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Teaching grammar and testing grammar in the English primary school: The impact on teachers and teaching of the grammar element of the statutory test in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) in England

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Teaching grammar and testing grammar in the English primary school

The impact on teachers and teaching of the grammar element

of the statutory test in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) in England

Which sentence is grammatically correct?

Tick **one**.

Robin was more braver than his brother. ☐

Robin was the bravest of him and his brother. ☐

Robin was braver than his brother. ☐

Robin was bravest than his brother. ☐

UKLA funded research carried out by

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Examples of grammar test questions in this report are taken from the 2014 SPaG test.

Main findings

In English primary schools, since the introduction of the statutory SPaG test:

- Time spent teaching decontextualized and contextualised grammar has increased significantly;

- Grammar is now taught explicitly and formally as a classroom literacy routine;

- The grammar test format influences teaching content and approaches;

- Teachers observe that pupils enjoy learning grammar and taking the test;

- Teachers disagree about the extent to which explicit grammar teaching and testing have a positive impact on pupils' language and literacy skills;

- Teachers feel more confident about teaching grammar.

Additional desk-based research indicates:

- Ethnic and linguistic minority pupils perform as well as, or better than, white and native English speaking pupils on the SPaG test;

- Pupil socioeconomic deprivation is the strongest indicator of low performance on SPaG;

- Socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils perform better on SPaG when they are learning in classrooms that are linguistically and ethnically diverse.

Contents

Write a **pronoun** that could replace the underlined words in the sentence below.

Each morning, the boy's mother would walk <u>the boy</u> to school.

_____

Introduction

> Circle the word that makes the most sense in each set of brackets.
>
> The two friends ate (since / before) leaving the house, (wherever / because)
>
> they were not allowed to eat in the library.

In the academic year 2012-2013, Year 6 primary school pupils sat the first of a new statutory test in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar ('SPaG') as part of their end of primary school assessments in English. SPaG replaces the externally marked statutory writing test (pupils' writing is now teacher-assessed in the school). Along with SPaG, primary schools in England have a new national curriculum with a grammar glossary and programmes of grammar study for each year of primary school.

The grammar element of SPaG is focused on small units of syntactic analysis and standard English forms. Questions test pupils' knowledge of standard English sentence constructions, definitions of grammar terms, and functions of word classes. Pupils tick boxes to identify word functions or terms, circle or underline to define words and phrases, draw a line to connect words or phrases and definitions, label words, and choose words to change or complete sentences. In some cases pupils are asked to choose words that make 'the most sense', as in the example above from the 2014 test, synthesising implicit or learned knowledge of standard English grammar (subordinating conjunctions), the meaning of English vocabulary and the nuances of English culture.

Pupils have 45 minutes to complete the test booklet for grammar, punctuation and vocabulary, which is worth 29 marks out of 70, or 41% of the total (the spelling test is given separately and is worth 41 marks/ 59%). Marks are not disaggregated, so it is not clear how well or poorly pupils perform on the grammar questions in the test. From 2016 the grammar, punctuation and vocabulary questions will be worth 50% of the total mark, and there will be a parallel statutory SPaG test for younger primary school pupils in Year 2, when they are age 6 or 7.

This UKLA funded research examines the impact on teachers and their teaching of the grammar element of the statutory SPaG test. The aim of the research has been to evaluate the nature and the extent of changes to the teaching of grammar and to wider literacy teaching since the introduction of SPaG. The research explores teachers' responses to teaching grammar to a statutory test format, and how teachers have implemented rapid curriculum change in their classrooms. We present the perspectives of teachers as they adjust to new English assessments and new expectations for children's language in the primary school. Our research explores issues of teacher knowledge, understanding, skill and enjoyment in relation to grammar, at their own level and for teaching pupils. In this research, teachers also discuss their observations of how pupils have responded to explicit grammar teaching and the grammar test.

Our research aims to give insights into the processes for teachers, at the 'chalk-face' in classrooms, of applying the requirements for teaching and testing grammar, some of the paradoxes involved and how teachers strive to make grammar accessible to children. The variety and contradiction of teachers' responses to grammar teaching and grammar testing were sometimes difficult to interpret and report. We have tried to keep a critical perspective whilst remaining sympathetic to teachers and the demands of their role.

As part of this research we accessed Department for Education data on pupils by gender, ethnicity, language and deprivation in relation to SPaG attainment in 2014, to examine SPaG attainment patterns nationally. Not all of the data were complete or consistent from all 150 Local Authorities in England. We examined SPaG attainment for groups of pupils in four anonymised Local Authorities (Castlehaven, Longcliffe, Narrowgate and Norchester), specifically in relation to pupils' ethnicity, languages, deprivation and special educational needs.

Teachers, TA, schools and Local Authorities are anonymous in this report. We thank all the participants for supporting this research, and we thank UKLA for funding this research.

Circle all **five** nouns in the sentence below.

When making the mask, Kate carefully cut the shape of eyes and a mouth.

Data collection

Which word describes **how** Danny studied the map?

Tick **one** box.

Danny took out his compass before studying the map carefully.

Data was collected throughout the academic year 2014-2015, as teachers were preparing pupils for the third SPaG test and as teachers became more familiar with the new national curriculum for England. Information was collected from:

- Teacher interviews in two local authorities (Teachers n=16, schools n = 8), these are the focus of the report;
- A national online survey for teaching staff (N=170), explicitly identified when included in the report;
- Grammar teaching resources and lesson planning formats used by teachers interviewed;
- A paper questionnaire to Teaching Assistants in one of the above local authorities (n=27);
- Analysis of SPaG attainment patterns nationally and in four local authorities different to the two above.

Interviews with teachers were semi structured and collegial. The teachers interviewed ranged in experience from 2 to 20 years, and all were White British. The group included three men, one head teacher, two deputy head teachers and one literacy coordinator. They had a variety of backgrounds and recent grammar training (Table 1). They were using a range of grammar resources for themselves and for pupils, and three published schemes were used by all the teachers interviewed (Table 2).

Interviews with teachers took place in eight schools. Two schools were in a rural area, and six schools were in urban areas (Table 3). In 2014 the largest school had 368 pupils on roll, and the smallest school had 130 pupils. School B had a high proportion of pupils with English as an Additional Language, and had just been graded as 'requires improvement' by the schools inspection service Ofsted. School D had a high proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (a deprivation indicator).

In addition, details about the 170 respondents to the online survey are provided in Table 4. UKLA made the survey available to its members, and it was publicised through the research team's professional and schools networks, emails to schools in three local authorities, and Open University websites.

The 27 teaching assistants who answered the paper questionnaire were from a cohort studying part time at a university for a work-based BA which confers qualified teacher status.

Table 1 Teachers interviewed

Teacher	Years teaching	Teaching Year Group/s	Grammar training 2013-2014	Other background
Teacher E	2	6	None	Retrained secondary school PE teacher.
Teacher J	3	6	SPaG test Espresso INSET	Maths specialist.
Teacher G	5	5/6	Professional association conference with David Crystal, Ronald Carter	Literacy coordinator. English language & literature A levels. English literature degree.
Teacher N	6	3	Staff meetings	Prior experience as literacy coordinator. English literature degree.
Teacher R	7	6	1 whole school INSET + INSET at other local primary school	Deputy head teacher.
Teacher M	7	5	3 day SPaG course	BA primary education.
Teacher H	7	6	2 in school twilight grammar sessions	English literature degree. Taught ESL in bilingual school in Portugal.
Teacher L	8	4	2 in school grammar INSETs Staff grammar audit	Psychology degree.
Teacher A	9	5/6	Local authority SPaG training	Upper KS2 coordinator. English literature degree.
Teacher C	10	6	Staff audit	Deputy head teacher. English language, literature and drama degree.
Teacher O	12	5/6	2 afternoon SPaG sessions	English GCSE. Maths coordinator.
Teacher W	14	5/6	3 grammar INSETS	Welsh and French A levels. English and RE at university
Teacher T	15	5	3 grammar INSETS	English degree.
Head Teacher P	15	6 PPA	Led whole staff training on SPaG, including teaching assistants	Head teacher
Teacher R	15	3/4/5	2 in school afternoon sessions	English literature A level
Teacher D	20	6	None	SPaG lead. Nursery PPA. Experienced Nursery teacher. Never taught grammar before introduction of SPaG.

Table 2 Grammar resources used by teachers interviewed

In the classroom all 16 teachers interviewed use	For their subject knowledge 16 teachers interviewed use	In the classroom 16 teachers interviewed use
CGP *Grammar, Punctuation and Spellings* books and *'Grammar SAT Buster'*	Collins Grammar Dictionary	VCOP starters re-versioned as SPaG starters
Rising Stars *'Skills Builders'* and Assessment Books	David Crystal *'Rediscovering Grammar'*	'Grammar for Writing' activities re-versioned for SPaG
Collins primary focus, English grammar, punctuation and spelling test revision and practice	Letts Key Stage 2 Success Revision Guide: Grammar, Punctuation & Spelling	Espresso grammar and punctuation (digital)
	Sue Palmer Grammar Skeletons	Schofield and Simms English Skills
	New National Curriculum grammar glossary	BBC Bitesize
	The knowledge of more experienced colleagues	Times Education Supplement resources
	The knowledge of friends or relatives	Own home-made resources
		Internet resources
		The ideas of more experienced colleagues

Table 3 Schools where teachers were interviewed

School	On roll	% EAL	% SEN	% FSM
A	368	47	19	17
B	345	75	15	33
C	325	61	7	19
D	236	67	21	60
E	230	58	4	11
F	230	79	4	3
G	175	5	11	14
H	130	3	6	4

Table 4: Online survey respondents

Respondents	Roles	Currently teaching	Teaching experience	SPaG experience	Grammar teaching experience	School achievement
170	42% Key Stage 2 teachers 27% Deputy Headteachers 7% Literacy Coordinators 7% Headteachers 7% Teaching Assistants 10% Others (SENCO, Key Stage Coordinator, Foundation/KS1 Teacher)	68% Year 6 20% Year 5/6	Average of 15 years teaching	75% helped pupils prepare for the SPaG test in the previous school year	87% taught grammar before 2012	55% reported their school to be above national average 2013 KS2 English SATs 30% reported their school to be within the 2013 national average 15% reported their school to be below the 2013 national average

A statutory test of grammar in the primary school: initial reactions

I was terrified of it …I had no idea what it was going to involve. (Teacher M)

In the sentence below, what is the word **walk**?

