Exploring non-standard English amongst teenagers

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Introduction

The main aim of this research is to measure the levels of awareness of non-standard English amongst GCSE level students.

There is a reasonable consensus on the conception of Standard English (SE) – a dialect or variety of English, (though with no local base). It is the most prestigious form of the language, its identifiable features residing in its grammar, vocabulary and orthography[1], but not in accent or pronunciation (Crystal, 1997, Trudgill, 1999). It is the variety of English used as the norm of communication in official communications, publications and broadcasting (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002). Paradoxically perhaps, as a spoken form, SE is probably a minority variety. Although it is widely understood, it is not widely used in spontaneous speech.

Non-standard English (NSE) is not just language which is merely different from SE, an accidental or one-off 'slip'; NSE implies a systemic feature of language which is shared with other speakers of the language but which diverges from the standard form. Nevertheless, an NSE utterance may have no marked semantic differential from the SE form. As Deborah Cameron (1995) points out, non-standard forms do not interfere with intelligibility – listeners are not bamboozled when decoding the intended meaning of Mick Jagger's 'I can't get no satisfaction'.

There is not a single NSE (in the way that there might be considered a single Standard English), but rather a number of forms, which include double negatives ('I can't find no money') and non-standard past simple or past participles (e.g. 'She brung me a drink').

The National Curriculum requires that pupils should be taught about differences between standard and non-standard English, and in particular, 'to be aware that different people make different choices about when standard English is appropriate' (DfEE, 2001). Certainly, the ethos of SE in the National Curriculum is intended to be descriptive, rather than prescriptive (Hudson, 2000), that English pupils should have a respect for their own and others' dialects and a sense of linguistic appropriacy – being able to shift their language usage in terms of register and form according to the communication situation. However, the expectation is that pupils will be able to write 'sustained standard English with the formality suited to reader and purpose' (Assessment Focus for Key Stage 3). There has, of course, been considerable and heated debate over the last two decades concerning the place of SE in the National Curriculum and how non-standard varieties or dialects should be treated (e.g. Cameron, 1995; Honey, 1997). This debate continues (e.g. QCA, 2005).

English is constantly evolving. Certainly, we are all familiar with changes in lexical usage as new words fill lexical gaps, find their way into usage and published dictionaries; slang terms become acceptable for formal usage. Change also takes place at the level of syntax[2]. Crystal illustrates this point by describing how the SE of today is not the SE of Jane Austen (Crystal, 1995). Differences include tense usage (*So, you are come at last*), irregular verbs (*so much was ate*), articles (*to be taken into the account*), prepositions (*she was small of her age*). It is an interesting point for prescriptivists to note, as such structures might now be considered as much non-standard as archaic.

There has been, however, less research into actual levels of usage of non-standard English. Hudson and Holmes (1995), investigating spoken English, found that about 30% of a selection of school children could speak for several minutes without using any NSE forms. Since this was produced in a rather formal school context it probably sets the upper limit (Hudson, 2000).

QCA (1999) found surprisingly little non-standard English in whole GCSE scripts, with 67% not displaying any non-standard forms.

Recent Cambridge Assessment research (Massey, Elliott and Johnson, 2005), using a cross-longitudinal design, identified a notable increase in non-standard usage in a sample of GCSE English scripts (stratified by grade) between 1980 and 2004, and in particular, between 1994 and 2004. The report also suggested that boys were more likely to use non-standard English forms than girls. Furthermore, as found in the QCA study, there was an indication that non-standard English usage was more prevalent amongst lower grades. The scope of this research, however, does not record the usage of the various NSE forms.

Lockwood (2006), in a cross-longitudinal study of 10–11 year-olds, found 'an overall decline in the children's awareness of standard English features' between 1999 and 2005, though this pattern was not uniform for all non-standard forms. Similar to Massey *et al*, he too found a gender difference, with males less likely than females to display awareness of NSE forms.

This project, through use of a questionnaire/assessment instrument, seeks to add to the empirical research on non-standard written English in young people at GCSE level. It attempts to add to the research in the following areas:

- which NSE forms are most and/or least recognised
- whether respondents could produce SE versions of the NSE forms
- whether respondents could spontaneously use the term non-standard English when asked to identify the type of English used in the assessment instrument
- perceptions of NSE
- whether characteristics of respondents (gender, school type, region) produce any differences in recognition and production of NSE

Method

To answer the above research questions an assessment instrument was devised in order to survey GCSE level students.

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1 The accepted system of writing a language, including spelling and punctuation.

2 The rules and principles that govern the sentence structure of a particular language.

The NSE Assessment Instrument

The main part of the assessment instrument used in this study was broadly based upon that of Michael Lockwood's (2006) task. It contained twelve sentences/lines, each of which contained one or more NSE forms (see Appendix B). The sentences deliberately contained standard or even quite basic vocabulary in order to reduce the likelihood of adding an irrelevant source of difficulty.

The NSE forms contained within the instrument are shown in Figure 1. Not all the 41 NSE forms identified in a literature review were included, for reasons of brevity or the difficulty posed in creating a stand-alone

sentence with an unequivocally NSE form. Finally, some NSE forms were deemed to be associated exclusively with particular dialects and these too were excluded.

Three NSE forms with origins in other 'Englishes' were included: 'gotten' – which is an American variant of the past participle of 'get'; noun phrase plus pronoun as subject ('that boy he went…'); and 'luggages', (treating an uncountable noun as countable), a common feature of second language English speakers in India, Singapore and Nigeria (Crystal, 1995). In all, 25 different NSE forms were tested on the assessment instrument.

Respondents were instructed 'neatly circle the word/s that don't sound right to you, then, underneath in the grey space, rewrite the sentence to make it a better one'. Thus, this provided both a test of recognition and production.

Respondents were also asked to describe the *type of English* used in these sentences. It was hoped that this would reveal something about the perceptions of NSE and whether or not respondents would be able to spontaneously produce the term 'non-standard English'.

There were other aspects of the research that will not be reported in this article for reasons of brevity. These included: (i) the measurement of students' perception of the varying appropriateness of NSE forms for communication contexts of varying formality; (ii) the administration of the same NSE assessment instrument to teachers and (iii) the analysis of the responses to a teachers' questionnaire about their attitudes towards teaching about SE and NSE in the classroom.

