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The grammar, punctuation and spelling test: an evaluation of the disconnect between declarative knowledge and applied knowledge

Angela Jayne Kilpatrick

Centre for Collaborative Learning, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This research contributes to the limited literature on the Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS) Test by examining its value for retention and application of knowledge to pupils' writing, over a period of 10 years. It explores the disconnect between declarative knowledge and applied knowledge to writing, highlighting broader tensions between policy and classroom practice. Through an analysis of pupil GPS Tests and writing samples at Key Stages 2 and 4, it shows that while the test improves metalanguage, it does not necessarily translate to improvements in written composition, a finding with implications for pedagogy, curriculum design and testing. If the purpose of the GPS Test is to improve decontextualised grammatical knowledge, then it could be considered a success. However, if its implementation is intended to raise writing standards, then much more needs to be done to address the disconnect between knowing grammar and applying it in meaningful ways to improve pupils' writing. This paper calls for a reduction in metalinguistic knowledge taught at primary and breadth across Key Stages 3 to 4.

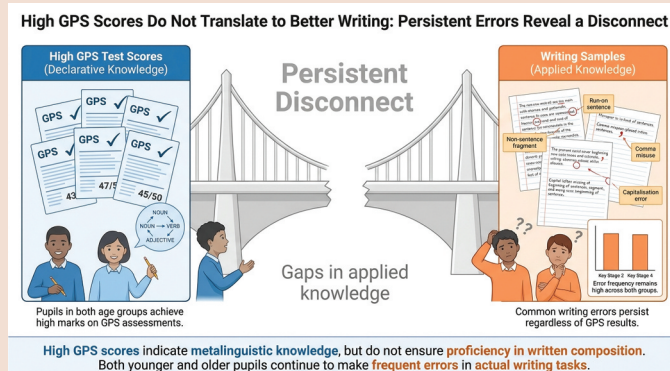
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CONTACT Angela Jayne Kilpatrick  AJKilpatrick@lancashire.ac.uk  University of Central Lancashire, Preston, Lancashire PR1 2HE, United Kingdom

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Introduction

Concerns over literacy rates have been a key driver of grammar policy in the last two decades. In 2012, national data revealed that 17% of the 7-year-olds and 23% of 11-olds were not meeting expected standards in writing (DfE 2012). This led the government to refocus heavily on grammar in the 2013 National Curriculum (DfE 2013). This placed a stronger emphasis on giving pupils the metalinguistic knowledge from Key Stage 1 to 2. In addition to this, the Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS) test was implemented to assess pupils' knowledge in these areas at Key Stage 2. This marked a turning point as to how grammar and punctuation were assessed and measured and ensured that all teachers taught grammar as a statutory requirement, the results of which are published nationally.

Since 2016, reading attainment has remained stable, while writing standards have statistically seen some marginal improvements (DfE 2019; Ofsted 2022) – arguably this may be due to how writing is now assessed for grammatical features (Cushing 2021). However, writing attainment remains the lowest area of performance at 72%, with 73% for grammar, punctuation and spelling, 75% reading and 80% for phonics, and persistent gaps in attainment remain for socio-economically disadvantaged pupils (DfE 2025). Despite curricula reforms in 2014, 28% of pupils are still not meeting expected standards in writing and 31% are not attaining level 2 in English at Key Stage 4 (DfE 2025).

While the presence of grammar in the curriculum is now broadly accepted, the central debate has shifted from *why* grammar should be taught to *how* and to *what* extent (Clark et al. 2019). The National Curriculum recommends teaching metalinguistic knowledge and grammar in relation to reading, speaking and writing (DfE 2014a), which is contextualised grammar. Pupils are expected to master a vast array of grammatical terminology for the GPS Test. However, this paper questions whether declarative grammatical knowledge measured by the GPS Test transfers into improved writing performance. It is also unclear whether teaching grammar in the context of writing is happening in practice, as research suggests the test has led to decontextualised grammar teaching (Cushing 2021). Teacher autonomy in curriculum delivery, pressure to teach for the test and lack of teacher subject-specific knowledge further contributes to variability in pedagogy (Giovannelli 2016; Merisi, Msani, and Mba 2023; Myhill, Jones, and Watson 2013; Ofsted 2012; Watson 2012). Despite these ongoing issues, pedagogical approaches were not the focus of the recent curriculum review (DfE 2025).

A lack of coherence between the primary and secondary curriculum has been acknowledged (Cushing 2019) and this may impede progression into secondary school (DfE 2025). Teaching grammar in the context of writing does not appear to have the same emphasis at Key Stage 3 to 4 (DfE 2013, 2014a). Linguistic terminology is statutory in primary and non-statutory in secondary, meaning there may be less impetus to teach it at secondary (Myhill 2021). Moreover, Cushing (2019) found that pupils enter Key Stage 3 with a set of grammatical terms but with little knowledge of how to apply them to writing.

The Francis review acknowledges that more needs to be done to support pupils with progression to secondary school and assessing writing at Key Stage 2 D (DfE

2025). It identifies that the focus on excessive grammatical knowledge at Key Stages 1 and 2 has resulted in grammar being taught in isolation, which is contrary to the research evidence on how grammar should be taught in the context of writing for it to be effective (Myhill et al. 2011). This review proposes to revise the GPS Test to assess application of knowledge to writing and to include a formative assessment at Key Stage 3 to identify gaps in knowledge, but nevertheless fails to include guidance on pedagogical approaches for applying grammar to writing. This present study supports the view that explicit focus should be made on applying grammar in meaningful ways to improve written composition and less emphasis should be placed on the metalinguistic knowledge tested at Key Stage 2 (Myhill et al. 2012).

Grammar and writing

Learning to write is an essential multifaceted skill involving composition and transcription. It can be challenging, as it requires both low-order skills such as spelling, grammar and punctuation as well as high-order skills such as organising text and choosing a formal register. A lack of competency with low order skills can impede progression of higher-order skills (Hughes and Schwab 2010), giving credence to the need for pupils to have mastery over lower-order skills, such as grammar and punctuation.

The term “grammar” has suffered much bad press over the years but nonetheless has stood the test of time across the battlefields of the anti-grammar war perpetrated by politicians, teachers, tabloid writers and the general public. As Myhill, Lines, and Watson (2011, 1) state, “grammar has become inextricably intertwined with notions of correctness and standards”. This has inherently led to a discourse around “good” grammar versus “bad” grammar (Halliday and Webster 2007). Pre-1960, traditional grammar involved parsing sentences, labelling word classes and learning grammar as a standalone subject, disconnected from other aspects of English, such as reading and writing (Giovannelli 2014). It included “drilling correct forms” and “learning grammar by heart” (Carter 1990). As Locke (2005) states, grammar did not appear to be taught in such a manner that would help improve writing. It was detached from the reality of how language is used in everyday talk and was an “idealised”, prescriptive view of how language ought to be used (Halliday 2012). Often when the term “grammar” is used, it refers to this concept of “traditional grammar”.

