**Carl**

**Can I just ask what your current role is and how long you’ve been teaching for then?**

Yes. I’m Assistant Head Teacher and I’m an SLE in Writing English. I work with KS2 and I’ve been teaching at [SCHOOL] for 20 years.

**So quite a good range of experience then. Have you taught both or either of the content prepare students for the grammar tests at Key Stage 1 or 2 at all?**

I’ve been in Year 6 for 15 years so I’m used to teaching the content of the Key Stage 2 grammar tests, yes.

**Moving on to a little bit about your feelings of the tests then. They first came into place round 2013 and then the new version in 2016. Since the introduction of the tests, can you just talk a little bit about your very general feelings about them and I suppose the way that they might have affected or changed what happens in your classroom within grammar teaching? Does that make sense?**

Yes, absolutely, yes. The first stipulation of the tests, the original grammar tests in 2013 actually I didn’t think were such a bad thing; it didn’t have such a harmful impact on teaching because it was easier and I think they just, I’ve always been quite keen; I’m actually a massive grammar nerd, I enjoy it but I like grammar yeah and so I was quite excited. Because I think if you’re going to talk about something then call it a proper name and you could sort of keep teaching English then as you’re writing, reading and your spelling through the way we always have done but as a side product like use proper language and you know standard English which the tests really do make a big fuss about. I didn’t see much point to it and I think overall it has a harmful impact, purely because I think it encourages bad teaching of grammar. That’s not always the case, and you can of course teach grammar in a much more common sense, contextualised way. As the test is cranked up in increased difficulty, I think that people have put in more and more time into teaching the contextualised grammar and especially the Year 3 to 6 spelling lists which is just a tiny fragment of all the wonderful vocabulary you’ll be learning and teaching; I really, really think it starts to become harmful and impacts from the writing if it remains decontextualized, which I think it often does sadly.

**So you’d argue then that Pedagogy especially since the new iteration to tests have been affected as a result of how those tests are designed, is that what you’re saying?**

Yes, I think because they’ve got harder and people, and maybe [03:11] I don’t know, more people are teaching these concepts from Year 1 to Year 6 in ways that aren’t about effect on the reader and thinking about grammar in real life uses and ways,

**Right, I see. So more of a shift perhaps towards more decontextualized grammar pedagogies, you’d use that word then.**

Exactly, yes. There has been so much more decontextualized teaching because of the tests. I’m forced into doing it to prepare students for the test because that’s the grammar that they need to be familiar with to get through the test.

**If the pedagogies are decontextualized then that is arguably reflecting the decontextualized nature of the tests themselves.**

Yes, completely, yes and I think for example the Year 6 spelling lists; I’ve been working with 3 schools in Sussex to help with their English and I’ve been for this last year I’ve been and plus in a new school, I’ve been to 15 different classrooms and I’ve seen everyone just hammering through their [04:18] spelling lists and I’ve sort of thinking that had a massive impact I think on if that’s all you’re concentrating on with the vocabulary and then you [04:36] words and sentences, children don’t know what it means and it can be really harmful.

**So it’s not just that pedagogies have become more decontextualized but it sounds like arguably they’re a little bit more artificial.**

Yes totally. The test controls the teaching. Not all the time of course, you know we’re not spending every English lesson prepping for the tests of course, but ultimately, the test wins in terms of how grammar gets to be taught.

**Your shoe horning turns in, you’re not talking about meaning; is that accurate do you think?**

Absolutely, yes.

**Why do you think the tests, because it sounds like what you’re saying the tests are quite powerful then in the sense they can change the way that people teach; what is it about the tests then that makes them so powerful? Why do they have such a hold on what teachers do do you think?**

I think by the very nature of the tests in which you’re going to get a percentage pass rate or not, I think that that naturally brings its own pressure. Just an example, this is fairly anecdotal but in my last school, we did a first year [05:43] got harder, we really [05:47] contextualised ways and also in a [05:52] we did them fairly [05:58] we got the highest score in Brighton Hove our school for grammar and then about 4 weeks later from my own interest I ran a quick quiz with the class about all the things that they absolutely [06:18] and they didn’t remember any of it. And then from then on, we’ve very much done the bare minimum to get through the tests and just focus on everything else. We were lucky because our head teacher supported that but I think yes, external pressures [06:40].

