

Assessment of Spoken Language in the New GCSE English Language



Introduction

In September 2015 students will begin studying the new GCSE in English language (graded 9 to 1) for first award in 2017. This GCSE is based on new subject content, including the requirement that students are assessed on their ability to demonstrate their spoken language skills.

We have already announced that the outcomes of the assessment of students' spoken language skills will be reported in a separate grade and will not contribute to the 9-to-1 grade for the subject. The latter grade will be based on students' performance in their written exams only. The background to this decision can be found on our website.¹

In July 2014 we launched a consultation² on how spoken language assessments should be conducted, assessed and graded. In that consultation, we made a number of proposals. We also said that we had asked the exam boards to carry out some trials with schools on how those proposals would work in practice.

The exam boards carried out those trials between January and April 2015 and have reported their findings to us. We have used feedback from our consultation,³ teachers involved in the trials and the exam boards to help shape our decisions, which we set out in this document.

¹ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031163546/http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2013-06-11-gcse-reform-consultation-june-2013.pdf>

² <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141110161323/http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/spoken-language-skills-in-gcse-english-language/>

³ www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-english-language-assessment-of-spoken-language-skills

We want GCSE English language qualifications which allow all students the chance to develop and demonstrate their spoken language skills. These skills are an important element within the qualification. We also want to ensure the best educational outcomes, through valid and reliable assessments that are manageable for schools.

Summary of decisions

- Spoken language assessments will be assessed by teachers (although we have made provision for students to be directly assessed by the exam boards where desirable or necessary) using a set of criteria that will be common across all exam boards.
- There will be three levels of achievement, “Pass”, “Merit” and “Distinction”, and one outcome indicating the required standard was not met. This will be called “Not Classified”.
- A student must meet all of the criteria in relation to a level to be awarded that level. The assessments will not involve the use of marks and marking schemes.
- Exam boards will monitor the assessment of spoken language where this is undertaken by teachers by requiring schools to submit audio-visual recordings of a sample of their students.

We are now consulting on proposals⁴ for:

- Schools to provide a written statement indicating that they have taken reasonable steps to ensure that their students have undertaken the spoken language assessment;
- all outcomes to be reported on certificates, including Not Classified;
- the rules and guidance needed to put in place our decisions.

Our decisions balance these priorities.

⁴ www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-reform-regulations-for-english-language

How spoken language will be assessed in the new GCSE English language

In the new GCSE English language, taught from September 2015, teachers may conduct spoken language assessments and make judgements about the performance of their students. Students' results will be reported as a separate grade on certificates, alongside the 9-to-1 grade for the part of the qualification assessed by examination.

Conducting the assessment

Assessment

Spoken language assessments will be assessed by teachers (although we have made provision for students to be directly assessed by the exam boards where desirable or necessary) using a set of criteria that will be common across all exam boards.

Monitoring

In our consultation, we said that current speaking and listening assessments have some shortcomings because, in many cases, after a student has been assessed, no evidence exists to support the decisions that have been made about their skills. This makes it more challenging for exam boards to monitor internal assessment.

We therefore proposed in our consultation that students' performances should be recorded to provide this evidence. We asked respondents whether the benefits to marking, moderation and review outweighed the costs of recordings and to identify positive and negative effects of recording on students, teachers, schools, colleges and exam boards. We also asked exam boards to consider these questions as part of the trials they undertook with schools.

Some respondents to the consultation and many teachers involved in the trials raised concerns about recording every student's performance. Some respondents identified issues for particular groups of students who may be uncomfortable being filmed or whose parents may not consent to their child being filmed. Others told us about potential manageability issues, associated with availability of recording equipment and the time and space required to upload and store recordings on school computer systems.

The exam boards also carried out a technical investigation into the implications of requiring all students to be audio-visually recorded during their presentations.

We were told that there could be significant issues associated with requiring all students to be audio-visually recorded, and a range of similar and additional issues if recordings were to be audio-only.

We strongly believe that measures must be put in place to monitor internal assessment to ensure it is reliable, accurate and consistent. At the same time, we also recognise that arrangements must be proportionate and manageable for schools and exam boards. We have therefore reconsidered our original proposal.

Where spoken language assessments are assessed internally by a school, we have decided that a sample of students from that school will be audio-visually recorded to allow exam boards to monitor assessment. The details of the sample and how this will work in practice will be confirmed in exam boards' specifications. We believe that, with a sample, we can have sufficient confidence that spoken language results are valid and reliable without creating potentially significant manageability issues for schools.

To give us further reassurance, we will require the exam boards to consider additional ways in which they can monitor internal assessment.

Spoken language statement

Spoken language skills are a key part of the subject content for the new GCSE English language and they are a mandatory part of the new specifications. To ensure that all students are given the opportunity to be assessed on their spoken language skills, we propose in our consultation on conditions, requirements and guidance⁵ that schools will be required to confirm that they have taken reasonable steps to make sure that their students complete the spoken language assessment. We are calling this a spoken language statement.

Details of what a spoken language statement will involve and the action exam boards will take if it is not provided will be confirmed in the specifications.

Reporting outcomes

Number of levels

In our consultation, we described how we could report outcomes for spoken language assessments. We discussed the possibility of a pass-or-fail model, where results identify simply whether a student has demonstrated an acceptable standard or not.

We said that we thought this approach was inappropriate in this case as spoken language skills can be demonstrated to varying degrees. We then discussed the possibility of using five levels, as used in current speaking and listening assessments. We did recognise, however, that using five levels, which requires teachers to make fine judgements about a student's performance, suggests a degree of precision that might not be realised.

