

languages ICT



What are spreadsheets in MFL?

A spreadsheet is a grid of rows and columns used to store, display and manipulate data by means of arithmetical operations or formulas. Spreadsheets allow users to view information from different and new perspectives and thereby to make decisions. Data can also be presented in the form of charts, which can be linked to and displayed in other applications. Microsoft Excel is the most common spreadsheet in use today.



For teachers of modern languages, spreadsheets offer a stimulating way to involve pupils in compiling and using data to achieve specific goals and demonstrate linguistic competence, as well as opening up cross-curricular opportunities. It is clearly important to maintain the focus on developing competence in the target language, however, so tasks must be relevant and challenging linguistically. Tasks may well link in spreadsheets with use of other applications, such as presentation software, word processors, desktop publishing or the Internet.



One of the most common and useful activities in the MFL classroom is the survey, focusing on oral and listening skills. Teachers are always looking for different ways of providing a real context for survey work and of setting follow-up activities. Where a survey is planned around the creation of a spreadsheet, a series of activities can be designed to practise all 4 language skills for real purposes. The stages could be several or all of:

- whole-class oral discussion to design the spreadsheet (i.e. decide on and write the questions);
- oral, listening and note-taking practice during the survey (which could also be a written exercise, where pupils in a partner school are additionally surveyed via email);
- limited writing practice to build the spreadsheet structure and input data, a key opportunity for collaboration with the ICT department;
- reading practice and application of analytical skills as the data is interrogated;
- oral or writing practice using predictive language, anticipating likely results of the survey;
- writing practice to produce a written report, using comparative and superlative language;
- alternatively, oral practice through presenting individual findings to the whole class, with the use of bullet points in a PowerPoint presentation and/or with reference to charts or diagrams;
- listening practice for the class through completion of a True / False activity.

There are clearly many ways in which spreadsheets can be incorporated into the teaching and learning of modern foreign languages at all levels. Moreover, advanced technical skills are not required to achieve satisfactory outcomes.

To give a specific example, a teacher might want a class of beginners or near-beginners to investigate favourite colours. For this activity, pupils can conduct their own enquiries, and input findings into the spreadsheet. It is then a simple matter of using the SORT function to determine the order of preference for the colours and move on to the desired linguistic expression. This data can be presented as a chart which can then be shown in a presentation. In this way, a simple data-gathering exercise is linked to a more complex task requiring other technical skills while the focus remains on applying the correct linguistic expression.

To give a more extended example for older or more advanced learners, students could use the Internet to obtain data prior to inputting it into the spreadsheet and manipulating it to complete a communicative task. Such a task might require information about hotel facilities in order to deal with enquiries from potential visitors to a specific location. A web search based on any number of criteria such as the prices of double, single or family room, prices for children, room facilities, laundry or parking rates, additional costs for breakfast or half board, hotel facilities, discounts, and special promotions should yield the necessary information.

Once the information is entered in the spreadsheet, Autofilter can be used to answer enquiries. These can be received and dealt with in a formal word-processed reply, or by email, or, if the facilities are available, by phone. The Autofilter feature is very useful for analyzing data for specific purposes and really is like a database facility. This is an aspect of Excel which gives it versatility, especially for this sort of task in the modern languages classroom.

Activities such as those already described are completed by developing oral or writing skills in the target language, and, in the case of Internet research, reading skills are used. Recorded dialogues or interviews with a Foreign Language Assistant could be used to develop listening skills. The dialogues would be linked to specific points in a prepared spreadsheet and pupils would listen and input data into the spreadsheet and then manipulate it appropriately in completion of the task. The key, of course, is to ensure that the content of the audio recording and the task are both suitable for spreadsheet work.

Problem solving is both demanding and stimulating, and requires care and concentration. Spreadsheets can be used very effectively to solve problems which arise from changing circumstances. For example, pupils working with a limited budget for a weekend in a city of the target language country could use the spreadsheet to plan their expenditure. The challenge would come from having to input and manipulate fresh data, amending their plans to stay within budget. In a case such as this, pupils would be able to use a range of tenses to describe future plans, changes and decisions taken.

Pupils are often interested in sharing and comparing experiences or information with their peers in a partner school in the country of the target language. Email is an ideal medium for the rapid exchange of information and lends itself to focused spreadsheet work. Pupils can work individually or in groups to share information about spending habits, musical tastes, television viewing habits, leisure pursuits, weather, or family size. In each of these instances, information obtained can be stored in a spreadsheet and analysed. Findings can be presented in charts, which can be placed in other applications and explored orally or by writing in the target language, often using comparative or superlative expressions.

Spreadsheets can also be used for cross-curricular work involving data gathering and analysis. A survey of housing in a locality might be used by one subject area to focus on social differences, and by another to focus on calculating average prices or percentage differences. A modern languages cross-curricular task might do both these in the target language whilst reinforcing the vocabulary of home and neighbourhood, and the grammar of number, comparison, and description. A focus on weather might be used for a geographical analysis of temperature data over a given period and for creative writing in English. In modern languages, the task could be interpreting the data to prepare an advice sheet on necessary clothing for a range of outdoor activities, in the context of a forthcoming exchange trip to a partner school abroad.

It is straightforward to use spreadsheets to perform calculations. The SUM function can be used to total data in defined cells, while the AVERAGE function will give averages for a specific range of data. Percentages can be calculated by inputting arithmetical formulas. Icons are available for the SUM and SORT functions and arithmetical formulas can be copied to more than one cell, thus avoiding unnecessary repetition. The SORT function and Auto filter permit rapid re-arrangement of information for analysis from different perspectives, a very useful activity for role plays.

Finally, it might be useful to prepare a spreadsheet, inputting data prior to a lesson and then using it on the interactive whiteboard for whole class work. As data is manipulated it will give pupils an opportunity to respond quickly to changes, and manipulate language accordingly. For administrative purposes, a spreadsheet is a valuable device for monitoring performance, or attendance.

To read about tried and tested ideas for using spreadsheets, try searching the Useful ICT ideas, effective language lessons database on the Languages ICT website.

Note: Information in this booklet has been collated by a number of practising teachers and advisers and is accurate to the best of our knowledge at the time of writing. CILT and ALL do not take any responsibility for inaccuracies contained within. The inclusion of any software products and/or companies within Languages ICT guidance does not imply endorsement by CILT or ALL in any way.