**Ravinda**

**Describing your current role and a little bit about your experience in terms of whether you taught the KS1 or 2 tests or both of them and how long you’ve been teaching, is that okay?**

Yes. I’ve been teaching about 20 years, more in Year 6 than anything else and I’ve been Year 6 ever since 2014 so since the new tests have come in.

**If we could think now a little bit about your perceptions of the tests. Could you just briefly describe your very general feeling about them and the way that they might have affected or changed what happens in your classroom in your school a little bit; your general perceptions of them.**

As a test in itself, it’s quite a simple one to teach to be honest because it’s quite a restricted body of knowledge and you can get everything you know to the KS2 grammar test on 2 sides of A4 and basically, it’s ‘learn it’. So from that point of view, it’s an easy test to prepare for; we have pretty good pass rate. It’s quite nice that it favours EAL kids almost more than native speakers because they’ve obviously learnt the grammar as a second language and know the terminology better. So from that point of view, it’s the test is an appropriate level, it’s do-able, it’s fine. The frustration of it is that it has absolutely zero impact on what they actually do in their writing and it takes time away from things that they actually need to be doing and the kids by now, we’re 4 or 5 years in now so they’ve worked out that there is no follow-through at KS3 at all so there is no curriculum for KS3, no teacher expects to know it; they’re passing this knowledge down to their younger brothers and sisters and it’s becoming increasingly hard to persuade them to care.

**Interesting. That makes a lot of sense and that very much echoes a lot of what other teachers that I’ve been talking to have said, especially in what you said about writing and the frustration that you mentioned there with writing.**

Yes, you have to double teach everything. I could teach [02:35] for them to pass in a test, that’s absolutely fine. I could teach them to use it in their writing but that’s two separate lessons neither of which have any impact on the other. Teaching it in context doesn’t make them do it in a test and teaching it in a test doesn’t make them use it in their writing so it doubles the workload basically.

**If the tests were to be abolished then, how would that change, if at all, the way that you teach grammar and writing? Would it have much of an effect?**

Yes, I would teach it in context rather than just. Now there are elements of it, I think the sentence grammar elements, the subject object verb stuff has been useful to do more explicitly because there’s always been a problem with kids basically just not knowing where to put a full stop because we haven’t had the language to talk about it so from that point of view, I would probably hold onto that bit because that’s the thing that I think is worth investing a bit of time in and we’ve tried to do it implicitly from the year dot and it hasn’t worked. In that sense, at least it gives me vocabulary to talk about it so I’d probably teach that and the rest to be honest, who cares if they know what a determiner is.

**I’m getting a sense that there’s some bits of terminology that you feel are useful like subjects and the sentence level stuff but some less so perhaps. Is that fair to say?**

Yes, and I definitely wouldn’t teach it the same way; I would teach it very contextualised.

**That’s interesting what you say about the difference between contextualised and decontextualized grammar then. I think I’m right in what you’re saying then that the tests have kind of forced if you will teachers into teaching decontextualized grammar.**

Yes.

**Even though that’s not necessarily something that you value or believe in, is that fair to say?**

Not sure. It comes in handy when you learn the second language, I suspect kids possibly finding Year 8 French a little easier then they work through it. I think it’s quite hard, lower down it seems incredibly abstract for some children between 3 and 4, they really struggle with adverbs and adjectives and things just because it’s such an abstract concept and I’m not sure really how much we’re gaining from it. It’s a lot of effort for not a lot of impact.

**That makes a lot of sense.**

Somewhere around 10 they kind of click in because I teach Year 5-6 class and you can see with Year 5, the first time it hits them, they’re like ‘Oh my God what is this?’ and then because they did get to do it around again in Year 6 because of the mixed class, by the time they get to Year 6, most of them are competently there and they’re like ‘Okay right. I can do this now.’

**Do you think that you teach more grammar now than you did before the introduction of the tests?**

Yes, just because we have to do it all double. I still do the contextualised because of they need it for their writing. The idea that you can write without grammar is ridiculous; you need modelling, you need explaining how things work; you need to have some [05:40] breaks and then we have to do it all again and the sort of question you might get in a test is dah dah dah. They’re really, really unsure. Other people have said this but the really, really funny ones are the ones that the DFE have literally made up the rules of grammar for the text like the exclamation rules specifically.

