**James**

**Very briefly, can I ask you just to explain what your current role is and whether or not you have taught or you are currently teaching the content for either the KS1 or the KS2 tests?**

Yes, I’ve just started as a Deputy Head at a new school and prior to that I was a Year 6 teacher at another school. I taught Year 6 for the past 4 years and prior to that I’ve taught KS2 so I’ve been teaching 15 years. So, the new curriculum I saw the changes first-hand of how the Year 6 grammar curriculum was introduced so the light version first and then the, when the curriculum changes went through to KS testing, how that was taught to that test and so for the past few years.

**So you’ve got quite a good experience of the tests and structure. Can I ask, since their introduction of both those initial ones and then the revised ones, what are your general feelings about those tests then? I suppose here I’m looking for your thoughts on the type of knowledge about language that they assess, your sense on their purpose, their usefulness and maybe any changes that you’ve seen happen since their introduction at all?**

Okay. Well, the grammar [01:46] prior to that was often very haphazard and you’d have lots of pupils say 2010-ish time, you’d have pupils who knew parts of speech, knew nouns and that was useful enough on the first instance [02:02] doing language teaching later on but there was not much focus on it. The odd comprehension type questions in reading paper, it would be helped or the analysis and [02:16] that knowledge was there but some schools I taught in, some different cohorts of kids just had never learnt that at all. So I think when the grammar changes first time round, it was 2012/2013 when the initial grammar papers came around and they were easy, they were easy for kids to get to the standard by Year 6 but I think they were a step in the right direction and at the time I was doing a middle leadership course and my project was about looking at that introduction and seeing as a base line, where our pupils that had never really done grammar did it at the time and then by the end of the year, where they were because we taught to that test which are my words but that’s what happened; we have to teach the content [03:00] knowledge-wise. But I think after that, I think the accountability was absolutely wrapped up in terms of what things count for; your grammar testing is not included in most accountability measures [03:17] external ones so [03:20] prioritised and so I’ll give you an example. Last year Year 6 I had a small village school, nice neatly managed [03:29] school. Year 6 that I had did not have much grammar knowledge but by the time it came round to the test, I gave them a base line test around September and said ‘Look, by now you’ve been in Year 5 up to now, you should have passed this level’ but grammar wasn’t embedded across the school well enough so [03:50] a lot of gaps by Year 6 and funnily enough, they did okay in that test because you can teach them to pass the test. Did their knowledge of grammar and the way it applies to language really deepen their understanding? No, because a lot of the terminology is very useful and to analyse text and to see the author’s viewpoint and all sorts of things can be great but if you’ve got a large bunch of kids who caught really engage with that because they’ve not the emotional maturity to understand the subjunctive for instance; some of them [04:33] absolute throwaway, it’s the time and the opportunity costs of teaching that as opposed to teaching them the circumference of a circle in Maths or all sorts of contexts, you think gosh I wish there was a way to take some of that content away. The other stand to it of course is, and I’d love to be corrected on this but is all the various articles years ago about how the original curriculum changes were put in place and that KS3 was going to continue this but the number of pupils that have come back in Year 6, 7, 8 [05:12] we don’t do any grammar now; we don’t need to know all that and it’s not yet in the English curriculum; by the time it is at GCSE, it’s sort of a sea of other knowledge, it’s gone by with. You’d think in Year 6 you might be teaching something in May just prior to STATS and you think you won’t touch this for quite a few years. If it was worthwhile knowledge and you thought okay, their knowledge of this is going to be [05:44] but it isn’t as far as I can see because the KS3 curriculum pretty much says if you look at the National Curriculum which I know every school doesn’t have to cover because they’re not all academies have to teach that but if you look at the Curriculum, it pretty much says KS3 Curriculum grammar, see KS2 [06:06] onto that teaching as far as I understand it.

**I think that’s right.**

My Dad was an English teacher and a lot of the terminology I think is fine and getting kids to write well using a range of sentence-types, [06:26] and things like that are useful enough because you are getting them to see the patterns in language but I’ve got Year 3 now at this new school, I’ve got just got a group in Year 3 and we were talking about coordinating conjunctions the other day and I’m just thinking I just can’t see the value of teaching them the name of something.

**And that’s been a lot of the criticisms of the test, just to pick up on that and a lot of other teachers have echoed a lot of what you’ve said there which is really interesting including one of the main critiques of those tests has been that they assess decontextualized grammar knowledge.**

Yes, absolutely. That’s the better way of putting it, decontextualized. You can have kids who may not even do, be very good leaders but can still do a grammar test because [07:22] and that’s great short-term memory practice but they’re just churning it out; they don’t truly understand the use of it. And you can see how the questions over time have evolved to try to counter that but ultimately, there’s still going to be a test ‘what is this part of speech? Is it a this, is it a this?’ and this is a tick box if they know it.

