**Xena**

**Could you just very briefly outline your current role and what experience you have of the tests either in your current post or a previous post?**

This year I’m covering a class up until Christmas when the teacher returns from maternity then I’m out of class. I’m the maths lead for a 3-form entry in a very deprived area of inner-city Bradford. Then previous 6 years I’ve been in year 6. So I’ve been for the introduction of the new curriculum and everything since.

**Right okay brilliant. So you’ve seen quite a lot of change then in the last few years or so is that right?**

Yeah, a massive amount of change really. When I started, we were still on APP for writing etc.?

**Right okay wow okay. What year group did you say that you’re teaching now sorry?**

Yeah 5.

**Yeah 5 okay fab. So thinking about those tests then and starting to think about your feelings about them and their impact on teaching. And when I say the tests, I’m talking really about the grammar punctuation and spelling tests. So the tests came into place, I think the 1st version of them was around 2013 and then a newer version in 2015 or so. What’s your general feeling about those tests and your perception of them your feelings of them in very general terms?**

Mixed. I see the advantage in the curriculum changing to include quite specific technical understanding of grammar. The tests themselves, from experience I think the children have to do a lot of work often for 1 mark and very small errors can be penalised quite heavily.

**Can you give an example of that?**

So for example, if there’s 1 mark available and they need to account all of the verbs for example in several sentences and they make an error, they might get 80% of the question right they get 0.

**So the questions are perhaps a little bit strict then would you agree with that?**

Yeah. And I think that a lot of the questions, rightly or wrongly, also aren’t necessarily just testing anything particularly useful about language, they’re just focused on identifying rather than evaluating or talking about meaning. The question’s obviously about, you know is it just the children remembering to, when they’re answering a question about putting vocabulary and making sure it’s got a capital letter or whatever. But I mean I guess from their perspective obviously if we tell them to do that, they will hopefully remember but actually from their perspective they’re not necessarily writing a sentence they are just answering a question which is what word would go here what adjective etc. I don’t think that necessarily achieves anything in remember as cloud. I feel like it could have question I guess if that’s the right term.

**Like it contaminates it.**

Yeah. You’re trying to get one piece of information but because actually they put another barrier in actually stops really understanding, will get stops getting the information that you was actually to get to do the talking understand adjectives for example.

**Okay I see.**

Yeah but actually what you found out is that well you can’t trust that page because actually some children will have lost 95% because they didn’t put a capital in the box even though it’s not in actually within the sentence. Does that make sense?

**It does make sense yeah. And it’s interesting you say that because it’s very similar to what some of the other teachers that I’ve been speaking to have been talking about as well. Since the tests have been introduced then have, they had an impact at all on your teaching would you say on the teaching of grammar or the amount of content or time that you give to preparing students for that test?**

Yes massively. Initially when they first came in, I hadn’t really had any grammar education.

**Right.**

So in the first stages of the tests I had to make sure I learnt it all.

**Yeah sure that must have been quite hard because it’s quite a lot.**

Yeah there’s quite a lot there was a lot of learning as you teach which I mean I enjoyed it but I think it was probably quite a large increase in workload. And then the other issue is that being in year 6, where we actually finally had the pressure to make sure that they were ready for the test. We ended up teaching the entire grammar curriculum in a year.

**Wow okay.**

The school now has a long-term plan. It’s aiming to ensure that teachers further down the school teach a share of it, but I’m told I have to do the same this year really with year 5, starting with [5.29] very basics, sentence.

**Right okay.**

Because the children don’t know. And I do actually think a lot of this stuff’s is really useful to know because the children can understand what technically makes a sentence when you say that isn’t actually a sentence, they can actually then have some tools to go away and to understand what I mean. So I think the knowledge is really useful to an extent.

**I’m sensing a but!**

Things like the subjunctive mood, that feels like it’s purely for the test. And then I guess there’s also, there’s elements of vocab I think that’s just. A few years ago, there was a question about [06.21] stipulated that it had to be a true synonym despite the fact that actually there are other meanings of the word fear so the children would understand and actually perfectly valid in this day and age but.

**Yeah sure.**

Yeah that kind of, don’t know really how to describe it but it feels more of an ideological [6.47] than actually anything else.

**I know what you mean. And what kind of ideologies do you think the test is promoting. What kind of ideologies do you think it’s underpinned by then?**

I would guess largely the educationist, education ministers and what they experienced. The focus on correct grammar, correct ways of speaking, and I say the word correct with inverted commas there.