What is meant by grammar is often ill-defined with no clear established boundaries (Hudson 1992). It can include everything from vocabulary and punctuation to semantics and has come to encompass many different meanings (Myhill 2018). For some, it is to break the language down into its simplest form to examine “how it works” (Crystal 2004); for others it is to study grammar as a source of “making meaning” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013). Misunderstandings and multiple interpretations of grammar have hampered the debate in both public and educational spheres. The lack of consensus on what “grammar” refers to makes the position of a researcher somewhat challenging.

To compound the issue, grammar is not clearly defined by the DfE. The National Curriculum glossary and GPS Test cover a wide spectrum of topics, such as word classes, clauses, tense and correct standard English conventions, and so one can surmise that this is their current understanding of what grammar entails. The level of prescriptivism is

apparent: it focuses on a deficit model of grammar where non-standard English is seen as inferior, despite many influential policy reforms since the 1980s (Carter 1990; Cox 1989; Kingman 1988) which have challenged prescriptivism and advocated for a Knowledge About Language (KAL) approach, where pupils use their implicit knowledge of language to discover how language works.

One school of thought posits that formal grammar (i.e. traditional grammar) is an autonomous system, “a system of arbitrary forms based on abstract principles unrelated to other aspects of cognition or human endeavor”, a view unlikely to enthuse the general learner (Langacker 2008, 13). On the other hand, in a functional approach, grammar is viewed as a resource for making meaning. It is used to both express and construe meaning from speech and texts; it is context-dependent and therefore cannot be divorced from meaning, aligning with Langacker’s (2008) theory of Cognitive grammar. Grammar, in this sense, is our primary means of engaging in communication and making sense of the world, a perspective that may have more appeal for learners.

According to Crystal (2004, 8), “Everyone who speaks English knows grammar, intuitively and unconsciously” via acquiring language in the early years of life. Children appear to be predisposed to learn the internal structures of grammar without explicit instruction (Chomsky 1975). Thus, a person instinctively knows how to construct a sentence in speech through an implicit understanding of grammatical patterns. The National Curriculum similarly notes that “The grammar of our first language is learnt naturally and implicitly through interactions with other speakers and from reading” (DfE 2013, 64). It also acknowledges that to use language effectively in writing requires an explicit understanding of grammar. Pupils may struggle to apply their implicit metalinguistic knowledge to their writing if it is not explicitly taught, and they are not given opportunities to discover grammar through texts (Myhill et al. 2012).

Nevertheless, teaching linguistic terminology simply for its own sake is unlikely to improve writing (Richmond 1990). The analogy provided by Myhill, Lines and Watson (2011, 2) is apt: “being taught to identify and label the component parts of the combustion engine is of little use if you want to know how to mend your car”. Similarly, a student needs to understand how the parts of speech can be used to produce better writing. This follows a KAL approach which looks at how language fits together to make meaning, rooted in a Hallidayan principle that focus on the function of language rather than its form (Carter 1990).

For the purpose of this study, grammar includes sentence structures, clause structures, word classes and the rules for constructing sentences. It advocates for a more nuanced KAL approach where grammar is about making meaning from text (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013) and looking at how patterns in language are used to construe meaning. It focuses on grammar at the sentence level as an understanding of sentence/clause structures inextricably linked to effective use of punctuation. For example, Hudson (2001) highlights a study where pupils’ punctuation scores improved after being taught clause structures. Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2013, 1243) state that “effective punctuation is underpinned by grammatical understanding” and knowledge of grammar helps pupils to understand how to structure and punctuate sentences appropriately. For example, breaking a sentence down into its constituent parts and identifying the finite verb helps the writer to identify what a sentence is as shown below (Berry 2016).

I	/	love	/	Paris.
Subject		Verb		Complement

From this basic analysis, we can ascertain that this is a sentence and a comma is not needed as commas are not placed between the subject and verb. This example may be challenging to explain without appropriate terminology. One of the benefits of knowing grammatical terminology is that it provides a metalanguage to talk about language, which can be useful for both teachers and pupils when discussing writing (Fontich 2016; Hudson 2001; Myhill, Jones, and Watson 2013).

Despite the contention around the usefulness of teaching grammar, there has historically been a dearth of empirical evidence. Much of the research previously reviewed focussed on how teaching traditional grammar and decontextualised grammar have little effect on improving writing (see Andrews, Torgerson, Beverton, Locke, et al. 2004). It is somewhat incongruous, however, to hypothesise in the first instance that teaching grammar in isolation to writing would improve written composition.

Myhill et al. (2011) has provided robust empirical evidence to show that teaching grammar can improve writing when taught in the context of reading and writing – crucial evidence absent from the previous theoretical deliberations. However, one of the questions regarding metalanguage which has been longstanding throughout the debates is how much grammatical terminology is enough and at what point should it be taught. According to Kingman (1988, 13):

... the evidence we have received stresses that these terms must be acquired mainly through an exploration of the language pupils use, rather than through exercises out of context. ... Before 1960, it was usual to overemphasise parts of speech, sentence structure and punctuation and to teach these through exercises unrelated to the child's real needs.

Wyse et al. (2022) found that teaching grammar for 6–7-year-olds did not improve pupils' writing and called for a review of how much grammar is covered at primary level, claiming that current practices may not be the best way to help pupils learn how to write. It is worth noting that Halliday (2012) suggests that grammar should be taught at secondary level and the current iteration of the National Curriculum has chosen to do this in reverse, frontloading complex grammar at the beginning of a child's education when perhaps they do not have the mental maturity to understand such concepts in relation to writing.

Research suggests that metalinguistic terminology may be a barrier for the less able pupils and that teaching grammar via "pattern finding" may help to address this (Jones, Myhill, and Bailey 2013; Myhill et al. 2011). Richmond (1990) postulates that it is through reflecting on language use that appropriate terminology can be introduced - an approach in line with Carter's (1990) work. Myhill (2018) provides a compelling stance that making meaning through grammar supersedes the need for learning metalinguistic features. Thus, knowledge about language must come first, and terminology can be introduced at meaningful points through a process of reflecting on a pupil's implicit grammatical knowledge. Hudson (1992) is a proponent of this type of grammar teaching, where the aim is not to understand grammar for its own sake but to use grammatical patterns to improve writing, though he points out that teacher linguistic knowledge is required in order to address the anomalies to the patterns in language. This requires deeper learning, and the curriculum must allow time for this type of approach.

