"A lot of them write how they speak": policy, pedagogy and the policing of 'nonstandard' English

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Abstract

International studies of talk-intensive (or 'dialogic') pedagogies have demonstrated that children who experience academically challenging classroom discussion ('dialogue') make greater progress than their peers who have not had this experience. In England, gains in achievement have been greatest for pupils from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, thus underlining the importance of dialogue to social mobility. However, policy prescriptions on 'standard English' run counter to the principles of dialogic teaching by privileging 'correct' forms of expression over emerging ideas. In this article, we argue that schools can be coerced by macro-level policy into creating meso-level policies which police nonstandardised forms in the classroom with the assumption that this will improve literacy rates. We draw upon a corpus of Ofsted reports as well as data collected in primary schools – pupil writing and focus groups, video-recorded literacy lessons and teacher interviews – to demonstrate that features of spoken dialect grammar occur infrequently in pupil writing, yet the narrative that spoken dialect is a 'problem' within education is driving policy/practice that is detrimental to classroom talk and pupil learning. We argue that this must be addressed urgently if we are to exploit the full potential of talk for learning and for addressing educational inequities.

Key words: dialect, dialogue, spoken language, pupil writing, language ideologies, standard English

Introduction

Addressing educational inequity is a social priority and there is increasing recognition that spoken language has a significant role to play (e.g. Oracy APPG, 2021). International research has highlighted that the kind of talk pupils encounter in the classroom has implications for their learning and cognitive development. Studies of talk-intensive (or 'dialogic') pedagogies have demonstrated that children who experience cognitively stimulating classroom discussion ('dialogue') make greater progress than their peers who have not had this experience (see Resnick et al., 2015, for a review). Some pupils retain this advantage for 2 to 3 years following a dialogic teaching intervention, and some transfer their gain from one academic domain to another (Adey and Shayer, 1993, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2015) and to tests of reasoning skills (Topping and Trickey, 2007). This research points to the potential for dialogue to improve children's general ability to learn. Crucially, a large-scale UK-based dialogic teaching intervention found that gains in achievement were greatest for pupils on free school meals (used as a measure of socio-economic status) (Alexander, 2018; Jay et al., 2017), underlining the importance of dialogue to social mobility (see also O'Connor et al., 2015).

Classroom talk is a powerful tool for learning and cognitive development and can be a lever for educational equity, but it must be the *right kind of talk*. Dialogue is talk that stimulates thinking, makes thinking public and refines thinking (where good thinking is independent, engaged, critical; responsive to ideas and evidence) (Lefstein and Snell, 2011). In dialogic classrooms,[1] teachers work to elicit a range of pupil ideas, bringing multiple (and potentially conflicting) perspectives into play. Teachers probe pupil responses and push them to extend and clarify their thinking. In turn, pupils listen carefully to the teacher and to each other, and with their teacher's support, they build on, challenge or clarify others' claims and offer alternative explanations. Throughout, teachers and pupils remain committed to factual accuracy and to disciplinary standards, and they work hard to develop coherent lines of inquiry (see Michaels et al. (2008) and Michaels and O'Connor (2015) on 'Accountable Talk' and Alexander's (2020) principles of dialogic teaching).

[1] This summary draws upon the work of Robin Alexander (e.g. 2008, 2020), Adam Lefstein and Julia Snell (e.g. 2014) and Neil Mercer and colleagues (e.g. Mercer, 2000; Mercer and Littleton, 2007) in the United Kingdom and Sarah Michaels, Catherine O'Connor and Lauren Resnick in the United States (e.g. Michaels et al., 2008; Michaels and O'Connor, 2015).

Significantly, reasoning is valued over 'correct' forms of expression:

> *dialogue accepts students' ideas regardless of whether they are framed in standard English (or German, or …) […] Successful teachers and students in dialogic classrooms are not concerned […] with 'proper' speech, or sounding like the teacher. Students think out loud in these discussions, and half-formed ideas and broken statements are part of that process. This discussion space can accept, "Um like um like if the um – wait, what were we talking about?"* (Resnick and Schantz, 2015, p. 447)