Joe crossed the road and continued his walk.

Tick **one**.

a preposition ☐

an adjective ☐

a verb ☐

a noun ☐

Primary school teachers generally have always taught grammar within the English literacy curriculum, but grammar was not a consistent or explicit focus. Teachers who were interviewed for this research said they had little preparation or guidance on what grammar to teach, or how it should be taught, to enable pupil achievement on the first SPaG test.

Quite daunting cos it was an unknown. (Teacher H)

Although we've taught grammar throughout the school it might not necessarily be in line with what's in the grammar test. (Teacher A)

I've had to very much learn on the job, as I think a lot of other teachers have … in my first four years of teaching, grammar was not a focus at all (Teacher R)

Of the teachers interviewed, none, including those with many years of classroom experience, felt confident in the first year of the test. As Teacher R comments, teachers had to learn rapidly 'on the job' to become familiar with test content and requirements. They had to develop or revise grammar knowledge at their own level and what pupils needed to know. In some cases, Year 6 teachers were introducing formal grammar to pupils who had never had an explicit grammar lesson before.

There wasn't much grammar teaching being taught through the rest of the school so I felt like we were playing massive catch up. (Teacher D)

We were learning as fast as the children were. (Teacher W)

Teachers' lack of preparation and training were sources of anxiety. There was uncertainty, and even shame, as school leaders gave grammar audits and grammar tests to teaching staff and scheduled

classroom observations of grammar teaching. Even where teachers instinctively knew what was 'correct', it was not always easy to explain why to themselves or to pupils.

> *I didn't name names. I gave everyone a number…I did an analysis sheet, put it up in the staff room … it was quite shocking the amount of questions that everyone except one or two members of staff were getting wrong. One of our teachers came to me in tears: 'Oh, I've got an observation for teaching connectives. I don't want to teach it, I don't want to teach it' … people's confidence has been really, really knocked cos they feel a bit stupid. … The terminology definitely wasn't there….and the staff were really, really worried about it. (Teacher C)*

> *The use of 'I' and 'me' is incredibly hard… I was with some of my friends, four of whom were Oxbridge educated… They knew how to use it correctly but they couldn't explain it. (Teacher A)*

When this research took place in the academic year 2014-2015, teachers were continuing to adjust to the new regime for teaching and testing grammar. They were trying out a variety of resources and approaches, and discussing the ambiguities of grammar with colleagues and pupils. Teachers were sometimes struggling to balance the teaching of grammar rules with a holistic approach to language that accommodates non- standard forms and young children's development.

In the sections that follow, this report will look at each of the main findings listed on page 2. It will also report briefly on the responses of teaching assistants to the grammar element of the statutory test, and examine SPaG attainment patterns nationally and in local authorities for specific groups of pupils.

Grammar teaching increases significantly and is more explicit

We've got a huge, huge push on it. … it's just beating the drum every single day. (Teacher N)

> Complete the passage below with the correct **articles**.
>
> It was _____ enormous castle. It had a lake and _____ tall
>
> tower with _____ most amazing views of the garden.

As Table 5 shows, according to respondents answering the online survey, the statutory test in spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) has had an influence on 'your teaching of grammar'. On a 7 point scale (from 1 'not at all influenced' to 7 'extremely influenced'), 61% responded above the midpoint on and 23% responded at the midpoint. The majority of respondents reported increases in the amount of time 'teaching grammar by itself', as well as the amount of time 'teaching grammar and literacy together'. Most respondents thought there had been 'an overall change in the time spent teaching grammar', with 12% considering there to have been 'a very big change' in the overall amount of time teaching grammar, and nearly 15% considering there to have been a very big change in the time spent teaching grammar by itself..

TableTableTable

	(no change at all) 1	2	3	4	5	6	(a very big change) 7	Total
Your teaching of grammar?	3.70% 4	3.70% 4	8.33% 9	25.00% 27	27.78% 30	20.37% 22	11.11% 12	108
The overall amount of time spent teaching grammar	2.78% 3	2.78% 3	7.41% 8	12.04% 13	32.41% 35	30.56% 33	12.04% 13	108
The time spent teaching grammar by itself?	5.56% 6	3.70% 4	9.26% 10	7.41% 8	26.85% 29	32.41% 35	14.81% 16	108
The time spent teaching grammar and literacy together?	7.48% 8	9.35% 10	16.82% 18	19.63% 21	20.56% 22	18.69% 20	7.48% 8	107

In the online survey, respondents reported that preparations for the SPaG test usually began in the early autumn (65%; N=124; in cases where the number of respondents is less than the sample size, here and elsewhere the N of the respondents is given), only 3% began preparing pupils in the late spring (with the test taking place in May). Around half of the respondents to the online survey reported that they had intervention groups for the grammar element of the SPaG test (51%; N=129), that there were specific resources or extra help for children with EAL (42%; N=123), and specific resources or extra help for children with SEN (56%; N=125).

Preparation for the grammar element of SPaG takes multiple forms, from quick grammar 'starters' before literacy lessons (which could be a game, quiz or drill) and stand-alone explicit grammar lessons focusing on specific terms and their usage, to writing lessons where pupils are given specific grammar targets and writing lessons where pupils incorporate elements of grammar in specific genres – for instance, starting a sentence with a dependent clause in order to build suspense (see Table 6, below).

Activity	Online survey percentage of responses (n= 129)
Whole class exercises (whiteboard/blackboard quiz, set questions to answer, revising terms and definitions)	93
Grammar focus within writing lessons	88
2013 test questions	87
Oral work	80
Stand-alone grammar lessons	78
Differentiated group tasks	77
Grammar targets in writing genres	74
Grammar Starters (game, oral or written drill)	67
Worksheets	62
Homework booklets	52

Table 6: 'How do you prepare children for the grammar test?' (online survey)

In interviews, teachers reported that grammar is taught at least twice a week, and it is not unusual for Year Six pupils to have a grammar lesson every day. Grammar homework is given regularly. There are grammar 'booster' groups for more able and less able pupils. Teachers reported having to re-teach some grammar concepts and terms, to match the way these are presented in the test. In some cases teachers have had to correct their own misunderstandings and inaccuracies. In other instances, they had to explain to pupils how familiar words have different meanings as grammar terms.

> *We're teaching it every day … some days for an hour and some days as a twenty minute starter. …There's quite a lot of things that we're re-teaching … We were teaching something as a complex sentence and in real grammatical terms it wasn't …. We'd never taught children about articles… [except] of course, they write newspaper articles. (Teacher A)*

> *There is a grammar element to every English lesson. (Teacher L)*

> *In Years 5 and 6 at the start of every literacy lesson we have a grammar starter… something linked to the SPaG test. …every day [Year 6] have a similar question to a SPaG test question as a starter and then we spend between five and ten minutes just as an opener at the beginning of each lesson. In Year 6 they also have a standalone lesson once a week based on an area of grammar or punctuation… we also have intervention teacher who works with an 'Aim for Level 4' grammar group and an 'Aim for Level 5 and 6 grammar group' which each of those groups happens once a week as well. (Teacher R)*

In preparing pupils for the grammar element of the SPaG test, teachers who were interviewed described taking an approach that is similar to mental maths and phonics: repeated practise and exposure to terms and concepts in short, fun 'snappy' sessions, to enable pupils quickly and reflexively to recall the grammar they are taught. In planning for grammar, teachers consciously draw on their own and on pupils' prior experiences of phonics teaching and learning. There are strong similarities to the ways in which systematic synthetic phonics has been embedded in primary schools, where pupils are inducted into the use of specific linguistic terminology through games and activities. There is awareness amongst teachers that if grammar is to be tested at the end of primary school it must be learnt much earlier. Grammar is therefore rapidly being introduced to younger pupils, with related on-going teacher assessment.

> *We do a ten minute grammar starter every day because we've found it's a bit like the mental maths, unless you're revising that terminology all the time the children tend to forget. And we try to do it in a game format. So it could be like, you know, prefix bingo or, you know, that kind of thing. (Teacher W)*

> *If they [pupils] know what a trigraph and a digraph and a grapheme is, then I'm sure they can tell me what a proper noun is. (Teacher C)*

It's similar to how you teach phonics in Key Stage One. … the emphasis there is to come up with new and exciting ways… make it fun, make it snappy, make it memorable. (Teacher N)

It's no good waiting till they're Year 5 and Year 6 to try and get all the grammar in. … the vocabulary needs to be introduced much further down the school. So everybody is aware that they need to be making sure they're using the correct terminology rather than just saying 'Isn't this is a nice sentence' but 'This is actually a complex sentence and that's a conjunction' so children get to hear those words regularly. (Teacher O)

In interviews teachers described how they now talk to pupils about grammar in an explicit way, 'noticing' grammar orally and in texts, using meta language with pupils and encouraging pupils to use meta language.

I am a lot more explicit now… 'Oh a lovely proper noun, well done' or 'Oh that's a brilliant adjective but could you think of an even better one? Could you use a fronted adverbial?' (Teacher C)

Now it's more explicit, much more explicit…. you've got to make sure they definitely know it. …. Much more emphasis on it, much more revisiting, making sure they know the right terms, they can say the right terms, they can explain them. (Teacher L)

Outside of specific grammar lessons, teachers take opportunities spontaneously to focus on points of grammar in guided reading, shared and guided writing, and when pupils proof read their own writing to identify errors and make improvements or extensions. Teachers encourage pupils to notice grammar in other subject lessons, such as History, and in environmental print.

