It ain’t what you say ...

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This essay takes as its starting-point the recent announcement that GCSE English, the high-stakes test taken by 16-year-olds in England, will no longer include the assessment of speaking and listening. It attempts to place this decision, and other recent policy interventions that will have an impact on how talk in the classroom is conceptualised and valued, in a longer history of schooling, attitudes to spoken English and the notion of a spoken standard. The essay then explores, through an account of an observed GCSE English lesson, something of the complexities involved in taking talk, and the assessment of talk, seriously.

**Keywords**: talk; speaking and listening; Standard English; assessment; identity; social relations

At the end of August 2013, Ofqual, the agency responsible for the oversight of public examinations in England, announced that it had decided that the marks awarded to GCSE students for “Speaking and Listening” would no longer contribute to their overall English grade, as they have done for the past twenty years. The decision has immediate effect: it will apply to those students who are halfway though their GCSE courses, students who have already participated in formal assessments of their oral work – assessments that they had undergone and their teachers had marked in the belief that they would contribute to the students’ final (high-stakes) GCSE English grade.

Ofqual’s rationale for this change was straightforward:

The change is being made to the qualifications in England to protect standards, as there is no workable way to ensure the skills are assessed consistently and fairly across all schools.

… Moderators do visit one-third of schools each year to advise them on their marking but it is not possible to design workable controls to ensure fairness. (Ofqual 2013b)

Four months earlier, Ofqual had announced that they were consulting on this proposal. In opening this up for consultation, however, Ofqual was also very clear that it was minded to do what it has in fact done:

We believe this is the most appropriate option to achieve our aims to increase confidence in controlled assessment results and to increase validity of GCSE English and English language results. Written exams are more resilient to pressures on schools from accountability measures and therefore we are proposing to adopt the highest weighting for the written papers (Ofqual 2013a, 8)

When is a consultation not a consultation? When the outcome has been decided in advance? When 90 per cent of respondents indicate that they disagree with what is being proposed (Ofqual 2013c), but the proposal is implemented regardless of the views that have been canvassed?

Ofqual’s use of the word ‘validity’ is an interesting one. A test is valid if it tests what it purports to test. So the claim that stripping out the oral element from the GCSE English exams will increase validity only makes sense if English is really to do with reading and writing. I have the feeling, though, that what Ofqual is actually bothered about here is not validity so much as reliability. Or, to put it another way, the problem is English teachers, who cannot be relied upon. That’s what the reference above to ‘accountability measures’ means. The claim is that, in a context where individual schools and individual teachers are judged on the basis of their pupils’ GCSE grades, the temptation to over-mark is too great to be resisted. Teachers, Ofqual tells us, cannot be trusted.

This would, in itself, be enough of a reason to be concerned about what Ofqual is doing. If there really is a problem with over-marking, as is alleged, Ofqual’s response is one that mistakes symptoms for causes. The problem is not one of unreliable teachers but of high-stakes testing as a central accountability mechanism – a point that was made, rather emphatically, in a recent report by the Washington-based Economic Policy Institute:

… educators can be incentivized by high-stakes testing to inflate test results. At the extreme, numerous cheating scandals have now raised questions about the validity of high-stakes student test scores. Without going that far, the now widespread practice of giving students intense preparation for state tests—often to the neglect of knowledge and skills that are important aspects of the curriculum but beyond what tests cover—has in many cases invalidated the tests as accurate measures of the broader domain of knowledge that the tests are supposed to measure. (Baker et al. 2010, 7)

But this is not just about whether teachers are capable of making professional judgements about the attainments of their students. Ofqual’s intervention is also an intervention in what English is as a school subject, and in what counts as work – what is valued – in school. Ofqual argues that this change won’t really make much difference, since ‘speaking and listening is a requirement of the National Curriculum Programme of Study for English’ (Ofqual 2013a: 8). The argument doesn’t quite work, though. Where high-stakes testing plays such a central role in school and teacher accountability measures, it is disingenuous to suggest that changing what is assessed will not have an impact on what happens in the classroom, on the aspects of a curriculum which will occupy the time and attention of pupils and their teachers.

The very first version of the National Curriculum emphasised the ‘central importance’ of speaking and listening to children’s development and the value of talk in all subjects. It instructed English departments in secondary schools to take responsibility for preparing pupils for the ‘purposes of spoken language in public life’ (DES/Welsh Office 1989, chapter 15). Such broad conceptions of the role of talk – and of its centrality to the curriculum as a whole – have, to a greater or lesser extent, informed each subsequent version of the English National Curriculum, that is until the most recent one, the one that is about to be imposed on us.[[2]](#endnote-1) This understanding of the importance of talk is undermined by Ofqual’s decision to marginalise the assessment of speaking and listening at GCSE.