Despite increasing evidence of the positive effects on young people, dialogic talk is still rarely enacted in classrooms, especially in schools serving socially and economically disadvantaged pupil populations (e.g. Applebee et al., 2003). Research has highlighted that several challenges confront those who seek to promote dialogic teaching and learning, including the high demands that dialogic discussion places on teacher knowledge and flexibility (Alexander, 2015); pressure from high stakes standardised testing (Segal et al., 2017); and the interaction between dialogic pedagogy and the identities of perceived low ability pupils (Snell and Lefstein, 2018). In this paper, we investigate an additional challenge, namely, that educational policy and prescriptions on 'standard English' are undermining attempts to encourage good quality classroom talk, because schools can be coerced by macro-level policy into creating meso-level policies which police nonstandardised forms in the classroom with the assumption that this will improve literacy rates. We triangulate several datasets which shed light on this issue: a corpus of Ofsted inspection reports; pupil focus groups; teacher interviews; pupil writing; and video-recorded literacy lessons. Our analyses demonstrate that features associated with spoken dialect grammar occur infrequently in pupil writing, yet the perception and narrative that spoken dialect is a 'problem' within education is driving policy and practice that is detrimental to dialogic classroom talk and pupil learning. We argue that this must be addressed urgently if we are to exploit the full potential of talk for learning and for addressing educational inequities.

Standard language ideologies and post-2010 policy mechanisms

Existing critiques of contemporary language education policy in England have shown how ideologies around linguistic 'correctness' are propagated via a dense web of policy mechanisms, including national curricula, grammar tests, assessment frameworks, professional standards for teachers and Ofsted, the schools' inspectorate (see, e.g. Cushing, 2021a). Schools have always been a space where linguistic standards are institutionalised, maintained and policed, with pressures on both teachers and pupils to speak in ways which are deemed to conform with standardised English and the subjective notions of 'appropriateness', 'clarity' and 'articulacy' (e.g. Cushing, 2020; Flores and Rosa, 2015; Mugglestone, 2003; Snell, 2013). Whilst these ideologies are a foundational and persistent feature of education policy in England (e.g. Cameron, 2012; Crowley, 2003), we argue that contemporary policy is particularly saturated by deficit discourses of language which emphasise so-called 'standards' in talk whilst suppressing patterns which are heard to be deviant. 'Standards' here refer to "spoken standard English" – a socially constructed form of the language with its roots in the speech of the nineteenth century bourgeoise (Cushing and Snell, 2023; Snell, 2023).

Across the policy mechanisms of post-2010 reforms, the use of spoken standardised English in schools is framed as a legal requirement for teachers to model and promote (DfE, 2011), is a core aspect of curricula content (DfE, 2014) and is named within various Ofsted documents as something which inspectors are listening out for (Ofsted, 2013). Working together, these mechanisms operate as technologies of sonic surveillance which have the potential to coerce teachers into reproducing language ideologies of correctness in their own classroom policies and pedagogical choices (see Cushing, 2021a). These local-level initiatives are often justified on the grounds that 'improving' talk will bear direct consequences on the 'improvement' of writing. Primary schools in England have justified the banning of local dialect and nonstandardised forms in these terms, citing the demands of "the literacy framework" that "asks children to write in standard English" (Williams, 2013; for critiques, see Cushing, 2020; Snell, 2015, 2018).

Whilst the current National Curriculum for England (DfE, 2014) emphasises that spoken language is important to pupils' development across the curriculum, it also emphasises that the 'right' kind of talk is that which is heard to conform with standardised English. For example, the first use of 'standard English' in the curriculum instructs teachers that:

> *Pupils should be taught to speak clearly and convey ideas confidently using Standard English. They should learn to justify ideas with reasons; ask questions to check understanding; develop vocabulary and build knowledge; negotiate; evaluate and build on the ideas of others; and select the appropriate register for effective communication. […] This will enable them to clarify their thinking as well as organise their ideas for writing.* (DfE, 2014, p. 10)

Standardised English is here associated with clear speech and thought, confident expression of ideas, academic knowledge and successful classroom participation. The final clause on "organising ideas for writing" is especially important for this article, as it suggests that talking in standardised patterns will lead to improvements in writing, despite a lack of evidence which supports this (see Snell and Andrews, 2017). Similar ideologies about language are present in recent changes to pre/in-service teacher education provision, such as in the Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019a), both of which describe "high-quality oral language" in terms of talking in 'full sentences' and having a direct implication for writing development (DfE, 2019a, p. 13).

Talk and spoken language itself is unhelpfully rendered into a single 'type' in the National Curriculum, blurring an important distinction between talk as *performance* and talk for *learning* (Snell, 2013, 2019). In relation to talk as performance, pupils are required to develop the skills necessary to give speeches/presentations and participate in structured debate, which, in the context of schooling, would generally be taken to be in standardised English. However, when it comes to talk for learning, the aim is to think out loud and contribute spontaneously to an evolving argument. This kind of talk necessarily involves hesitation, lack of fluency, half-formed statements and emergent ideas, and for the sake of equitable participation, it is crucial that pupils feel able to respond, question, challenge and elaborate their thinking using whatever language they find most comfortable, which for many will be their local dialect. There is no reason why this thinking aloud should be in standardised English, because, unlike the way talk is conceptualised in the curriculum, it is perfectly possible to express complex ideas in a variety of linguistic forms and styles (Resnick and Schantz, 2015).