The 'wases' and the 'weres' and the things that you've taught and then you come across it in [a novel, poem or newspaper] … and go 'Oh look, there's a real life example of it'. (Teacher C)

We do guided reading every day in each class and some of these questions will be looking at the grammar side. (Teacher R)

We *do a lot of audience and purpose. Grammar's not just something that is discrete and labelling, it's about the purpose and why is it there? How is it enhancing that text type? (Teacher G)*

I also try to incorporate it into all of my creative writing lessons. So when I'm modelling writing I'll refer to the grammar structures that I'm using or link that to the SPaG. (Teacher H)

[I am] constantly referring to it within everyday teaching. (Teacher L)

In interviews teachers also reported changes to the ways in which they mark pupils' written work and give feedback, with increased emphasis on technical accuracy and setting additional targets for elements of grammar in writing.

> *It's actually more grammar targets than [the content of] writing. Creativity is one out of eight, say. Using subordinating and coordinating conjunctions is one. Vocabulary is one, and complex sentences. (Teacher M)*

Our research indicates that the teaching of grammar in primary schools in England has become routine, explicit and formalised. There is no longer an option, according to Teacher N, to *'pick and choose your moments'* to do grammar. Grammar is very much on the primary classroom timetable, consciously planned for, and continuously assessed. The statutory test has also increased teachers' awareness of opportunities to bring grammar to pupils' attention outside of English and literacy lessons.

The test drives teaching content and approaches

> *What's a preposition? What's an adverb? … if you can remember what the terms mean, you stand more of a chance [on the test]. (Teacher S)*

Write the correct label in each box.

| verb A | noun B | article C | adverb D |

The siren sounded loudly.

Our interviews with teachers indicate that the language and format of the test strongly influence the way grammar is regularly taught, in bite-size units where pupils are 'trained' to spot and identify word classes and sentence structures. Teachers make time for pupils to practise reading and answering the different types of questions on the test (circle, tick, label, fill in the blank). They have pupils practise the question types in grammar starters before lessons, worksheets and grammar games, and they refer to the test format in other lessons where there are opportunities for pupils to spot and name elements of grammar. Teachers observe that pupils who are able to quickly recall terms and definitions fare better on the test than pupils who are less skilled at memorisation.

> *We do look at a lot of texts and I say 'Where is this in it? Can you tell me where it is? … 'I want you to highlight where you've done it'. (Teacher M)*

> *We also pick things up as we're teaching, perhaps teaching writing or a topic. We refer back to the test: 'Oh, can you underline the adjective? Can you circle the noun? Or the subordinate clause? Let's turn this into a complex sentence.' (Teacher W)*

> *It's very much like the maths test, that you can teach them how to answer the test really. The questions follow a certain format and [they need to] read the question properly and they tick the right number of boxes. (Teacher O)*

According to Teacher M, '*It's very easy to train children to do well*' on the grammar test through regular drills and practise. Given that pupils must be trained to spot and identify grammar to undertake the test, Teacher G expressed disappointment that the test does not contain examples of real life texts for pupils to parse.

You're not going to get such meaningful kind of responses from the children if you're just underlining a noun in a sentence. I just felt like the [test] was lots and lots and lots of discrete tiny phrases, sentences, passages, rather than if we'd have had a text that the children could have unpicked. I think they would have enjoyed showing off those skills. (Teacher G)

The test format is further reflected in strategies teachers use to make units of grammar small and manageable, not giving pupils too many language choices which might invite ambiguity. As Teacher T put it, *'The smaller you try to make the concept you're trying to teach, the better they get it'*. Teachers try to make grammar concepts small enough for pupils to recall for the test, but big enough to be meaningful and provide a secure base for further learning, as this teacher's exchange with a member of the research team illustrates:

[Teacher J] My class are very good at telling you the job of [conjunctions] ... how 'but' and 'however' turn good news into bad news, bad news into good news…there's an understanding there.

[Research team] And do you think that with words like 'however' and 'fortunately' and 'despite', are they aware of how to use those properly?

[Teacher J] They haven't got a huge range to choose from cos we kind of narrowed it down to almost an essential … but that gives them a little platform to build on and to bring in all those other words that do a similar job or to explore the differences.

On a macro level, the grammar test measures pupils' knowledge of standard English. The language of the test tasks (e.g. 'Complete the sentence correctly', 'Which sentence is grammatically correct?') has led teachers and pupils, perhaps inevitably, to reconstruct standard English as 'correct', 'proper' and 'right', with nonstandard forms labelled with the opposite adjectives.

Before [SPaG] I think maybe we'd have been a little bit kinder to the children, saying 'Yes, I can see what you're trying to say'. Now you say to them 'No, that's wrong'. (Teacher T)

[A lot of my children say] "Was you?" So for them speaking standard English is really hard. They can't hear it when they say it. And it's also very sensitive because to tell them they're speaking like their parents, and that's incorrect, is hard. (Teacher A)

In interviews, teachers discussed the social capital of being able to use standard English fluently. Some teachers felt strongly that control of standard English grammar would lead to improved life chances and educational opportunities for pupils.

Our school serves a very diverse community, seventy percent of which come from social housing and have very many difficulties and challenges in their life and I think it evens out that playing field somewhat. (Teacher D)

We've got over seventy per cent of children with English as a second language and so the grammar's really important. (Teacher T)

If children can't speak clearly, if they can't communicate, they will struggle… I know it's not the be all and end all, but I think it's really important that a child can recognise that actually there is a correct way to do something. And I think if they do it early enough they'll find communication when they're older a lot easier. (Teacher L)

It's frustrating when some things don't sink in or they don't recognise errors…. What I like is when children realise actually, they twig, that actually 'Oh that's the correct way to do this and that's not right.' (Teacher R)

As Teacher L says, grammar is *'not the be all and end all, but…'* in their desire for pupils to achieve well on the test, teachers may feel compelled to tell pupils their speaking or their writing is 'wrong'. Some comments from teachers appear to conflate standard English with clarity of speaking, communication skills and positive behaviour for learning. Teachers like R are frustrated when standard English grammar doesn't seem to 'sink in', when pupils can't see or hear their 'errors' and recognise what is 'right'. Pupils with English as an Additional Language, and pupils who use non standard English, can be problematised in this environment (in spite of what is widely understood about the cognitive and linguistic benefits of multiligualism and stages of language learning). None of the teachers who were interviewed referred to the language knowledge of linguistic minority pupils, or the grammar of non standard or English regional speakers, as comparative resources for the teaching and learning of standard English grammar.

Teachers develop subject knowledge, training and resources for grammar

[When I trained to teach] there was no spelling, punctuation or grammar. (Teacher C)

Draw lines to match each group of words with the term that describes them

Words		Description
, who scares the postman away,		subordinate clause
a tiny, helpless kitten		main clause
a team of firefighters arrived		phrase

Secure subject knowledge is essential to teach pupils skilfully and confidently, and the statutory test has produced new expectations for teachers' grammar knowledge. Primary teachers have variable levels of grammar education and training in grammar pedagogy, from none at all to English degrees and specialisms (see the teacher profiles in Table 1). In interviews, teachers reported being sometimes unsure how to acknowledge the inconsistencies of English whilst teaching the rules of grammar to pupils.

> *When I get a little muddled is when I think 'Oh is that a compound or complex sentence?' … We looked at a sentence the other day [in class]. It was in a myth, and it looked like a complex sentence to me, but there was also 'and', and I thought 'Is that allowed?' … The children pointed it out. (Teacher M)*

Teacher M's complex-or-compound sentence dilemma arose from reading a myth with the class. Literature and real-life texts are likely to contain such linguistic anomalies for pupils and teachers to consider, unlike the grammar test questions which present no ambiguities.

The online survey provided some information about teachers' access to knowledge relevant to the grammar element of the SPaG test. On a 7 point scale from 'unaware' to 'extremely familiar', the mean ratings of familiarity with the new National Curriculum for English, the grammar element of the new National Curriculum, and the grammar glossary appendix to the new National Curriculum were above the mid-point of the scale, with the majority of teachers providing a positive response to the questions (respective means, standard deviations and percentage of respondents above the midpoint: 5.3 (1.2) 79%; 5.3 (1.3) 79%; 5.2 (1.4) 77%; N=144). It is not clear, however, how far these kinds of knowledge resources, which are largely focused on terms and definitions, would help

teachers like Teacher M and her pupils parse the sentence in the myth they were reading together. Discussions with colleagues are often more productive for teachers' subject knowledge, according to teachers who were interviewed.

> *The English language is so complicated. There are still areas when we've had a discussion with other Year Six teachers, 'Why is that a subordinate clause and not a phrase?' 'What makes that different even though it's got a verb, but phrases don't have verbs in, but that's being called an adverbial phrase?' (Teacher R)*

Just over a quarter (28%) of respondents to the online survey reported that since 2012 they had spent more than 2 days in grammar training and/or preparation in response to the requirements of the SPaG test (N=144), ranging from in-school twilight sessions to three-day SPaG courses. A similar number (26%) reported that since 2012 they had no training or preparation specifically for the test. Of the respondents who did have SPaG training, 15% had in-school sessions and 11% had local authority sessions. Other sources of SPaG training reported in the online survey were external consultants and literacy coordinators. According to the online survey responses and teachers who were interviewed, a minority of teachers access wider types of English language training not linked to the test (see for example Teacher G in Table 1). In-school and local authority sessions generally appeared to take a wider approach to grammar than training offered by external literacy consultants.

> *The trainer that we had was very clear that this is the right way and this is the wrong way, there's no 'This could be the right way'. She said 'This is yes or no… you don't accept an incorrect grammatical construction'. (Teacher T, on external consultant training in school)*

> *A fabulous training day linking it with a text. Stopped it being dry and dusty. (Online respondent no. 23, on local authority training)*

> *We looked at "The Jabberwocky"… we looked at the nonsense words and what they could be … how you know it's got to be an adjective because of the way the sentence is structured in order for it to make sense. And a lot of the staff got a really good feeling from that INSET because the feedback was 'Oh we didn't realise we knew so much'. (Teacher C, on literacy coordinator in-school training)*

Of 169 responses to the online survey question 'What training and resources for the teaching of grammar generally have been provided?' 12% reported 'None', with several respondents specifically stating they had to do their own research and resource development. In the online survey, most respondents reported that there was no scheme of work for grammar used by the whole school (84%; N=135).

