

Variations in aspects of writing in 16+ English examinations between 1980 and 2004:

Vocabulary, Spelling, Punctuation, Sentence Structure, Non-Standard English

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Interest in standards of written English

This report describes an extension to the research published by Massey and Elliott (1996), which explored differences in written English in public examinations set in 1980, 1993 and 1994, by the inclusion of a further sample from an examination set in 2004. In 1980 the GCE examinations first introduced in 1951 were still in operation and 1993 and 1994 were, respectively, the final year the initial GCSE syllabuses introduced in 1988 were examined and the year of new examinations incorporating curricular changes reflecting the introduction of a National Curriculum for England. Hence these later years were landmarks in the evolution of what is taught and learned in our schools under the banner of English. The initial study sought to inform the debate on the longitudinal comparability of grading standards across this period by comparing features of writing produced by candidates awarded ostensibly similar grades in the different years. Whilst informative, the research could not reach definitive conclusions on this issue but it revealed substantial variations in aspects of writing reflecting changes in the curriculum and shifts in cultural values affecting how children wrote and what examiners valued. The evidence was displayed in a fashion inviting readers to apply their own value systems to questions of standards. Since 1994 social change has of course continued; arguably apace. The decade since then has seen a plethora of further policy changes introduced in an energetic political effort to drive up standards of achievement. Ten years on it seems timely to replicate the work to see if (and, if so, how) the process of change has continued. Because the 2004 evidence needs to be set in the same historical context this paper repeats many points made previously and we have borrowed freely from the earlier text where it seemed appropriate.

The original report attracted a great deal of press interest – making front page headlines in *The Times*; albeit on Easter Monday, a famously 'slow' news day. This fuelled an unusually well informed episode in the everlasting, if sporadic, debate about changing standards of literacy. For instance the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* reported that

'the report was interesting for the amount of precise information it produced about specific areas of language and also for its recognition that it is easy to oversimplify and that there are many different aspects of English that have competing values.'

TES Extra English 20/9/1996

Whilst the research was – broadly speaking – well received in both academic and popular circles, there were critics. For instance correspondence in *The Times* on Friday 12 April 1996 suggested that

'The suggestion in the study by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (report April 8) that 'alright' is an incorrect spelling as against 'all right' is a piece of pedantry long overdue for scrapping.'

Real issues arise here. Not everyone will agree with the criteria utilised in categorising 'errors' in written English. We readily acknowledge that some decisions in this respect are essentially arbitrary – as did Massey and Elliott's original report. Our language is not frozen but evolves continuously. At any point in time many current orthodoxies of usage will be under challenge. Nevertheless, in the interests of continuity, we have tried to remain consistent in our classifications in this extension to the research. But because language is an ever-evolving medium, one must frame the writing which forms our 'data' from 2004 in the context of its own time and we have recognised this in the course of our analyses. However, whilst spoken English can change rapidly, written English moves more slowly, and the bulk of the conventions against which we measure the sentence samples continue to be widely recognised. Likewise, although the original methodology has been extended by researchers free to select contemporary writing samples to their own designs, we have followed the same procedures as before because the data available from the now quite distant past limit the comparisons we can make.

There is no need here to rehearse the original report's account of the long term tendency for successive generations to complain that the grading standards applied in public examinations (or indeed standards of achievement in the more general sense) have declined since their day. Such speculation has continued to prosper throughout the last decade; not least because the introduction of a system of national tests in mathematics, science and English for all children in England at the ages of seven, eleven and fourteen has massively enhanced the volume of high stakes testing and, moreover, related it directly to government policy and targets. Results in these national tests have improved enormously since 1994 (DfEE, 2001 for instance) but this has not always been accepted as unquestionable evidence that government policy initiatives were bearing fruit. Press coverage following the lowering of test thresholds in 1999 suggested that standards were being eased and government found it necessary to commission an independent enquiry to confirm the probity of the testing system (Rose et al, 1999). Subsequently publication of research investigating the medium term longitudinal comparability of national test standards (notably Massey et al, 2003) generated considerable media interest (see Massey, 2005) and suggestions that government had used test results to overstate the success of their policies (Tymms, 2004), particularly in relation to performance in English at age eleven. This led to the issue of a public reprimand to the Department for Education and Science (DfES) by the Statistics Commission – a public watchdog (Statistics Commission, 2005). Assertions that standards are declining have clearly not yet gone out of fashion. What light can further investigation of aspects of examination candidates' writing shed on such matters?

It is important to consider the educational policy context as it affects our evidence.

Literacy has enjoyed a high profile since 1994 and has been promoted in schools through the introduction of a National Literacy Strategy. Research suggests it was unlikely that the 2004 GCSE cohort (the 'population' from whom our writing sample came) were fully exposed to the strategy's strictures regarding teaching. Many primary schools introduced the National Literacy Strategy from the bottom up, or at least did not implement it for this cohort (then in their final year of primary

education) in this first year of the National Literacy Strategy – 1998/9 – on the basis that it would get in the way of preparation for key stage 2 (KS2) national tests (Beverton and English, 2000). This notwithstanding, Beverton and English noted that, in contrast to previous years, grammar was being taught every day and that all teaching staff in the schools observed had a greater awareness of literacy as a subject in its own right. Frater (2000) in a report on best practice in highly performing schools noted that *'best practice is in a steady line of descent from the best practice of the past'* and that within schools with good practice the emphasis is on use of language rather than specifically on spelling and grammar. We should recognise that changes in emphasis and values such as these might contribute to improvements in teaching and learning.

KS2 English national test results (in 1999) for the 2004 16+ cohort continued the year on year improvement observed between 1996 and 2000 (57% reaching level 4 or better in 1996; 63% in 1997; 65% in 1998; 70% in 1999 and 75% in 2000 – since when they have reached a plateau). But these improved results should be treated with caution. Massey et al (2003) reported research commissioned by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) – the quasi-governmental body responsible for national tests – indicating that about half the rise in KS2 English results was false, being attributable to easing the standards applied by the tests themselves rather than improvements in achievement. This easing appeared to stem from the Reading element of the tests. Writing standards (with respect to both test calibration and to pupils' achievements) appeared to have changed little, if at all, so we have no sound evidence to suggest that this cohort's writing had improved, let alone attribute it to the introduction of the Primary Literacy Strategy.

Beverton (2003) found different levels of awareness in secondary schools in taking forward foundations laid by the NLS at primary level. She studied four secondary English departments selected within an LEA on the basis of the KS2 attainment of their intakes. Vastly differing practice was observed, ranging from one department with a highly structured approach to KS3 English which built on the primary strategy, to another with a very low level of awareness of the KS3 literacy strategy – where the head of department had grudgingly adopted some aspects under duress. If these observations are typical it is likely that candidates within our sample have received very different levels of structured literacy teaching based upon the National Literacy Strategy for secondary schools. We should also remember that this cohort entered secondary schools before the Strategy became a statutory requirement and that whilst it is unlikely to have been unaffected by changes in what schools were being asked to value it is clearly not appropriate to draw conclusions about the impact of the Strategy on the basis of examination performances at 16+ in 2004. For this we will need to wait for a few more years. However, it is likely that this cohort would be affected by changes in emphasis and values promoted via the strategy which may have influenced teaching beyond the statutory requirements.