**Katharine**

**OK if you could just briefly outline your role and how long you’ve been a teacher for Katharine, that would be great.**

I’ve been a teacher for a decade. So I’m now 42 and I came into teaching at 30 having previously worked in marketing and PR. My training route was through the GTP. So my 1st school and then my 2nd school were both schools in Sunderland. The 2nd school in particular was a school which worked on a very, very difficult council estate. I didn’t teach in year 6 in that school I was in year 3 and 4. I’ve been 7 years in my current role, and my current school is a private school, but we are not a selective private school, we’re not academically selective so although we have children who are school ready we don’t necessarily have children who are particularly or significantly above national average in any way. I’ve been in year 6 in the last 6 years and I’ve been a lead for English for the last 5 years with a gap of a year and a half in the middle where I moved to Geography.

**Okay great. So are you teaching the national curriculum in that school then?**

Yes, we are. We do SATs and did do SATs up until 2 years ago. Since then we haven’t set them publicly but we do use them and still use them obviously a year behind because they’re not published in the timeframe to test in that year, but we stick to the national curriculum and teach the curriculum. The curriculum and sort of beyond is our version of it but sometimes it is just the curriculum.

**Okay great I see. Thinking now as a teacher but also your role as English lead as well then. What are your general feeling about the grammar tests and I suppose the way that they might have affected or changed what happens in your classroom? And how they’ve changed things since their introduction back in 2013 was the 1st iteration of them. So yeah, your general feelings, the way that they’ve changed, you’re affected, things that happen in your classroom as such, does that make sense?**

Yes absolutely. I moved into year 6 in 2013 so I hadn’t taught year 6 before the grammar tests existed. And when I inherited that situation in 2013 I think one of the reasons I was put into year 6 was there was a perception that I knew or understood the grammar in a way most teachers didn’t and there’s still a huge amount of fear amongst my colleagues that they don’t understand what is on the national curriculum and are worried about teaching it. I’ve only ever known that requirement to be there and that sort of accountability and I am very much in favour of children being taught the grammatical underpinnings of language. I creatively write for pleasure myself, I’ve very, very keen on the creative sides of English but I am very, very keen that children have a grammatical understanding because it underpins the acquisition of 2nd languages so effectively.

**Yeah sure.**

And we see that as a through school it’s very obvious. I talk to a lot of colleagues in MFL in the secondary school who make that point a lot. So in terms of the content of what’s covered I’ve found that our children have always been very receptive to the majority of the content. There is a fringe element of sort of 5-10% which is difficult, but we do have children who are lesson ready. So I imagine in other schools that’s a higher percentage which is harder around the edges.

**Yeah sure.**

In terms of sort of the pressure that they feel in sitting an exam. I find that not evident at all to be honest.

**Right okay.**

I find children get very worried about the reading comprehension tests and they get worried about maths tests but they find the grammar test and they don’t mind the spelling test I’ve got to say. I mean there is pressure of course. But the content is quite easy I think. They view it much more in the way they might respond generally to a verbal reasoning or non-verbal reasoning test as in they’ll just try and crack the code or they’ll have a go at it. I find most of the anxiety around it comes from parents and comes from teachers.

**Right that’s so interesting. And you say that you’re fairly comfortable with the grammar and the grammatical content is that because. Have you got a background in linguistics or language at all?**

No not at all. I think the perception in school is that’s true because I did a degree that had some literature and old English in it, but actually when I started teaching in year 6 I would have been hard pressed to explain what a preposition was, in fact I didn’t know what a preposition was. I would have found active and passive voice not a clue, and I used to work in marketing. I was using this all the time but I had no idea about the technical terms for these things. So what I did find in that sort of steepish learning curve when I was prepping to teach it, was a lot of this stuff was totally intuitive and was there naturally because it was my mother tongue, but I didn’t know the technical terms. And I think that was hugely helpful in teaching the children because it meant, a bit I think in the same way that somebody who hasn’t found maths easy straightaway is often the best maths teacher. I could understand from the word go where they were faltering and when they were faltering was nothing to do with the concept it was simply to do with the way it was presented or the phrasing of how it was presented. And even now there are parts where I will look up, I’ll just double check. So for example, some of the clause names I quite often think um. And some of it, more obscure tenses, I don’t know them, I will check, I’d look up. But to me that’s, you know I do that in front of the children, that’s part of being a learner, that’s part of, you don’t carry in your head what you don’t need, you know where to go to look it up and to check it. So in terms of some of the tests themselves I think they’ve always been viewed as the light relief of key stage 2 tests.