> *Mostly use own knowledge and research on the topics and government documents. (Online respondent no. 58)*

> *We used info from Department for Education website. Relied on prior knowledge. Found resources on the   internet. (Online respondent no. 18)*

Online survey respondents who reported the provision of general training and resources for grammar listed a range that is reflected by the teachers in Tables 1 and 2, with a small number of grammar resources used in common. In interviews, teachers also reported using 'DIY' approaches, 'trial and error' and improvisation for their own knowledge and for classroom activities, for instance re-versioning 'old' grammar resources that used different terminology.

> *I just make up my own stuff ….I've basically kind of come up with my own little system of doing things. So I've got this thing called Snowball Sentences and four pointers that I do… it's all just about sentence improvement: you take a simple noun phrase, build in adjectives in a list, relative clauses or phrases, and then similes … . (Teacher N)*

In interviews, teachers reported instances where the school bought new grammar resources to help teachers plan and carry out grammar lessons, and how the impact of new resources was evaluated.

> *Our results weren't very good the first year. We needed something to give us a bit more guidance… [A publisher] came in, did a sales pitch… we bought into it…quite expensive…three hundred and fifty pounds… But we find them very useful. It gives a very clear lesson plan for a teacher. A short thirty minute lesson. It gives you some resources to use if you want to, but they're very much worksheets which is not the best way to teach grammar, but they can be used if necessary and it gives the teacher an outline of what to do. (Teacher R)*

> *We've done a little bit of sort of trial and error really….for every child in Year Five and Six we purchased [a grammar workbook] … But when I interviewed the children about the impact they felt it was making, they thought that it helped them but it wasn't as significant as the lesson that they'd had with the teacher…. it had obviously cost quite a lot of money for the school, so we decided not to invest in books for every child but each teacher in upper school has one of these books that they can pick up and use as and when. (Teacher G)*

In terms of teachers continuing to develop their grammar knowledge and skills, discussions with colleagues and the internet appear to be important resources for self-study and classroom activities; published grammar workbooks and schemes may be less flexible to meet the needs of teachers and pupils. Of the 8 schools where interviews took place, only in Teacher G's school did teaching staff ask pupils for their views on the impact of grammar resources; according to those pupils, the most important factor in their grammar learning was the lesson they had with their teacher.

Teachers observe children's enjoyment of grammar teaching and testing

Children love the SPaG … Which is really odd. It is quite strange….kids really enjoy it. They look forward to their SPaG test. It's one [test] they enjoy doing. (Teacher R)

Tick **one** word to complete the following sentence.

The children went out to play _____ the rain.

Tick **one**.

despite ☐

although ☐

unless ☐

yet ☐

Teachers interviewed agreed that pupils enjoy learning grammar and taking the grammar test which (in teachers' words) is 'odd', 'funny', 'strange' and 'surprising'. Teachers see pupils taking pleasure in learning and using meta language. They observe that children appreciate the brevity and clarity of the SPaG test. They note, also, that learning a set of unambiguous rules for language can boost the confidence of weaker writers and readers.

They love being able to cite words that they probably think their mums and dads won't be able to use at home. So they talk about prepositions and subordinate clauses. They get a real sense of pride that they know what those mean. (Teacher G)

For those children who are on the lower end in terms of attainment and those that are receiving Special Educational Needs support and might have a statement [of SEN], I think it really supports their image of themselves as a learner of English … it's been really, really positive for those children in particular. (Teacher D)

I don't enjoy teaching it. The children quite enjoy learning it … they love knowing what an adverbial phrase is… They quite like having that kind of vocabulary. (Teacher A)

In interviews, teachers reported that pupils 'love' the grammar test and find it to be easy, quick, 'transparent', 'logical', 'accessible', and a 'positive experience'. The test format (circle, tick, draw a line, write one word, fill in the blank) is appealing to pupils. According to teachers who were

interviewed, the majority of pupils can complete the test quickly, well within the allotted 45 minutes. Teachers compare the appeal of the test to a maths quiz with clearly right or wrong, 'yes or no' answers. They can see why pupils might prefer the SPaG test over an assessed writing composition, with its demands to be creative and fluent whilst controlling transcriptional elements of handwriting, punctuation and spelling.

> *With English writing we're always saying to them 'It was brilliant but can you …?' … they quite like the fact, 'That is the preposition'. (Teacher W)*

> *It's short answers, you're ticking, you're underlining, you're [writing] just one sentence. And a lot of them finish within twenty minutes, half an hour…they obviously prefer that compared to the reading test. (Teacher J)*

> *They liked the right or wrong element … the children didn't seem to mind the testing as much as the teachers did. (Teacher T)*

> *When it came to doing the SPaG test they found it a lot less stressful than the others [statutory tests]. And that didn't necessarily mean they achieved quite highly, they just found it less pressure…. It's so funny. We dread doing it and they really like it. (Teacher A)*

Teacher A ('*We dread doing it and they actually like it*') and Teacher T ('*The children didn't seem to mind it as much as the teachers did*') do not speak for all teachers, but there appears to be a gap between teachers and pupils when it comes to enjoyment of grammar teaching and grammar testing.

The online survey contained mixed results on teachers' perceptions of pupils' enjoyment of grammar. Respondents were asked to rate the amount of change since the introduction of the SPaG test on a seven point scale, from very large decrease (1) to very large increase (7). In terms of children's enjoyment of learning grammar, 37% of the respondents thought there had been no change and 40% thought there had been an increase (mean rating 4.2 (1.5); N=106). A small number of respondents reported a decrease in pupils' enjoyment of learning grammar since the introduction of SPaG (see Table 7, in the next section).

Teachers disagree about the extent to which explicit grammar teaching and testing have a positive impact on pupils' language and literacy skills

It's had quite a positive impact on standards. (Teacher H)

I would like it to go. It's just an exercise. (Headteacher P)

Tick one box in each row to show which word completes the sentence correctly.

Sentence	good	well
He plays the drums _____.		
The concert was _____.		
I had a _____ idea.		
The children worked _____ as a team.		

In terms of children's knowledge about grammar, 17% of respondents to the online survey thought there had been no change and 75% thought there has been an increase (mean rating 5.2 (1.2); N=108). No respondents to the online survey reported a decrease in pupil knowledge about grammar since the introduction of SPaG (See TableTableTable 3).

	(v. large decrease) 1	2	3	4	5	6	(v. large increase) 7	Total
Your confidence about the teaching of grammar	0.00% 0	2.75% 3	8.26% 9	31.19% 34	18.35% 20	26.61% 29	12.84% 14	109
Your enjoyment of teaching grammar	6.42% 7	3.67% 4	14.68% 16	40.37% 44	11.93% 13	15.60% 17	7.34% 8	109
Children's enjoyment of learning grammar	5.66% 6	7.55% 8	10.38% 11	36.79% 39	19.81% 21	15.09% 16	4.72% 5	106
Children's knowledge about grammar	0.00% 0	1.85% 2	6.48% 7	16.67% 18	29.63% 32	33.33% 36	12.04% 13	108

Table 7: Since the introduction of the SPaG test, how much of the following has increased or decreased? (online survey)

Amongst teachers who were interviewed, there was disagreement about the depth of pupils' learning from explicit grammar teaching and the test. Teachers expressed both positive and negative views.

> *It makes an impact on their writing because, if they can identify a grammatical feature in something and know why it's being used, they can then internalise that and use it in their writing. So we've seen that it's made an impact on their abilities and their grammar within their writing cos they're actually applying it, cos they've seen it in a context. (Teacher G)*

> *It's really had a positive impact on the children's writing … Not so much the composition but the technical side of writing. (Teacher S)*

> *The test's a bit farcical. (Teacher O)*

> *I personally don't feel that you need to be a Level 6 writer to get Level 6 in the SPaG paper. It's recall and memory: 'I know what this is. I can label that'. There's no discussion or explanation or application of those skills. (Teacher W)*

On the positive side, teachers reported improvements in pupils' technical skills as writers, pupils' pleasure in acquiring meta language, and overall improvements in pupils' language and literacy skills. Teachers who contextualise the study of grammar in the reading of literature and discussions about real life texts reported a positive impact on pupils' writing.

> *When they can write or when they're speaking or debating… they can construct a sentence and they can do this or they can do that, or they understand those in the correct tense, it's a really positive thing. (Teacher R)*

> *I really see what we've learnt in class being used then in different writing lessons. Even in other subjects as well, History, I have seen that it has quite a positive impact. (Teacher H)*

> *[In reading] They can spot more. They're more inclined to talk about it when you start questioning them, more confidently than they did before. (Headteacher P)*

Another positive aspect identified by teachers in interviews was the response of pupils to grammar targets for their writing. As Teacher W noted earlier, '*With English writing we're always saying to them "It was brilliant but can you …?"'* Grammar targets enable teachers and pupils to have some shared and explicit success criteria for writing. Teachers observe that pupils find grammar targets manageable, and can use these targets to enhance the quality of their writing.

> *If you said, 'Today please ensure that you're writing a complex sentence,' they think 'Yeah I know what you mean'. Or, 'This time can you start your sentence with a subordinate clause? Can we start our sentence with a propositional phrase?' they go 'I know what a preposition is.' …and that's helping them to improve their writing. (Teacher W)*

On the less positive side, teachers interviewed felt that pupils retain and apply grammar only when teachers are *'beating the drum every single day'*. Teachers reported gaps between what pupils can achieve on the grammar element of the SPaG test and what they can apply in their own oral and

written texts. The test itself is seen as a measure of memory rather than understanding, and not a true reflection of pupils' skills or needs as readers and writers.

> *Fronted adverbials they're really good at. Do you know, it's funny though because when you concentrate on one thing they'll lose, say, using adjectives. (Teacher M)*

> *They don't apply it to their writing. …Whether that's me or whether they see it as something separate, I don't know. … if [the test] was introduced to try and raise the children's writing ability, I haven't seen that happen. (Teacher L)*

> *Children who can use all of the grammar we're teaching don't necessarily know the names of them and vice versa. In the test, it's much more about knowing the names of things rather than how to use them. (Teacher A)*

The variety of teacher responses to the grammar element of SPaG may reflect their different experiences of teaching grammar generally and teaching grammar for the test. The bite-size approaches, widely used in order to prepare pupils for the test, may explain the observations of teachers that pupils can become skilled in answering the test questions but cannot apply these skills elsewhere. Where teachers embed the study of grammar in wider reading and literacy, they see a more positive impact on pupils' deeper knowledge and understanding about language.