Sample

The sample consisted of 2098 students enrolled on English GCSE courses, of which 58.2% were male and 40.1% female (1.1% unrecorded). The students were from 26 schools, representing 23 different counties in England[3]. Although the original invited sample had been carefully constructed in order to represent the overall population in terms of geographic spread and centre type variation, the final sample that took part was more heavily weighted towards the independent sector (52.2% of respondents) than the general school population.

Materials

Each centre which had agreed to participate was sent multiple copies of the questionnaire (assessment instrument) so that there was one for each student enrolled on a GCSE English course (in either Year 10 or Year 11 in most cases). In addition, the contact teacher (usually the Head of Department) was also sent instructions to help them administer the questionnaire as well as standardised instructions to read out to the class. In brief, respondents were informed that the purpose of the research was to develop a national picture of English usage in England. They were instructed on how to complete the questionnaire and that there was not necessarily a single correct answer – they were asked to indicate what they thought was best or most appropriate.

The assessment instruments were completed in Spring Term 2007, or soon after the Easter holidays. In most cases, this represented the term immediately before the respondents completed their GCSE English course.

Figure 1: The Non-Standard English Assessment Instrument

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3 These were: North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, County Durham, Greater London, Bedfordshire, Essex, Suffolk, West Midlands, Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Shropshire, Merseyside, Tyne and Wear, Somerset, Devon, West Sussex, East Sussex, Wiltshire, Oxfordshire, Kent and Gloucestershire.

Analysis

The emphasis of this research was on particular forms of NSE and whether some forms were more readily recognised than others. There were multiple strands to the analysis:

- Rates of correct recognition for each NSE form.

- Rates of 'correct' versus 'incorrect' production for each NSE form.

- Overall 'scores' for recognition – each response was coded 0 (not recognised) or 1 (recognised) and totalled to give a score out of 25 for each candidate.

- Overall scores for production – each response was coded 0 (SE form not provided) or 1 (SE form provided) to give a score out of 25 for each candidate.

- Overall performance of the cohort on the assessment instrument including gender, school type and regional differences.

- Content analysis of responses to the question 'How would you describe the **type of English** used in the original sentences above'.

In order to reliably code whether the new version of the sentence was SE, three judges independently coded each response type during the course of an extensive content analysis. A discussion took place on all responses where there was not 100% agreement. In the majority of cases, this achieved a resolution. In about four cases where there was some disagreement, a fourth judge acted as the arbiter.

Results

Recognition and production rates

This analysis looked at which forms were most and least recognised, as well as the production rates – whether respondents could produce acceptable SE versions of the target NSE form (regardless of any other changes that might have been made which may have introduced a spelling error or even a non-target NSE form elsewhere in the sentence).

Table 1 shows a high correlation between NSE recognition and NSE 'correction', which provides some evidence of cross-validation of the two measures. However, perhaps counter to intuition, the rates of recognition (in all but one instance), are lower than that of correction. Possible reasons for this might include:

i. Respondents could not be bothered or did not realise they had to circle the relevant words even though they had recognised the presence of a non-standard form. There is some evidence for this as over 50% of respondents who did not correctly recognise a single NSE form had scores of over 20 in terms of correctly producing SE versions of the NSE forms.

ii. Respondents had either overlooked or had not consciously realised some of the NSE forms (because they did not interfere with comprehension), though naturally altered them at the point of production. This certainly seems likely in both items 8 and 19 where a quick read may not always register the missing –s or the missing preposition, though it is not a form the respondent would naturally produce.

Table 1: NSE forms according to most and least recognised and production rates of appropriate SE version of the target NSE form

| Item	NSE form	Example in NSE instrument	Recognition of target NSE form		Production of SE version of target NSE form	
			Rank	% recognised	Rank	% corrected
1	Noun phrase + pronoun	That girl she is tall	4	88.0	5	93.4
2	-est form with adjective > 2 syllables	The beautifulest	7	84.2	10	87.6
3	Double negative	I didn't break no vase	1	91.2	4	95.3
4	Use of additional preposition	Off of	23	56.6	21	67.8
5	There is + plural	There isn't any seats left	14	74.0	20	69.9
6	Could of/should of etc	We should of	19	69.2	18	77.7
7	Use of adjective as adverb	Come quick	25	41.9	25	44.8
8	Loss of preposition	out the window	20	65.3	14	81.9
9	Me and xx as compound subjects.	Me and my friend…	24	53.8	24	56.4
10	Third person singular + were	It were quite good	3	88.8	1	97.2
11	More with +er	More easier	17	71.3	16	80.7
12	Third person singular + don't	That one don't work	8	83.9	6	92.6
13	Past Participle instead of past simple	It wasn't me who done it	13	75.9	13	83.5
14	Them + plural noun	Them books	10	79.6	11	86.8
15	Plural subject + was	[Them]…books was already ripped	11	78.7	7	92.4
16	Non standard past tense	Tom had gotten cold	12	77.5	15	81.7
17	Non-standard past tense	His mum brung him	5	86.6	9	89.2
18	Lack of subject verb agreement	She walk…	2	89.1	2	96.7
19	Measure nouns without plural marker	…three mile	9	79.9	3	95.8
20	Past simple instead of past participle	Must have took	16	72.4	19	77.0
21	Use of 'what' as relative pronoun	…the trainers what I need	6	84.7	8	91.5
22	Was sat/was stood	She was stood	22	57.3	23	58.2
23	Negative plus negative adverb	..and couldn't hardly move	18	71.0	17	78.5
24	This + noun to indicate newly introduced thing	This man showed us	21	58.8	22	65.5
25	Plural uncountable noun	Luggages	15	73.7	13	83.9
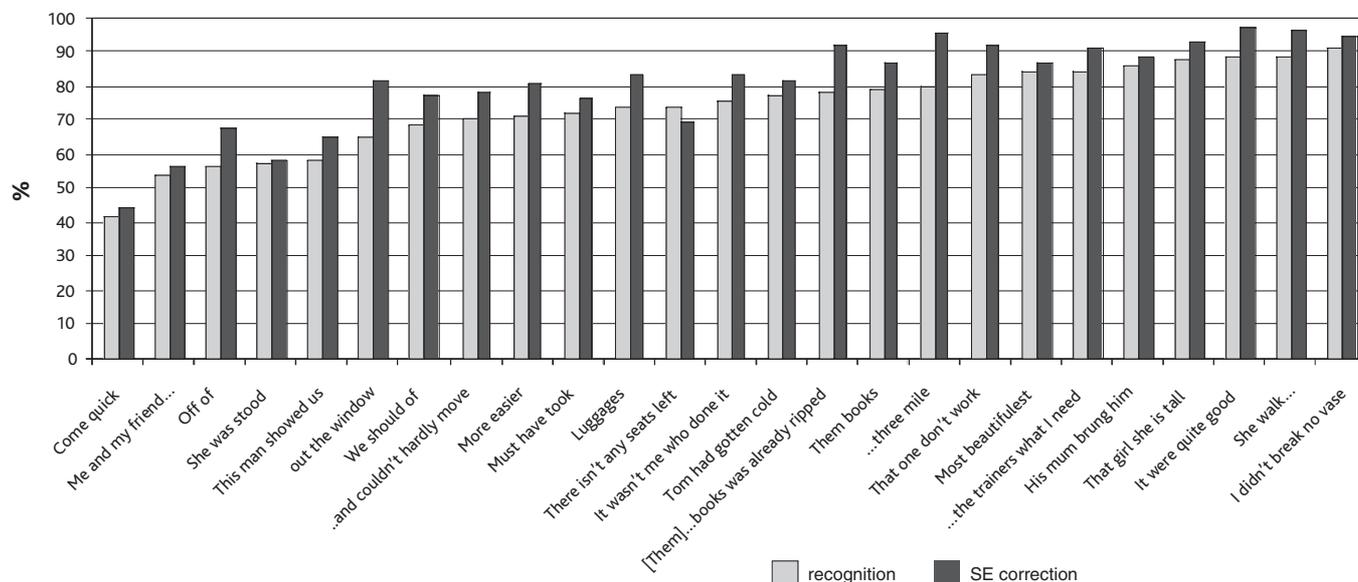
Figure 2: Recognition and production rates for each NSE form on the assessment instrument, arranged in ascending order according to SE production rates for NSE form