**That’s really interesting so you can prepare students for that test but you don’t have to revert to those very artificial more reductive decontextualized pedagogies then.**

No, exactly yes. But I do think that happens a lot, because of pressure from elsewhere like management and OFSTED and things.

**That’s so interesting.**

And I think we’ve still got good scores because we had well established in our English [07:06].

**What kind of knowledge about language do you think the tests are assessing then? You’ve mentioned meta language is one thing that’s obviously important. What else, if anything, do you think the tests are assessing in terms of language knowledge and students’ awareness of language do you think?**

I think tests, I think looking at the history, I think the [07:43] thought there was a weakness there for teachers and children and I agree actually there was. Noticeably when I’m training, that’s when it first came out and I realised actually my grammar knowledge was pretty poor but I think that was the initial aim but I think now I don’t think they’re testing actually what they think they’re testing but I think they think they’re improving writing or reading or general English skills and knowledge but not in my view. I think because a lot of these questions they’re trying to put the binary answer [08:24] variations and argued answers. Michael Rosen wrote a great blog when we went to do [08:33] different answers for each question but the English language doesn’t work like that.

**Could you say a little bit more about that? What do you mean when you say the language doesn’t work like that?**

Well I mean the very nature of testing something as messy as language in very simplistic ways. So questions like which one is right and which one is wrong, that kind of thing you know? The kind of oh this is correct language and this is incorrect language.

**Oh ok, so very binary?**

That’s exactly it. The way that the tests describe language is so fake. I know that language doesn’t work like that but I’m kind of steered into saying that it does in my classroom because of the language of the tests.

**How does that impact on teaching then? Do you find that talking and thinking about language in those very reductive binary ways, does that manifest itself in the classroom at all?**

Yes, but I think the number 1 issue I see is I think mentioning [09:23] my thoughts about English [09:29] phrases and it’s just up to the team to make life more interesting. It doesn’t make life more interesting [09:42] so I think actually having the correct terminology [09:47] to talk with the students and making sure the teacher knowledge is there is good but then by putting into a test and too much time is focused onto that, what you leave [10:00] but it’s definitely robbed big parts of what’s been called [10:09] English.

**Interesting and it’s very, very similar what you’re saying that a lot of the other teachers that I’ve interviewed have said as well so there’s definitely some patterns emerging, especially what you say in terms of writing in that the Government claim that these tests have improved writing but every teacher that I’ve spoken to says ‘Well no, they haven’t because all they’ve done is created very artificial pedagogies where you have paint by numbers approach to writing’.**

And actually it’s not a test because any grammatical features that are placed in the National Curriculum, what you get then is tests Years 3 and 4 they have to use the [10:52] phases 9 [10:57] purpose or sometimes [11:03] what you find then is I’m looking at books and the thing I see most commonly; this isn’t just the tests [11:12] test [11:17] they’re teaching them 3 or 4 times saying ‘Don’t forget to use them in your writing’ and children are using them, they’re getting [11:29] and then when I look, they’re wrong. They using them in the sentence construction, they’ve been used incorrectly but it’s actually [11:39] not just the tests, it’s also the grammar [voice keeps fading in and out] it’s sometimes they ignore [11:49] Year 2 or Year 1 Curriculum [11:51] in place and we’re actually, I’ve noticed more and more we’re getting students come up to Year 5 and 6 and still don’t know how to form a sentence in the right fragments [12:07] other grammar features in these strange [12:12].

**But purely because of the assessment, because the assessment dictates that that’s what good writing looks like which is just weird.**

Yes, exactly and I think trying to [12:24] in Year 3 the verbal [12:29] in Year 5 you will use relative clauses and it will build up to being a better writer and that’s actually working [12:40].

**Would you say that the tests have either narrowed or broadened your curriculum very generally in school then would you say?**

Narrowed.

**And narrowed in terms of; could you elaborate a little bit on that?**

Yes. It’s narrowed in two ways; one in literally time so any schools, there are lots of schools doing it, any time that’s given over, half an hour every day to grammar just to prepare for those tests. Totally separate to the English lessons that would normally take place, where you know things like reading and writing would be happening, storytelling, that kind of thing. It is narrowing the curriculum because there’s still too many children who don’t read and don’t write and the tests just distort their view of English and language. They create a false kind of subject which I don’t recognise as English. I think the teachers have this in their head about [13:30] it’s not writing and reading.