> *So if you're talking about newspapers, being able to talk about the type of words that start sentences … I think, for the children, that brings it to life and gives meaning to what they're looking at. (Teacher G).*

The range of teachers' comments may also reflect their variable confidence and skills to teach grammar. As Teacher L commented, if pupils don't apply taught grammar in their own writing, '*Whether that's me or whether they see it as something separate, I don't know'.* Teachers are aware there are inconsistencies in the teaching of grammar within their schools, and between schools.

> *I'm teaching my kids that adjectives are modifying words and they don't describe a noun, they just change it … but is every other teacher teaching like that? (Teacher N)*

Teachers are also aware of the high stakes nature of statutory tests, for pupils and for the school itself. The online survey asked respondents to rate on a 7 point scale, from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7), their views on 3 statements.

- Many respondents thought that 'Good SPaG tests results are important for children's education', with 45% giving a positive response and 21% answering at the midpoint (mean rating 4.1 (1.6); N=132).
- Fewer respondents thought that 'Good SPaG results show that children have a sound understanding of grammar', with 36% giving a positive response and 23% answering at the midpoint (mean rating 3.8 (1.6); N=131).
- Just over half of the respondents (54%; N=132) thought 'SPaG results are important for the school's reputation', with 18% answering at the midpoint (mean rating 4.4 (1.7); N=132).

Teachers' responses in interviews and in the online survey indicate a high level of professional engagement with the new demands of SPaG, and recognition of the pedagogic and political issues involved in this curriculum and assessment change.

Teachers feel more confident about teaching grammar

> *[The first year] very much it was 'We need to get you [pupils] to pass this test' and that was the panic …But now we know that we can, and that they can, pass the test, it's now sort of to use that to improve their literacy. (Teacher L)*

Put a tick in each row to show whether the word missing from each sentence is 'I' or 'me'.

	I	me
Sarah and ____ both had a cold.		
In the concert, Freddie and ____ sat next to each other.		
My mother drove Linda and ____ to the party.		
Tom, Kate and ____ are on the red team.		

Having felt initially challenged by the statutory test, many teachers report that SPaG has made a positive impact on their own knowledge about grammar and their ability to teach grammar to pupils. In the online survey, 58% of the respondents reported an increase in confidence about the teaching of grammar since the first SPaG test in 2013, 32% reported no change in their confidence, and none reported a decrease in confidence since the introduction of the test. In interviews, teachers reported developing confidence about grammar from routine and frequent teaching.

> *I've really had to do my own research and learn myself. I'm a lot more confident now. Only from teaching it though. (Teacher R)*
>
> *It's all in how you sell it, and I've kind of sold it as 'This is just us. No-one else in the school will understand our little acronyms, our little codes…' And they are kind of little mini experts. (Teacher N)*
>
> *I was teaching more about the creative side of writing … the composition effect rather than the technical side of writing. And I know myself I wasn't as skilled at teaching writing then as I am now because this [test] has helped me become more skilled. (Teacher S)*

Teacher S believes he is now a more skilled teacher of writing by focusing more on the 'technical side'. Teaching grammar regularly has increased his confidence. By giving feedback to pupils on specific elements of word and sentence grammar, teaching the 'nuts and bolts' craft of writing, he is giving pupils tools to manipulate language. Teacher R notes the importance of regular practice in

building confidence to teach. Teacher N is 'selling' grammar to his pupils as a unique, secret language in which he and they are 'experts', inviting pupils into an exclusive language club. As Teacher L said earlier, teachers now know that pupils can, in general, pass the test – so the goal is to improve pupils' overall language and literacy learning through grammar teaching that can be fun and creative.

In terms of being able to assess the impact of grammar teaching, online survey respondents reported some confidence in predicting pupils' SPaG test results, with 43% giving a positive response on a 7 point scale (1= not easy at all to predict, 7 = very easy to predict) and 23% answering at the midpoint. In interviews, teachers were less sure about how to gauge pupil understanding based on the test, and did not identify a strong correlation between pupils' literacy skills and their SPaG test scores. As Teacher A noted earlier, the test does not differentiate between pupils who can memorise 'the names of things' and pupils who excel at reading or writing. Some teachers who were interviewed reported, anecdotally, that pupils who read widely seem to perform well on the test, and that pupils' reading ability may be a better predictor of success on the grammar element of the SPaG test than their writing skills.

> *A lot of our real avid readers do really well in the SPaG …. Children that don't read so much, and I'm talking chapter books, novels, tend to not do as well. …Some of our lesser writers have done really well in the SPaG. (Teacher C)*

Along with more overall confidence to teach grammar, many teachers report their own enjoyment of grammar teaching has increased. In the online survey, 35% of respondents reported an increase in enjoyment above the midpoint of the 7 point scale, with 40% reporting at the midpoint (n=109). Not all teachers felt this way: 25% of respondents reported below the midpoint, with over 6% reporting a very large decrease in their enjoyment of teaching grammar since the introduction of the SPaG test (see extract from Table 7, below).

	(v. large decrease) 1	2	3	4	5	6	(v. large increase) 7	Total
Your enjoyment of teaching grammar	6.42% 7	3.67% 4	14.68% 16	40.37% 44	11.93% 13	15.60% 17	7.34 8	109

From Table 7: Since the introduction of the SPaG test, how much of the following has increased or decreased? (online survey)

Teaching assistants are deployed to support grammar learning

> *SPaG booster sessions after school, daily SPaG lessons. Lead children through SAT [exam] style grammar tests. Take smaller groups for intensive specific work. (TA no. 12)*

Circle the **adjective** in the sentence below.

All the parents cheered the successful runner.

In one of the Local Authorities where teacher interviews took place, the research team gave a paper questionnaire to a small cohort of teaching assistants (n=27) who were studying part-time for teaching qualification. Their responses form a picture of grammar teaching and learning that matches the reports of teachers interviewed. The majority of the teaching assistants were supporting grammar learning at least once a week; 4 TAs were supporting grammar lessons daily, and six TAs were supporting grammar lessons twice or three times weekly. Only TAs in Reception/Foundation classes reported that SPaG was not relevant to their classroom support work with very young primary school pupils. TAs working with older classes said their roles have changed to accommodate a greater focus on grammar, specifically to help underachieving individuals and groups:

> *[My role has changed] because of the decision by the school to have one of the five literacy lessons solely as a grammar lesson. (TA no. 5)*
>
> *I simplify resources for a boy with SEN. (TA no. 14)*
>
> *Coaching for specific SPaG level tests weekly. (TA no. 21)*
>
> *Catch-up intervention group. (TA no. 16)*
>
> *Familiarise children with SPaG test layout. (TA no. 25)*

Most Year 6 teachers generally do not have a teaching assistant, but from visits to schools and from interviews it was evident that TAs are playing an active role in supporting grammar teaching and testing, although this varies from school to school. Teachers who were interviewed reported a very wide range of grammar training, expertise and skill amongst teaching assistants.

> *The TAs came out a lot better [on the INSET grammar test] than the teachers. (Teacher C)*

> *We haven't really used our TAs much for the teaching of grammar because they don't feel very confident. (Teacher A)*

> *[TAs} were all trained on what to look for, how to do it. [For the first SPaG test] when the teachers were focusing on the Year Six children two TAs and myself took all the Year Fives for grammar. (Headteacher P)*

> *Our literacy TA does a lot of withdrawal groups and a lot of those groups are the children that are underachieving and a lot of the reason they're underachieving is cos their grammar is so bad…. I would just tell her [what to focus on]. She makes her own stuff [resources]. (Teacher L)*

The involvement of teaching assistants in phonics teaching has provided a precedent and a model for their grammar support work. As Teacher C (above) also noted in an interview, *'A lot of the TAs are doing phonics interventions which then sort of leads into the spellings and everything else'.* The comments from teachers and teaching assistants reflect the deployment of TAs generally: teaching assistants tend to work with underachieving pupils, often in withdrawal sessions; they may be responsible for making their own resources; they may or may not have secure subject knowledge, and they don't always have access to training along with teachers.

Like teachers, teaching assistants have positive and negative views on the value of grammar teaching and testing.

> *I find discrete grammar lessons are dull and that children can easily identify grammatical features although they struggle to apply this knowledge in their own work. (TA no. 18)*

> *The focus on grammar firstly makes it more explicit and secondly gives the children more confidence to use it in their writing. (TA no. 8)*

The teaching assistants who answered the questionnaire felt confident to support children's grammar learning, but less confident about grammar at their own level. When asked to rate their improvement in grammar knowledge since the introduction of SPaG on a scale of 1-7, with 1 being '100% improvement' and 7 being 'No improvement at all', the responses of the teaching assistants were mainly at the mid-point and higher (4 to 7). But when asked to rate their confidence to support pupils' grammar learning since the introduction of SPaG, the TAs' responses were mainly grouped in the 1-3 range.

Patterns in pupil attainment on SPaG and the positive impact of diversity

Children with English as a second language don't do any worse in the SPaG test than children whose first language is English. (Teacher T)

Which sentence shows the correct agreement between **subject** and **verb**?

Tick **one**.

The walkers carries their lunch in their backpacks. ☐

They eats all the pudding. ☐

The baker makes gorgeous cakes. ☐

He go to the dentist every month. ☐

As part of this research we examined SPaG attainment in 150 Local Authorities in England, based on the available data from the Department for Education on pupils by gender, ethnicity, language and socioeconomic status. Not all of the data were consistent or complete across all the Local Authorities.

In the first year of the SPaG test (2013), nationally 74% of Year 6 pupils attained Level 4 or higher. In 2014, 76% of Year 6 pupils achieved Level 4 or higher on SPaG; as a comparison, 83% of pupils nationally attained Level 4 in the statutory reading test in 2014.