The only NSE form which bucked the trend and had higher recognition rate than production rate was 'there is' + plural noun ('There isn't any seats' – Item 5). In this case, some respondents who had circled the target NSE form struggled to produce SE versions.

Overall, the most commonly recognised NSE forms were the double negative (I didn't break no vase' – Item 3) the loss of inflection from 3rd person singular verb ('she walk' – Item 18) and subject-verb agreement ('It were quite good…' – Item 10).The most commonly successfully corrected forms also included 'she walk…' (item 18) and 'It were quite good…' (item 10) as well as 'three mile' (item 19). Certainly, recognition of double negatives and subject-verb agreement are flagged up in the National Curriculum as examples of non-standard English and this may explain the higher awareness in the respondents.

Non-standard forms which were least recognised and corrected were the use of adjective as adverb (omission of adverbial form -ly) as in 'Come quick' (Item 7) and the use of compound subjects 'Me and my friend' (Item 9). Interestingly, while some authors note that 'me and my friend' is 'unquestioningly non-standard' (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002), it is fairly standard in teenagers' conversation. 'She was stood' (item 22), 'This man..' (item 24) and 'off of' (item 4) all have less than 70% recognition and correction rates.

It is possible that these less well recognised NSE forms will find their way into SE, especially given the view that teenagers are linguistic innovators who bring about change in standard dialect (Kershwill and Cheshire, *in prep*).

Cohort profile

It is of some interest to see the distribution of respondents' scores on the questionnaire. It will give us some insight into how capable the cohort was overall at 'correcting' NSE forms. For the frequency graphs in Figure 3 the 'production' figures were used, rather than the recognition figures as these possibly represent possibly more sensitive outcomes.

The negatively skewed distribution (see Figure 3a) indicates that, overall, the cohort was quite capable at producing SE versions of target

NSE forms as well as recognising them (see mean and modal scores in Table 2).

The difference between males and females in the 'production' score is significant, with females scoring slightly higher, though it must be noted that a difference of 0.44 in the means is only equivalent to 0.11 in terms of effect size for production scores and that there is no difference for recognition scores.

The comparison between state and independent schools reveals a highly significant difference, both with large effect sizes of 1.01 and 0.92 for production and recognition scores respectively[4]. While the difference between state maintained and independent sectors is significant and in favour of the students in independent schools, it is not possible to determine the cause of this difference within this study (e.g. academic ability, educational experience etc.).

The difference between north and south is also significant. While references to the 'north-south divide' are common in geographical, political and economic discourse, there is no universally agreed, single and exact North-South dividing line. Rather, it moves according to various indicators (Green, 1988). In this research, the line was determined by appropriate groupings of the nine English 'NUTS 1' areas (Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics) as used by the Office of National Statistics. The dividing line runs roughly from the Severn Estuary to the Wash (Figure 4). This North-South dividing line is not dissimilar to the geographical line which divides upland from lowland England. Respondents were grouped according to the location of their centre[5]. In this research, respondents from the northern counties obtained a higher score on average. This is possibly counter intuitive: although Standard English is not associated with any specific local base or dialect, there is a common perception that it is something more associated with the south. The effect sizes are moderately small – 0.20 for both production and

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4 Effect size calculated using the version of Cohen's d where the denominator is the pooled standard deviation (Cohen, 1988). Effect size takes account of the magnitude of difference between the groups. Unlike significance tests, effect size is independent of sample size.