**So it’s done separately then, it’s discreet part of the teaching where you focus on.**

Yes, which is robbing time over other areas. The tests completely infect other things we do, you know. They just end up taking over, and I think they contribute so much to the poor teaching of grammar.

**So that policy that you have around SPAG teaching, the introduction of those very discreet SPAG lessons, is that a policy that’s been implemented since the tests have been introduced? Is that a reaction to those tests?**

Yes. I wouldn’t have any concrete data on that but I would say from my experience discreet SPAG lessons have come into place because of the tests, without a doubt. I hardly ever saw them before and now they’re all over the place, every day in English classrooms, and I can’t help but thinking that other such better and useful things could be happening with language and teaching you know.

**Just one more question if that’s okay Chris and it’s about the use of standard English and the framing of standard English in those tests. The tests I would argue kind of emphasise the use of standard English.**

Yes, and the curriculum too, I think. The tests are designed to assess that I think.

**And at the same time that can present non-standard English as incorrect as such. Do you have any thoughts on the way that standard or non-standard English is presented in those tests, and again if that’s impacted at all on teaching or things that you’ve seen happen in classrooms?**

I mean I think the standard English testing or the idea of that in the grammar paper is a bit unfair because of how language really works in every day society and it most situations. People just don’t go around speaking like the way that language is presented in the tests in this very weird artificial way. If you’re a student who doesn’t use standard English then that is confusing in that if you’re already using language and you just don’t recognise it. Standard English is an important skill which you need to learn because actually beyond story writing and poetry, at some point they have to fill in a job application or whatever so I understand that some conventions of standard English are important but I think the way it’s presented is completely wrong, a total unnecessary emphasis on very very formal ways of using language. I love speaking to my students about dialect and accent and variation but the tests don’t recognise that.

**I know exactly what you mean. So the problem itself is in the language of language then; it’s those evaluative adjectives like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; is that fair to say?**

It’s turning into a binary right/wrong without thinking. [16:38] we had to reuse the formalities that when you’re writing for Year 6 [16:44] what everyone did was they couldn’t even work out where to do it so they suddenly, [16:54] all of a sudden you had all these sort of narratives where informal characters appeared and [17:09] very odd.

**So again, quite artificial bits of writing as a result of policy?**

Yes. The only thing I forgot to mention is that the absolute nonsense of it all, as I’m sure you know, is that come Year 7, [17:32] to look at English in our local secondary schools and I’ve been in their English meeting where they say ‘Oh I think we’re getting a bit too technical with talking about verbs and adverbs’ and I was sitting there, I was working in Year 6 at the time, [17:50].

**So the risk is it all gets lost. So all of that time that you’re spending on it as a result of the narrower Curriculum sometimes just gets wasted anyway because it doesn’t get taken up at secondary school or continued at secondary school.**

Yes.

**And that does teachers an enormous disservice about all the good work that they do do with language and grammar regardless of the test like you talked about in your blog for example.**

Yes, if it’s taught well, I think that having been [18:28] that useful way of writing [18:33].

**It’s really nice to hear that you’re doing something differently and managing to resist the way in which grammar is framed in those tests and great to hear that you’ve had success with that.**

Thank you.

**I think that’s probably the end of my questions as such. Was there anything that you wanted to talk about or revisit or clarify that you haven’t had the chance to do so at all?**

No, no. I think I’ve had a grammar therapy session here.

**I think I’ve got a good sense of your thoughts so some criticisms of the tests but not criticisms of the study of language at all in any way.**

Yes, exactly, yes.

**But criticisms of the way in which the tests can be seen to be quite powerful in how they might manipulate pedagogies as such. Again, is that a fair assessment of your thoughts do you think?**

Yes, absolutely because I think from when I’ve worked with people or schools or main school or [19:44], you’d have the two camps; one is the other passionate camp [19:50] they don’t need to know any of this and if you look [19:55] I didn’t know any of this and I was fine but I definitely, in another camp which is [20:07]. I think that’s completely captured my view on the subject.

**Thank you.**