**Yeah sure.**

That’s my impression I don’t know to what extent it’s true. I do think though there is value in teaching grammar and teaching it discretely as well as part of a writing process.

**I’m hearing from the tone of your voice that you sound quite exasperated maybe with the tests and I’m getting a sense that you value the study of grammar there’s nothing wrong with that, but the way that it’s assessed is a little bit problematic. Is that accurate or?**

Yes. I don’t feel like the grammar test actually [07.49] I just don’t [07.51] very good job of getting accurate representation of what the children do. I mean our children do actually pretty well. And there’s also that isn’t there because that mass to practice over a year and get them to the test then I don’t know to what extent grammar’s really covered in secondary school but I don’t think it’s quite as rigorous as far as I’m aware or there isn’t the same expectation teaching grammar for the sake of grammar.

**Yeah, you’re right.**

If that doesn’t carry on and isn’t utilised a memory will fade so actually it was useless.

**I think you’re absolutely right. A lot of the secondary school teachers I’ve spoken to have talked about the fact that a lot of kids come up with explicit grammar knowledge and the secondary curriculum isn’t necessarily continuation of the primary. So a lot of secondary school teachers aren’t building upon that work that’s happened at primary school. So it’s very incongruent I think what’s happening across policy.**

Yeah and so it’s just that frustration of we’ve done. Sometimes we’ve put a lot of effort in and it does feel like it is just for the test.

**Sure. So sometimes it must feel that you’re teaching to the test, right?**

Yeah. Because the grammar teaching our school is separated in teaching grammar for writing and teaching grammar for the test.

**Oh, really so you have set lessons where you focus on the test.**

Well yeah so there’d be like the grammar which is required and is useful for the writing the children are doing then we need to teach this set of skills and explicit grammar knowledge that isn’t actually particularly useful for writing and certainly not at the age the children are. I might be going off at a tangent but now the way the writing’s assessed as well, still got writing and applied on the test and then we’ve also got the formal grammar test.

**In what way is applied grammar test then could you explain a bit more about that?**

The writing criteria, the kind of framework, the writing’s assessed against feels very much like a tick question of grammatical features rather than very much to do with purpose [10.17] mentioned.

**Right I see.**

And then you have loads and loads about using the full range of punctuation at key stage 2. One of the things is using your semicolons, with more complexities so actually using them to separate related causes.

**I see okay.**

[10.40] so.

**So do you find yourself talking about writing in a sort of paint by numbers tick box insert feature here approach?**

Yeah because I mean it’s hard not to because throughout the year, every year the children are assessed against maybe a slightly truncated version of what is the end of year 6 assessment criteria for writing. So what you get is a progression and a build up of complexity of grammatical terms and features. I find kids just sticking in fronted adverbials or modal verbs or whatever into their writing, just because they know that gets the marks.

**I see.**

It’s important to have you know frames of different types of cause in your writing if you wanted to you know sound interesting and have cohesion but [11.27] what’s the point of the grammar tests you know.

**Yeah. So if students are designing writing and it’s like oh, I’ve got to include at least 3 fronted adverbials or whatever in then it’s a little bit problematic isn’t it perhaps.**

Yeah and when we do a piece of writing, that is a fantastic piece of writing. Now it needs to go back and make sure you’re actually using a colon to introduce a list, and make sure actually yes that it follows a whole clause. That’s not really what makes good writing is it.

**Sure. So the grammar has a real powerful hold then over writing but also your teaching if.**

It feels that way. A lot of the conversations at moderation meetings we have either across our academy trust or with schools outside of it, it depends now to say oh have they used this grammatical feature properly. Obviously, there are conversations about kind of tone and everything but.

**It’s not the way that writers think is it not really.**

No. Because what you end up getting is children have a flair and voice but are very kind of good with the technical bits of grammar and not scoring [12.42] as well as the children who just manage to get it all in.

**That just seems.**

So you get children who aren’t as good at writing performing better.

**Just seems completely the wrong way round doesn’t it.**

Yeah completely.

**I mean Nick Gibb talks so much about how the tests have improved writing and literacy abilities but every teacher that I’ve spoken to just says well that’s absolutely nonsense.**

Well yeah because if you also at the same time change the way you assess writing and actually then you change it to reflect a face on the grammar and you think well of course it would improve it. Nick Gibb has absolutely no idea. He just seems to think education is about knowledge and strictness and artificial writing, madness.