5 In the vast majority of cases, candidates' place of residence is likely to be in the same NUTS area (and therefore any larger regional grouping) as that of their school. However, in the case of independent schools, especially if they are prestigious, candidates may live much further afield.
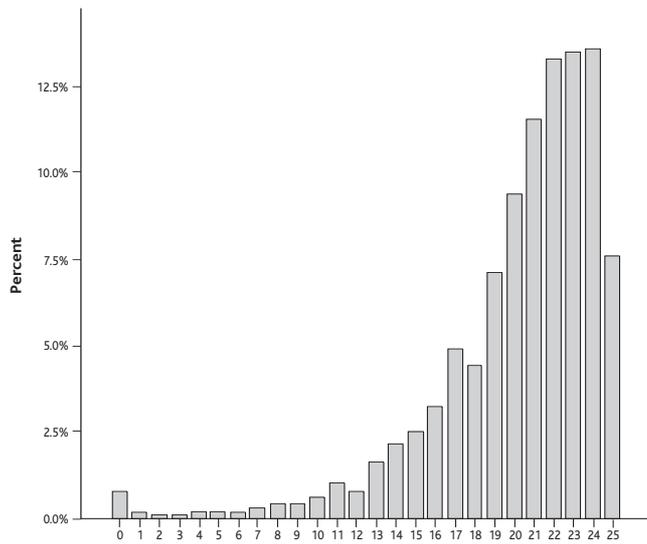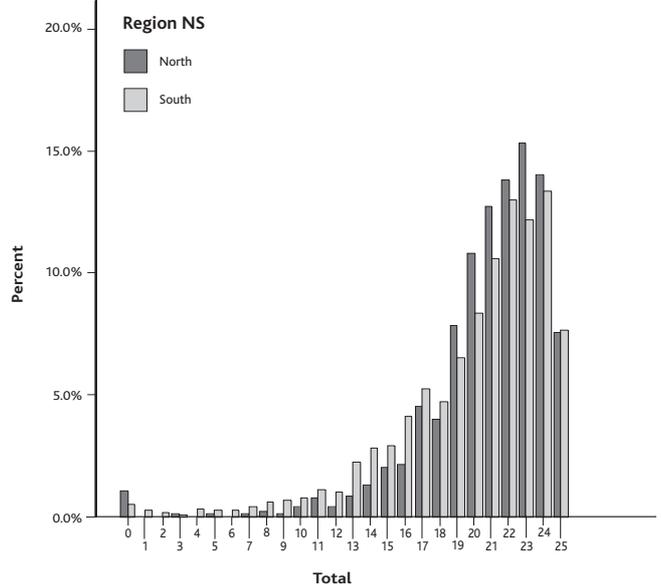
3a) Overall distribution of 'production' scores
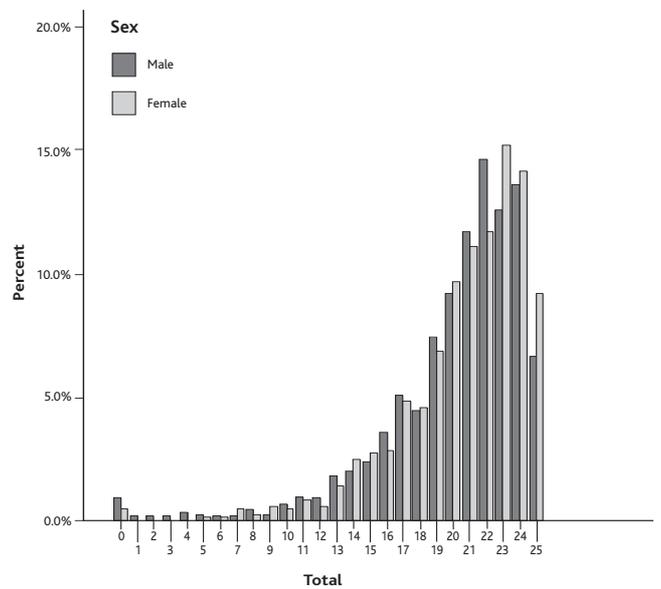
3b) Distribution of 'production' scores by gender
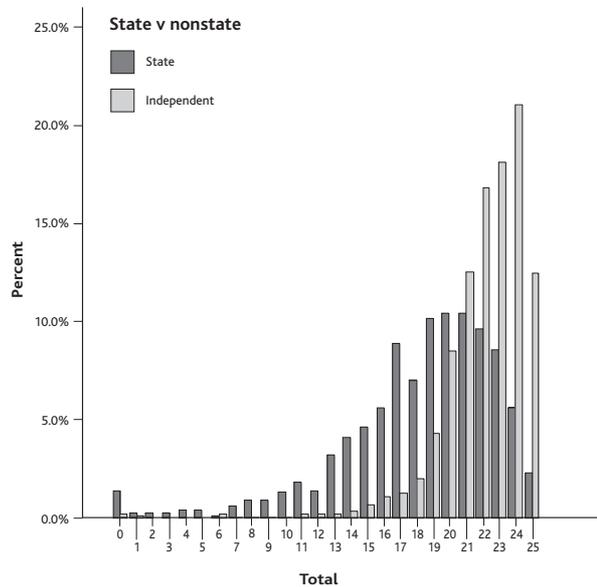
3c) Distribution of production scores by school type[6]

3d) Distribution of production scores by region (North/South)

Figure 3: Distribution of production scores on the assessment instrument for the whole cohort and with breakdowns for gender, school type and region

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for distribution of 'production' and 'recognition' scores on the assessment instrument

		Production scores					Recognition scores				
		Mean	s.d.	Median	Mode	Sig p =	Mean	s.d.	Median	Mode	Sig p =
	Overall	20.26	4.26	21	24		18.55	5.71	20	22	
sex	Male	20.13	4.38	21	22	0.020	18.61	5.65	20	22	ns
	Female	20.57	3.91	21	23		18.60	5.73	20	22	
school type	State	18.25	4.76	19	20 & 21	0.000	16.05	6.18	18	19	0.000
	Independent	22.11	2.65	23	24		20.85	4.07	22	22	
region	North	20.73	3.85	22	23	0.000	19.19	5.44	21	22	0.000
	South	19.89	4.53	21	24		18.05	5.88	20	22	

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6   For this bar chart, the state school category includes comprehensive and sixth form respondents.