The GPS Test

As GPS Test results are made public and are used as a judgement on how well a school is performing, this puts pressure on teachers for their pupils to perform well. The GPS Test influences how grammar is taught and can lead to teaching for the test (Cushing 2021; Safford 2016), feature spotting, basic labelling of words and a surface approach to learning grammar (Cushing 2019). High-stake tests can distort pedagogical priorities (Myhill 2021) and lead to pupils viewing grammar as a means for passing a test (Cushing and Helks 2021). As a result, teachers increasingly rely on “decontextualised mini grammar lessons” (Myhill 2021, 273). Nevertheless, Hudson (2014) states that, given the current education policy, “if it’s not tested, it won’t be taught”. Therefore, the test is favourable in ensuring grammar instruction in the curriculum.

The test focuses on identifying formal features of language and metalanguage. The examples are invented, decontextualised and not reflective of everyday language use (Cushing 2021). Cox (1989, 82) was opposed to the testing of grammar, stating that “terms should not be tested out of context”, yet the current GPS Test does just that. Langacker (2008) argues that grammatical structures cannot be understood independently of the meanings they express and the contexts in which they occur; grammar is a symbolic system in which form and meaning are inseparable. Therefore, testing grammar through isolated, invented examples is counter-intuitive to the contextual nature of grammatical knowledge. Some might say that the GPS Test is a step back towards traditional grammar, vaguely reminiscent of drill-like exercises, and as Carter (1990, 105) points out, knowledge is likely to be “quickly forgotten” post-test. Furthermore, as grammar is not tested at secondary school, this has widened the disconnect between primary and secondary curriculum (Cushing 2019; Cushing and Helks 2021).

The GPS assessment remains a source of contention and perpetuates inconsistencies in grammar teaching practices at Key Stages 2 and 3 (Cushing 2021). Safford’s (2016) research on the impact of the GPS Test indicated that teachers do not agree on whether the test helps to improve writing, though their confidence in teaching grammar has increased since its implementation (Safford 2016). The test exemplifies a wider shift in educational policy towards performativity and accountability, in which grammar is framed as a series of testable conventions rather than as a resource for making meaning from texts (Cushing 2019; Myhill 2021). There remains a paucity of research on the GPS Test, as current research is based on teachers’ perceptions via surveys and interviews, rather than student outcomes; it relies predominantly on memory and subjective accounts with potential for bias (Cushing 2019; Safford 2016). No studies to date have provided empirical evidence on pupils’ retention of GPS knowledge and its application to writing in primary or secondary schools.

Research Questions

This study sought to evaluate the value of the GPS Test in relation to pupils’ application/retention of knowledge to their writing. It forms part of a larger study which included teacher interviews (Kilpatrick 2026). Given the gaps in research on the GPS Test and lack of empirical studies which look at the application of GPS knowledge to writing, the research focused on the following:

- (1) pupils' application/retention of knowledge, acquired through the GPS Test, to their writing.
- (2) the impact of the GPS Test over the last 10 years in relation to grammar teaching and pupil knowledge.

Methods

Research design

Although the project spans over 10 years, it does not constitute a longitudinal study in the strictest sense as it was not possible to follow the same cohort of pupils, owing to reasons of ethical clearance. Instead, the design aligns more closely with a comparative cross-sectional study helping to identify disparities in two distinct cohorts at two separate time points. The methodology draws from the Myhill et al. (2011) study by using an adapted version of the linguistic coding framework (see [Appendix A](#)) and complementing this with an interview with the teacher and a lesson observation. The study is unique in that it compares the analysis to the GPS tests results with two different cohorts of pupils: one aged 10–11 and one aged 15–16. The first cohort comprised pupils completing Key Stage 2 in 2014, the year in which the GPS Test was first introduced. The second cohort consisted of pupils completing Key Stage 4 in 2024 who, unlike the earlier cohort, had experienced GPS instruction throughout their schooling. The research project uses a mixed method approach: a quantitative and qualitative analysis of pupils' GPS Test results and written work. It compares the GPS results and writing performance of both cohorts and subsequently contrasts 2014 and 2024 data to evaluate the enduring effects of the GPS Test and assess the extent to which the government's initiative has achieved its intended outcomes. The study provides two snapshots of the usefulness of the test at two different points in time: one at the point of its initial implementation and another after nearly a decade of embedded GPS curriculum practice.

Participants and data collection

Data collected from 2014 primary schools served as a baseline for the study. A sample of 18 pupils aged 10–11 was selected by the teacher from different bands based on pupils' ability to ensure equal representation across attainment levels. The 2014 pupils had taken the GPS Test as part of the end of Key Stage 2 statutory tests.

For the 2024 secondary school data, a sample of 11 pupils age 15–16 was selected by the teacher. This cohort was smaller than the 2014 cohort due to the challenges of releasing the pupils from the curriculum at the time of their GCSEs. This also meant that the distribution across sets was unequal: six were from set 1 with one pupil with SEN, three from set 2 and two from set 3, with one with SEN. The 2024 pupils took 2014 GPS tests under exam conditions. The 2024 cohort would have received grammar instruction from Key Stage 1 of their schooling over 11 years from when the new curriculum was brought in during 2014 and would have taken the GPS Test in 2020.

Data analysis

The 2014 papers were officially marked as part of the SATs (statutory tests) process. Discrepancies identified between the original marking and the GPS marking scheme (Standards and Testing Agency 2014) were corrected by the researcher to ensure reliability and prevent distortion in comparative analyses. The 2024 GPS papers were marked by the researcher in accordance with the same marking scheme. Errors relating to punctuation or capitalisation were marked strictly, and use of the Oxford comma was judged incorrect in line with the marking scheme. Questions pertaining to vocabulary, tense, standard English and punctuation features not relevant to the writing analysis were excluded.

Results

GPS analysis

For the 2014 cohort, the average GPS score was 43/50, with individual scores from 36 to 50. Questions which pupils found most challenging were Q33 (contractions), Q47 (apostrophes) and Q45 (commas with paired adjectives). Difficulties with word-class identification were evident in Q42 and Q50 on nouns. Q50 (word classes) proved particularly problematic, as this required pupil to recognise “walk” functioning as a noun in the sentence: “Joe crossed the road and continued his walk”. In this context, “walk” functions as a direct object and is preceded by the possessive determiner “his”, signalling its nominal role. Many pupils appeared to default to classifying “walk” as a verb, possibly influenced by prior teaching, which labels verbs as “doing words”. One pupil’s annotation explicitly reference the terminology “doing word” for verb and “naming word” for noun, suggesting that teaching practices may have contributed to these misclassifications. Pupils were able to identify clauses well, though question 40 (clauses) shown in Figure 1 caused some confusion. This may be attributable to the fact that the main clause in the question resembled a phrase and did not contain an object, potentially obscuring its grammatical function, as illustrated in the example below:

