

SAY WHAT?

Mr Gove wants to remove speaking and listening tests from GCSE English results. And **Phil Beadle**, for once, couldn't be happier...

In May 1981, my classmates and I queued outside the nurse's room in a South London comp and waited with a level of expectation that might best be described as 'less than feverish'. We'd been in a similar line twice before: the first time there were dropped trousers, cold hands, embarrassed coughing; the second, they stuck a bloody great needle in our arms to stop us from getting tuberculosis. This final visit was for something more benign, less important: a spoken English 'O' level. We sat in threes, chatted about some nonsense in front of an external examiner then, individually, engaged in a more intimate conversation about something equally forgettable with the same guy sporting the same sideburns and wearing the same paisley shirt. It all took about fifteen minutes. I was, and remain, certified a 'B' grade at Spoken English.

The Secretary of State for Education would have been just 14 at the time – about to start the same course that my classmates and I had recently finished. Thirty-two years have passed, and in those years the certification in English has gone from 'O' level to GCSE, but it seems that old fashions are becoming current again beneath this leadership. The speaking and listening element of the English Language GCSE is now, like the Spoken English exam of the 80s, to be an add-on extra as opposed to an intrinsic part of the grade.

And I, for one, am celebrating. Lest anyone is unaware of the distorting effect that speaking and listening assessments have had historically on the GCSE grades of young people in English in this country, I'll outline the debacle. Twenty percent of a student's grade has been a reflection of his or her achievement (or total lack of anything resembling the same) in speaking and listening. This is internally assessed, and the only evidence base for the grade awarded is written by the child's teacher. Could this possibly have been open to abuse? You betcha it could, and you betcha it has. As the only evidence to justify the grade is what the teacher has written, then that teacher can award whatever grade his or her, erm, integrity, permits. Consequently, we have students whose every utterance is populated with, "I was like, and she was like, and we was like," obtaining top grades in a subject at which they are completely and utterly useless. All this has been accompanied by the seesaw idiocy of teachers' consistent, nonsensical, self-justifying claim that, "Our kids are much better at speaking than writing."

No they are not! No one who has ever uttered this phrase can have given half a thought to the fact that if you are a fluent speaker of the language then this will generally cross over – if you are not struggling with dyslexia – into your written communication. Kids who can't write for toffee are generally less than competent with the spoken word; there is a very simple cause and effect at play here that too few teachers get near enough understanding.

What will be the impact of withdrawing speaking and listening's contribution to the results in a core subject, and consequently, on schools' places in the league tables? Well, those who game the most will suffer the most. The maths departments will get a break, as the

means through which many English departments have falsely bolstered their results will have been made to disappear. And at long last, without the aid of this illusory crutch, English teachers may have to concentrate on teaching their students the technical skills of writing. Mostly, though, it will have a substantial effect on the bottom line at the business end of the league tables.

But it's about time. As I hinted last issue, if you give teachers a chance to cheat without any real chance of them being caught, they will cheat – it is a rational response to an irrational situation. Now that at least one temptation to play the system has been removed, finally, maybe finally, kids will start to get the grades they genuinely deserve in English, and senior management will stop looking for miracle cures that merely plaster over an epidemic of poor teaching of writing, analysis and basic skills.

I thought it unlikely I'd ever write this phrase... but bang on, Mr. Gove.

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