4a) All respondents   4b) State school respondents only   4c) Independent school respondents only
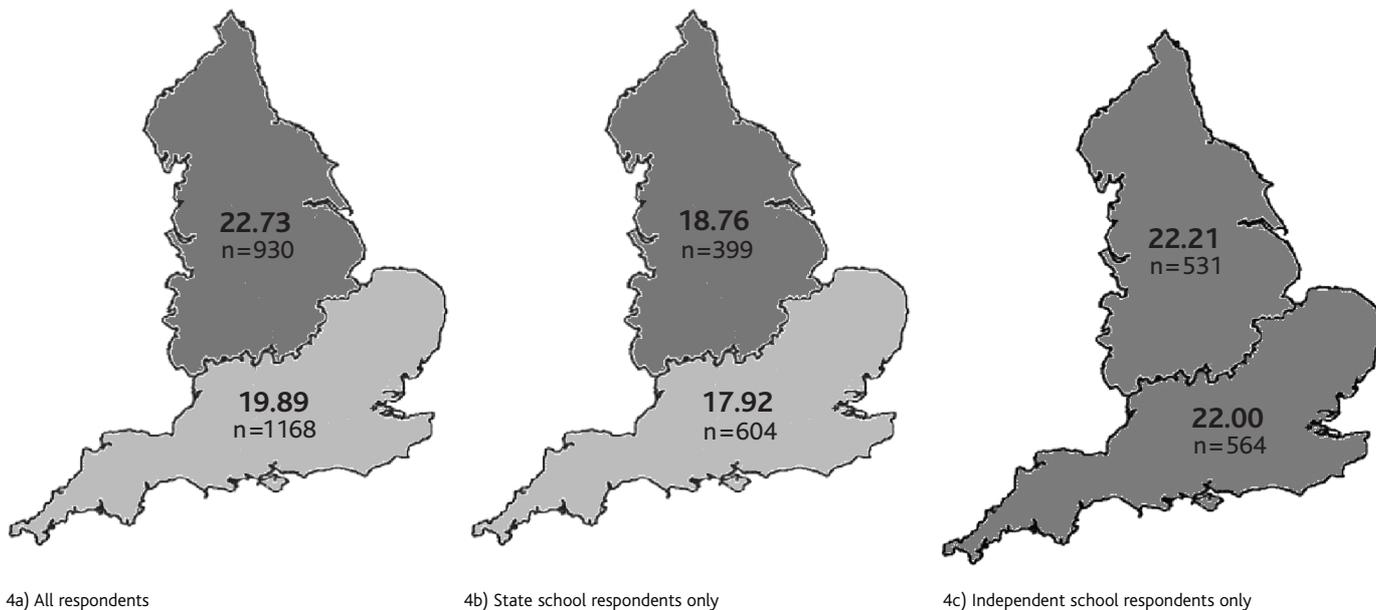
Figure 4: mean production scores by region – North, South

5a) All respondents   5b) State school respondents only   5c) Independent school respondents only
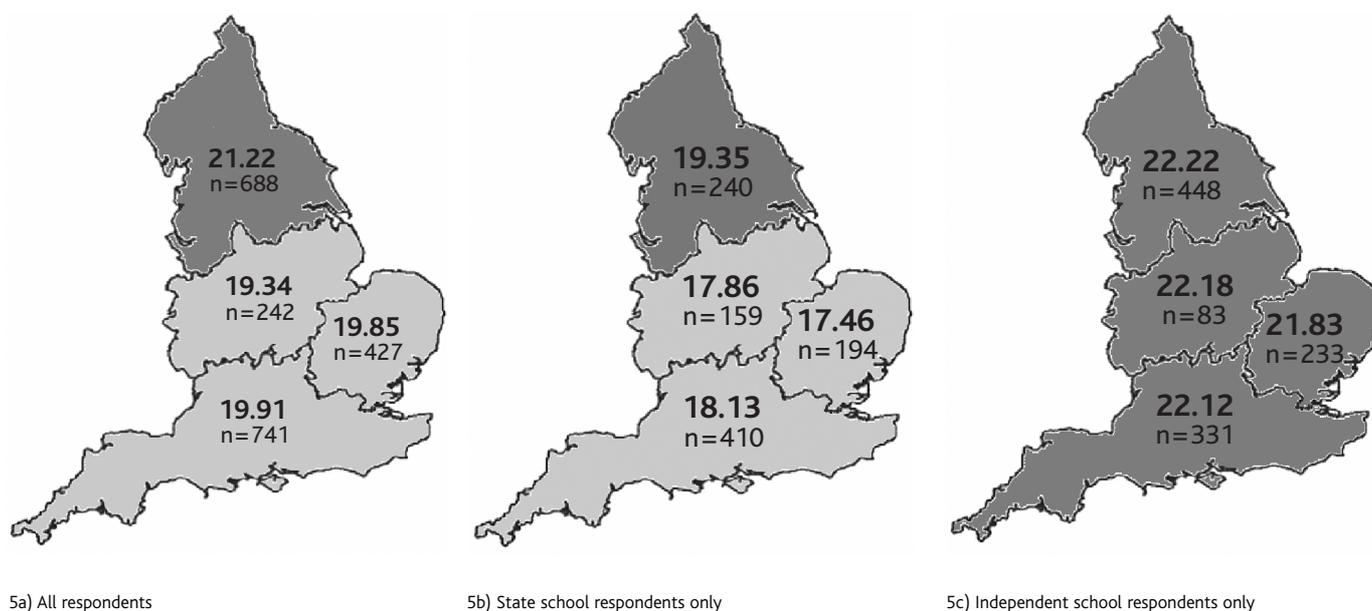
Figure 5: mean productions scores by four regions – North, Mid, East and South

recognition. In part, it might be thought that the better scores for the candidates from the North is because there is a disproportionate percentage of independent school candidates compared to the south. However, when the mean for north and south is calculated for independent schools and state schools separately (see Figure 4), we can see that there is almost no difference between north and south for independent school students, but a difference for state schools (p=0.000). This pattern is replicated also when region is looked at in terms of four areas – North, South, Mid and East – see Figure 5 – whereby we can see an overall significant difference between the mean production score (p=0.000), no difference for independent schools (p=0.307), but a significant difference for state schools (p=0.000). In some ways, it is unsurprising that we can see more variability for state school respondents by region, when reminded of the overall distributions of the two populations (see Figure 3c and Table 2).

Finally, regional differences in overall production scores were analysed by grouping respondents' centres according to NUTS areas (see Figure 6). It is worth noting that, when looking at these smaller regions, perhaps only 3 or 4 schools might be in any one region and it is unknown how representative the schools' intake and production of NSE might be of any specific region. Any differences between regions may be just an artefact of the data rather than any real effect.

For Figures 4 and 5, differences in the shading of areas indicates a statistically significant difference between the regions.