**That’s interesting. And you talked about your students that they don’t mind the tests etc, they see it as a bit, that phrase light relief is quite nice. And you’re obviously in favour of students knowing about language and grammar for things like L2 language learning and just general language awareness. Why do you think. If that’s on the curriculum and teachers value that and students value learning about grammar why do you think it has to be tested in this way because you say that a lot of other teachers and perhaps parents feel pressure and anxiety around the tests. So could you imagine a curriculum where you were able to teach grammar in these nice ways without having to have it tested as such. Do you see what I mean?**

Yes, I think that option’s there but of course that would have been the situation before 2013. And when I stepped in the children they didn’t know, weren’t familiar with the grammar because it wasn’t being tested, it actually wasn’t being taught as a result of the fact it wasn’t accountable at the end of a situation. And I know, I work on some of the IBT and TBT for science and I know talking to my colleagues in science, since the science tests have been scrapped the level of understanding in science has dropped by an incredible amount because it’s not seen as a priority because it isn’t tested. And I think that’s a very sad situation and it’s not a situation that I’m happy about. But I can absolutely see that testing is one way of ensuring something remains vivid in teaching. And I’m very lucky, I’m at a school where the children, as I say, they are school ready, they’re lesson ready, but we do have time pressures, because we have children who have very poor attention spans for opposite reasons, usually because they’re doing so many clubs, so they’re doing things after school, so there are issues there which do cause attention, seep at their attention. And I know that when I come out of year 6, and I will eventually, I’ll move to somewhere else, whoever goes in will not teach to the standard of the grammar test because they don’t have the grammar test to worry about it in the same way as we do when it’s externally marked. And that does concern me because I think it’s inevitable in a busy job, in a busy school, of which all schools are, there’s always something else that needs to be done. And unfortunately, academically that, one of the ways to ensure it is done is to make sure that there is a finite date, a finite point on which you reach and then you relax afterwards and you have your lovely summer term, and a deep sigh. So I do feel it’s not a popular opinion. I do feel a lot of other teachers don’t agree with it. But I can see a very clear justification for why it’s there.

**Yeah sure that’s really interesting thank you. One of the criticisms of the tests has been that it focuses on testing decontextualised grammatical knowledge. And there’s a kind of focus on sentence level grammar on identifying bits of grammatical terminology and the technical bits of language etc. How do you feel about the kind of decontextualised nature of the grammar that’s assessed on those tests?**

I think that is a fair point. I think it’s very forensic. You’re looking at quite minute detail and often it’s sentence level, sometimes it’s just phrase levelling, it’s very, very discrete in how it testing. It’s quite unfair. It’s trickier because it doesn’t give children other hints and clues. But then for a lot of children those other hints and clues would distract them from. And I suspect actually with a lot of children they wouldn’t respond grammatically with additional information or textual information around it. I’m not convinced the alternative is better. I’m not saying it’s ideal but I’m not convinced the alternative is necessarily better.

**Sure. And so when you’re teaching grammar then how do you generally approach it. Do you generally teach it in context or out of context as it is in the test?**

Almost completely in context. So partly through guided reading. Often when we’re looking at the text types at the beginning of getting to know a text type and pulling it apart and looking at it I’ve found what works for our students, and it’s a function of who your students are I’m not saying it would necessarily work everywhere. What works for us is refusing to tell them, I find the sort of counter psychology, simply saying this is what older children learn about you’re not ready for it, they are insistent on knowing all the technical information, some of whom will retain it some won’t but they still feel that they’re winning in finding it out. And that goes a long way to making what something that’s quite dry and quite disinteresting generally a more exciting subject.

**I see.**

And as soon as it’s presented with those messages, along the lines of if you can do this, I bet your mum and dad can’t do this, you can go home and teach them, they will. And then they’ll come back to school and they’ll use it in their writing straightaway because they’re beating an adult. And actually, isn’t that what we want from this generation. It’s what I’d want.

**Yeah definitely. It’s interesting you mention writing there because that was going to be the next thing that I was going to ask you about, and you mentioned before that you’re a writer and very creative. What kind of impact has the increase on grammar in the curriculum and the tests yes but also grammar more broadly in the curriculum? What impact would you say has that had on I suppose the teaching of writing and also how you see your students writing ability and the type of writing that they’re producing?**

I think for some students. For the students who have quite sort of procedural and almost mathematical approaches it gives them a sense of security because they know their imaginations might not be their strongest point but they know they can technically write effectively. So we see lots. In fact I was talking to one of our girls this weekend who’s now in year 12, and when I taught her in year 6 she was very much this sort of child, she couldn’t write an exciting, she was not a story teller, she couldn’t write an exciting story, but she could write a very, very clear explanation. And of course, now is going on to be a scientist. She’s used those skills very effectively to access the curriculum she wanted. So for those children it can work in that way. For the weaker children it can overload them because it’s something that they see a series of symbols rather than a series of meanings. And that is hard if they’re at the poorer end. But for some of the people at the top end and the middle who are perhaps very, very creative, I think what punctuation has done has made the verbalisation of storytelling easier for them to communicate. So they’ve found more ways to emphasise what they want to highlight in their stories without having to bung in loads and loads of lists of adjectives. They’ve found ways to direct attention through their sentence structure or their use of more sophisticated punctuation. And I think those children have found that useful, it’s been a useful tool.