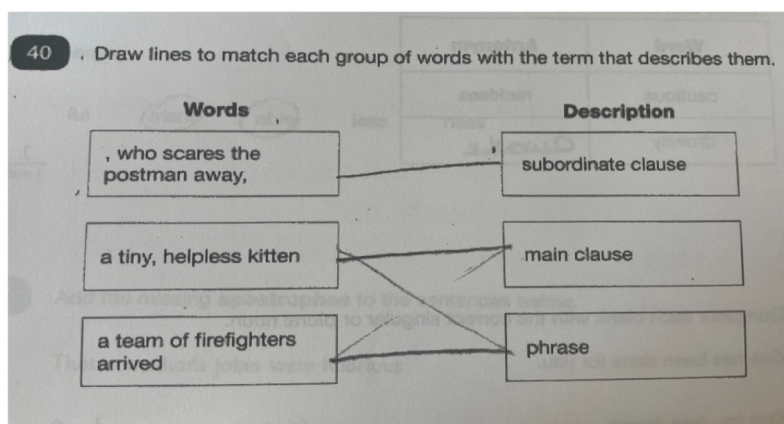


Figure 1. Example of question 40 answered incorrectly from pupil’s GPS Test 2014.

Table 1. GPS results in question for 2014 and 2024 data.

Key: GPS Questions selected	2014 (18 pupils)		2024 (11 pupils)	
Q15 Punctuation – listing commas	0	0%	2	18%
Q16 Word classes - nouns and verbs	0	0%	1	9%
Q19 Punctuation – full stops and capitals	2	11%	2	18%
Q21 Word classes - adjectives	3	18%	1	9%
Q22 Punctuation – full stops	0	0%	1	9%
Q24 Punctuation – full stops and capital letters	2	11%	2	18%
Q25 Connectives – subordinating conjunction (<i>Before</i>)	0	0%	7	63%
Q26 Punctuation – full stops and clause boundaries	1	0.5%	1	9%
Q27 Connectives – subordinating conjunction (<i>when</i>)	1	0.5%	1	9%
Q29 Punctuation – listing commas	3	16%	3	27%
Q33 Punctuation - contraction	5	27%	2	18%
Q34 Word classes - nouns	3	16%	1	9%
Q35 Word classes - nouns, verb, article and adverb	1	0.5%	2	18%
Q36 Punctuation – bracketing commas	0	0%	1	9%
Q38 Punctuation - contraction	0	0%	3	27%
Q39 Clauses – main clause and subordinate clause	1	0.50%	2	18%
Q40 Clauses – main clause, subordinate clause, phrase	6	33%	3	27%
Q42 Word classes - nouns	4	22%	1	9%
Q45 Punctuation – commas with paired adjectives	6	33%	2	18%
Q47 Punctuation - apostrophes	6	33%	4	36%
Q50 Word classes - verb used as noun	13	72%	7	63%
Average overall score for GPS Test	43	43.5%	43	43%

For the 2024 cohort, pupils also performed strongly overall on the GPS Test, achieving an average score of 43/50, but with an overall lower range from 31 to 49. The items that were most frequently answered incorrectly were Q47 (apostrophes), Q38 (contractions) and Q25, which required pupils to identify the connective before within a fronted subordinate clause. Responses indicated some conceptual misunderstandings: for example, one pupil identified a comma and an apostrophe as the connective, while another circled “Tom”. As with the 2014 cohort, they were fairly adept at labelling word classes, apart from in Q50 (word classes) with 77% of pupils providing an incorrect response. The high error rate suggests that the nominal function of “walk” in this context remained difficult for pupils to identify. This exemplifies why prioritising the function of the word over its form is important. (See Table 1 for the distribution of incorrect answers from the selected GPS Test questions for both 2014 and 2024 cohorts).

Some basic errors arose in the 2024 sample from missing capital letters or full stops. In several cases, pupils provided the correct grammatical answer but omitted the required punctuation, and in accordance with the marking criteria these responses were therefore recorded as incorrect. The Oxford comma was marked as incorrect in one test. Generally, pupils were apt at identifying when to use full stops and capitals, and did not make errors that would have resulted in a run-on sentence. Pupils were able to identify clauses well, though question 40 also caused some confusion for this cohort, suggesting that pupils did not understand that a clause is a unit of meaning containing a verb.

Overall, the 2024 cohort had an average score of 43 on the GPS Test which was aligned with the 2014 cohort’s mean score at 43.5. The questions on which the 2014 pupils performed noticeably less well were word class identification (adjectives and nouns), contractions and commas with paired adjectives. The 2024 cohort demonstrated greater difficulty with items addressing listing commas, full stops and capitals, and the connective “before” placed in the middle of the sentence.

Writing sample analysis

For a comparison of the writing errors found in 2014 and 2024 cohorts, see Table 2. The two cohorts differed in size with a ratio of 18:11 pupils and the overall size of the writing samples was unequal. Therefore, the frequency of the types of sentences was calculated in relation to the total number of sentences in all categories to allow for a better comparison across groups. The same calculation was used to establish the frequency of errors for P7-P9 (non-sentences and run-on sentences). The frequency error in all other categories was calculated by the number of errors made in relation to the number used in that category.

The writing sample analysed for the 2014 cohort was a creative writing task and pupils frequently employed direct speech in their written composition. The majority of errors concerned the use of commas for clause boundaries, difficulties in identifying what constitutes a complete sentence (resulting in non-sentences) and the production of run-on sentences. Pupils predominantly used simple sentences with a comparable number of compound and complex sentences. A substantial proportion of errors arose from the use of minor sentences, many of which resulted in non-sentences. While some minor sentences may have been intended for literary effect, many could have been more effectively utilised as apositional or modifying structures, as illustrated in Example 1. Errors occurred most frequently in compound sentences, with an error frequency of 31%, particularly when pupils omitted a co-ordinating conjunction, resulting in run-on sentences. “Therefore” was misused as a conjunction (see Example 3).

Non-sentence

(1) Something incredible. A sky scraper.

Table 2. Writing analysis for 2014 and 2024 samples.