Perceptions of NSE

Respondents were asked to name the type of English in the sentences in the instrument. One aim of the National Curriculum for literacy is for students to be able to identify standard versus non-standard English, and that they should also see NSE as a dialect with equivalent status to SE,

Figure 6: Mean production score by region – NUTS areas
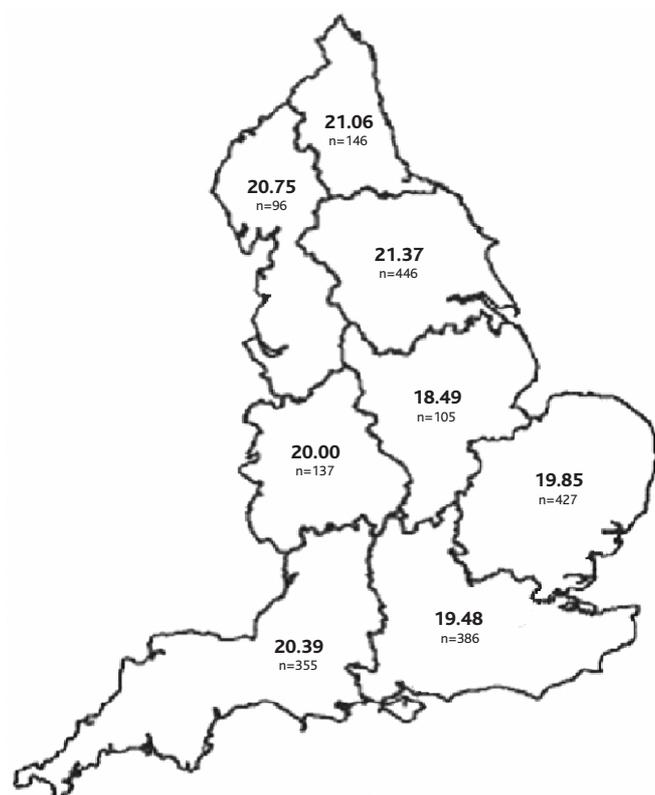
North East	Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, County Durham, Tees Valley	21.06
North West	Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Cheshire	20.75
Yorkshire and the Humber	North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, East Yorkshire, East Riding, North and North East Lincolnshire	21.37
East Midlands	Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Rutland and Northamptonshire	18.49
West Midlands	West Midlands, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire	20.00
East of England	Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Essex	19.85
London and the South East[7]	London all boroughs, Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hampshire, East and West Sussex, Surrey, Kent	19.48
South West	Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon, Cornwall.	20.39

though not appropriate for formal spoken or written English. It was hoped that this question would give some insight into perceptions of NSE.

Many respondents included more than a single codable response such as:

Respondent #962: *wrong/slang/improper English*

Respondent #1656: *Coloquel and like they speak in Eastenders! Informal, conversational*

Respondent #1390 *Common, peasantry, 'chav', Incorect, Heinous grammatical errors*

Respondent #1380 *Formal and third person*

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7 For this figure, the NUTS areas of South East and London were merged because of the low sample size in one area.

Responses to this question were coded according to the first codable unit in any response as any coding method to take account of combinations of descriptions involved in excess of 100 categories. Thus, the examples above would have been coded, in turn, as 'wrong', 'colloquial', 'common', 'formal'. Figure 7 indicates the frequencies of the first codable unit in any response.

Figure 7 shows that the four most common first responses (according to codable response) were 'slang', 'informal / casual', 'colloquial' and 'bad / poor'. A number of respondents identified the language as 'childlike' (or 'like a 5 year old') – and it is possible that for these respondents the salient features of the language were *not* the non-standard forms per se, but the simple sentence structure and vocabulary.

Overall the term non-standard English (or 'not standard English') was present (at any point) in just 2.8% of responses (n=59) (compared with 3.4% (n=72) for 'chavvy'). Thus, it seems that most of the respondents could not spontaneously deploy the term non-standard English.

There were some respondents who identified the type of English as a specific dialect (see Figure 8).

Interestingly, these identified dialects range (in addition to American) from north-east to south-west England, and in the majority of cases represent a geographic locality close to the respondent. In these cases, it is not always possible to know whether the respondent themselves identified with a specific dialect (their own in-group), or regarded it as belonging to an out-group.

Further analysis was required to discover whether respondents viewed NSE (regardless of whether they had used this term or not) as of equal status to SE as is the intention of the National Curriculum, or as a lower status form. This involved recoding the first codable units (as seen in Figure 7) into either 'neutral' or 'negative'. Thus, responses originally coded as 'colloquial', 'informal', 'casual', 'abbreviated', 'teen speak', 'everyday' were coded as neutral; while 'bad', 'poor', 'disgraceful', 'pikey', 'Pidgin' (NB: in every case, spelt like the bird), 'unintelligent' and so on, were coded as negative. The percentages are presented in Figure 9.

Overall, (see Figure 9a) respondents were more likely to present the NSE forms as negative/inferior than give a response indicating a more neutral stance[8]. There was little evidence of any gender difference in these perceptions, or, as one might have imagined, a state versus independent school difference. However, there was a difference in terms of region (North/South) which was significant (p=0.000[9]). From the graph (see Figure 9d) we can see that overall the respondents from the northern counties were less likely than the respondents from the southern counties to hold a negative view of NSE. This finding, together with higher production and recognition scores for northern respondents, may indicate that these respondents have more readily absorbed the values of the National Curriculum towards SE/NSE.

