



VANISHING WORDS

Spoken English, the GCSE and the National Curriculum

Colin Butler

Biographical note

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Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Spoken English and the GCSE	6
3. Spoken English and the National Curriculum	8
4. External Moderation and Spoken English	10
5. What Must Be Done	13
6. Postscript	15
Notes and References	16

1

Introduction

Should Spoken English contribute to candidates' overall marks in public examinations – as it will in GCSE English from this summer? There are good reasons to think not. Besides the deficiencies of the assessment procedures in use and the inadequate level of external moderation, there are also problems which arise from the very nature of Spoken English. Spoken English is ephemeral. It cannot be retrieved for independent scrutiny. Can it be right to allow a significant part of candidates' marks in a major public examination to come from unevidenced and unverifiable work?

The best solution is to remove Spoken English from the GCSE (and from assessment at earlier stages of the National Curriculum) and return it to schools and teachers, to be fostered in the light of individual pupils' needs.

Spoken English and the GCSE

This summer, over half a million candidates in England and Wales will sit GCSE English. For the vast majority, it will be a compulsory examination since English, unlike English Literature, is a National Curriculum core subject. Many a young person's future will depend not only on a good result but on public confidence in the examination itself. Owing to the inclusion of Spoken English, that confidence will be misplaced.

Spoken English as part of GCSE English has a history. Gradually, and despite its being seen and treated as requiring distinct and separate examining, it has been infiltrated into the written examination. The original National Criteria for GCSE English (1985) required that candidates 'communicate effectively and appropriately in Spoken English'. It was to be assessed separately, using a different grade scale and written grade descriptions. At no point was it formally connected with the written part of the examination, though at least grade 5 was necessary to gain an award in the written examination. Since 100 per cent Spoken English coursework was available, a school or other examination centre might or might not elect to take a final examination in Oral Communication, as it was called; but, either way, it fell to the centres to carry everything out themselves. Teachers' records of their candidates' performances could be as simple as brief written notes; and external moderation could be confined to a handful of assessment exercises put on during a single annual visit. Verbatim records were not a national requirement. Thus a significant change in the examination of Spoken English had begun and a new way of approaching it was under way. In practice it was becoming a discrete area of assessment with discursive reference criteria, written notes (in lieu of what was actually said) and disproportionately minute sampling. Moreover, grades in a public examination were being awarded in the absence of lasting primary evidence to support them, for the candidates' words could not be recalled, compared or independently validated. Once said, they were gone for good. What made this extraordinary state of affairs tolerable was, ironically, another weakness: the separate status of Oral Communication. Whereas the written part of GCSE English was graded by letter, Oral Communication was graded by a number that in practice was seldom quoted, not even in published tables of performance. Out of sight, out of mind. But, this summer, Speaking and Listening, assessed as inadequately as before, will be a compulsorily integrated component of English's overall mark, counting for 20 per cent of the whole – the remainder consisting of 20 per cent

written coursework and 60 per cent written final examination. Furthermore, English Literature, which carries 30 per cent compulsory coursework, permits 'written and oral coursework . . . as appropriate.'¹

In the authoritative *GCSE Examinations: Quality and Standards*, an advisory document for the Secretary of State for Education published by the School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) in October 1992, among 'a number of initiatives to strengthen the GCSE' was to be found 'improving the assessment of coursework'. Yet if a given kind of coursework assessment is weak in principle and if it is nevertheless compulsorily incorporated into the overall grade, then the aim of strengthening the GCSE will be directly frustrated. By incorporating assessment of Spoken English into an overall mark for English, the authorities are working against the laudable ideal they profess.

Spoken English and the National Curriculum

Some of the problems about assessing Spoken English are directly linked to the framework of assessment imposed by the National Curriculum. GCSE English, and so its Speaking and Listening component, is now part of Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum, that is, part of a comprehensively planned curriculum covering all the years of compulsory education in the state sector, with summative or 'snapshot' assessments at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 (the GCSE) marking the end of each numbered Key Stage. Indeed, to stress this continuity, school years are themselves now numbered sequentially, beginning with Year One and ending, as far as the National Curriculum is concerned, with Year 11, when the majority of pupils will be 16. As for what are sometimes called the 'staying on' years, they – ominously – have been numbered Years 12 and 13 respectively. So numbered, they may easily be assimilated to a 'natural' extension of the National Curriculum culminating in some kind of Key Stage 5. The remainder of this pamphlet will indicate why this would be undesirable.

