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## Assessing Primary Literacy through Grammar Tests

JOHN HODGSON

**ABSTRACT** Originally an editorial for *English in Education*, this short article summarises key issues in the imposition of a separate test for grammar, punctuation and spelling. It illustrates the poor foundations, lack of clarity and distortion of curriculum which invalidate the test.

There has been much concern about the new grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS) tests for primary school pupils. Parents, teachers, academics and other commentators claim that the tests are inappropriate for primary pupils and that these high-stakes assessments have a deleterious effect on teaching and learning.

Part of the problem lies in terminology. Children have to spot examples of grammatical constructions such as 'fronted adverbials'. This term has become notorious as it has not previously been used in grammatical descriptions and seems sometimes to apply to phrases that are essentially 'adjectival'. The deeper problem is that the label becomes more important than the underlying reality. It is obviously good to teach children the structures of language, particularly if such knowledge helps them to express themselves more accurately. But testing a knowledge of labels is very different from testing an understanding of language structures.

Such understanding requires a connection between children's everyday understanding of language and the grammar they have to grasp. Linguists such as Halliday have developed a functional approach to language that gives meaning to everyday interactions. However, GPS relies on 'ideal' forms of language that contradict everyday experience. The Oxford or 'serial' comma is outlawed when it is in fact common and correct usage. GPS requires that 'exclamations' must begin with 'How' or 'What' and include a finite verb – which is not the case in real language use. Terms like 'command' or 'exclamation', which have a social function, refer in GPS only to specific grammatical structures.

This context-free view of grammar implies that children's language is either right or wrong. Lord Bew's review of Key Stage 2 testing, assessment and accountability seized upon 'spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary' as elements of writing 'where there are clear "right" and "wrong" answers, which lend themselves to externally-marked testing' (Bew, 2011, p. 60). GPS performance thus becomes a key indicator of a school's success or failure – even though the view of language enshrined in the tests is so limited.

### **Reference**

Bew, P. (2011) *Independent Review of Key Stage 2 Testing, Assessment and Accountability*. London: Department for Education.

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**JOHN HODGSON** has taught and researched English studies in secondary and higher education in the UK and overseas. He currently edits the journal *English in Education*. Correspondence: [john.hodgson@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:john.hodgson@uwe.ac.uk)