⁵ www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-reform-regulations-for-english-language

We therefore proposed that students' performance should be reported using three levels of achievement and that there should also be an outcome to indicate performance where the required standard had not been met. We said that we thought this would provide sufficient differentiation between students, and enable employers and others to identify students with the skill level appropriate for particular roles. We also thought that students' performance can be sufficiently accurately and consistently reported using three levels.

In our consultation, 50 per cent of respondents agreed with our proposal for three levels and an outcome indicating that the standard had not been met. They said that this was a straightforward way of describing different levels of attainment and would be understood by users of the qualification. Some respondents said it would be difficult to differentiate further between students as the evidence of attainment is more limited in spoken language assessments than, for example, in current speaking and listening assessments.

Thirty-seven per cent of respondents disagreed, saying that three levels did not provide sufficient differentiation between students. Others thought a pass-or-fail approach would be appropriate.

In the trials carried out by the exam boards, three levels were used. Feedback from teachers in the trials shows that almost all the participating teachers were either confident or very confident in applying the criteria within each of the three levels.

We have decided therefore to proceed with our original proposal of three levels of achievement, with one additional outcome indicating the required standard had not been met.

Titles of levels

In our consultation, we proposed that the three levels could be titled Pass, Merit and Distinction. We also proposed that there could be a 'fail' outcome. We highlighted that other nomenclatures could be used, and we sought feedback on our proposals and suggestions for alternatives.

We received mixed feedback on the proposed titles. Around 40 per cent of respondents agreed with our proposals for Pass, Merit and Distinction, saying these are well-understood terms commonly used to describe degrees of performance, and would therefore be easily interpreted by users of the qualification.

Despite some respondents not favouring our proposed titles, overall there was no overwhelming response in favour of a specified alternative to Pass, Merit and Distinction. The exam boards used these terms during the trials they carried out and, in general, the teachers involved were comfortable with them.

We have therefore decided that levels will be described as Pass, Merit or Distinction, with Distinction being the highest level available.

We did, however, receive significant feedback about the use of the term fail. Many respondents felt this was an inappropriate way to describe performance below the required standard, and this view was shared by the teachers involved in the trials.

We have considered those views carefully and have decided, on the balance of the evidence we have, that this outcome should be described as Not Classified.

This, of course, does not include students who are exempted from spoken language assessment by reason of disability. Arrangements for how outcomes should be reported for these students will be considered in our work on reasonable adjustments under s.96 of the Equality Act 2010, and we will confirm decisions in due course.

Certificates

Our regulations require exam boards to issue certificates which are accurate, complete, clear and readily capable of being understood by users of qualifications. This applies to all qualifications, including the spoken language grade in GCSE English language.

Certificates will only be awarded for spoken language if students also achieve at least a grade 1 in the other parts of the qualification. This is similar to the current approach for speaking and listening. (Students who do not achieve at least a grade G in the other parts of the qualification do not have a certificate awarded for speaking and listening.) While such students would not receive a certificate, they will be made aware of their result for spoken language via the results slip.

Where a certificate is issued, we are proposing in our consultation on conditions, requirements and guidance that all outcomes for spoken language will be reported on that certificate⁶. That includes a Not Classified outcome.

If a student does not achieve the required standard in the spoken language assessment but achieves a grade 1 or above in the other parts of the qualification, they will be awarded a certificate on which their 9-to-1 grade will be reported alongside a Not Classified result for spoken language.

Marking the assessment

In our consultation, we said there were a number of possible models for assessing spoken language skills. We proposed that teachers should identify the level which

⁶ www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-reform-regulations-for-english-language. Certificate and reporting requirements for students with exemptions are being considered separately.

describes each student's performance. We said that this could be done using either a marks-based approach, similar to current speaking and listening assessments, or a non-marks approach which does not involve the award of marks.

An approach which does not involve marks requires teachers to identify in which level the student's performance falls. The marks-based approach requires teachers also to judge, using a mark scheme, the student's performance within the level, for example 5 to 10 marks for performance at the lowest level, 11 to 15 the middle level and 16 to 20 for the top level.

Slightly less than half of the respondents felt a marks-based approach would be beneficial as it could allow greater differentiation between students; others thought a non-marks approach provides the same clear outcomes with a more straightforward assessment approach for teachers.

The work carried out by the exam boards in the trials explored both models. Teachers used exemplars of students' performance to apply the non-marks based approach. Feedback from the trials was generally positive, and the majority of teachers involved felt confident or very confident in applying the criteria within each level without the need for a mark scheme.

We have therefore decided that a non-marks approach will be used. To be awarded a level, a student must meet all the criteria within that level. Marks will not be used and it is not a best-fit approach.

Following consultation, the finalised criteria will be included in specifications and exam boards will provide guidance and exemplification to teachers on how to assess their students using this model.

Next steps

Having confirmed our approach, we now plan to consult on the rules and guidance for GCSE English language which exam boards follow in designing their qualifications.

The exam boards currently have accredited qualifications for GCSE English language. The specifications for these qualifications currently contain a statement saying that detailed arrangements for spoken language are to be confirmed. Exam boards will design the spoken language information for the new qualifications against the rules we put in place, and updated specifications, including the finalised assessment criteria and monitoring arrangements, will be available in advance of first teaching in September.

We have decided that exam boards will not be required to seek new accreditation for their qualifications once our rules and guidance around spoken language assessments are in place.