Speaking and Listening is Attainment Target One of five areas of attainment in English, the others being reading, writing, spelling and handwriting. Each attainment target except the last two is divided into ten levels of difficulty (the controversial 'Ten Levels'), and each level is in turn subdivided into a number of strands. These strands define in detail particular requirements. For example, Attainment Target One, Level 8, Strand d states: 'Show in discussion and in writing an awareness of the contributions that facial expressions, gestures and tones of voice can make to a speaker's meaning.' This example of itself demonstrates an obvious difficulty never far from the Ten Levels as they currently stand, namely, that in order to be precise enough to discriminate clearly and to enable grading, they go into great detail. But the moment so much detail obtains, of course, the possibility arises, certainly in English, of partial rather than complete fulfilment of a strand or level, not only within a given attainment target but across the range of attainment targets, too. Theoretically, this situation could be addressed by forsaking clusters of detail for lists of entirely separate statements of proficiency, to be complemented by what would be the ultimate in tick-boxes. It is unlikely that such a move would find favour among English teachers, though it would serve the useful purpose of making clear the absurdity of the National Curriculum's attempt to unitise proficiency in Spoken English for assessment by levels and strands. Instead, a stop-gap measure has been put forward. A circular to schools of November 1993 (*Recording*

Pupils' Achievement) concerning statutory teacher assessment in 1994, signed jointly by Professor Stewart Sutherland (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, England), Mr Roy James (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, Wales) and Sir Ron Dearing (Chairman of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA)), states that 'the aim should be to arrive at an all round judgment of the level a pupil has achieved' and that 'teachers need only consider whether the knowledge, understanding and skills displayed correspond *on the whole* [my italics] more closely to the statements of attainment at one level than another'. This circular offers the disquieting spectacle of the National Curriculum's pseudo-scientific grid system – entrenched in statute and enforced by the newly-formed Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) – being openly subverted at the top even as it is being applied at the base to real children in real schools. It also clearly raises acute practical questions concerning proportionality and standardisation across over half a million GCSE candidates nationally. It is difficult, as things stand, to see how these questions might be answered.

The new Order for English will be published in January 1995, and any changes made with regard to GCSE English will first apply to those taking the examination in 1998. To light the way forward, the National Curriculum Council (NCC) published in September 1993 *English in the National Curriculum*, a report claiming 'greater clarity and less prescription'. If the Programmes of Study that accompany each Statement of Attainment through each Key Stage are included, it is debatable by how much the report contains less prescription. Certainly, the *principle* of central prescription is not shed. Moreover, it is not so much that its Statements of Attainment are clearer as that they are less detailed. For example, in Attainment Target One, there are now only two strands, Communication being the first, with Listening and Responding the conglomerate second. And at Level Eight, pupils must now be able 'to listen with sustained concentration and understanding, making varied, relevant contributions to a discussion, taking others' ideas into account'. But is this really much better than the earlier version? Having pointed out that the English Curriculum had been revised in order to serve national assessment better, one recent reviewer of the NCC's proposals, Graham Frater, concluded: 'Using the same resource as before, a value-laden vocabulary open to wide interpretation, the new statements come no closer to eliminating ambiguity than before . . . National accountability cannot be delivered on the backs of levels which are inherently indeterminate.'² Mr Frater is right. And what applies to National Curriculum English in general applies *a fortiori* to GCSE Spoken English in particular. Neither at the moment, nor in the foreseeable future, may Spoken English look to criteria that are free from indeterminacy; which is another way of saying that the precision every public examination requires is, and will be, lacking by design.³

External Moderation and Spoken English

Spoken English, like any other form of coursework in a public examination, requires dependable moderation. What passes for dependability in the GCSE is to be found in the *Mandatory Code of Practice for the GCSE*, published in January 1993 by SEAC and endorsed by the Secretaries of State for Education and for Wales. Compliance with the Code is required under Section 5 of the 1988 Education Reform Act. In its preamble, the Code undertakes to 'ensure quality and consistency in the examining process across all examining groups offering GCSEs'.