**Yeah exactly.**

But that’s because they’ve moved the goalposts.

**Exactly. It’s not too difficult to work out what’s happening is it not.**

No, it’s quite transparent isn’t it.

**What’s fascinating to me is that. I mean this is one of the reasons why I’m doing the research is that there seems to be quite little research out there that’s really being critical of these kinds of things. And is the research round grammar or writing something that you’ve engaged with at all or something that you’ve seen evidence of or perhaps lack of evidence of?**

Not really. A lot of the kind of research that I’ve looked at has been kind of more in general terms of pedagogy and then obviously to an extent with maps but by and large learning is kind of learning. And whether or not the research shows that the teaching of grammar explicitly actually does have benefits I don’t know and in a way it’s irrelevant because we’ve no choice.

**Yeah. I mean I can tell you what the research says. The research says that it doesn’t have any impact upon writing if you’re teaching it explicitly, which is bizarre thinking about how those tests are designed, which tests decontextualise grammatical knowledge right.**

Yeah. Well in that case [14.43] probably not massively useful then.

**Yeah. Would you say that the tests and the change and curriculum reform has that had a kind of? Has that affected your I suppose your professional identity at all as a teacher in terms of what you see education for perhaps your enjoyment of teaching, your perception of what education is and curriculum etc?**

Not massively in all honesty. I find yeah, the kind of the grammar side [15.20] but I think there have been some positive changes. So maths curriculum I think is better.

**Okay that’s good to hear.**

I think there’s still too much in it. Because obviously we’re wanting to teach everything to depth but as a school, we’ve just basically yeah basically said well actually it’s better to move slowly and sacrifice coverage to make sure that they’ve got fundamentals and they’re actually well established. I do think there’s been a lot of positive changes around maths. Reading, I feel like the only change really is they’ve just made it a lot harder. I kind of feel that that might be the government’s way of raising standards is just basically just [16.10]

**Sure. Okay.**

I mean high expectations are good aren’t they. [16.18] It’s whether or not [16.20] to beat people with which they are.

**Of course.**

And we’ve had a real difficult time with the reading because out children almost exclusively have English as an additional language, which also has a knock-on effect with grammar as well.

**Of course, yeah.**

If they’re not speaking English at home and their language has quite different grammatical structures.

**Yeah definitely.**

Which is apparent in the way that they structure their speech, it’s giving them difficulty [16.51]

**And that was going. Sorry go ahead.**

Actually, I can’t remember what I was going to say now.

**My next question was kind of picking up on what you’ve just been saying about your students’ grammatical structures and I suppose one other thing about the curriculum and indeed the tests is that it really emphasises standard English quite exclusively.**

Yeah.

**How do you deal with that then if you’ve got a class where you’ve got students who (a) their 1st language isn’t English so they have different grammatical structures to standard English? You mentioned you’re in Bradford so you might have kids speaking local varieties etc. How do you navigate the difference between those 2 things in terms of your students and what the curriculum says about standard English?**

I think you have to acknowledge the way the children speak. And I think you have to explicitly address the fact that that is a way of speaking, that’s not the way that is assessed, and that isn’t the way you’d necessarily talk in professional circumstances. If you’re talking to your friends that’s fine because that’s how you talk with your friends. There’s nothing wrong with that. But then within lessons I guess it’s. The tests are another thing though. I hate the focus on standard English in the test questions, the stuff about formal language and correcting errors you know, just hate it. My pupils don’t speak like that and why should they? But to pass those tests I have to tell them how to speak and so you know. It can feel so fake. I think there’s a value in teaching standard English and saying this is what we are doing, and I think you can do that without devaluing other ways of speaking because the children we hope some of them will go on to work in hopefully quite professional context and actually being able to converse in a way that everyone else understands, because the standard English then is what people who speak English from other countries are aiming for. But the problem with the tests is that they don’t do that, they just want children speaking and writing exclusively in standard English.

**Yeah sure.**

So I guess it’s about having a shared language isn’t it.

**Sure.**

Because that’s a point of the standard English, this is my view anyway. But yeah it’s basically modelling and when they say something you don’t tell them off or anything you just model and say actually you know we say the word this way round well actually no we wouldn’t say basic or whatever when describing something when we’re writing a letter to somebody.

**Sure. So you talk about context and adapting language for context.**

Yeah so that’s what it’s about. There isn’t more value in one another it’s like usage isn’t it they’re tools.