Ofqual’s interference is part of a wider reshaping of English, its scope and its purposes. This is what the new draft programme of study for KS4 says:

**Spoken English**

Pupils should be taught to:

* speak confidently and effectively including through:
  + having opportunities to use Standard English in a range of formal and informal contexts
  + giving speeches and making presentations to argue, inform and entertain, using language for emotional appeal and impact, taking account of an audience and adjusting intonation, tone of voice and pace of delivery for effect
  + participating in formal debates and structured discussions on topics of interest and contested issues, organising points compellingly (DfE 2013b, 7: see also DfE 2013a, 87, where these words are echoed in relation to KS3).

What is most significant about this is what is missing. Where every earlier version of the National Curriculum emphasised listening as well as speaking, and hence tended to present talk as a collaborative activity, here the focus is unwaveringly on the speaker, in isolation from any social, interpersonal context. Likewise, where every earlier version sought to present a broad spectrum of contexts and purposes for talk, including drama and improvisation as well as the exploration and development of ideas, here the range has been narrowed to such an extent that what ‘Spoken English’ would appear to mean is nothing more than public speaking.

And then there is the fraught issue of Standard English, fetishised here even more than in earlier curricula, with the insistence that it is to be used in ‘informal’ as well as ‘formal’ contexts. In his memoir, Brian Cox, the architect of the first version of the English National Curriculum, records Margaret Thatcher’s single intervention in the drafting of the subject English as a statutorily enforceable entity:

The Report was sent to Mrs Thatcher’s office with summaries and references prepared by the civil servants at the Department of Education and Science. They naturally drew attention to our firm proposals for the teaching of spelling, punctuation, grammar and written and spoken Standard English. Mrs Thatcher agreed to allow the Report to be sent out for consultation, but asked for one alteration. In the attainment targets for Writing we had put: ‘Use Standard English, where appropriate’. The Prime Minister asked for ‘where appropriate’ to be deleted. I presume she feared – rightly, I suspect – that in some schools where children spoke in dialect the teachers might decide it was never appropriate. I rewrote the sentence as follows: ‘Use Standard English (except in contexts where non-standard forms are needed for literary purposes, e.g. in dialogue, in a story or play-script).’ This was accepted, and printed in the final version. To my surprise the civil servants informed me that the revision went back to the Prime Minister, and that she herself checked it was satisfactory. I was impressed by her meticulous attention to detail. (Cox1992, 257-8)

Even in relation to writing, the binary of Standard/non-standard is a pretty unhelpful one: it doesn’t begin to open up the territory explored by John Dixon in his recent historical survey of writing in English, of the struggle over register and forms of expression that has always had a class dimension (Dixon 2013a, 2013b). But, as Raymond Williams (1961/1965) argued half a century ago, there is fundamental difference between writing and speech in terms of what a standard form means and how it was produced, a difference that is elided in Cox’s account (above). Williams’ argument is that the development of a common (shared) written form was an enabling condition, whereas the much later arrival of a notion of a spoken standard was never anything other than an assertion of class distinction. In Williams’ history, the force behind the nineteenth-century rise of ‘Received Standard’ pronunciation was ‘the new cult of uniformity in the public schools’ (Williams 1961/1965: 247):

It was no longer one kind of English, or even a useful common dialect, but ‘correct English, ‘good English’, ‘pure English’, ‘standard English’. In its name, thousands of people have been capable of the vulgar insolence of telling other Englishmen that they do not know how to speak their own language. And as education was extended, under mainly middle-class direction, this attitude spread from being simply a class distinction to a point where it was possible to identify the making of these sounds with being educated, and thousands of teachers and learners, from poor homes, became ashamed of the speech of their fathers. (Williams 1961/1965, 247)

Twenty years ago, in the first wave of controversy around the National Curriculum, an interesting contribution to the debate about the place of a spoken standard English was made by John Marenbon, one of the most prominent of the cultural conservatives. Taking seriously Williams’ emphasis on the link between speech and identity, Marenbon argued that the inclusion of speaking and listening in the curriculum was an unwarranted intrusion by the state:

A person’s way of speaking – not just accent and tone, but grammar, syntax and choice of words – is intimately connected with his conception of himself, the sort of person he is, what his roots are, who his friends are, what his aspirations are. To adopt, or to acquiesce in growing into, certain manners of speech is a way to express or accept loyalty to a certain group and to distance himself from other groups. Governments should not, and cannot, break down this function of speech as self-definition. (Marenbon 1994, 6).