	2014			2024			
Key: SV - Sentence Variation	No.	Freq	Err	Freq	No.	Freq	Err
SV1 No. of minor sentences	49	9%	33	70%	22	8%	18
SV2 No. of simple sentences	276	52%	10	4%	78	31%	0
SV3 No. of compound sentences	101	18%	31	31%	48	18%	14
SV4 No. of complex sentences	99	19%	17	16%	118	44%	18
Total sentences / average errors	525		91	30%	266		50
SV5 List all co-ordinating conjunctions used	174		22	13%	146		1
SV6 List all subordinating conjunctions used	91		4	4%	151		2
SV7 List all connectives used	65		1	2%	46		8
Total errors			125				61
Key: P - Punctuation	No.		Err	Freq	No.		Err
P1 Commas used to separate clauses	67		24	35%	54		23
P2 Listing commas	28		10	35%	13		2
P3 Commas with paired adjectives	5		2	40%	4		0
P4 Bracketing commas	25		8	32%	9		8
P5 Full stops	402		83	20%	223		26
P6 Capitals	800		108	14%	321		50
P7 Non-sentence (phrase)	30		30	6%	11		11
P8 Non-sentence (subordinate clause)	6		6	1%	8		8
P9 Run-on sentence	29		29	6%	32		32
Total errors			300				160
Total SV and P errors			425				208
NW No. of words in samples and overall percentage error			5145	8%			4647
							5%

Run-on sentences [RoS]

- (1) //... but he was slipping out of his hand's // [RoS] Dan had disappeared into [illegible]///.
- (2) ///We will move for a left flank// and/go in cover behind that rock//then/ call for Team Charlie to go behind that other rock//[RoS] therefore/we will come in either side//and kill them.///

The most common punctuation errors involved commas marking clause boundaries (33%), listing commas (35%) and commas with paired adjectives (40%), although these punctuation forms were used relatively infrequently overall. Across the writing samples, pupils demonstrated notable consistency in their use of the series (listing) compound sentence, which was generally punctuated accurately. This may suggest that this structure had been explicitly taught prior to the writing task.

The 2024 samples consisted of formal argumentative pieces in which pupils presented a position on arranged marriages. The writing was far more complex and often cursive writing was used. Language use and clauses were more complex, and the samples were often much longer. The majority of errors found were with minor sentences, that is, using phrases, non-finite or subordinate clauses as sentences. Pupils used fewer simple sentences and compound sentences and significantly more complex sentences. Significant errors were made with compound sentences (29%) where sentences were fused together with or without a comma, resulting in a run-on sentence. Many pupils used overly complex sentences due to fusing sentences together forming run-on sentences. Commas used incorrectly to separate clauses were particularly problematic for this cohort (42%). A limited use of fronted subordinate clauses was observed, and when such clause structures were seen, the comma was frequently omitted.

Non-sentence (phrase):

1. More specifically, family pressure.

Non-sentence (subordinate):

2. As your partner will be selected based on wealth or even race in some parts of the world.

Non-sentences (non-finite):

3. Therefore, resulting from just being in an arranged marriage into being a domestic marriage.

Run-on sentence [RoS]:

4. ///She still had a choice to leave, // but instead had chosen to stay in hopes that it would get better, ///[RoS] I believe that this was fine/// [RoS], however, I argue in [illegible] like beforehand some other places.///

Significant errors were made with bracketing commas (88%). Full stops were used incorrectly with an error frequency of 11% and capital letters at 15%. Basic errors were made, such as not capitalising proper nouns. Despite these issues, many samples demonstrated sophisticated sentence construction, including effective use of embedded clauses. Several pupils also employed non-finite present participle clauses, indicating an emerging awareness of more advanced clause structures.

GPS and writing comparison

For the 2014 cohort, the frequency of errors made in the pupils' writing, when compared to the GPS score, shows a moderate negative correlation (Pearson's $r = -0.61$ $p < 0.01$), as shown in [Figure 2](#). This suggests that higher GPS scores are somewhat predictive of lower writing error frequency overall.

The relationship between pupils' GPS scores and the frequency of errors in their writing for the 2024 cohort was not statistically significant (Pearson's $r = -0.19$, $p = 0.56$), as shown in the following [Figure 3](#). This indicates that higher GPS scores did not correspond to lower overall error frequency in pupils' writing.

A comparison between the overall frequency of the errors in pupils' writing to the GPS Test items answered incorrectly for both cohorts can be seen in [Table 3](#). A number of pupils had difficulties using commas to separate clauses. However, this is not tested for in the GPS Test. In the 2014 sample, pupils made significant errors with listing commas, yet they demonstrated comparatively little difficulty with the corresponding GPS test items. Only Q29 proved challenging, with three pupils answering this item incorrectly.

Numerous run-on sentences were identified in both writing samples, although pupils showed little difficulty with Q24 and Q26, which required pupils to mark the clause boundaries with a full stop (refer to [Appendices B](#) and [C](#) for GPS and writing score data).

Discussion

Despite the pupils in 2014 and 2024 datasets representing different cohorts, it remains valuable to examine the areas in which pupils struggled most on the GPS tests and whether this knowledge is transferred to writing at these separate stages of their schooling. With similar average GPS scores, both cohorts showed good retention of knowledge. For the 2024 cohort, this refutes Carter's (1990) claim that much knowledge would be lost post-test. However, they did not apply this knowledge efficiently in writing. Furthermore, the error complexity increased at Key Stage 4 (e.g. more convoluted sentences and run-on sentences). The 2014 cohort

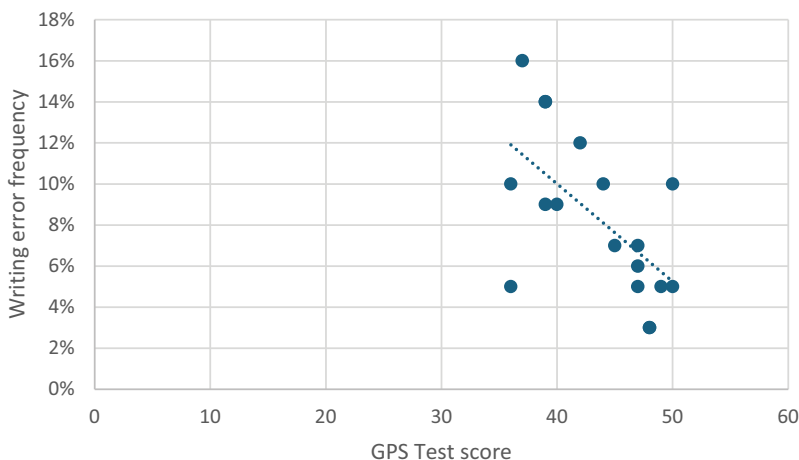


Figure 2. 2014 frequency of errors made in writing compared to GPS scores.