Other responses, which provide some insight into attitudes and understanding of language, include:

Respondent #2017: *Confused tenses (a.k.a. Russell Brand speak.) and plural adjectives and verbs incorrect. In a word 'childish.'*

Respondent #78: *I can describe this type of English like a type of simple language what we can use when we speak with friends.*

Respondent #1263: *COMMON/AGRICULTURAL*

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8 It is likely that if the coding were based upon the whole response, that the proportion of negative responses would increase.
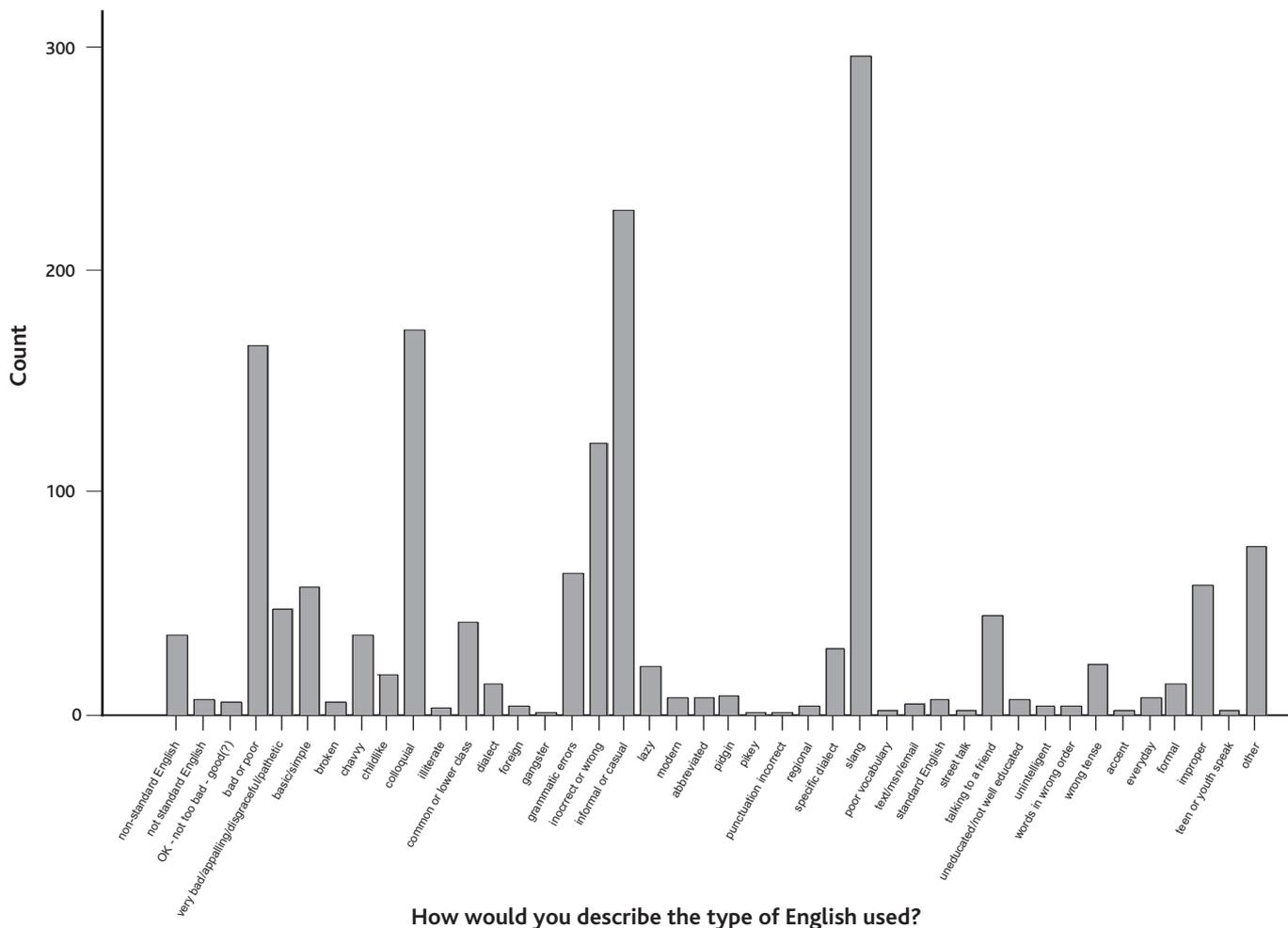
9 Determined using a Chi-Square test.

Figure 7: Frequency counts of first codable unit of responses to the question 'how would you describe the type of English used in the sentences above?'

Respondent #929: *It is understandable however there are many mistakes.*

Respondent #1456: *Not correct, yet understandible*

Respondent #1400: *Bristolian/chav*

Respondent #291: *incorrect, slang, use of double negatives*

Respondent #126: *disscorrectly ordered*

Respondent #1222: *Some of the original sentences had small mistakes and there were bit unproper.*

Respondent #301: *Standard english /poor grammer*

Respondent #447: *The original sentences have different dialects which make them incorrect*

Respondent #102: *Very informal, as you would talk to a friend or over an instant messaging programme (msn).*
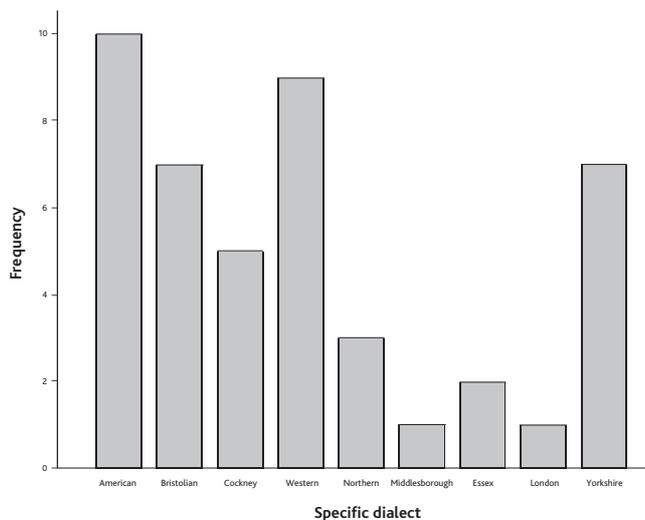
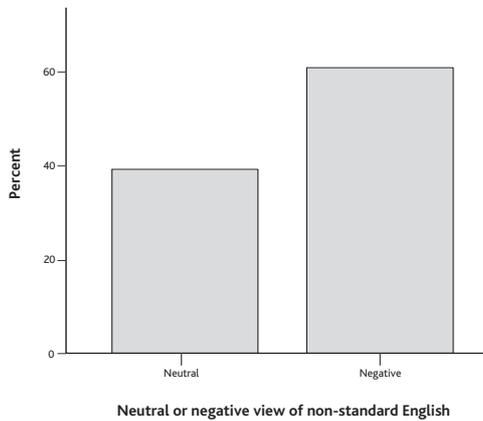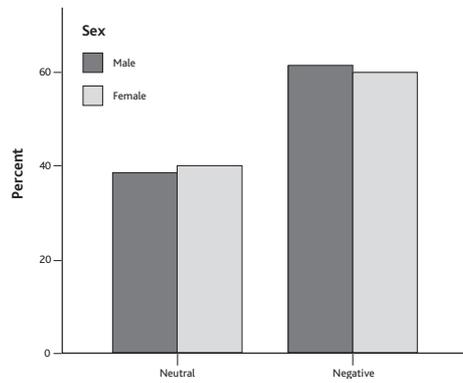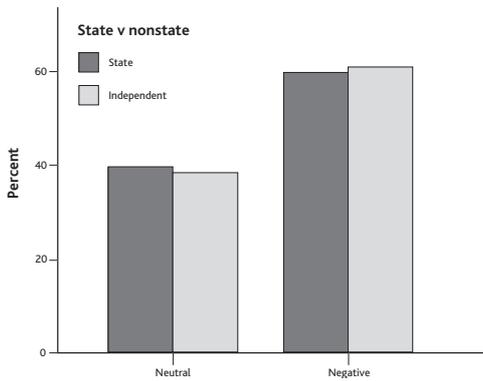Respondent #1898: *written in a Regional accent. Non standard english*

