

Literacy in Schools –
When a large number of English Language students cannot define a
sentence, should schools really be teaching less grammar?

A couple of experts on the English language argue their points for and against the evolution of language, sparked by Government's decision to scrap grammar lessons in primary schools

No, thinks Language Professor Sally Forty, who lives in Oxford with her husband and children

Change is a fact of life, and we have to accept this. But we don't have to help it on its way. "Education, education, education!" was the promise of the Government, but over the last decade, what have we seen? A sure and not-so-steady decline in literacy in children; their vocabularies have been crippled, their sentence structures held back, and it is doubtful whether they could even define common grammar points, let alone apply them!

But I know that you don't need a report from a newspaper to tell you this, though, because you can hear it on the streets. "Right, blood?" "Yeah, mate." will be the monotone introduction to conversations regularly punctuated with expletives. The same word can be repeated several times within a sentence. Even when younger people do have a hash at more complex vocabulary, the way in which they construct their sentences means that half of it is incomprehensible to anybody over thirty. Just how describing a girl to be "fit as f***" makes sense, or is even supposed to be a compliment, I'm not sure. And now the Government want to aid this decline!

Prescriptivism worked well for generations, why now does it all have to change? When will it be accepted that we have to stop this so-called "progress" and return to the methods which we know will work? It is not realistic to think that all changes will be for the betterment of society today, and this persistent sliding away from prescriptive teaching and general school of thought is a prime example.

Many younger people are already showing the negative effects, and even some adults as well – in case you hadn't already noticed. An article in the Guardian reports that "In 2001, the former Department for Education and Skills launched the Skills for Life strategy with the aim of helping 2.25 million adults by 2010. Two years later, it

Yes, thinks novelist Philip Smith, who lives in York with his wife

We're supposed to be against prejudice, and it's clear that the educational system is taking the right steps. Prescriptivism is prejudice in language. Who are the ones who decide what good English is and how it should be written? That would be the middle classes, the "educated", the influential, who all have a rather biased point of view, and basically want everyone speaking like clones of them. We just sweep under the carpet the fact that Britain has a richly diverse linguistic heritage in its different regional dialects, all of which are wholly comprehensible to most people in the country.

Britain has a history brimful with linguistic creativity, displayed primarily through a lack of prescriptivism. Some of the most famous writers in our cultural history invented words. Shakespeare for example, came up with more than 1,700 of his own words, like "dauntless" and "besmirch" and manipulated the language in his own ways, irreversibly altering the development of English then and now. Can you imagine the response in schools if a student began creating and employing new words in their schoolwork? Words like "tweeting" and "blogging" seem to be frowned upon in schools, even though these are now a part of our language.

This elitist attitude of conformism in language – which is frankly a misplaced sense of pride and culture – is responsible for the crippling of creativity in younger generations. Yes, we need some general rules, in order to make our speech clear and logical, and differentiate one written word from another, but such extreme prescriptivism as is currently present in the school system is just ridiculous. It explains, quite clearly, why Ofsted issues such damning reports as, "students are entering secondary school possessing 'literacy skills... with attainment below Level 4 (the standard expected of 11-year-olds)'" . Ofsted and other systems judge language as they

established by survey that 75% of the working-age adult population had numeracy skills below the level of a good pass at GCSE and 56% had similar literacy skills.” Just bring back grammar schools, I say.

These so-called “progressive” thinkers up in Government labelled our previous, prescriptive methods “unsuitable”, and thought that we were all defective. Well, if there’s anything in the school system nowadays which could be described as defective, it would most certainly be the system itself. If we were to teach prescriptively, then all classes across Britain would use the same language to an extent, and certainly be able to understand each other. There is too much relativism in our attitudes to grammar and correctness nowadays, and this is a key weakness in our language, which could easily be eradicated given our nationwide educational boards in place today. There’s nothing wrong with standards and we need to be teaching a standard grammar nationwide.

For our children to succeed in a global marketplace which requires high levels of written and spoken communication, the rather poor standards of grammar which we have at present just won’t cut it. They don’t have to all have poetry streaming from their fingertips, but really, whose child today could name and define even the basic features of grammar? On these flimsy foundations, it’s little wonder that they struggle not only with their own language, but also languages of other countries. It’s really a very pitiful situation. So, what are we going to do about it?

think it should be, not as it is. To them, children’s diversity of language has no value at all, it’s just deficient.

The clearest link is probably found in modern music. You just need to turn on the radio, play a CD or switch on MTV and you will hear English employed in entirely non-prescriptive forms. This applies even to such artists as Noisettes, Paloma

Faith and Lily Allen, who are considered more representative of modern culture. The lyrics of music are as strong an influence on modern language as any of the great epics of the past were, mainly because it is the music being produced today which affects the language being employed by the youths of today. These are the ones who will shape and craft our language in the future, and this new music will play a large role in it, with its non-standard grammar.

It’s not true now that the shocking combination of “he” with “don’t” is confined solely to rap and R’n’B, but it can now be found in the general mainstream of music, and even the more artistic and creative musical genres, such as rock and the youth “indie” movement. It is not true now that non-standard English is only for the uneducated working class, or that people cannot understand it. It is not true now that we must teach purely prescriptive English. So, my message to all the young people reading this – because believe it or not, they can read! – is this: break the rules and use language as you want. Language changes, and you’re the ones changing it. As for my message to the teachers: let them break the rules.