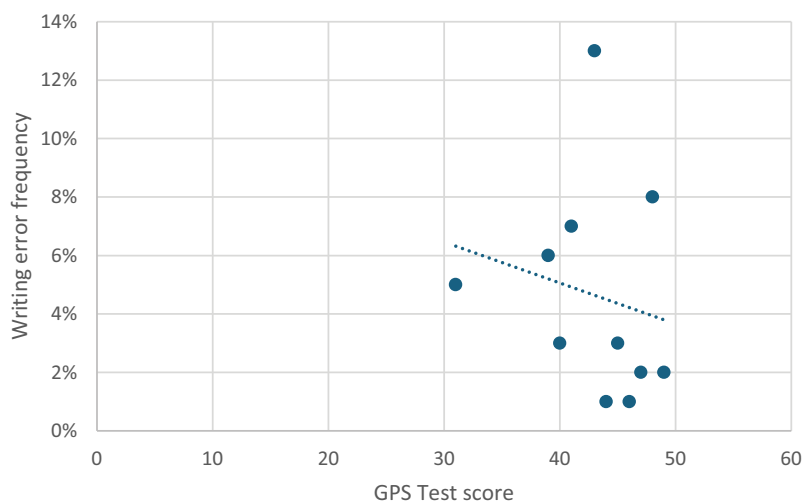


Figure 3. 2024 frequency of errors made in writing compared to GPS scores.

Table 3. Writing frequency errors compared to 2014 and 2024 GPS results.

Punctuation	2014			2024		
	Error	freq	Incorrect GPS Answer	Error	freq	Incorrect GPS Answer
P1 Commas used to separate clauses	24	35%	Not tested	23	42%	Not tested
P2 Listing commas	10	33%	Q15 (0) Q29 (3)	2	15%	Q15 (2) Q29 (3)
P3 Commas with paired adjectives	2	40%	Q45 (6)	0	0%	Q45 (1)
P4 Bracketing commas	8	32%	Q36 (0)	8	88%	Q36 (1)
P5 Full stops	83	20%	Q19 (2) Q22 (0) Q24 (2)	26	11%	Q19 (3) Q22 (1) Q24 (2)
P6 Capitals	108	14%	Q19 (2) Q22 (0) Q24 (2)	50	15%	Q19 (3) Q22 (1) Q24 (2)
P7 Non-sentence (phrase)	30		Q22 (0) Q40 (6)	11		Q22 (1) Q40 (3)
P8 Non-sentence (subordinate clause)	6		Q22 (0) Q39 (1) Q40 (6)	8		Q22 (1) Q39 (2) Q40 (3)
P9 Run-on sentence	29		Q19 (2) Q22 (0) Q24 (2) Q26 (1)	32		Q19 (3) Q22 (1) Q24 (2) Q26 (1)

showed a moderate negative correlation between higher GPS scores and lower error frequency, whereas the 2024 cohort did not. This suggests either knowledge attrition or the increasing demands of more complex writing. These results align with prior observations that pupils can recognise grammatical features in decontextualised items on the GPS Test but not necessarily apply them in context (Cushing 2019).

The findings indicate a persistent gap between feature spotting on the GPS Test and accurate sentence construction in writing. Pupils commonly misused commas at clause boundaries, produced non-sentences (e.g. subordinates or fragments lacking a finite verb)

and used run-on sentences, despite pupils correctly answering test items relating to run-ons correctly in the test. This supports critiques that the GPS tests declarative, decontextualised knowledge rather than contextualised production in writing (Cushing 2019, 2021; Myhill et al. 2011) and that grammar teaching detached from writing does not reliably improve written composition.

Error frequency shifted with age: while minor sentences appeared in both cohorts, they were arguably more defensible as stylistic choices in the 2014 narrative pieces; in contrast, the 2024 samples, which required formal prose, included fragments, adding to the informal tone of the samples. Overall, sentences in the 2024 sample were longer and more convoluted, with run-ons doubling (12% vs. 6%) and complex sentences used in 44% cases with a 16% error rate. These patterns may be due to attempts to sound formal and the complexity of writing at this level. The GPS Test does not prepare pupils for shifting sentence types according to the style or genre of writing.

Despite the errors found, some sophisticated use of sentence structures and embedded clauses was seen, which demonstrates the pupils' creativity in constructing sentences. Sentences were often more complex than subject / verb / object and contained embedded clauses, subjects or direct objects. This was seen considerably more so in the 2024 sample. Writing and sentence structures naturally become more complex as language expands during secondary school, suggesting it is important to teach grammar and punctuation at Key Stages 3 and 4. The Key Stage 4 curriculum currently focuses on the "effectiveness and impact [of grammar] in the texts they read" (DfE 2014b). Arguably, it is not enough to assess the use of grammar in texts; grammatical knowledge needs to be explicitly applied to their writing (Myhill et al. 2011).

As Myhill, Lines, and Watson (2011, 2) state, "producing longer, more complex sentences does not make better writing; they have to be used appropriately relative to form and purpose". The term "simple sentence" can mislead pupils into thinking that such sentences are simplistic, which may discourage their use. Some simple sentences can be complex, and some complex sentences can be simplistic, as acknowledged in the National Curriculum glossary definitions, where it is recommended that "single-clause" and "multi-clause" are used instead (DfE 2013, 15). Using too many simple sentences may be seen as an indication of lower-level writing. However, varying sentence types and using a simple sentence along with complex sentences can add impact to a piece of writing. This links to the method of sentence combining and pattern finding used with success in other studies (Andrews, Torgerson, Beverton, Freeman, et al. 2004; Myhill, Lines, and Watson 2011). By allowing pupils to experiment and play with language possibilities, they can better understand how sentences are constructed, the effect they have and how the punctuation governs the patterns used.

The National Curriculum (DfE 2013, 31) states that "Teachers should prepare pupils for secondary education by ensuring that they can consciously control sentence structure in their writing and understand why sentences are constructed as they are". The GPS Test requires pupils to spot whether a clause is a sentence or phrase. Answering these questions correctly may be through good judgement, or a process of elimination, rather than an explicit understanding of what makes a clause a sentence: that is, it must have a finite verb and be complete in meaning. Pupils in both cohorts had difficulty identifying a phrase, subordinate clause and main clause in Q40. This may show a lack of understanding of what constitutes a main clause/sentence. A pupil's being apt at feature

spotting does not necessarily translate into their becoming a better writer (Cox 1989). The implicit understanding and declarative knowledge need to be made explicit and applied to writing (Hudson 1992). Teachers might hope that declarative knowledge is transferred to writing, but there is no guarantee that this will happen unless teaching for the GPS Test is explicitly taught in relation to constructing sentences and writing (Myhill et al. 2011). As teachers may teach for the test, the pedagogical motivation and space in the curriculum for this may be lost and grammar teaching becomes decontextualised (Cushing 2021; Cushing and Helks 2021; Myhill 2021).