Marenbon’s argument might lead to a version of English similar to that which Ofqual is now endorsing – English as, in effect, exclusively focused on the written word – but Marenbon’s argument is, at least, founded on a recognition of, and respect for, difference, not on a rather shoddy assumption that teachers are not to be trusted. Whether identity or speech are necessarily quite as fixed as Marenbon suggests is a question worth considering in relation to the account of an observed lesson which occupies the second part of this essay.

Tony Crowley’s (2003) more recent exploration of the history of Standard English examines the lack of clarity in the meanings attached to Standard English in policy documents from the Bullock report (DES 1975) onwards, the slippage between Standard English as a particular written form, traceable to a single Middle English dialect, and an always ill-defined notion of a spoken standard:

‘Standard English’ refers to the universal written code of English, a specific spoken form of the language, or both at the same time since they are largely the same thing in any case. ‘Standard’ in the sense of the written code presumably means uniform or common. ‘Standard’ in the second sense cannot mean uniform or common. What then can it mean? (Crowley 2003, 256)[[3]](#endnote-2)

As Crowley notes, the spoken standard tends to be defined in one of two ways, both of which have an unfortunate circularity about them: either it is identified by the absence of non-standard features, or it is (as it was when the category first emerged in the nineteenth century) the speech of an educated person. Crowley’s observation that policy documents display ‘a remarkable confidence that what the term means is ‘commonsensically’ clear to everybody’ (2003: 258) might be applied to the appearance of Standard English in the current *Teachers’ Standards*:

A teacher must ... demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher’s specialist subject. (DfE 2012, 7)

Here again, there is ambiguity and circularity aplenty. What would the incorrect use of Standard English look like? Does the obligation to promote the correct use of the standard apply to written and oral language? Presumably so. And if standard spoken English is the language of an educated person, who better than a teacher to take responsibility for its promotion?

Crowley offers an alternative definition of a spoken standard. He asks us to imagine a scenario, a conversation between a newly-arrived asylum-seeker who has only recently started to acquire English and a native speaker of English, brought up in Britain:

The two have difficulty in understanding each other but by a willingness to attempt to understand, tolerance rather than insolent contempt, and a readiness to exploit the language resources available to them, they succeed in making sense to each other. They do not, either of them, use the language with the facility of an ‘educated’ speaker, say a professor of education, but they manage to communicate. That is what might be called ‘spoken Standard English’. It is ‘standard’ not in the sense of a level of excellence fixed in advance, but in the sense of making and having something in common. It is ‘standard’ in the sense of being able to share sense and meaning through common effort and participation. And, in case it be forgotten, ‘common’ is the etymological root of both ‘communication’ and ‘community’. Looked at in this way ‘standard spoken English’ is what each of us creates every time we use any of the various forms of English and make meaning with them. It is not a level of excellence to be achieved, nor the usage of a specific group, but simply what we commonly do when we speak and when we understand: when we work things out. (Crowley 2003, 266)

Informed by Crowley’s version of a spoken standard, what would the teacher’s responsibility to understand and promote ‘high standards of ... articulacy and the correct use of standard English’ (DfE 2012) look like? To begin to answer that question, I want to focus on a lesson I observed earlier this year.

This is a year 10 English lesson in an ethnically diverse girls’ state school in South London. The class is taught by Sarah Millar, a student on her second and final practicum as part of her PGCE, a pre-service teacher education course.[[4]](#endnote-3) The class has finished reading Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men.* The lesson is to prepare students for their speaking and listening assessment the following week. The nature of this assessment is a group discussion on an aspect of the novel that they have been reading. (At the time of the observed lesson, Sarah and her students believed that the forthcoming assessment would contribute towards their English GCSE grades. Now, of course, they know better.)

The lesson is focused on and structured around the assessment criteria by which the students’ performances in the group discussions will be judged. As students enter the room, they are presented with the learning objective – ‘To learn how to interact effectively in a group discussion’ – which is displayed on the first slide on the interactive whiteboard. Under the learning objective is a statement: ‘We need to work on developing our speaking and listening skills.’