With regard to Spoken English, the appropriate section reads: 'For syllabuses in which a weighting of 20 per cent or more is allocated to assessments from which no written outcome or artefact arises, moderators must either visit centres while assessment is in progress or check audiotaped or videotaped samples of assessed work.' The phrase 'no written outcome' is crucial, for, of course, the linguistic performances to be assessed are, by their nature, transitory. They may be caught on tape (about which I shall say more shortly), but that is not obligatory. It is sufficient that, over a stipulated period of time, teachers assess their candidates *sur le vif* in accordance with the levels of Attainment Target One and file a brief dated statement of each task, together with a mark. Obviously, even where some attempt is made to add a written record of what has taken place, a verbatim record is out of the question; and so, what remains for verification purposes is not, as with the written word, a given candidate's actual performance – to be retrieved and independently refereed at will – but, essentially, an individual teacher's uncorroborated and highly abbreviated judgment. These judgments will eventually comprise a set and furnish the basis for the candidate's final mark in Speaking and Listening. However, what the candidate actually said is entirely beyond the reach of scrutiny.

Enter the external moderator. There is no requirement in the Code that moderators visit centres more than once; none that every teacher in a centre be observed (let alone every candidate); none that every occasion of a given candidate's assessment be observed. Observation may indeed be confined to the teacher who is responsible for co-ordinating assessment in a centre, together with, although the Code does not prescribe it, an inspection of candidates' written records. Since these cannot be checked back anyway, large assumptions have to be made on the basis of small samples of teacher assessment in action: for example, that the Ten Levels as they stand will supply an objective basis for exact, standardised marking;

and that, if the co-ordinating teacher is deemed inaccurate when the external moderator calls, the whole centre may be deemed inaccurate and have its marks adjusted *en bloc*. What should happen if a co-ordinating teacher were to depart the scene after he or she had been moderated, but before the marks of that centre's candidates had been finalised, is left to the examinations boards to decide.

The moderation procedure itself is disconcertingly weak. But what really weakens Speaking and Listening, as it had Oral Communication, is the evanescent nature of the spoken word to begin with, even that heard and adjudicated by the external moderator. As for appeals, I have it in writing from one examinations board that 'as the evidence is ephemeral, it is not possible to institute an enquiry about results in respect of the Speaking and Listening component of the GCSE syllabus'. This ushers in the situation – surely unjust – that a candidate cannot appeal against every part of his or her assessment, despite the critical importance of every mark, particularly on the C/D grade boundary, because, thanks to the very nature of the examination, part of the work assessed is unavailable for review. In fact, what the Code says is: 'If the nature of the coursework is such as to make retention a problem, teachers must keep evidence (documentary, photographic, audiotaped or videotaped, as appropriate) sufficient to support their marking.' But such documentary evidence as is deemed appropriate is no evidence at all; and the other sorts are not mandatory. At best, this holds out the suspect prospect of a post-mortem without the body. That cannot be satisfactory.

There is, further, the matter of oral coursework for GCSE English Literature: it need not be externally moderated. That creates the bizarre situation wherein Centre A opts for written coursework and external moderation, but Centre B opts for as much oral coursework as possible. The first question is whether the two forms of coursework are comparable in principle. The second is whether the two centres are subject to the same degree of discipline. Clearly, the answer is negative in both cases. It is true that the number of marks at stake would be relatively small. But that is scarcely the point at issue.

But what if taping were required? Audiotape would be less than adequate, since the spoken word implies unspoken signals on the part of speaker and listener as well. That leaves videotape. However, even where coaching and editing do not take place, videotapes raise serious questions concerning comparability of resources from centre to centre. Some centres neither can afford, nor would wish to have to afford, video equipment, while others have at their disposal fully fitted studios and the time to use them. And some teachers are better at handling video equipment than others. Moreover, speaking about tapes in general, Professor Brian Cox, former chairman of the National Curriculum English Working Group, writes in *Cox on Cox*: 'Given the technical and administrative problems [of tapes] . . . and

the artificiality which would be introduced, we recommend that tape recordings . . . should not be used to moderate the assessment of oral performances.¹⁴ Quite so.