Several systemic factors may account for some errors found in the samples. The legacy of the term “connective” (previously covering both subordinating conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs) appears to have entrenched misuse in writing. The most notable error was the use of the conjunctive adverb “however” used to join main clauses, contributing to run-ons, with a 50% error frequency in the 2024 sample. Only one instance was found in the 2014 cohort, where the conjunctive adverb “therefore” was used as a conjunction. Conjunctive adverbs and conjunctions are used to connect ideas and are semantically similar. For instance, *however/but* and *so/therefore* have the same meaning, though the grammatical function of these words is different, and this is why it is important to teach the function of the word rather than its form. Imprecise grammatical definitions can cause confusion for teachers and pupils.

Likewise, the definition for a sentence in the glossary is imprecise as it does not include that a sentence needs a finite verb:

A sentence is a group of words which are grammatically connected to each other but not to any words outside the sentence . . . A sentence may consist of a single clause or it may contain several clauses held together by subordination or co-ordination. (DfE 2013, 15)

This is problematic as a single clause can be non-finite or finite, and a non-finite clause on its own would be classed as a sentence fragment, non-sentence. Using the term “main clause” which includes a finite verb would be more precise. Whether a sentence contains a finite verb is an important aspect of sentence construction and identifying what is a sentence (Berry 2016). The definition for “finite verb” provides additional information. Nevertheless, this requires the teacher to make those links and assumes that teachers will have the linguistic knowledge to ascertain clause types.

Myhill, Jones, and Watson (2013, 86) found that often clauses were inadequately taught with references to “parts of a sentence” and “the bits in between the punctuation”. Furthermore, they found that teachers often informed pupils that more complex sentences were needed (Myhill, Jones, and Watson 2013). This could lead pupils to use more convoluted sentences. Pupils who were given the correct definition for a simple sentence were able to define it as having a subject and a verb (Myhill, Jones, and Watson 2013). It is important to teach pupils the function of the word rather than semantically labelling verbs as doing/action words. The glossary is careful not to do this. However, using semantic definitions for word classes is often seen in practice (Myhill, Jones, and Watson 2013) and was observed in pupils’ annotations on the GPS Test. Being able to explain the function of a word rather than its semantic meaning requires a good grounding in linguistic knowledge.

Linguistic knowledge is useful in helping pupils to better understand sentence structure and word classes. However, there is no requirement to cover linguistic knowledge on the PGCE programmes (DfE 2019). It is assumed that the trainee teacher has already acquired this knowledge prior to enrolment (Merisi, Msani, and Mba 2023) and it is not explicitly taught in the same manner as phonics or maths. Subject Knowledge Enhancement courses are not available for English (DfE 2024). Given that grammar has become such an important aspect of the curriculum, it remains to be seen whether it is sensible to be asking non-experts in linguistics to teach vast amounts of grammar at primary level. The need for teacher training has been called for since the National Curriculum's conception (Cox 1989; Kingman 1988).

Basic punctuation presented persistent difficulties in 2024 and 2014 data (e.g. commas, full stops and capitals). The GPS test penalises pupils for adding the Oxford comma, despite tools such as spell check on Word indicating the lack of an Oxford comma as an error. This is considered an element of style yet is prescribed as incorrect. It could be argued that it is not a good use of resources and time to focus on an element of optional usage, when there are more important aspects of English which pupils find challenging. Furthermore, pupils are expected to understand how to use semi-colons and colons at Key Stage 2 yet are struggling to correctly use basic punctuation, as seen in the data. It may be useful to focus on basic errors pupils make in their writing rather than aspects of optional usage and advanced punctuation which would be more appropriate for Key Stage 3 and 4.

Conclusions

The study was limited in that it did not follow the same cohort of pupils throughout their schooling. However, a key strength of this study is the cross-key-stage comparison over a ten-year span, revealing retention of declarative knowledge alongside increasing error complexity in writing. This formed part of a larger study including teacher interviews, though it was not possible to obtain information on classroom practice for the Key Stage 4 cohort (Kilpatrick, 2026). Despite this, the comparison offers a substantial insight into how grammatical understanding develops over time, attrition of knowledge, and how early pedagogical practices may influence later performance.

The findings argue for a realignment of assessment and classroom practice towards applied grammatical knowledge, for instance, explicit teaching of finite-verb requirements, clause boundaries and appropriate coordination/subordination. Targeted work on sentence combining and patterning may prove more useful than teaching for the GPS Test. The discrepancy in pupils' GPS tests and errors found in writing shows that pupils are able to recognise grammatical features in a test but cannot consistently apply them in writing (Cushing 2019). While the GPS requires pupils to spot clauses and sentence-level features, success may rely on test-wise strategies (test practice, intuition, elimination) rather than a robust grasp of clauses and punctuation. The GPS Test assesses decontextualised declarative knowledge and does not test whether pupils can apply this knowledge to their writing. It does not directly measure whether pupils can craft sentences in continuous text with appropriate punctuation and clause integration. A test that assesses

applied knowledge in writing rather than identifying isolated items in a test unrepresentative of everyday speech may prove more useful.

The primary curriculum frontloads grammar and punctuation and this knowledge is often assumed once pupils enter secondary school. To bridge this gap, curriculum and assessment should prioritise contextualised sentence construction, ensure incremental breadth of knowledge across Key Stages 1 to 4, use clearer and consistent terminology (especially around clauses), and enhance teacher training in functional grammar, as grammar is inherently meaningful, embodied and inseparable from context (Langacker 2008). The importance placed on the results from statutory tests is currently at odds with the curricular aim of developing language awareness and improving writing, as each demands a different pedagogical approach. The present study makes a contribution to the dearth of literature on the GPS Test. It supports the government's proposal to reform the GPS Test and reduce grammatical terminology at Key Stages 1 and 2, but calls for clearer guidance on pedagogy for contextualised grammar teaching.

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Microsoft Copilot was used to support minor wording, editing and structural adjustments due to the author's dyslexia. All ideas and conclusions are the author's own, and all AI-assisted suggestions were reviewed for accuracy and integrity.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Angela Jayne Kilpatrick is a Lecturer in Learning Development at the University of Lancashire, based in the Centre for Collaborative Learning and holds an MRes in Educational Linguistics. Her work focuses on embedding academic literacies within the curriculum and she is co-author of *The Essay Route Map* (2025). Her research interests include inclusive practice, informed by her experience of dyslexia. She is Co-Chair and co-founder of the Neurodivergent Staff Network at the University and serves as a School Governor, supporting the English curriculum.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Linguistic coding framework

CODING FRAMEWORK FOR LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Pupil:

Sentence Variety	No.	Error	Examples
SV1 No. of minor sentences			
SV2 No. of simple sentences			
SV3 No. of compound sentences			
SV4 No. of complex sentences			
SV5 List all co-ordinating conjunctions used			
SV6 List all subordinating conjunctions used			
SV7 List all connectives used			

Punctuation

P1 Commas used to separate clauses
P2 Listing commas
P3 Commas with paired adjectives
P4 Bracketing commas
P5 Full stops
P6 Capitals
P7 Non-sentence (phrase)
P8 Non-sentence (subordinate clause)
P9 Run-on sentence
NW No. of words in sample

Comments and Observations.