**I know what you mean, you’re right.**

There is no way to get round that apart from saying to the class ‘The government have made this rule up so they can test you on it.’ ‘Miss, what is it?’ ‘Please learn it and then you will never need to use it again’ and they look at you like you’re this weird alien and why shouldn’t they frankly?

**And that kind of goes onto my next question which is about a certain government minister, Mr Nick Gibb. Nick Gibb has kind of defended the tests on the ground that he thinks that they’re helping with writing and they’re improving writing.**

I’d like to know what his evidence base is for that.

**Yes, sure because you’re saying something quite different in that the grammar tests and the writing is something quite separate.**

Yes, and you’re going to have a knock-on correlation with no [06:45] whatsoever but I suspect writing marks will have gone up quite markedly since the introduction of the new tests simply because we can keep on editing them until they’re finished. And if somebody in the DFE is putting that together and going ‘Oh, we’re teaching grammar better, that’s why we have more people passing writing’ then they are following the wrong thing.

**Thank you. Thinking a bit more about the way that language is described in those tests and thinking specifically about standard English and the tests really quite emphasise standard English.**

Yes.

**Is that something that you have any thoughts about or have you noticed change at all since the introduction of the tests?**

I think it’s a good thing to do; I think one of the things we’re here to teach is give children access to, you shouldn’t have high prestige registers of language but as we have them, everybody should be able to use them. I think it’s tricky to test across such a wide range of dialects because quite often when you have the standard English questions, you’ll have 3 examples from very different; you’ll have a Yorkshire one and an Essex one and a Herefordshire one or something and my lot are great with the Essex ones because that’s where we are. I’ve usually drilled [08:04] until they know them but sometimes they’ll look at the ones from other places and just be like ‘What is this?’ and because they obviously know their own dialect but they don’t know somebody else’s dialect, they find that particularly when it’s standard English, it’s a foreign dialect to many of them. They don’t quite know whether if this is standard English funny dialect or is this another one? and it’s quite confusing. I’m not sure what you can do with that apart from regionalise the tests which would obviously be impractical but that’s a weakness of the question, I think.

**Of course. How do you feel about the language of those, the way that standard English is often described in the tests as the correct way of using language versus the incorrect way?**

I think they do quite well about just describing it as standard English. I hear a lot of teachers describing it like that but I’ve never seen anything in the tests that I would have a political disagreement about; they’re always quite clear about it being standard English versus other dialects and this is the one we use for these situations and I’ve no problem with that.

**Yes, sure. You mention that you’re in Essex and your children speak using local accents and perhaps using local dialects.**

Yes.

**Do you as a teacher or your wider school have a policy around the use of standard and non-standard English in the classroom then?**

We don’t particularly. I think as teachers we probably have a thing of modelling standard English as far as we can. We don’t really extend that to teaching assistants and I think that would be quite a difficult thing to do although there would be a good educational case to be made for doing so.

**So you’re quite happy for children in your class to use non-standard forms of the language?**

I’d expect them by Year 5, I will be teaching them to model it in standard English, that’s the way you might say it in the playground and that’s the way we say it at home; if we’re using standard English, this is how we say it and the modelling that sort of language and by Year 5/6 I’d expect them to know where to use which one.

**So you model standard English with the expectation that they then start to assimilate I guess might be the word towards the standard?**

Yes. The fact remains the kids who have Radio 4 in the background at home all the time do this naturally because they hear it all the time and the kids who don’t have to have it modelled although yet again their [10:27]. So we end up having to correct informal language and pick students up on that if they use it you know. We know it’s a bit of a problem but I guess we have to just comply.