**Exactly. It seems such a shame doesn’t it because the message I think that I’m getting from you is that you value very much the study of language and of grammar.**

Oh yes, yes, yes, absolutely.

**But not perhaps in the way that the tests demand and the type of knowledge that the tests assess. Would that be accurate?**

Yes, I think it’s the choice of it. If you literally took a grammar curriculum at primary and perhaps shaved off maybe even two-thirds and taught it really well. That’s a basic concepts idea of that [08:27] of really, really understanding I think rather than saying ‘Oh gosh, it’s term 3 Year 6. We’ve got to make sure they know their past tenses. Who knows perfect tense?’ It doesn’t really add to their analytical toolkit; it’s just there, it’s just to be regurgitated like you said.

**Would you say it’s fair to say that the tests have had quite a lot of power then in terms of how they’ve affected pedagogies? Have they changed how grammar is taught or the amount of grammar that’s taught? Since those tests have come in, has classroom practice changed as a result of that then?**

It had to. Despite the fact the accountability measures out there for grammar externally, you still, it’s still going to be an important part of your toolkit for understanding what, where your school is, how the pupils are doing. The knock-on of course is about spelling because the way it’s set is grammar and spelling so if you take all I said and you have a reasonably high attaining group of pupils and you say ‘Right, we can get all these tasks test,’ it then becomes spelling that’s the difference and then you’re looking at a different kettle of fish because the majority, the actual marks for grammar stay fairly consistently high but in regards to spelling, seem to be the point where they make a difference so you do a lot of shift back into spelling which is another knock-on but hey ho. What was I saying? The grammar teaching, I mean, so many, I don’t know how they do it but lots of English consultants and things, people you speak to say teach your grammar in context, teach your grammar in context and yes, I agree, I fully agree but the actual way of doing this, fairly, tray to look at advanced text by Year 6. [10:27] where are we going to find that? And you find yourself hunting the classroom [10:36].

**It’s the wrong way around, isn’t it? You should be letting the text lead the discussion rather than the terminology.**

Precisely but if you, in an ideal world you would want to do; you’d want to try and integrate your reading practices that you do and the writing outcomes to a purpose and your grammar input and your spelling. It’s like catch [10:58] because there’s so many different stands to pull together to do them more usefully, I just know a lot of people say ‘Right, by the time we get to that stage, grammar is going to be a separate lesson to keep everything going’ and we will pay lip service to it but the rest of reading practice will be done separately.

**To me it’s just fascinating what you’re talking about because so much research talks about the value of contextualised grammar teaching; there is no research to suggest that decontextualized grammar teaching has a positive impact on writing and so, what you were just saying there is that you want to do the more meaningful contextualised grammar teaching but the tests demand that you do it in a decontextualized way. Is that accurate in terms of what you’re saying?**

Yes, I think that’s accurate certainly for large portions of the knowledge base as you go further [12:03]. The KS1 grammar curriculum I can’t talk at length; I’ve worked in schools where [12:14] deputy head, they just chose not to do the test. It wasn’t seen as important, it’s not compulsory. It was [12:22] KS1.

**I remember.**

It wasn’t seen as but structuring that build-up of grammar throughout the school to reach that is not, it’s a massive opportunity cost. I think if there was one massive, main strand to be, to try and get the kids to pass the test, there’s lots of other things that are more useful to teach that you can teach usefully and well.

**And presumably teachers and students feel the pressure of these tests; they must get a sense that these are quite high stakes and that there is some sense of accountability and that there’s a feeling that these tests are quite powerful. Is that true in your school?**

In previous schools, yes. I’ve worked in schools not too long ago, 3 or 4 years ago, where they were in a [13:21] category so it was always [13:26] if we get our grammar up, that’s something to harp on about to new parents. It’s an easy win in that sense so let’s get them cracked on. But the last school I was at was an easier [13:42]; it wasn’t quite the same pressure but yes, the pressure of testing, you just can’t deny it. There’s so many, what’s the word, there’s so many contradictions around it; people will say ‘Well, just make it a normal week’. Well, you can’t make it a normal week because the kids are sitting there doing tests; everyone has to be quiet and there’s no way you can pretend it’s normal by the age of 11.

**There’s definitely like a ceremony and like a ritual around them, isn’t there? You know it’s impossible to [14:13] that things are different.**

The accountability, there was some headline that they got forensic experts in to check papers the other day and you think really? Anyway, the trust [14:26] are quite ridiculous, the things you’ve got to do, signing in, signing out, everything absolutely by the book and yet it’s got to be done to an extent but it’s just got worse and worse. I’ve been in Year 6 for quite a while and seen how things used to be a little bit more lax but I’d like to think that no-one cheated but now it’s like being a spy; it’s the only time you get to feel like a spy when you’re locking away papers and making things be absolutely signed off by enough people.