But the matter does not end even there. Speaking and Listening's being treated as a separate category of attainment reinforces an unfortunate characteristic of the National Curriculum throughout, namely, the artificial separation for assessment purposes of activities that more properly belong together. Further, each candidate has to be given a fair crack of the whip in Speaking and Listening if like is to be compared with like, and the time-consuming distortions of good classroom practice this can introduce bring disproportionately few benefits to English teaching. Finally, the compulsory assessing of Spoken English as part of the candidate's overall assessment makes it perfectly possible for candidates who are highly intelligent on paper but shy or simply lacking glibness to be unnecessarily disadvantaged when it comes to their overall grades. That is neither just nor even efficient. It is sometimes claimed that some candidates may be able to express their thoughts better orally than in writing and that they, too, should have the opportunity to show what they can do. But, leaving aside how they might be moderated, that is really a claim that candidates should be allowed the medium that suits them best. And it cuts both ways. That schools should enable children to become good speakers is an entirely valid contention. But compulsory assessment of Spoken English in the GCSE does not follow from it; nor *should* it follow from it if, among other causes for concern, it risks penalising good minds.

In sum, to attempt to catch and assess the spoken word is to attempt catching sunbeams in a sieve, an activity to which the levels of the National Curriculum lend no more than spurious respectability. And Spoken English's ephemeral nature automatically leads to the absence of what should be fundamental to examining procedure, namely, the verifiability of candidates' work. Consequently, despite laborious and costly but defective moderation, compulsory Spoken English brings unreliability in principle into a major public examination; and this unreliability will not be removed by any reformed National Curriculum that remotely resembles the present one. Further, Spoken English as an assessed component of the GCSE introduces both artificiality and the uneconomical use of time into the classroom. Finally, it has the potential to pull down the grades of good candidates. This situation, both obvious and avoidable, will serve neither national standards nor public confidence in the GCSE.

What Must Be Done

Spoken English – spoken Standard English – is, I repeat, an educational necessity. It is the most developed and, therefore, the most potent form of extant spoken English in this country; it is commonly accepted as *the* way to speak, with all that that entails in terms of social acceptance and social mobility; and it is the language of the highest reaches of society. Therefore, it is *every* child's entitlement. But it should be removed from formal national assessment altogether and returned to individual schools to foster in accordance with their perception of individual needs.

It may be feared that the return of Spoken English to schools may in practice lead to its neglect. That fear is understandable, but it derives at least in part from a misunderstanding of the relationship between the written and the spoken word. It is true that Spoken English has, by virtue of the fact that it implies a listener or listeners, a number of characteristics that are peculiar to it and that need to be mastered by anyone claiming proficiency in Spoken English. These include voice modulation and volume, modification of accent as needed, and timely repetition or rephrasing – not to mention the paralinguistic repertoire of eye contact, facial expression, gesture and so forth. What is not true is that these and other speech-related characteristics have to be taught with the same point-by-point deliberateness as, for example, French verb formations, though National Curriculum English imposes by statute a contrary view.

In a Centre for Policy Studies publication of 1987 entitled *English our English*, Dr John Marenbon wrote:

. . . whereas writing and reading are skills that require specific instruction, children learn to speak and listen just by being present at these activities. The child learns to speak and listen *better* in three main ways: first, by practice in the course of everyday life; second, by coming to understand more about all the various particular activities which can be the subjects of conversation . . .; third, by mastering the standard written language and thereby increasing his range of vocabulary, grasp of syntax and ability to choose standard forms correctly.⁵

Dr Marenbon does not exempt teachers from their responsibility to improve the Spoken English of their pupils. But what he makes clear is that mastery of spoken Standard English derives to an important extent from at least two kinds of mastery that are not specifically oral: intellectual mastery, or understanding; and mastery

of written Standard English. The benefits of understanding, questioning, commenting and explaining would find common acknowledgement among teachers of English. But the way in which good written English can lead to good Spoken English is less obvious.