**Yeah sure okay.**

And if they view it that way they’re bursting, they want it, they want to know why semicolons, why does this person use semicolons, why is that different to a colon, what’s happening here, why is this on a different line, so that’s not a paragraph, why have they done that. I have to couch that by saying I am in a school where we do have children who read widely, who enjoy reading. So I have very few of the sorts of children who are reluctant readers or who would see it necessarily as a barrier. And I can see in other schools that may well be the case.

**Yeah definitely. That makes a lot of sense. And I suppose the risk with these things is that writing becomes a kind of like a painting by numbers kind of approach where the focus is on inserting grammatical features just for the sake of it rather than thinking about narrative or the story or character development etc, where you get students perhaps wanting just to bung in 5 adjectives and 4 adverbials or whatever it might be at the expense of other things. Do you see any evidence of that happening at all?**

I don’t think it creates that situation. And I think it opens up opportunities for children who might never access the higher-level strands of sort of storytelling because they’re simply not interested in it. It’s not where their strength lies. They’re not. It doesn’t matter what exposure those children have to different reading material. It’s not where their strength lies. And so I can well imagine for example, my father was a research scientist, he doesn’t read fiction for pleasure, he reads non-fiction, but he would have thrived on a situation where he would have been rewarded for clarity and control in his writing because that would have allowed him to achieve in a way that he could not have achieved on storytelling.

**Yeah that makes a lot of sense.**

I’m very wary about some of the sort of jungle drums that go around about grammar because it’s a tool, and people will use it in a way that’s most effective for them. But the important thing is we don’t force them to use it in any particular way, so they will naturally find their own strengths with it.

**Definitely. I’m very pro-grammar, the students learning about grammar and developing knowledge about language I think is brilliant. I wonder whether some of these stories about the tests and about the kind of painting by numbers approach to writing develop because perhaps teachers don’t feel secure in grammatical pedagogies or grammatical knowledge themselves and so there is a fear about grammar around isn’t there and anxiety around grammar as well. And sometimes that is a result of teachers perhaps not feeling so secure in their own subject knowledge as well, I think.**

Yeah. I think it’s very interesting to. I agree with a lot of what you said there. I think one of the big problems is adult anxiety and whether it’s parents or teachers, or whoever’s driving it. Grammar and punctuation are simply clues and hints and code breaking, and just like maps, there is no part of maps which is beyond you. They are simply you’ll go as deeply into it as you want to, and I think it’s the same with grammar and punctuation. And the idea that it is in any way restrictive I find bizarre. I would not accept the notion that children shouldn’t learn about division because it’s restrictive. That’s ludicrous. It’s an absolutely ludicrous argument. And they’ll absorb the degree of detail that they are capable of and they’re interested in, and our job is to give as many opportunities to get them interested in it. And I appreciate that’s hard, it’s not easy, but it’s not fair to say children, you know it’s difficult or it overwhelms them. I don’t see any evidence of that at all to be honest.

**That’s so interesting to hear. Just one more question if that’s okay Kirsten. I suppose it picks up a little bit on something that you just mentioned about people’s criticisms of the tests being that it offers, that it can be quite restrictive when it comes to studying language. What I’d like to think about now is the language of those test questions which often presents quite a binary view of language because it talks about language being correct or incorrect or the right or wrong way of using language for example, a kind of overt focus on identifying things rather than evaluating things. Those kind of things people have suggested might be presenting perhaps a little bit of a restrictive perhaps reductive view of what language is and what the study of language can be. Do you have any thoughts or comments on that at all?**