At the start of the lesson, Sarah places the work in the context of their reading of the novel and of the forthcoming formal assessments. At this point, Patricia asks what Sarah means by ‘issues to do with the novel.’ Before Sarah can explain, Patricia volunteers the view that the novel is ‘very poorly written’ – she thinks that the class should have read something else. Other students are prompted to recall aspects of their exploration of the novel – the relationship between George and Lennie, the theme of dreams, and so on. Sarah uses these to address Patricia’s question – this is what she meant by ‘issues’, and emphasises that the students are all very knowledgeable – they will have things to say about the text.

Sarah focuses on the word ‘interact’ in the learning objective displayed on the board. One of the students, Leanne, provides a good explanation of what interact means – that it is about listening to other contributions and responding to them. And Sarah draws out the significance of ‘inter-’ and its etymology. Students are then presented with the assessment criteria in five bands of attainment. They are instructed to read the criteria and to put them in rank order – to identify which criteria apply to a Band 1 (the lowest) and so on up to Band 5 (the highest). They accomplish this sequencing task in pairs, while Sarah circulates among them. She brings the class back together and elicits from nominated individuals the reasons why they have identified particular bands as Band 1, and so on. Patricia expresses the anxiety that it may be hard to achieve a band 4 or 5.

Students are then invited to decide which of the five bands they can achieve at this stage in their development – ‘right now’ as the instructions on the slide have it. Once they have had time to think about this and decide where they would currently position themselves, Sarah takes some feedback from students – again, showing an interest in their thinking rather than in the number they have attached to themselves. She asks Marlene why she highlighted 3, 4 and 5. She explains that she doesn’t want to aim too high or too low. And then Sarah says that she has consulted with the class teacher and both of them have agreed that all of the students in the class should be aiming at band 5.

‘We can aim for band 5 but it doesn’t mean we are going to get it!’ says Patricia.

The next task is to focus attention on the three bullet points that form the criteria for band 5:

* Sustain concentrated listening, showing understanding of complex ideas through interrogating what is said
* Shape direction and content of talk, responding with flexibility to develop ideas and challenge assumptions
* Initiate, develop and sustain discussion through encouraging participation and interaction, resolving differences and achieving positive outcomes.

Sarah explains that she wants the students to rewrite these criteria with a particular readership in mind: they should make them intelligible to a Year 9 student (someone in the year below them). Patricia comments that this is not helpful, since she has high expectations of Year 9 students, so does not feel that they would either need or benefit from this condescension, this dumbing down.

What should become clear from the account of the lesson so far is that Patricia is both keen to contest the teacher’s script (Gutierrez et al. 1995) and really rather good at doing so. What makes her interventions particularly worthy of note is her ability to criticise the lesson from a position of ethical and aesthetic superiority: she can adopt the (adult) discourse of high expectations as well as of refined literary sensibility.

What of the content of the lesson and of Sarah’s approach to it? It is certainly a lesson that conforms to current notions of objective-led teaching, a lesson that is situated explicitly and unmistakably within schooling in the age of standards-based reforms. Thus the lesson is framed both by the learning objective displayed as students enter the room, the objective which they must copy into their exercise books and by the assessment criteria by which their subsequent performances will be judged. In comparison, Steinbeck’s novel occupies a much more shadowy place, alluded to as a common point of reference but certainly not salient in the business of the lesson.

Sarah’s management of the lesson is deft and very inclusive. She works hard to draw quieter students into activity, remains relentlessly positive, takes students’ questions seriously. Her approach to the assessment criteria is one that enables the students to explore them at least partly on their own terms, to wrestle with their meanings. So, for example, in taking feedback on the sequence of the band descriptors, Sarah makes space for students’ contributions. Different interpretations are explored collaboratively, so that there is a sense in which the difference, in the criteria, between ‘challenging’ and ‘interrogating’ others’ opinions can be teased out among the students, not subject to any premature *ex cathedra* judgement from teacher or exam board. Insofar as it is possible for the criteria to become owned by the students, Sarah’s approach achieves this. And she is prepared to problematise the criteria by asking if it is always possible to resolve differences of opinion in the way that the Band 5 descriptor envisages, while also suggesting the strategies that might be employed to work towards a resolution of such differences.

And then, drawing attention to the final bullet point in the band 5 descriptor, Patricia quotes it and asks, ‘What if you are not a very encouraging person?’

Sarah takes this seriously, reflecting it back to the class and asking why it might be useful to encourage participation. Mejgan says that you would be encouraging others to get a higher grade. Janais suggests that you might be boosting someone else’s confidence. ‘How does this help us in the discussion?’ Sarah asks. Other students respond, showing a developed awareness of the importance of listening. And Sarah suggests that we might learn something from others’ contributions.