Note particularly effective or ineffective uses in any of the two coding categories.

Note ambitious attempts which may not quite work.

Note anything interesting, problematic, curious that seems to be arising.

Appendix B. 2014 data for writing sample and GPS score

Pupil	SV1	Err	SV2	Err	SV3	Err	SV4	Err	SV5	Err	SV6	Err	SV7	Err	Tot Err	P1	P1 Err	P2	P2 Err	P3	P3 Err	P4	P4 Err	P5	P5 Err	P6	P6 Err	P7	P7 Err	P8	P8 Err	P9	P9 Err	Tot Err	Tot	NW	Freq per 100 words	GPS Score
1	0	0	15	0	8	3	1	1	10	0	1	0	3	0	4	2	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	18	4	38	5	0	0	0	0	3	3	13	17	248	6%	47
2	3	2	16	2	2	1	3	1	4	3	3	0	1	0	9	2	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	15	3	41	2	2	2	2	0	0	0	8	17	157	10%	36
3	6	4	20	0	3	0	8	0	7	0	5	0	3	0	4	4	0	2	0	0	3	0	27	5	51	4	2	2	2	2	0	0	13	17	327	5%	50	
4	2	1	27	0	4	1	2	0	4	1	2	0	5	0	3	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	27	4	51	3	2	2	1	1	0	0	10	13	263	5%	36	
5	0	0	12	0	3	1	2	1	3	0	4	0	6	0	2	6	3	4	3	2	0	1	0	14	2	19	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	11	13	248	5%	47
6	3	3	10	1	3	0	7	1	4	2	4	1	4	0	8	3	0	2	1	0	0	2	1	18	5	34	6	1	1	2	2	1	1	17	25	193	12%	42
7	1	1	5	0	5	2	5	3	7	0	3	0	4	0	6	7	7	3	3	1	1	1	13	2	29	5	1	1	0	0	1	1	21	27	189	14%	39	
8	3	3	13	0	2	1	6	1	6	3	4	0	1	0	8	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	16	8	29	5	3	3	0	0	1	1	20	28	198	14%	39
9	4	3	10	3	8	2	12	3	22	1	16	1	5	1	14	4	1	3	0	0	0	3	2	27	10	122	12	2	2	1	1	4	4	32	46	472	10%	50
10	3	2	9	0	7	0	14	1	12	0	16	0	6	0	3	9	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	29	3	54	3	2	2	0	0	1	1	11	14	429	3%	48
11	0	0	8	1	3	2	1	0	12	1	0	0	3	0	4	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	12	4	22	4	0	0	0	0	2	2	11	15	156	10%	44	
12	7	5	31	0	7	0	11	0	9	0	8	0	3	0	5	8	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	51	6	76	7	5	5	0	0	0	0	18	23	464	5%	49
13	4	3	15	0	4	1	1	0	5	0	1	0	3	0	4	1	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	17	3	35	6	3	3	0	0	0	0	13	17	179	9%	40
14	0	0	13	0	7	4	2	0	5	1	2	0	2	0	5	3	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	19	3	32	5	0	0	0	0	3	3	11	16	198	9%	39
15	5	3	16	0	5	1	0	0	9	0	0	0	4	0	4	3	1	1	0	1	0	2	0	19	1	41	6	3	3	0	0	1	1	12	16	227	7%	47
16	1	1	13	0	13	1	12	0	18	1	8	0	0	0	3	5	1	2	0	1	1	1	1	34	2	52	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	9	12	407	3%	48
17	1	1	22	3	11	10	7	3	25	8	7	2	2	0	27	1	3	0	1	0	0	2	1	14	14	88	26	1	1	0	0	9	9	55	82	506	16%	37
18	6	2	21	0	6	1	5	2	12	1	7	0	10	0	6	4	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	32	4	46	5	2	2	0	0	1	1	15	21	284	7%	45
Totals	49	34	276	10	101	31	99	17	174	22	91	4	65	1	119	67	24	28	10	5	2	25	8	402	83	800	108	30	30	6	6	29	29	300	419	5145	8%	43.5

Appendix C. 2024 data for writing sample and GPS score

Pupil	SV1	Err	SV2	Err	SV3	Err	SV4	Err	SV5	Err	SV6	Err	SV7	Err	Tot Err	P1	Er	P2	Err	P3	Err	P4	Er	P5	Err	P6	Err	P7	Err	P8	Err	P9	Err	Tot Err	Tot	NW	Freq per 100 words	GPS Score
1	3	3	9	0	9	4	13	6	21	0	22	1	6	3	17	10	6	1	0	0	0	1	1	29	12	51	26	2	2	1	1	8	8	56	73	556	13%	43
2	2	2	5	0	3	1	9	1	12	0	5	0	7	1	5	4	2	2	1	0	0	1	1	17	3	26	2	2	2	0	0	2	2	13	18	346	8%	48
3	2	1	18	0	2	0	12	0	5	0	28	0	8	0	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	33	1	34	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	3	4	480	1%	44
4	0	0	3	0	5	4	11	3	10	0	8	0	4	2	9	8	5	0	0	0	0	0	16	2	24	0	0	0	0	0	9	9	16	25	403	6%	39	
5	8	5	22	0	7	1	17	0	23	0	24	0	5	0	6	4	0	0	0	3	0	0	37	2	63	12	5	5	1	1	1	1	21	27	779	3%	45	
6	4	4	6	0	8	2	14	3	19	1	15	0	3	1	11	7	5	4	0	0	0	2	2	29	4	32	5	0	0	4	4	5	5	25	36	490	7%	41
7	0	0	2	0	3	0	5	2	10	0	4	0	2	1	3	6	3	1	0	0	0	2	2	8	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	8	11	232	5%	31
8	0	0	1	0	1	1	11	1	3	0	14	0	1	0	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	11	1	14	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	4	6	328	2%	47	
9	2	2	7	0	0	0	7	1	7	0	10	1	3	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	1	22	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	4	8	281	3%	40	
10	0	0	3	0	6	0	10	1	25	0	11	0	2	0	1	1	0	4	0	1	0	0	15	0	28	4	0	0	0	0	1	1	5	6	445	1%	46	
11	1	1	2	0	4	1	9	0	11	0	10	0	5	0	2	7	1	1	1	0	0	2	1	13	0	14	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	5	7	307	2%	49
Totals	22	18	78	0	48	14	118	18	146	1	151	2	46	8	61	54	23	13	2	4	0	9	8	223	26	321	50	11	11	8	8	32	32	160	221	4647	5%	43