**Thom 17 Oct**

**Okay that’s good. Well I would love to hear them if that’s okay. Previously when I’ve been doing these kind of interviews, I’ve tried to frame it as much more of a kind of conversation rather than an interview. But I’ve got a series of very loose questions around the grammar tests and their impact on you as a teacher in your classrooms etc. If we start with thinking about your broad perceptions of the tests and then I might ask some more specific questions later down the line. Does that all sound okay?**

Yeah absolutely.

**Great. Could you just explain a little bit about how long you’ve been teaching for then Tim and what key stage you’re teaching at the moment?**

I’ve been teaching for 11 years. I came into teaching when I was about 30 so I’ve come in quite late. And I came in 3 or 4 years before the draft of the new curriculum. The renewed for literacy framework was the thing that was in when I was teaching when I first started. So we still had like hangover from the national literacy strategy.

**Yeah sure.**

Then the renewed framework and then the new curriculum came in or when the 1st draft came out. My school I was teaching was quite on the ball in terms of innovating and need for speed with things so myself [1.46] at the time we took it and ran with it and pushed ahead with trying to spread the word. It was quite a large school, 2 form entry. There was lots of expertise there. Lots of people with different identities and different areas. And we tried to ensure that everyone was on board with the next expectations for grammar. So we did a lot of work around staff training just off our own back. And I had to go back and learn things because when I was at school in the 80s and 90s, I wasn’t taught that until I studied French and German and Spanish.

**Right okay.**

That was the only expressing grammar teaching I ever remember.

**And so how do you feel about your subject knowledge now in relation to grammar then?**

I feel pretty confident. There’s still the odd thing that comes up like the thing that I remember asking you about the bonfire night clause which was funny because it came up was it last week. I did a talk at Leeds Learn Lancs at the weekend in Burnley.

**Okay.**

And the presentation it started off with pictures of tweets from famous authors decrying things that children are being taught. There’s 1 a week.

**Oh yeah, they’re everywhere aren’t they.**

And this particular one was from Dr Alice Roberts, she’s on TV quite a lot, a famous biologist. She often puts ones on about, she’s got her child’s homework, the child must be in year 4. And a lot of times, well I don’t like kind of insinuation that shouldn’t be teaching children these things. And you hear that from everyone, you know from Philip Pullman. You hear it from him, you heart it like this is beyond the pail, Michael Rosen, lots of people that children shouldn’t know these things. Children should not need to know these things and we’re subjecting children to some kind of [04.04] and I always hate saying that, hard times. But children should not know this. And then you dig a bit deeper and you find out that all the people in the public eye who are successful who say this are an A successful and they’ve often been educated at [04.24] schools or grammar schools.

**Sure.**

And I’ve had these series of tweets and then had series of Wikipedia pages where there’s all these people been educated fine. That’s interesting because that’s kind of suggesting that often state school children should not learn these things. Sometimes saying because I never learnt them. Well I never learnt them when I was at school either. My relationship with grammar is I love teaching grammar and I like the way it’s spelled out in the national curriculum because I think it was always a massive grey area before you could pick and choose to teach whether you wanted to or didn’t.

**Yeah sure.**

I don’t. Like ultimately, I’m really opposed to the tests for other reasons. The question on her child’s homework was, there’s a lovely example of a non-finite opening clause can you find it. Because if I was teaching, I would be saying this stuff, I would say that in the classroom. And my kids would hunt it down and would be like gleeful that they knew this thing.

**Sure.**

And they would be really emboldened that they knew that and that their parents didn’t or adults didn’t. They’d love that kind of thing when they’re in some kind of secret.

**Yeah definitely. Because it can be really empowering can’t it if you know something about grammar then that’s a good thing to know about and that puts you in a situation where you’re then able to talk about texts in a more meaningful way. Maybe you’re able to understand how language works a bit better etc. So knowing something about grammar is inherently a useful thing without a doubt.**

And I do honestly believe if we teach it in a way that is put in context and creative children will then adopt these things knowingly rather than just allowing the children who read to kind of do it by osmosis.

**Yeah sure.**

That kind of then reinforces the gap as it were or the expectation that some children can do things and some children can’t do things.