In an article entitled 'Teaching Standard English',⁶ Professor Cox has made the same point as Dr Marenbon: 'If teachers concentrate on pupils' competence in written Standard English, pupils will gain sufficient knowledge of Standard English to be able to convert this into competence in spoken Standard English where appropriate.' In both cases, what is being emphasised is that the forms of written Standard English and the forms of spoken Standard English largely overlap. Moreover, it is the written form that may more properly be regarded as normative. Professor Cox himself quotes with approval Sir John Kingman's, 'It is the fact of being the written form that establishes it as the standard';⁷ and he adds the valid practical point that written English typically has to be more finished than Spoken English precisely because, being written, it has to stand on its own. It goes without saying that, in a school where written Standard English is insisted on, it will be difficult for anything other than spoken Standard English to be the vehicle of instruction and, *ipso facto*, the pupils' usual model of utterance. It also goes without saying that, in Professor Cox's words: 'If people need to learn a language for some real purpose, then they learn it. Furthermore, the desire to join a group is often very strong indeed.'⁸ For a whole range of reasons, then, Spoken English may safely be returned to schools. (Listening, which can leave its traces in written work, does not pose the same difficulties.)

6

Postscript

Written Standard English is a distinct form of English, and it supposes two concepts of correctness: saying something correctly and putting something correctly. The first means compliance with a standard. It has caused no end of trouble because it is, in the eyes of some, inseparable from authoritarianism, whereas it is a straightforward logical inevitability that a standard implies correctness. The second, and one that should be especially welcome to English teachers, supposes an essentially necessary convergence between correct thinking and correct expression.

The second concept, a thoroughly practical one, helps to explain why, in particular, grammar and punctuation matter. It is true that one can acquire considerable mastery of Standard English by absorbing the good practice of others. Indeed, such mastery is one of many benefits to be gained from reading good books. But mastery of Standard English goes further, as a distinction between knowledge and understanding makes clear. Knowledge of grammar and punctuation certainly holds out the prospect of good Standard English, since Standard English is rule-governed, and grammar and punctuation are part of the rule book. But understanding the discriminations they and other characteristics of Standard English imply is a qualitatively different story. What such understanding promotes is an increase in the mind's efficiency.

It was a radical error that the National Curriculum should seek to raise standards in English by means of multiple areas of attainment and a miscellany of stipulated activities; for, in addition to difficulties with assessment, an overload of work and the vulnerability to faddishness that is inseparable from comprehensive bureaucratic control, its dispersed character has led to the loss of any awareness of English as a subject with a highly complex content of its own. Just as those studying fashion need to know their fabrics, so those studying English need to know their materials, too – and thoroughly. They need, that is, to know what English is, as well as what can be done with it. That end can best be achieved not by tinkering with the present National Curriculum model but by rethinking it from scratch in terms of what a minimum curriculum of English should contain. There would then be little need for further prescription, since the resultant curriculum would, in itself, be the *fons et origo* of all other attainments in English – including good speaking.

Notes and References

1. From the 1994 and 1995 English Literature syllabuses of the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council (ULEAC). It is true that the criteria for Speaking and Listening allow a written response to spoken English, but only from Level 8 upwards. The dominant intention is undoubtedly to assess oracy.
2. Frater, Graham, 'Hardly Their Level Best', *The Times Educational Supplement*, 10.12.1993. Mr Frater refers to 'the redrafted English curriculum proposals published in October', but his examples derive from those published in September.
3. In *The National Curriculum and its Assessment: Final Report* of December 1993, Sir Ron Dearing envisages just a single calendar year (January 1995–January 1996) between publishing the new English Order and the arrival of syllabuses in schools. This suggests that the basic decisions have already been taken. Sir Ron's attachment to the philosophy of *English in the National Curriculum* is made clear in 4.36 of his Final Report ('It is unlikely that significant changes will be needed to the English curriculum . . .').
4. Cox, Brian, *Cox On Cox* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p. 131.
5. Marenbon, John, *English our English* (Centre for Policy Studies, 1987), p. 19.
6. In *Bilingualism and Languages Network* (1991), vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 1–3.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 1 and Kingman, Sir John, *Report of the Committee into the Teaching of the English Language* (HMSO, 1988), p. 14.
8. Cox, Brian, in *Bilingualism and Languages Network* (1991), vol. 1, no. 3, p. 3.