What Sarah has done here, quite properly, is both to address Patricia’s question and to deflect it. What she (and other students) address is the value of listening and of encouraging others to participate in discussion: this has been presented as both instrumentally advantageous (it will get you a better grade) and developmentally/intellectually beneficial (you might learn something from other people). What has not been addressed is the ontological force of Patricia’s question, in that what her question assumes is that there are people (like Patricia?) who simply are not very encouraging. And, of course, if this is an ontological matter – that there simply are some such people, and Patricia might be one of them – then judging her for failing to do something (encourage others) that she is constitutionally incapable of would seem unfair. What is at stake here is the role of schooling in privileging some forms of language and suppressing others, and hence some forms of identity and affiliation, that Raymond Williams raised in his discussion of standard English.

Sarah returns to Patricia and her question. She has decided it might be worth it to get a good mark.

‘Are we allowed to pretend?’ asks another student.

‘It’s all about pretending,’ returns Patricia.

At this stage in the proceedings, I confess that I read Patricia’s intervention as nothing more than another in a series of impressively sophisticated attempts to unsettle Sarah and derail the lesson. I give Sarah credit for her patience and her readiness to address Patricia’s objection, all the more so when Sarah goes on to talk about herself – how she had always had (and shared) her own strongly-held opinions – and to suggest that she had learnt from listening to others as she had gradually learnt to listen to others.

‘Can I not just pretend like I care – I don’t really have to?’ asks Patricia.

And suddenly she sounds very vulnerable. Sarah reassures her. Patricia’s sudden – palpable – vulnerability confirms my reading, above, about what is at stake here for Patricia – though it also forces me to reconsider her motives, where she is speaking from, as it were. It might also be taken as evidence in support of Marenbon’s (1994) argument, to which I referred earlier, about the deep ties between language and the sense of self. What bothers Patricia might be seen as a threat to her sense of self posed by the assessment criteria. For her, ‘being encouraging’ is no simple matter, and certainly not an unproblematic goal at which she should aim: implicated in the assessment criterion is a way of being in the world, a way that might be straightforward for those already signed up to the liberal middle-class values that are encoded in ‘being encouraging’ but is a direct challenge to Patricia’s sense of herself and her agency in the construction and contestation of social relations. The route that she, with a little help, has found round this problem – that she may not *be* an encouraging sort of person but she can *pretend to be* one for the purposes of this task – is a very, very useful one: it enables Patricia (and other students) to play with other identities, other ways of being in the world and other ways of speaking (and listening).

This is a lesson in which talk is taken seriously, not just because it has instrumental benefits (or so the students thought) but because it is through talk that relationships and identities are made and contested. Students are learning how to interact in a group discussion – as promised in the learning objective displayed at the start of the lesson – by interacting in a series of group discussions. There is nothing neat or cosy about this. Patricia is actively and imaginatively confrontational. The teacher’s authority is contested, and Sarah’s management of the lesson, of the inquiry into talk, is such that there is a space, albeit an uneasy one, for such contestation. And there is, I think, important learning going on – learning that is to do with assessment criteria and the performance of a speaking and listening task but also, most conspicuously in Patricia’s case, to do with the liberating power of work in role, to do with learning about the possibilities of pretence. In Sarah’s class, there is a recognition that what is involved in learning to ‘speak confidently and effectively’ (DfE 2013b: 7) is rather more complex than mere ‘articulacy’ or the promotion of ‘the correct use of standard English’ (DfE 2012: 7). There is, in this class, evidence of what Crowley’s (2003) version of standard English might look like: this is a place where ‘what we commonly do when we speak and when we understand’ is a process of working things out together (though it is a process that is anything but simple). Will such close attention be paid to these aspects of English now that Ofqual has decided to uncouple the speaking and listening assessment from the overall GCSE grade? Perhaps not.

Notes on contributor

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1. Email: j.yandell@ioe.ac.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The ‘Expert Panel’ report that was published as a precursor to the new curriculum also made a very strong argument for the importance of talk as a tool for learning across the curriculum (DfE 2011, chapter 9). Its recommendations on this matter would appear to have been disregarded. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. The idea that, even in writing, Standard English can be taken to represent a single, well-defined form is heavily contested. See, for example, Block and Cameron (2002), Brutt-Griffler and Collins (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. I am very grateful to Sarah Millar for allowing me to observe this lesson and for giving me permission to write about it here. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)