**That makes a lot of sense. I’m just looking through my list of questions here and I think we’re getting towards the end. A little bit about the teaching of grammar if that’s okay and again, feel free, I think you might have touched on this earlier but you’ve mentioned a difference between decontextualized and contextualised grammar and it seems to me that what you’re saying is you do a lot of contextualised grammar throughout the year but you start to do some more decontextualized grammar teaching in preparation for those tests. Is that true, is that what you were saying earlier?**

These days I’m doing more of a lesson a week decontextualized; over a typical week you’d probably have a lesson with a focus on reading, a lesson with a focus on decontextualized grammar and then maybe 3 on whatever we’re writing at the moment so the 3 would be focusing on the contextualised in one form or another.

**What does a decontextualized grammar lesson look like in your classroom or in your school then?**

Revise what we did last time, try to keep all the knowledge ticking over because they forget the terminology so quickly; teach the next things, give examples of it, get them to model it on their whiteboards, use it in sentences. They’re gradually building in mixed practice over the year.

**Contextualised grammar you’re doing it with texts that you’re reading or writing, is that what you mean?**

Yes, so that might be finding examples of it in the text that we’re reading and examining how it also uses most things, like [12:11] hyphens, I do that with the [12:15] but because he’s got a load of tellings, if he uses hyphens all over the place in there so we’ll look at the passage, see how he’s doing it; try some of our own examples and then do our own writing using what we’ve learnt, that kind of thing.

**That sounds really nice.**

It’s great.

**It sounds brilliant. Would you say that your students enjoy using grammatical terminology in thinking and learning about grammar then?**

It depends on the child, I think. There are some children who just like the tests, especially the ones who are good at them and can score high and they enjoy the sense of competition. There’s a few children who do enjoy taking language apart and seeing patterns. For most of them, I think they think it’s quite irrelevant really. They like the effect where they can use the language to actually do something and move somebody and have an effect but when it’s just ‘Can I put a semi-colon in here?’ then it’s why would you care?

**It’s difficult for them to see the purpose of doing that surely or the point of it.**

Yes. And again, the way it’s assessed doesn’t help that because the writing Rubric for expected level is literally use the semi-colon somewhere, it doesn’t even have to be correct. It has to be correct for [13:29] but it doesn’t for expected.

**That’s interesting so you tend to get writing that must sound a bit artificial.**

Literally putting a semi-colon in some random place with no concept of why they’re doing it because it says on their tick sheet they ought to. I had an autistic kid in my class a couple of years ago who had an absolute melt-down on me and I completely agreed with them because he came up to me with this piece of writing and I’m like ‘Jo mate, you need to look at your [13:56] and see what you’re missing and put it in’ and he threw his paper down on the table and said ‘No Miss. I’m not going to. This is how I want it to be and it works’ and he stormed out the room. He was completely right; I could not argue with him in any way. He had thought about what he was doing, it was calculated, it was cleverly done and it worked and he was not putting a semi-colon in for me or anybody else and actually, fair point.

**Yes, definitely. That’s a really interesting thing that happened. How do you as a teacher who sounds like you’ve got a really good sense of how to teach writing and grammar well, how do you feel as a teacher when you’re kind of forced into those bits of teaching which creates bits of artificial writing then?**

It feels like a waste of time and it feels like it puts the kids off which to a degree it does.

**You’ve been teaching for 20 years. Is this a relatively new feeling would you say, this sense that?**

Yes. There’s a sense since the new tests came in and not just in grammar, in a number of areas but the grammar is the silliest really. I [15:06] kids from the tests and we kind of worked so hard on the other things to make the rest of school good and exciting and meaningful so that we are, children do [15:15] pointless but I don’t really see why I should have to do that.

**Yes, definitely, definitely. That’s so interesting. I’m just returning to my list of questions and I think we’re actually there but was there anything that you wanted to comment on at all that you haven’t had a chance to do so or anything that you want to revisit or clarify at all?**

Not really. As I say, it’s a fair test of the knowledge that we’re being asked to test on. I’m glad they sorted out things like commas going the wrong way and stuff like that because again that was destructive and there was no reason for it. They’re making little tweaks to make it more sensible but I think there’s still a major question about whether it’s making any impact in a real sense and whether it’s having a noticeable impact.

**That’s really nice summary so thank you so much. If it’s okay then, we’ll leave it there.**