SPaG test scores vary considerably across Local Authorities nationally. Table 8 shows the minimum and maximum Local Authority percentages of pupils achieving level 4 or above (the minimum expected level of attainment). The difference between the lowest and highest performing Local Authorities is considerably greater for SPAG (in Table 8, below, 'Grammar, punctuation and spelling') than for the other subjects (DfE 2014 p.20).

Test	Minimum	Maximum	2014 range/percentage points (2013 range)
Reading	83% (78%)	95% (93%)	12 (15)
Grammar, punctuation and spelling	**70% (64%)**	**88% (87%)**	**18 (23)**
Mathematics	79% (77%)	92% (92%)	13 (15)
Writing teacher assessment	80% (76%)	92% (90%)	12 (14)

Table 8 Range in local authority achievement by subject: minimum and maximum local authority percentages of pupils achieving level 4 or above in England, 2014, state-funded schools only (2013 ranges in brackets)

Nationally, the gender gap in SPaG is wide, with girls outperforming boys by 9 percentage points at level 4 or above and 12 percentage points at level 5 or above in 2014 (see Table 9, 'GPS' = grammar, punctuation and spelling).
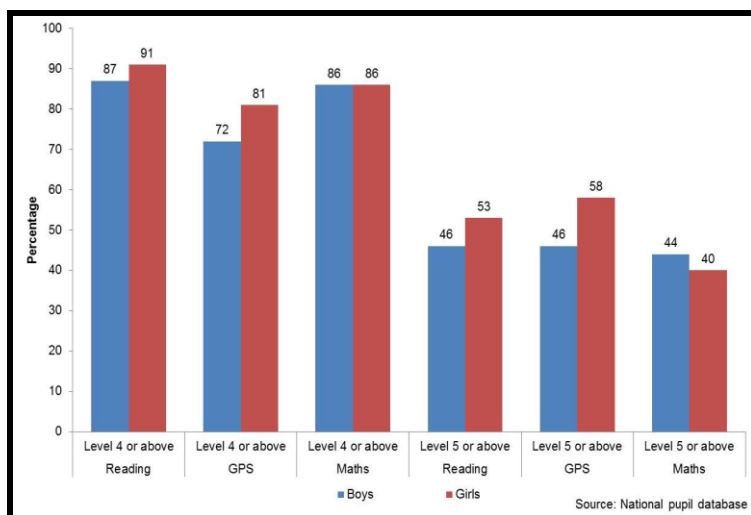

Table 9 Attainment in key stage 2 tests by gender, percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or above and level 5 or above in the key stage 2 tests in England, 2014 (all schools)

Deprivation, not language, is the key factor in low attainment on SPaG

15 of the 16 teachers interviewed for this research believed that the grammar element of the statutory test strongly disadvantages pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL). But

across Local Authorities in England, pupils who have EAL perform as well on SPaG as native English speaking pupils, and in some Local Authorities s pupils with EAL outperform native English speaking pupils. Only one teacher (Teacher T, above) noted this trend, which is specifically mentioned in the national attainment data report:

> *Pupils with English as a first language outperformed those whose first language is not English in each of the key stage 2 subject areas, with the exception of the grammar, spelling and punctuation test where there is no attainment gap between the two groups. (DfE 2014 p.15)*

Socioeconomic deprivation is the strongest indicator of low attainment on the SPaG test. White boys eligible for Free School Meals have the lowest SPaG scores nationally, and in 2014 the attainment gap between pupils eligible for Free School Meals and all pupils across all subjects was at its widest for SPaG (see Table 10 below). But the largest year to year increase in attainment for pupils who are eligible for FSM was on the SPaG test, with 62% overall achieving level 4 or above in 2014, an increase of 4 percentage points from 2013.
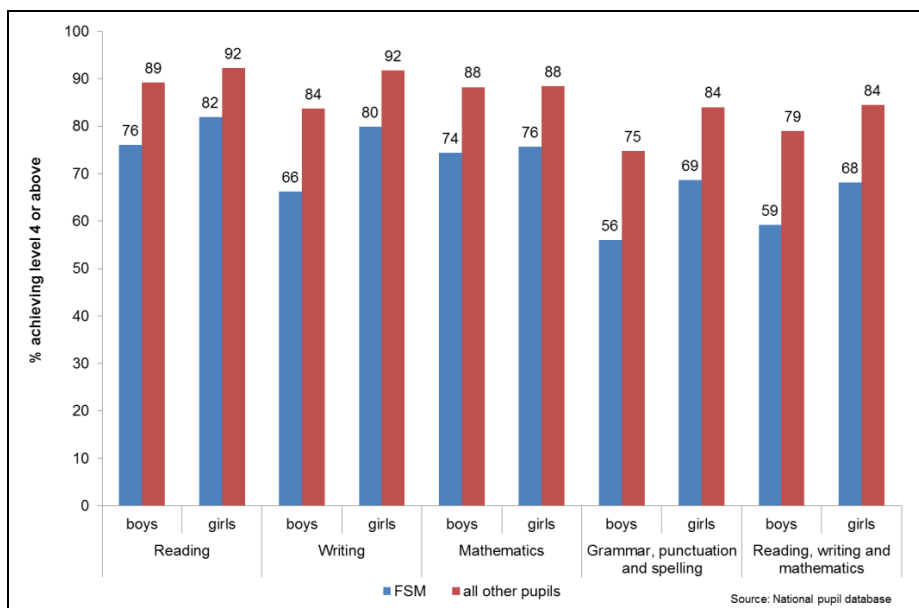

Table 10 Attainment at Key Stage 2 by gender and FSM, percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or above in England, 2014 (state-funded schools)

For pupils identified as disadvantaged based on specific deprivation indicators[1] SPaG attainment differs greatly in different areas of England: such pupils in urban and ethnically diverse areas perform better on the test than pupils in rural and isolated areas. For instance, London has the highest percentage of disadvantaged pupils who achieve level 4 or above on SPaG (72% in 2014), compared to the East of England and the South West where only 59% of disadvantaged pupils achieved level 4 or above (DfE 2014 p. 23).

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[1] Disadvantaged pupils are identified as known to be eligible for Free School Meals at any time in the previous six years, or who are looked after by the Local Authority for more than six months.

Differences between rural isolated and urban diverse Local Authorities

Based on the available Department for Education Data, we examined SPaG attainment for different groups of pupils in four Local Authorities which we have anonymised: Castlehaven, Longcliffe, Narrowgate and Norchester. Castlehaven is densely urban and multi-ethnic, and Longcliffe is a large urban Local Authority where pupils are largely White and Asian; both of these Local Authorities have high numbers of pupils with English as an Additional Language and high levels of pupil mobility. Norchester and Narrowgate are rural, with areas of isolation; these two Local Authorities are predominantly White in terms of ethnic composition, with low pupil mobility. Castlehaven pupils overall achieve above the national average on SPaG, and Narrowgate pupils achieve significantly above the national average (See Tables 11, 12 and 13 below).
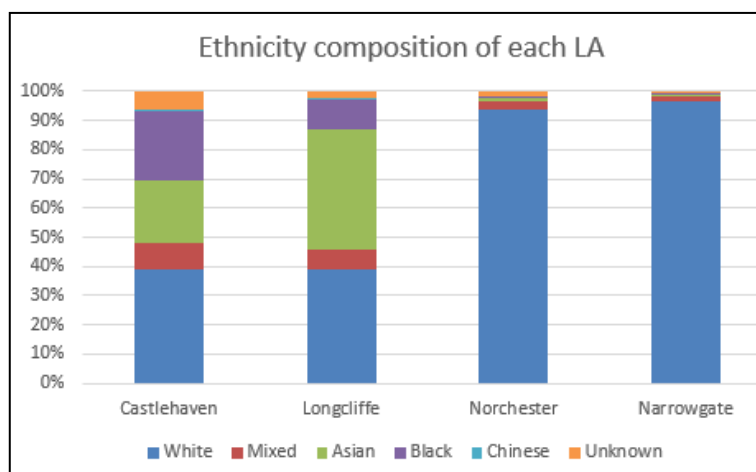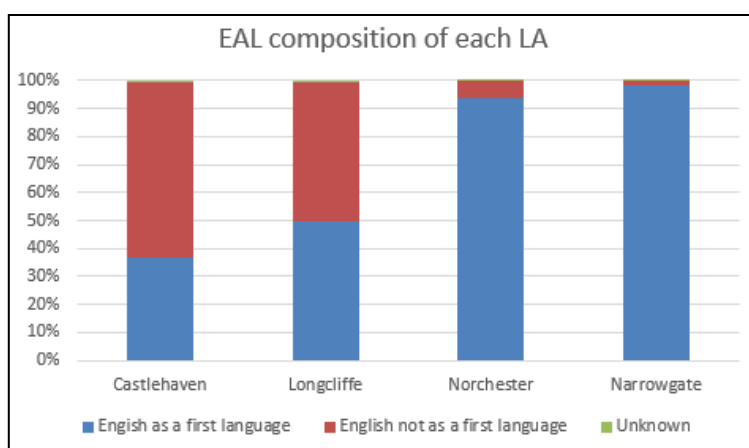

Table 11

Table 12

KS2 SPaG Results

Legend:
- ■ % achieving level 3 and below
- ■ % achieving level 4 and above
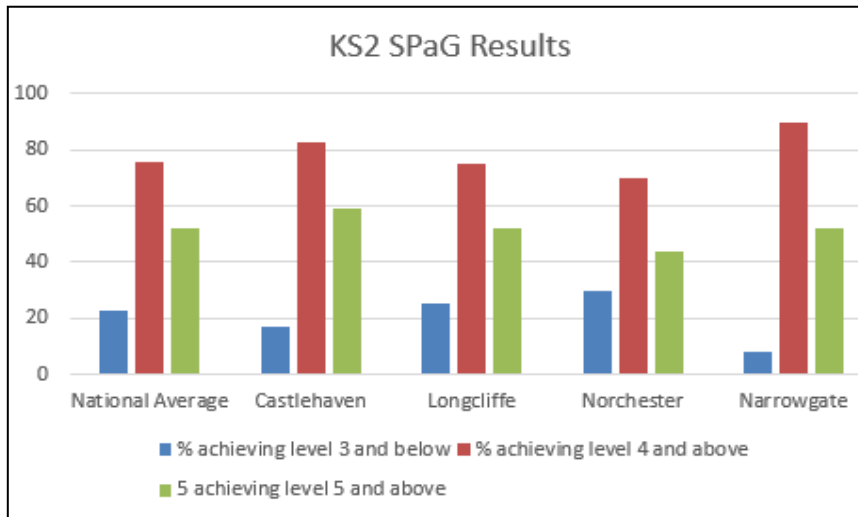- ■ 5 achieving level 5 and above

