is important to find ways of taking this forward in the consultation.

2. **Literacy, media literacy and artificial intelligence**

Lucy Henning opened the first session with literacy as a social practice, drawing on her ethnographic study in a diverse West London primary school. Recordings made by children aged four to seven showed them as agentive practitioners. They drew on teachers and on one another, adapted what they heard and built their own routines, including an interview format. The implication is that a literacy curriculum should leave room for children's creative and adaptive practice.

Viktoria Magne then argued that AI literacy is a linguistic literacy. The 2026 policy record anchors AI in Computing, which DfE calls the main vehicle for digital literacy. Using AI is also a communicative and sociolinguistic activity. These systems reproduce the norms, genres and biases of the data they are trained on. Students therefore need to understand language variation, multilingualism, register, genre and Standard English ideology to recognise when AI misreads their linguistic identity.

3. **English as an additional language**

EAL provision is marked by a policy void, patchy provision and persistently monolingual mindsets. Christina Richardson pointed to change coming from several directions, including subject associations, grassroots initiatives and international advocacy. Her priorities were whole-school approaches to language development, assessment that works for multilingual classrooms, and teacher education that treats multilingualism as an asset.

4. **Languages other than English**

Zhu Hua argues that England’s school curriculum needs a stronger and more systematic recognition of languages other than English, often referred to as Heritage, Home and Community Languages (HHCLs). She highlights three key reasons for supporting HHCLs,

drawing on the Coalition and CLIE reports. These are: social justice, multilingualism as a national asset, and the whole-school approach to language. Looking ahead, she argues that we can build on a number of promising initiatives such as NCLE projects on HHCLs, Cities of Languages. She also identified areas of tension, including how to recognise these languages in national policy and partnerships without tokenism, how to develop partnership between mainstream and complementary schools without assimilation and how to provide support without undermining community autonomy and flexibility.

The session closed with open questions.

Across every issue raised, the same underlying point emerges: language education is still being designed around categories that do not match how language actually works in people's lives. Whether the concern is literacy, AI, EAL or languages beyond the usual three, the curriculum will keep missing the mark until it is built around the multilingual, communicative reality it is meant to serve.

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www.coalitionforlanguageeducationuk.com