**Right.**

I’ve taught year 6 all my career but I’ve just moved to year 3 this year for a kind of breather or a change to get a bit more experience, you know thinking about going into school leadership. And that’s been a bit of an eye opener, but there’s been. We’re getting to know each other now and there’s been some brilliant writing from them. The dreaded front stuff verbal because I hate the phrase and I hate the way it was generated.

**Yeah sure.**

By the group of grammars that were assigned to write the national curriculum and then get to the key stage 3 one they were like forget key stage 3 that doesn’t matter.

**Yeah. It was very dodgy wasn’t it.**

But as a. The specific thing that I can say in the classroom and it helps it’s not just. Otherwise what is it, you know going back to that kind of woolly use of language that we used to use, the VCOP thing you know do you know the VCOP acronym.

**No what does that stand for?**

VCOP stands for vocabulary connectives. Can’t remember what the other stands for now! P is punctuation. O is openers.

**Right. And what and that’s like a sort of formula for writing.**

Yeah and that was part of Ros Wilsons big writing.

**Okay.**

Do you know what big writing was?

**Yeah, I remember the phrase.**

Yeah so a big writer was big when I first started and it was basically a way of preparing children for the key stage 2 writing tests. So it was a weekly off topic 45-minute cold write. And it would be dressed up with some kind of fancy up you know to put candles in the room or reward the children with sweets if they used one of these great vocabulary or a great connective or great opener there’d be highlighters and all this kind of thing. And people, still people say oh we did big write people say recall the piece of writing the children are doing and say it’s a big write. So it’s become and it’s got this whole kind of vernacular has kind of sprung off from that and that’s been everything in teaching people. For people who haven’t been trained in that particular strategy but then have had it like 2nd hand, 3rd hand, 4th hand and they just do this thing which is pushing to be good practice.

**Yeah sure.**

So that’s also the kind of genealogy of the whole connectives thing which is. It’s a useful term to think about connecting sentences but it’s not actually, it’s not specific enough, openers isn’t very specific enough is it.

**Yeah sure. So the introduction of the grammar is arguably pinned down some of that more woolly stuff then it’s given children the terminology. And you mentioned before that you like teaching grammar and you talked about the value of teaching grammar in context which I absolutely agree with. But you also said that you’re opposed to the tests.**

Yes.

**So if we could talk a little bit about the tests then now. Could you just describe your feelings about the tests and some of the reasons as to why you are opposed to them?**

So when the 1st tests came in, I remember the very first year. I hated the writing test anyway because it’s a new term. And a lot of my thoughts are kind of through the prism of being a year 6 teacher. I think when you move to another year group that pressure doesn’t exist and so a lot of the things that year 6 teachers worry about just don’t happen in other year groups. I’m not saying they don’t follow the curriculum or don’t care to cover everything, but there’s not that pressure especially in year 6 where you have to do key stage 2. You have to do 4 years worth of making sure they know everything not just your own curriculum. So I really dislike the writing tests because it made year 6 let’s rehearse how to write for 45 minutes, and you had to revise every single text types then and every possible form that could possibly be, possible scenarios that they were given.

**So it was.**

And hoped that they would. You’d do one on the day that you’d already done or the children were familiar with.

**Sure.**

In 45 minutes got to transfer all that now so I really dislike that. And the 1st year of the grammar test I remember there was a boy in my class who I wouldn’t have given a level 4 to when it was level 4. Because he’s very lazy, his writing was, not accurate, certainly not punctuation wise, run on sentences and tenses weren’t right and there was just nothing imaginative about it. He was quite an awkward boy anyway. And I remember him passing the grammar test. And it bothered me. I thought why has be passed the grammar test because I wouldn’t pass that. So I found out the scores and I realised it’s because he got 20/20 in the spelling.

**Right okay.**

And lots of the aspects of the grammar you can get if you can spell okay you get so many marks for the spelling. But that can give you such a big boost. And saying you’ve passed the grammar test [13.01] doesn’t necessarily mean you have, know all of the grammar or the punctuation it might just be that you know one area which I think.

**That’s interesting.**

I’ve not looked at the proportions but I’m convinced that spelling is a massive proportion because those 20 marks.

**Right I didn’t realise that I’ll have to go and have a look at that.**

Yeah, I think the normal test is about 40 marks. It’s a weird test because it’s probably the easiest test that the kids will ever do [13.40] arithmetic. It’s just you know it’s so thick the pages, there’s so many pages and so many questions, but children finish it so fast, they’re often sat twiddling their thumbs for 20 minutes. But the fact that it doesn’t go into any kind of school accountability measure and it isn’t carried forth into like a progress 8 prediction or anything like that. It’s like what’s it for.