**Sure. I suppose one problem with the tests is that they use quite evaluative ways of talking about language so they’ll use words like circle the correct form for example, and highlight the incorrect form. And do you have any thoughts at all on that way of thinking and talking about language in the way that the tests talk about language there?**

I guess it does give a value judgement doesn’t it. And if the way that you talk is labelled as incorrect. I guess it’s not idea. I would say from my experience of the pupils that isn’t actually something that they would pick up on.

**Okay right.**

But if that was something that was continuing, saying no speak correctly.

**Yeah sure.**

I guess it’s, it’s a way of beating people down isn’t it I guess.

**It’s good to hear that you’re sensitive about it though, and it’s interesting to hear that say the students haven’t picked up on it. Presumably in some schools there are situations where students have picked up on it because they’re likely teachers that are reinforcing those ideas about language in classroom discords.**

Yeah and I think it’s really easy just to say oh no we speak like this; this is the right way to speak.

**Sure.**

And I can be a bit of a stickler for you know proper English in the classroom but it’s about just making sure that it’s like well we’re going to aim to speak like this but also, it’s fine and in certain situations to be like this. I don’t think it’s hard to value standard English as it were without also labelling it as correct, I guess when you’re speaking about it. But I guess if you were speaking to children and they did question it say well it’s not incorrect in the same that you speak normally is incorrect it’s just this is a test on standard English and standard, so it’s in that context. I guess some people will view it and some people have very strong opinions about the way people talk and actually will view speaking certain ways as invalid.

**Sure. I’ve certainly spoken to a lot of teachers who think that unfortunately.**

Right.

**But you say you’re a stickler for language. So how do you. If a student speaks non standard language in the classroom then how normally do you react to that. Say one of your students says oh we was going to the cinema or whatever?**

Well I’d just make them talk in terms of, oh so you said was, where would we usually use was. So was is yeah you just have it in a technical sense, I guess.

**Okay that makes sense.**

Yeah, I don’t think there needs. Almost everything children do there doesn’t need to be a value judgement.

**Sure.**

They’re kids so.

**It’s really difficult to deal with I think because it’s a very tricky area.**

Yeah.

**It’s good to hear that you’re obviously quite sensitive about it.**

Well I try to think about. I mean I don’t always know where I stand with these things because. And it’s something I grapple with because I do see the value in having a standard English. But I do think we serve the children best if they’re able to use standard English alongside the way they would speak with their friends.

**Yeah sure.**

I speak very differently with my friends. I swear a lot more with my friends than if I was speaking in [23.08] context so really what we’re training the children do is to switch communication modes I guess I don’t know if that’s the correct term but that’s what we’re training them to do.

**Absolutely.**

And that’s all it’s about.

**Sure. Interesting. I think I’ve pretty much got to the end of my questions Xena so thanks so much for your time. Is there anything that you wanted to talk about, about the tests or curriculum change or pedagogy that you haven’t had the chance to do so and you wanted to speak about or indeed something that you would like to revisit or clarify at all?**

I don’t think so. I think you kind of got me into like the point where I start kind of like trying to work out exactly how I should answer your question.

**Yeah well, I’m glad the questions have made you think in that way I think that’s a good thing. If you have any further thoughts then feel free just to send me an email with some ideas, although I’m sure you’ve got lots of other things to think about and do.**

It’s been a really useful conversation for me because you’ve made me. The things I do that I’m happy with how I do but actually thinking about.

**Yeah sure.**

It hadn’t really occurred to me the use of correct and incorrect and how that could be construed, so that’s been really interesting for me.

**Great. Okay well I’m glad you found it useful. I’ll just remind you about the withdrawal policy so if you want to withdraw your data at any point that’s fine you just need to send me an email. And just a reminder that everything will be anonymised. If you’d like to see a transcript or any copies of academic publications when it gets to that point, I’ll send you an email and you’re very happy to see those things if you want to but no obligation to whatsoever.**

I do. I’m really interested to see how it all comes together.

**Great well I’ll make a note of that and when I’ve managed to write everything up, I’ll keep you in the loop and you’ll then have a chance to comment on things as well if you want to. But I think that’s everything so thanks so much again for giving up your Thursday evening. And it’s been really interesting and useful talking to you so thanks so much, lots to take away from that.**

Thank you.

**And yeah, any questions or anything then just send me an email.**

Will do thank you very much.

**Alright. Have a nice evening and take care. Bye-bye.**

Bye.