**It doesn’t do much for teachers’ feelings of being a professional in the sense of trust between teachers and Government.**

No, [15:08] a wider theme about [15:12] I would argue that some sort of testing is the only way to compare schools but I don’t know how vehemently I’d argue that grammar in that case is a good way of comparing. If you have the resources at your hands, there’s online resources that kids can tap into, you can get them plugged in. If you don’t have that, if you’re a small school which is the schools, I was in prior to this one, we were small, lack of resources, lack of extra teaching staff, it was a bit of an uphill struggle sometimes.

**Have you seen, because the tests are quite demanding in terms of the level of grammar required, especially if you take into account that most teachers don’t have a linguistics background for example? Have you seen any effects on teachers, on themselves and in the way that they feel about teachers and the way that they feel about teaching grammar in terms of their own confidence and subject knowledge at all?**

Yes, absolutely. I think unless you’ve taught Year 5 or 6, Year 6 in the last few years, people are scared, scared to move there; they just can’t see where they’re going to begin to learn these things from. I don’t like the narrative of ‘Oh, I never did this at school. It never harmed me’ but the reasoning is for various reasons but I didn’t learn that part of speech until Year 8 French because we didn’t have to because the Curriculum wasn’t grammar focused at all in the 80’s and 90’s. So you can very much date my schooling to [16:52] but then you look, I went on to do psychology and linguistics and things like that and you think well okay, so I can engage with those but yes, they were asked for a whole raft of new concepts and new things to have to sit down and learn and not everyone’s got that time to do it or willingness to get themselves up to speed.

**Just one final question if that’s okay Joe.**

Yes, of course.

**One other criticism, and there are many, of the tests has been around I suppose the emphasis on standard English and some of those questions which talk about correcting examples of non-standard English and I suppose talking about language in very binary kind of right or wrong terms, have you got any feelings at all about that in terms of those issues?**

Absolutely, yes, that’s a good question. I know I’m coloured by things I’ve read afterwards as well. I know Michael Rose writes a lot about this, about things about the fact that yes, there are very many questions that you can critique when you first read it, you think ‘Really?’ They’re the ones where you have to circle capital letters for things and [18:17] standard English, English should not be seen as right or wrong; if you’ve got regional dialects and so on, that is hard to say in school though because if you try and correct them to speak proper, you do want them to say ‘was’ rather than ‘were’ the correct [18:32]. But there are things where very easily as a writer, if you’re thinking about an audience, you may use a capital letter for something in a sentence because it might be something’s name. There was one a few years ago where it was a club or a name of somewhere in Manchester and you can easily argue that the example is wrong should or could have a capital letter in the context of blah blah, in context again, and then somebody would say ‘Well, it would be really valuable to look at that sentence, deconstruct it and say ‘why might this have a capital letter?’ if it’s a proper noun’ and so on. The binary nature of the questioning is frustrating.

**And quite reductive, I think. You’ve obviously got a good knowledge of linguistics and we know that’s not how language works; it’s not set.**

It’s something to be questioned about but not to say that’s definitely terribly wrong because it conveys meaning, it speaks volumes so it has value and if you want to; you don’t want to be too woolly when you’re at primary, you don’t want to give general answers all the time because it will be very hard to teach [19:53] but you want to, by the end. If they’re given that love of language and understanding, you have to be prepared to have those conversations with them but also ‘well it’s wrong in my grammar test’.

**It’s such a shame isn’t it because there’s so much more that you could be teaching about language but the tests have such an important, such a big place on the Curriculum so something is getting lost it seems somewhere perhaps.**

Definitely.

**Okay, thanks so much for your time Joe. It’s been really interesting to chat to you. Is there anything else that you would like to comment on that you wanted to or anything that you want to clarify or re-visit at all?**

No. The only stand that you’ve not come back to which I don’t know if other people have come to or if I am wrong about it is about the way the Curriculum was set up in the first place, about this transition to KS3 element. There was one particular article I read.

**I know the article, yes. The working group was set up for KS3 and then all of a sudden, they were, that just got used in KS2 and they weren’t primary experts at all.**

Yes. Okay. That’s not a treatment.

**That definitely happened, yes. Some of my other work has shown that there’s a real incongruence between KS2 and KS3; it goes back to what you were saying earlier, kids do loads of work on grammar at primary school and then when they get to Year 7, a lot of it gets lost.**

Yes, yes. So if we are going to teach these things and it’s something this teacher came to me and said ‘Do you know what? This grammar curriculum, you might not love it, the grammar tests might not be but actually when they get here, they fly because you’ve taught XY and Z’ and I said ‘Okay. I can go to colleagues and say you know what, they will’. I think it’s not true but that’s what it comes down to.

**Okay, thank you Joe. I’m sure you’re doing a brilliant job despite some of these issues.**