**Yeah sure.**

I don’t really. It’s almost like that’s the government’s acknowledgement that it’s pointless, nothing is done with it. It’s just marked and they get a score but it doesn’t go into any of the data you know you see on school data comparison thing, it’s not in there. It’s not in the headline data. It doesn’t go for, children don’t have to carry it forth, that’s ridiculous anyway isn’t it the fact that it sets targets for GSCE across the board.

**Definitely yeah.**

Based on these 4 tests, reading and the maths tests.

**So secondary schools don’t use them like that then do they not. They don’t use them as kind of baseline measurements for when kids arrive in year 7.**

I don’t think secondary schools. Because we’re in a muck now with secondary schools. Not in some of those teachers I don’t think they have any confidence in key stage 2 tests whatsoever.

**I see.**

Because they have children from dumping schools, some schools have been exam factories, some schools have been, like mine where I, for the last few years I’ve been so relaxed and just given them 1 practise test a couple of weeks before.

**Right okay.**

And some schools where they’ve had some well mal-administration let’s put it that way.

**That’s interesting. So a lot of the other teachers that I’ve spoken to seem to have spent an awful lot of time preparing for the tests.**

Grammar test is the one I spend the least amount of time bothering about or preparing for or revising for.

**That’s interesting.**

My head has been quite. Just let me get on with it because he knows I can get results in other areas.

**Yeah sure.**

Or maybe just because I have quite a strong belief, because the school has always been above the national average anyway but teaching grammar in context rubs off anyway teaching writing in context it then rubs off that they can do a test and so I don’t have to do.

**That’s so interesting.**

Lots and lots and lots of revision of these kind of strange questions. I just teach them where apostrophes go.

**So is what you’re saying then you prepare the kids. Because obvious the test is very decontextualised grammar.**

Completely yeah.

**But you prepare your students for that test by teaching them grammar and context.**

Yeah.

**So you don’t teach them any decontextualised grammar.**

I used to. Say when summer term came around.

**Yeah sure.**

I used to do quite a lot more revision. I was a little bit less experienced when the tests first came in.

**In preparation for the tests?**

The last 2 years we just carried out write we can write.

**Yeah sure. That’s so interesting because that just goes to show that.**

And our results have improved. And I’ve just been reading and writing rather than having test practise. Like I said that decontextualised grammar.

**Yeah, I mean that little story then just renders the tests completely pointless.**

Yeah that’s exactly my thought.

**And completely unnecessary.**

I just find them utterly pointless.

**Yeah because you’re doing all of this good stuff with contextualised grammar teaching and then they go and sit this test which is decontextualised grammar. If I was a kid, I’d be thinking what’s the point in this, this is completely different to the way that we’ve been told about language and grammar and writing.**

Yeah.

**So your negative thoughts about the tests then are about accountability, about the kind of decontextualised nature of language.**

It’s more about the lack of accountability.

**Yeah sure.**

I don’t know what’s done about the grammar test if you get a poor set of grammar test results because at the moment there’s teacher assessment of writing anyway.

**Yeah right.**

And I do moderating for the local authority which has been brilliant because the STA, now we have to sit tests, the STA make us sit tests every year to make sure we’re standardised. And we get training which is clearly about previous areas, whether they’ve picked up on previous areas of disagreement or ambiguity so that’s nice to get that extra training and to go into other schools and have a look at their writing and see what’s been doing there.

**Yeah sure.**

See what’s going on. And no-one ever talks when you’re. When you go into these schools no-one never talks about grammar. Sometimes in a book you might see grammar exercise. Some people talk about oh that’s like a book you know, I was like great.