Table 13

SPaG attainment data from these four Local Authorities provide further evidence that Minority Ethnic status may be an indicator of success on the test, rather than a disadvantage. See Tables 14 and 15, below: Mixed Race, Asian, Chinese and Black pupils achieve as well as or nearly as well as White pupils, and pupils from specific minority ethnic groups outperform White pupils. Asian pupils show the strongest performance, apart from in Castlehaven where Mixed and Chinese pupils achieve even more highly. Black pupils outperform White pupils in two of the Local Authorities.

| LA	No. of Mixed pupils (% of all pupils in LA)	% achieving expected levels	No. of Asian pupils (% of all pupils in LA)	% achieving expected levels	No. of Black pupils (% of all pupils in LA)	% achieving expected levels	No. of Chinese pupils (% of all pupils in LA)	% achieving expected levels	No. of White pupils (% of all pupils in LA)	% achieving expected levels	Variation between different ethnic groups and white pupils **+ Shows higher Ethnic Minority achievement compared to white pupils**
National		79 %		82 %		78 %		88 %		75%	**M +4 %** **A +7 %** B 3 % **C +13 %**
Castlehaven	134 (9%)	88 %	315 (22%)	84 %	340 (23%)	79 %	13 (1%)	100 %	567 (39%)	83 %	**M +5 %** **A +1 %** B 4 % **C +17 %**
Longcliffe	245 (7%)	72 %	1,513 (41%)	81 %	370 (10%)	78 %	10 (0.3%)	n/a	1,423 (39%)	67 %	**M +5 %** **A +14 %** **B +11 %** C n/a
Norchester	204 (3%)	71 %	98 (1%)	85 %	40 (0.5%)	75 %	23 (0.3%)	n/a	7, 460 (94%)	70 %	**M +1 %** **A +15%** **B + 5%** C n/a
Narrowgate	55 (2%)	85 %	34 (1%)	91 %	3 (0.1%)	n/a	12 (0.4%)	67 %	3,080 (96%)	75 %	**M +10%** **A +16 %** B n/a C 8 %
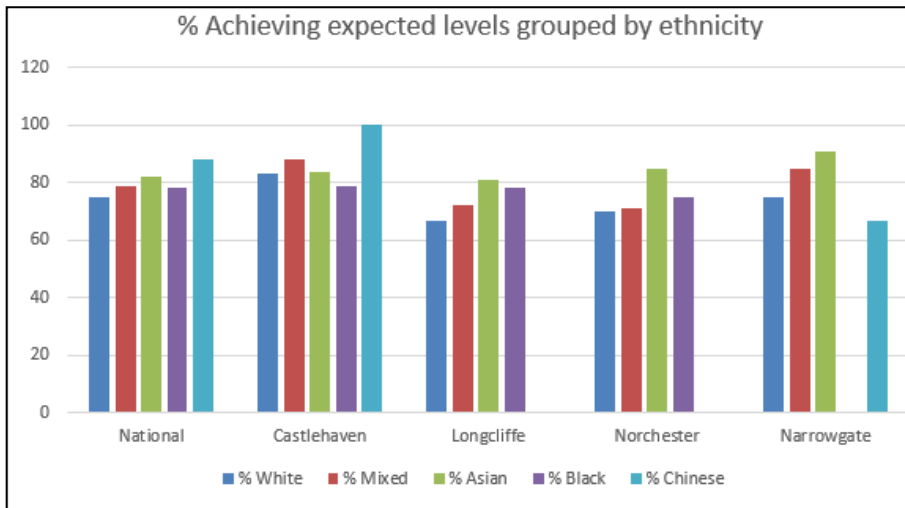
Table 15

Having English as an Additional Language (EAL) likewise appears to be an indicator of success on the SPaG test in these Local Authorities, where the smallest attainment gap on SPaG is between pupils with EAL and native English speaking pupils. In Norchester, pupils with EAL perform better on SPaG than pupils who have English as their first language (see Table 16, below).
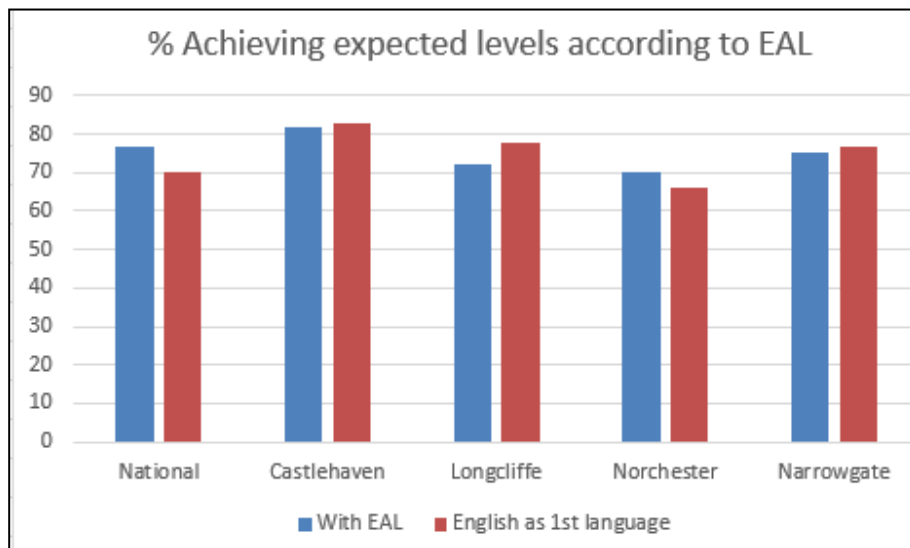

Table 16

Disadvantage on SPaG ameliorated by diversity

In the four Local Authorities, as in the national data, disadvantaged pupils perform poorly on SPaG. But diversity and an urban context appear to have an ameliorating effect on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils (see Tables 17 and 18, below). Castlehaven, which has the largest ratio of disadvantaged pupils, achieves - along with Longcliffe - the highest success rate on SPaG for disadvantaged pupils and the narrowest gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. Norchester and Narrowgate have the lowest levels of pupils eligible for Free School Meals, and the greatest gap in achievement between FSM and non-FSM pupils (Table 17). Norchester has the smallest percentage of disadvantaged pupils, and the lowest SPaG achievement of the four Local Authorities for disadvantaged pupils, and the biggest difference in achievement between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils (Table 18).

SPaG attainment and Free School Meals in four Local Authorities

LA	No. of FSM pupils (% of all pupils in LA)	% achieving expected levels	No. of non-FSM pupils. (% of all pupils in LA	% achieving expected levels	Variation between FSM and non-FSM pupils
National		62 %		79 %	17%
Castlehaven	487 (33 %)	75 %	972 (67 %)	87 %	12 %
Longcliffe	857 (23 %)	64 %	2, 790 (77%)	78 %	14 %
Norchester	1,198 (15 %)	52 %	6, 748 (85 %)	73 %	21 %
Narrowgate	447 (14%)	58 %	2,750 (86 %)	78 %	20 %

Table 17 From Table 9b & 25 DfE Local authority and regional tables, SFR 50/2014

SPaG attainment and Disadvantage Indicators in four Local Authorities

LA	No. of disadvantaged pupils (% of all pupils in LA)	% achieving expected levels	No of non-disadvantaged pupils. (% of all pupils in LA)	% achieving expected levels	Variation between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils
National		66 %		81 %	15 %
Castlehaven	896 (61%)	78 %	563 (49%)	91 %	13 %
Longcliffe	1,507 (23%)	67 %	2,140 (77%)	80 %	13 %
Norchester	2,163 (27%)	56 %	5,783 (73%)	75 %	19 %
Narrowgate	851 (27%)	62 %	2,346 (83%)	80 %	18 %

Table 18 From Table 9b & 26 DfE Local authority and regional tables, SFR 50/2014

Pupils with SEN perform poorly on SPaG

Pupils who have Special Educational Needs perform poorly across the four Local Authorities (see Table 19, below). Castlehaven, with the highest percentage of pupils with SEN, has a higher achievement rate for these pupils than the national average and the other three LAs. Pupils with a statement of SEN receive additional support, and these pupils perform better in Narrowgate compared to statemented pupils in the other three LAs; statemented pupils in Castlehaven and Longcliffe have lower attainment compared to the other two LAs and are below the national average for statemented pupils.
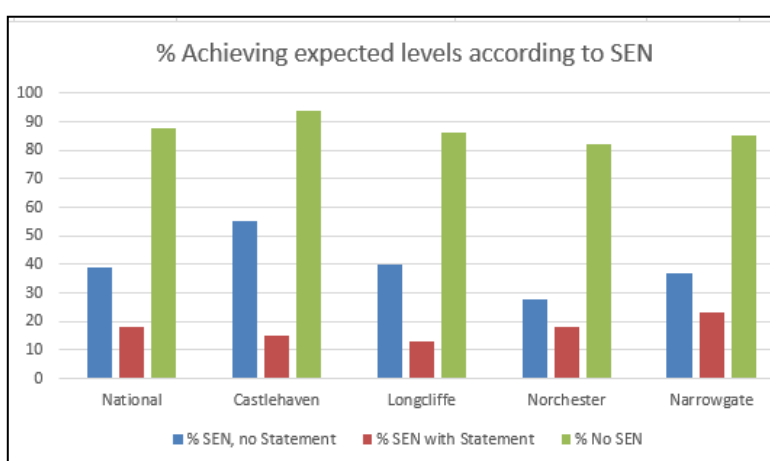

Table 19 Pupils with SEN in four local authorities

Discussion: the impact on teachers and teaching

The rights and wrongs of that are up for discussion. ... my job is to take what needs to be taught and do that in the most creative, fulfilling way I can do. Does a Year Three child need to know that an adjective is a modifier above certain other things? Well maybe, maybe not. But from what we know is expected of us, we're just attacking it and doing everything we can with that. (Teacher N)

Circle the **connective** in the sentence below.