I think there’s quite a lot of technical jargon in the key stage 2 content particularly. And I think that. And that’s creeping in year on year more. So looking back at 2018 and 2019 I’m glad that we didn’t sit pupils in those years because they were undeniably, it wasn’t the paper was necessarily harder but it was a little bit more dusty than previous years. And I think that will continue. There are some parts of grammar and punctuation which are right and wrong. And I think it’s only fair to be upfront with pupils about that because of course for some children they will grasp things through a binary approach. The problem comes when they might then need to transition into seeing the shades of grey in-between where it might be a little bit trickier, but they’re all learning, and that’s pretty much every subject on the curriculum in primary. You will find that you have to present very binary way initially and then you’re starting to get them to observe situations that might break those rules, why might not be. And that constant shifting from certainty to uncertainty is part of our job. And I think to. I’ve got to say some of the most difficult conversations I have with year 6 about grammar are around the situations where there are interpretations. But actually, that conversation is so useful because that is their learning point. It’s the fact that they are interpretations of all sorts of things. We live in a world of Brexit, where everything is being renegotiated constantly and checked and people are looking for shades of grey. And actually, we should be encouraging them to do that. We should be encouraging them to say this is how you’re first introduced to this, why do you think people sometimes break this rule. Shouldn’t I be allowed to break this rule. Can you start a sentence in this way? What impact does it have? And that’s a very flattering conversation to have because you’re saying to them, look here are the rules, you’re now old enough to know, people don’t always follow rules, how do you respond to that. Do you think that’s fair; do you think we should? Do you think we should change that? Can you argue. Can you defend that position? And I think that’s when they become active in the whole concept of how language changes and grammar changes. And that is the leaving behind of primary school to secondary school.

**Those kind of conversations about language just sound great. I was just thinking then when you. If I’m thinking about local dialects for example, and the test is very clear that it emphasises standard English and that non-standard English is often labelled of kind of the incorrect version of the language. Has that ever been an issue at all? How do you handle that in your teaching if you’ve got children saying well the way that I speak is like that in the test but I’m being asked to mark that as incorrect? Is that what you mean when you talk about you present it first as binaries and then you talk about the difference as such and the nuances?**

I haven’t really encountered it. I was just thinking as you were talking there, in my last school we had children who had quite broad Jordie accents and they would say heed for head. So that entire graphing was quite difficult with younger children because of course they’re hearing this at home, that’s quite tricky. So I haven’t been quite in that position in the school I’m in just because of the cohort that we’ve got. I think possibly for us this is a little bit easier because Newcastle has a very, very distinctive dialect, there’s very distinctive dialect languages and rhythm to speech. Children understand they might hear that in the town but they don’t see it on TV and they have already encountered that concept of appropriacy of language. Every child knows they shouldn’t swear, whether they choose to do it or not they understand some words have an impact and therefore have to be used with caution. And I think it’s really just part. It’s an extension of that. It’s an extension that you will be judged by the language you choose, and then it’s up to you whether you want to let that restrict what you’re going to do. And to me once a child has raised that composition with you, they have the maturity to understand the response. I would never proactively teach it because if you’re not ready for it you’re just putting a lot of extra additional information and attention’s drifting off in the wrong direction. But usually those conversations are thrown in by somebody who’s already engaged in that conversation in their head. So we should engage back with them. Yes, you are right. What do you think about that?

**And that must then generate such good discussions about language and variation and identity. Kids just love talking about that kind of stuff with language.**

Yeah absolutely, because in some ways we’re probably in a more interesting position than my previous schools because we’re a private school, but because we’re non-selective we have a number of children who come from backgrounds where their parents didn’t go to private schools and they aspire to change their daughter in some way. A little bit like an Eliza Doolittle type experiment. So there are children there who are hearing almost a 2nd language at home from school, and they are able to. And we have children who English is not their 1st language as well, so they are literally hearing completely different languages at home. And they are able to understand that concept of you will hear a variety of languages attached to different groups, and we look at it and each year a group in our school does a project on the city of Newcastle and the history of Newcastle, and they’re already engaging in this idea that Queen Victoria loathed Newcastle, she’d pull down the blinds on her carriage every time she went through because it was dirty and it was smoky. And have you encountered this. Have you encountered people telling you Newcastle is dirty? And I’ll say yes, actually my cousin in London says this. And that plays out in language. It’s just another useful conversation about the reality of their lives.

**Yeah definitely. That’s great. That’s a really nice way to finish. Thank you, Kirsten, for sharing your views and giving me such wonderful data. Just to reiterate that all of this will be anonymised so any publications that arise out of this your name and your school’s name and the group of your school won’t appear in any publications at all. If you’re interested then I’m very happy to send you any draft versions of research articles and keep you up to date with the publication process if you’re interested in reading the results that come out of this study but no obligation to you whatsoever.**

Oh no I’d be interested if there’s any way to. Is it best to give you an email address?

**Yeah that will be great. Maybe when you get a moment if you could send it through Twitter and then I’ll add you to the list.**

Okay.