**What’s interesting about this conversation is it’s quite different to some of the other teachers that I’ve spoken to. Because I think a lot of teachers they’ve been so panicked about the tests and getting students prepared for those that they’ve spent a lot of time teaching decontextualised grammar even though they don’t see the value or believe in that. So it’s really interesting to hear that you’ve been teaching a lot more in context and that actually the test results have just been fine and there’s been no issues. So that’s a really nice interesting message I think that other teachers ought to hear about. One other thing that I wanted to ask about the tests was again something that’s come up previously was as far as the language of language on those tests, so the way that it talks about language being reduced to something that’s right or wrong or correct or incorrect, I suppose a very binary view of thinking about language. Is that ever something that’s struck you as something you’ve had to deal with or do you have any thoughts about that or?**

All the teaching I’ve ever had has been with pupils who are predominantly EAL, so I’ve always been correcting their language, every day, always correcting language, always trying to put what they’re saying into standard English. Always trying to model standard English like that.

**And can I ask why you do that. That’s not a trick or loaded question at all, I’m just intrigued as to why. What’s your motivation for correcting their language in that sense?**

Because I found that they’re probably having their writing, the mistakes in their writing, which ultimately, I have to assess and have to assess against some very standard criteria. Their language comes through the way they speak comes through in their writing. So they’ll say we was going to the shops. They’ll miss out the definite article. They’ll really struggle with prepositions. They will mis-spell lots of verbs, spell them what they think just phonetically and a lot of it is because of their speech is not clear standard English because they are EAL so they don’t have those models of that kind of English at home. Or there might be a lot of dialect in there or just you know, I don’t want to say lazy or sloppy, but you know the standard in English where people drop, well if they don’t speak standard English. And I’ve got a trainee in my class at the minute, and one of the teaching standards that we have to adhere to is around modelling standard English, so I have to have a lot of conversations with adults about you said gonna. And the children will then write gonna because how do they know. No-one’s ever said going to, to them. And I think.

**And do you think it’s an issue. Do you think it’s a problem that? I see what you mean about standard English, all children need access to the standard right now, it’s silly to suggest that adults should deny children that. I suppose what I’m trying to think about is if you’re a child who speaks the local dialect or accent, to what extent should classrooms be spaces where they’re allowed to use that form of the language?**

Yeah, I think when I said dialect, I didn’t think I meant to say dialect. Because I think dialects should be encouraged. And we’re not far from Yorkshire here, Manchester’s not quite got anything like the same dialect as, Oldham hasn’t either, but there’s lots of the way people around Oldham speak, so they miss out the preposition to, a lot. But it’s not quite the same where like Yorkshire has its own language in many ways doesn’t it. Where I grew up, on the other side in Lincolnshire, has a lot of Yorkshire-isms, there’s lots of things that they say which, and that’s fine but. And I think it should be a teacher’s place to say yeah you know to appreciate that. But when we’re writing whatever form you’re writing in, it has to be standard so that anywhere, has to be clear and plain, anyone can understand that, do you know what I mean?

**Yeah. So is it more to do with writing than speaking would you say?**

Yes. But at the same time we want our children, sometimes, because Oldham has. Most of the borough of Oldham is rural and it’s not very well populated. And the bit that I live in is very middle class, in the Pennine Hills, which is very, very different to 6 miles down the road, the school I teach in which is in the centre of Oldham, it’s very multiracial or single racial groups, lots of racial tensions in Oldham historically.

**Yeah sure.**

Now when the children mix, say if there was a competition in the borough or at some kind of event, if there’s speaking involved the schools where mainly white British children have gone to, not just the white British children but the middle class of white British children have gone to, there’s this level of confidence with their speaking that where the Pakistani and the Bangladesh children and maybe children, worldly class white British children, they’re just in a different league. Maybe it’s an event where I’ve taken children when they have to do presentations, and they’re really embarrassed by it, really affected and don’t think they’re as good as these other children. So I think when I’ve had those experiences, oh I need to get them to, and even in assembly think oh been their teacher. Very quiet, mumble and don’t. So there’s an honesty element to it as well.

**Yeah sure. It must be really difficult to manage some of those things. Because you’ve talked a lot about as a teacher you want to celebrate the accent and the local dialect but at the same time you also want to teach kids about certain ways of using language. And it sounds like a tricky thing to navigate for you as a teacher I think yeah definitely. And I guess when the tests are saying that. I mean yes, I have a bit of an issue with the use of the word sort of wrong and right in the tests because there might be a right and a wrong way of using language maybe but only in certain contexts perhaps. And because the tests are at very decontextualised it perhaps doesn’t acknowledge language in different concepts.**

I mean the classic one is they’ll do a tick box and they’ll say which one of these is right. Me and Jo were going to the cinema. I my dad took Jo and I to the cinema. Jo and I went to the cinema. And they’ll guarantee they’ll tick the one that says, because they thought oh, I know this, someone’s told me it’s I. So we’ll say the one that’s like my dad took Jo and I to the cinema, which is wrong, because the I is an object there so it should be me. And it’s like trying to catch children out a lot of the time with all the tests, in all subjects they’re trying to catch children out.