Before it was time for tea, Tom decided to play football.

The key findings of our research into the impact on teachers and teaching of the grammar element of the statutory test in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) are:

- Time spent teaching decontextualized and contextualised grammar has increased significantly;
- Grammar is now taught explicitly and formally as a classroom literacy routine;
- The grammar test format influences teaching content and approaches;
- Teachers observe that pupils enjoy learning grammar and taking the test;
- Teachers disagree about the extent to which explicit grammar teaching and testing have a positive impact on pupils' language and literacy skills;
- Teachers feel more confident about teaching grammar;

Additionally, the desk based element of our research indicates:

- Ethnic and Linguistic Minority pupils perform as well as, or better than, White and native English speaking pupils on the SPaG test;
- Pupil socioeconomic deprivation is the strongest indicator of low performance on SPaG;
- Socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils perform better on SPaG when they are learning in classrooms that are linguistically and ethnically diverse.

SPaG has influenced teaching

Our research indicates that the grammar element of SPaG has made a significant impact on teachers and on teaching since the introduction of the statutory test in 2014. Teachers have changed the scope and content of their literacy teaching to focus explicitly on grammar. SPaG has prompted teachers to audit their grammar knowledge, take steps to secure it, and seek resources for themselves and for pupils. In their journey from 'panic' to confidence, teachers have been skilful in

responding to government curriculum and testing requirements, implementing rapid change in their classrooms to make grammar teaching and grammar testing a priority.

The grammar element of the SPaG test has contributed to the homogeneity of what and how teachers teach, and what and how pupils learn. The similarities to the ways in which synthetic phonics is taught and learned in primary schools provide some insight into how teachers accommodate new accountability demands from central government. The remark from Teacher L equating proper nouns with digraphs and trigraphs reflects a narrow view of grammar which can be easily taught and learned for the test. As in phonics teaching, teachers and pupils are using consistent, explicit grammar terminology. Pupils are drilled to memorise grammar terms and definitions, often in fun and entertaining ways, in order to facilitate automatic recall. A few published grammar resources appear to be used widely.

The test format and content strongly influence grammar teaching, privileging the memorisation of terms, definitions, and discrete, bite size units of word and sentence grammar. In our research there is evidence of teachers feeling compelled to teach to the test, promoting decontextualized approaches to enable pupil achievement on the test. As Teacher S said, if pupils can remember what the terms mean they stand more of a chance to succeed on SPaG. The concept of the statutory test seems to assume that pupils will transfer the knowledge they achieve for the test to other language and literacy contexts, and teachers in our research had variable observations and opinions on evidence of this. Other recent research (Myhill et. al. 2013) has indicated that decontextualized grammar teaching may not transfer to spoken and written forms.

Our research shows a great deal of consistency of grammar teaching at the level of test preparation, but the teaching of grammar overall is far from standardised. Teachers use a range of DIY, internet and other published resources, and discussions with colleagues are an important source of support and information. Teachers use a variety of approaches, from decontextualized 'grammar starters' and stand-alone grammar lessons to language study embedded in the reading of literature and grammar applied in extended writing. Although teachers can and do embed meaningful grammar study and application in a context of reading literature and real texts, and in discussions about audiences and purposes, they do so with awareness that these kinds of applications and discussions are not a feature of the test. Contextualised grammar study is more likely to happen where teachers are confident about their own grammar knowledge and feel able to make time in the classroom for talk with pupils about texts and language. Less confident teachers may feel unwilling to spend time discussing grammar with pupils if this might put their achievement on the test at risk. Furthermore, all teachers must ensure that they and pupils cover the curriculum's required grammar content.

Based on their phonics support work, the role of teaching assistants now includes support for grammar learning, particularly for underachieving pupils and pupils with Special Educational Needs. TAs have variable grammar knowledge at their own level and variable access to the grammar training offered to teachers. The enlargement of the TA role indicates the need to ensure all classroom support staff are adequately supported and prepared for grammar and the grammar test.

Pupils enjoy grammar – teachers are less positive

Pupils are enthusiastic about learning grammar and enjoy taking the statutory test, according to teachers interviewed for this research and a substantive number of respondents to the online survey. Not all teachers share this enthusiasm and enjoyment with pupils. There was a great deal of variety and contradiction in the responses of teachers who were interviewed and online survey respondents. Teachers expressed positive and negative views about grammar teaching and testing – often simultaneously. At their most negative, teachers believe the SPaG test to be largely a measure of rote memory and not a reflection of pupils' understanding about how language works. On the positive side, teachers believe the test and explicit teaching can cause pupils to become more aware of grammar and therefore more able and confident to apply it orally and in writing. Our research has identified how these contradictions and anomalies can influence teachers' and pupils' interpretations of what 'writing' is. For SPaG, grammar is positioned as an unproblematic transcriptional skill alongside punctuation and spelling: a set of terms and definitions to memorise. In real speaking and writing, grammar is knowledge about language, audiences and purposes: a flexible compositional/ authoring skill of choosing the most effective words to convey meaning.

Linguistic and ethnic minority pupils perform well on SPaG

The home and community languages and dialects of pupils offer opportunities for grammar teaching. Linguistic and/or ethnic minority status appears to be an indicator of success on SPaG, based on attainment data nationally and in four Local Authorities. Minority ethnic pupils achieve as well as, or outperform, white pupils on SPaG. The government report on pupil attainment for 2014 explicitly notes that pupils with English as their first language outperform pupils with English as an Additional Language in all other statutory assessments with the exception of the SPaG test where there is no attainment gap between these two pupil groups. The reasons behind this success are not clear. There is much research evidence of the linguistic and cognitive benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism. Minority ethnic and multilingual pupils have linguistic knowledge they may consciously or unconsciously apply to English grammar learning and the grammar test itself. The format of the SPaG test reflects 'TEFL' style language learning drills and exercises, and linguistic and ethnic minority pupils may have formal or informal experience of this language learning approach at home or in Saturday schools.

Teaching to the test reduces the value of linguistic diversity

Fluency in standard English is a valuable language, literacy, employability and life skill. This is recognised by teachers. But the grammar element of SPaG has resulted in a shrinking of pedagogic space for language diversity in the primary classroom. With the test's demand for 'correctness' in mind, teachers and teaching assistants may refer to 'right' and 'wrong' forms of writing, and 'proper' ways of speaking. The language resources of pupils who use English as an Additional Language, and pupils who use non standard English, appear to be under-utilised as comparative resources for standard English grammar teaching, in spite of what is widely understood about the cognitive and linguistic benefits of multilingualism and pedagogic stages of language learning. None of the teachers who were interviewed referred to the language knowledge of linguistic minority pupils, or the grammar of non standard or English speakers, as comparative resources for the teaching and learning of standard English grammar.

Disadvantaged pupils do better on SPaG when taught in diverse environments

A diverse learning environment appears to have a positive effect on SPaG attainment for pupils who are most at risk of underachieving on the test. Pupil socioeconomic deprivation is the single most salient factor in low achievement on SPaG, particularly for white boys, but disadvantaged pupils in urban and multi ethnic areas perform better on the test than disadvantaged pupils in isolated and low diversity areas. The desk-based element of our research has not explored why disadvantaged pupils perform better on SPaG when they are in learning environments that are ethnically and linguistically diverse. In classrooms where there is linguistic and ethnic diversity, teachers and pupils may talk more explicitly about language. It may be that teachers provide additional language teaching and language practise in classes where there are high numbers of linguistic and ethnic minority pupils, and socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils may benefit from being included in this.

Boys' underachievement mirrors other literacy areas

As a newly-introduced assessment, all pupils are not achieving as highly on SPaG as on other statutory tests. If the scores for grammar, vocabulary and punctuation were disaggregated, research could examine pupil responses to the specific grammar questions of the statutory test. The gender gap for SPaG is wide, but historically there was a similar gender gap in reading and writing attainment which has gradually narrowed. For all pupils and for specific groups (e.g. boys), statutory test scores in literacy have generally improved over time, and SPaG scores may follow this pattern as teachers and pupils adjust to test requirements and as SPaG-style teaching and testing is introduced in the early years of primary school.

Future research

The impact of explicit grammar teaching and the grammar test on a generation of primary school pupils in England will continue to be of interest. Future research could explore pupils' perspectives on grammar teaching and testing, and pupils' views of grammar resources. The glimpse into pupils' responses provided by Teacher G – that it is the teacher who makes the biggest impact on pupil's grammar learning – could be the focus of action research and practice development. The different teaching methods identified in this report could be analysed in detail to identify effective pedagogy for grammar, in particular: the different effects of teaching and interpreting grammar as a transcriptional or a compositional skill, and the extent to which primary school pupils transfer decontextualized grammar to other language and literacy contexts. The impact of diversity on SPaG attainment, pupils' home and community grammar resources, factors that enable linguistic and ethnic minority pupil achievement on the test, and how grammar teaching in classrooms where there is pupil diversity may differ from grammar teaching in classrooms where there is little or no pupil diversity, are all areas for further enquiry. Socioeconomically deprived pupils, who have the lowest performance on SPaG, could be targeted for specific research and interventions. The role of teaching assistants could be further explored, and supported, as grammar teaching and testing is introduced in earlier years of primary school and as TAs continue to provide close support for underachieving pupils and pupils with SEN.

We hope the topics in this report are useful for schools, teachers' associations and initial teacher training institutions, and that our findings enable school leaders and teaching staff to reflect on the professional and pedagogic issues of teaching grammar and testing grammar in the primary school.

Tick a box in each row to show whether the sentence is in the past or present tense.

Sentence	Present	Past
The children learnt about Romans in history.		
The computer works well.		
The children are choosing what they want to do for their projects.		
They added raisins to the muffins.		

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