Figure 8: Frequency of identified specific dialects

Figure 9: Perception of NSE of respondents, as coded on the basis of the first codable unit of response to the question
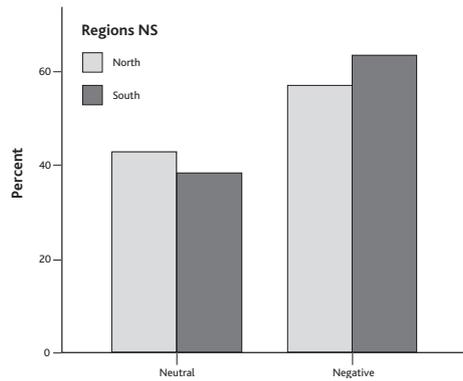
9a) Overall distribution of perception of NSE

9b) Distribution of perception of NSE by gender

9c) Distribution of perception of NSE by school type[10]

9d) Distribution of perception of NSE by region

Discussion

There are some interesting similarities and differences between this research and that of Michael Lockwood, though it must be remembered that Lockwood's study looked at a younger age group. Similarities include:

- Some gender difference, though not large, in awareness of NSE. Lockwood's own longitudinal survey points to a closing gender gap as a result of declining female awareness rather than increasing male awareness.

- High awareness of the various NSE forms which involve subject-verb agreement.

- Similar rates of identifying 'gotten' as NSE (77.5% in this study versus 70% in Lockwood's).

Some of the differences are worth pondering. One might speculate whether the differences are due to research design issues such as the choice of sentences, sample size, or age of the respondents. It is possible that children 'grow out of' some forms of NSE between the age bands of 10–11 and 14–16. These differences include:

- Adverbial use of adjective ('Come quick') was the least commonly recognised form in this survey, though one of the most commonly recognised in Lockwood's ('We done our work proper').

- In Lockwood's study, 'could of' was accepted by 92% or respondents as standard, averaged over the three sampling years. However, this study reports that only 20% of respondents failed to correct this form. This may suggest that this is one feature of English at which children improve with age.

- In Lockwood's study, 'Me and my dad' was accepted as SE by 86%, compared to 43.5% in this study, again, possibly indicative of awareness increasing with age.

Limitations

While this research had a very large sample, there were some limitations which included:

- The assessment instrument contained contrived sentences in order to try to produce clearly non-standard examples. Their contrived nature may not have been sufficiently convincing or life-like and may have confounded responses.

- Whilst this research shows that, for example, 'Come quick' (use of adjective as adverb) was the least commonly recognised and 'I didn't knock no vase' (double negative) as the most recognised, these results might not necessarily generalise to other examples of the same form such as 'I did it easy', 'speak proper' or 'I'm not never going back there again'. Different syntax and construction may alter the perception of a sentence or form within a sentence as non-standard.

- This research involves only written English, and did not tell us about the usage of these forms in spoken English.

- From this research alone, and without replication of this work in several years' time, it is not possible to know whether the usage and awareness of NSE is stable, increasing or decreasing.

10 For this bar chart, 'state school' includes both comprehensive and sixth form respondents.

Conclusions

In summary, this research indicates:

- On the whole, recognition rates of NSE and production rates of SE were quite high.
- Despite National Curriculum aspirations not to treat SE as the prestige version, the majority of respondents identified the language in the stimulus sentences as of an inferior type.
- There are significant differences in school types (independent versus state) in terms of correct production of SE versions of NSE forms.
- There is a small though significant difference between males and females in correct production of SE versions of NSE forms
- There is some evidence of regional differences in NSE production – in particular for a North-South divide.

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ISSUES IN QUESTION WRITING

The evolution of international History examinations: an analysis of History question papers for 16 year olds from 1858 to the present

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Background

The focus of this article is on international History examinations for 16 year olds from 1858 to the present day and examines the historical/cultural context for, and the setting of, these examinations in the medium of English. Specific reference points throughout this period have been taken and a linguistic analysis applied to the question papers. A variety of archive material has been used to show more general developmental changes to the curriculum throughout the period. The article examines the language used, the candidate base, the regional differences of the papers and the examiner expectations. To put these findings into context, other sources, including examination regulations, examiners' reports and subject committee papers have also been studied.

In 1858 when the Cambridge Local Examinations were introduced, History was a compulsory element of the Junior examination. Candidates had to pass in a whole range of subjects to gain a school leaving certificate and English history could not be avoided. 150 years later there is no doubt that school examinations for 16 year olds have undergone radical transformation and for History examinations to have remained unchanged would be unthinkable. The interest lies not in the fact that the examinations have changed but in the way they have changed. While the trend is inevitably towards a more familiar, contemporary style, this study also shows that the pace and particular directions of change have been of a less predictable nature.

Challenges and constraints

The aim of the study is to determine how History examinations have evolved. The selection of History question papers from different periods in time should be based on some assumption that comparisons across time are on a 'like for like' basis. However, this was not found to be the case. The question papers are drawn from different examinations: the Cambridge Junior Local Examination until the end of World War 1,