**Yeah because it’s not wrong at all is it, it’s just.**

No because someone says me and so and so. And the other one, on the TV and the news someone tries to sound formal and so they say I as an object don’t they.

**Yeah exactly. Yeah to sort of reduce language to that binary distinction between right and wrong I think is maybe a little bit problematic perhaps. I’m just looking at my questions here and I think a lot of the things that I wanted to ask you’ve probably touched on actually which has been really nice. Was there anything that you wanted to add or talk about that you haven’t had the chance to do so or to revisit or clarify at all?**

Yeah, the thing that I stopped on then went on a tangent about was that I remember reading a blog by I think one of the McKayla teachers talking about, I think it was Jo Dazer is it, I think she’s a headteacher now somewhere. I think it was her, saying about you shouldn’t teach grammar in context, it should always be taught just as, you know this is what it is and not at all in context and I was like I really don’t agree with that. And then when I came across the Writing Revolution book, have you heard about that?

**Yeah.**

And I remember reading it and I remember reading I think there’s a piece in the Atlantic or the New York Times or something, and when I read it, I thought oh this sounds like right up my street, this is so like the way to go. And so when I got the book and just every page, I just need a kind of punch in the air because it’s. While one of its main principles is grammar should be taught in context.

**Yeah sure.**

And in lots and lots of contexts but always. Then the book’s mainly in non-fiction but in our school, we use everything. So we use all the strategies and we teach all our grammar in context that way and I use little ways to expand sentences, always using the correct terminology, let the children know it. And it’s really, I think. Last week, was it Thursday, in year 3, kind of the penny dropped and they just managed to expand these sentences in all these different ways. And their 7-year olds you know and I was like yeah. And it was talking about Charlotte’s Web it’s to do with a classic piece of children’s literature. And that worked for them. And it worked really well. Obviously, my job’s to try and transfer that across to different contexts. I don’t think right I’ve taught that now so that’s it. I often end up going over the same thing again, just to get, I think that’s a proven way that I’ve used in my school and it’s really worked and children have really relished.

**That’s so nice.**

Being able to communicate in confident ways and using lots of different sentence structures. And it’s given me some names for things which aren’t necessarily grammatical, things like fragments or run on sentences or things like that, but they are interlinked with grammar and the children can then know it. Rather than me say, oh that’s just subject agreement put you lot there which with the best will in the world there’s not many children that will understand what I mean by that.

**Yeah sure.**

But that has been really good. And everyone I’ve recommended it to has got back to me and really loved it and got on with it because it does. It’s about teaching of writing which acknowledges it’s the hardest thing to do and it acknowledges that we have to be able to speak it first. Just like classic, can’t remember who said it like writing flows from a sea of talk.

**Oh yeah that was Douglas Barnes, I think. I’ll have to go and have a proper look at the book but that sounds really good. Great. Well it’s so nice to hear such a positive spin on teaching grammar in contexts and really nice to hear your thoughts about the tests as well Tim. It’s been a really interesting conversation.**

I did this thing in Birmingham at the weekend, this presentation, and I was only really meant to be on for 40 minutes. And after an hour the organiser had to come in and kick me off because I was already. I find it really hard to stop sometimes.

**Well it’s good to have a passion about something. I can tell that you are. And keep on fighting the good fight and keep on teaching grammar in the way that you do, I think. So yeah thanks so much Tim. Just as a quick reminder the research is all for academic publications. So if you’re interested, I’ll certainly keep you in the loop in terms of.**

Definitely.

**Things and very happy to send you things as and when they’re ready. Academic publishing takes quite a while, the clogs turn quite slowly. But when something’s ready then I’ll very happily and gladly send it on to you and your voice will be in there if that’s okay but it’ll all be anonymised so your name won’t appear in the writing etc.**

Thank you, Ian.

**Alright Tim well have a good evening and thanks again for your time.**

You too. Okay take care. Thank you.

**Cheers Time take care bye.**