Dialect, speech and writing

Societal expectations have long meant that children need to develop competence in written standardised English to pass examinations and have success in their future careers. However, there is little agreement on how to help children negotiate the differences between the grammar of their spoken dialect and that of written standardised English. Existing pedagogical guidance and support for teachers around nonstandardised grammar in writing is sparse, with teachers typically having low linguistic content and pedagogical knowledge and high anxieties in terms of grammar (e.g. Watson, 2015). Faced with this lacuna, it is common for teachers to 'correct' pupils' speech, believing this to be of pedagogical value in relation to improving writing. In practice, this typically involves paying "selective attention to a small set of socially stigmatized features […], while ostensibly ignoring other deviations from prescribed usage" (Levey, 2012, p. 418). There is no evidence that such oral correction helps children conform to the conventions of standardised English in writing; on the contrary, sociolinguists have warned that policing oral language may cause confusion about the relationship between standardised and nonstandardised English, make pupils less willing to participate in classroom discussion and, in extreme cases, cause alienation from school (e.g. Cheshire, 1982; Cheshire and Edward, 1991; Snell, 2013, 2019, 2023).

Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent local dialect influences children's writing. Early research (based on data gathered before the implementation of the National Curriculum in English) indicated that the impact of dialect grammar is relatively minor when compared with other aspects of nonstandardised usage, such as the mechanics of spelling/punctuation and the complexities of written compared to spoken structure (Williams, 1989a, 1989b; Williamson, 1990, 1995; Williamson and Hardman, 1997a, 1997b; see Snell and Andrews, 2017, for a systematic review). This research also indicated that the use of nonstandardised dialect in written work decreases as pupils progress through school (Williams, 1989a, 1989b; Williamson and Hardman, 1997b). More recently, Constantinou and Chambers (2020) compared the incidence of nonstandardised grammar in the writing of 16-year-old pupils in 2004 and 2014 and found an increase over time, which they attribute to decreasing language awareness. Significantly, there was no change in the six most common nonstandardised forms identified in 2004 and 2014, and these were also the same features highlighted as occurring most frequently in Williamson and Hardman's earlier work. This gives an indication of the specific areas of grammar that should be prioritised in teaching. Nonstandardised forms related to subject–verb agreement and past/past participle forms of irregular verbs were particularly common in the writing examined in these studies and thus may warrant focused attention (Constantinou and Chambers, 2020, p. 7; Harris, 1995, p. 127; Williams, 1989a, p. 185; Williamson and Hardman, 1997a, p. 168). However, this research also highlighted that some spoken forms do not occur in writing at all and thus should *not* be a focus of attention where the aim is to improve pupils' writing. Amongst these is the use of 'ain't' (as in, "we *ain't* got enough"), which is clearly identified by young people as a feature only of speech (Constantinou and Chambers, 2020; Williams, 1989a, 1989b, 2007). Much of this analysis has focused on secondary age pupils (11 to 16 years). We extend this work by focusing on

the writing of children aged between 9 and 11, attending primary schools in London and Leeds.

Findings

This section presents our findings, drawing together analyses across a diverse range of data to demonstrate how deficit ideologies about language work discursively across policy levels, mechanisms and implementation spaces. These data include a corpus of Ofsted inspection reports; teacher interviews; pupil focus groups; pupil writing; and video-recorded literacy lessons. We outline the methods adopted in each subsection. Before we present the findings, and in the spirit of self-reflexivity, we acknowledge our own privileged positions as academics working at UK Universities. We are both from the North of England and speak with recognisable accents and dialects, including the use of nonstandardised grammatical patterns. Julia is from a working-class background and identifies with the experiences of many of the children who have participated in her research. Ian used to be a school teacher and witnessed many of the things we critique in this article, in relation to the policing of marginalised children's language.

Ofsted and the inspection of language

We begin with a discussion of Ofsted, drawing on data generated from a corpus of over 100,000 post-2000 Ofsted school inspection reports, which are available on Ofsted's website (see Cushing and Snell, 2022). A sub-corpus was created by randomly selecting 3,000 reports to make the data manageable for current purposes. Future work using the entire corpus is planned. All reports from the sub-corpus were imported into the LancsBox software, allowing us to search for phrases which are representative of language ideologies – such as 'speak properly', 'errors', 'in/correct grammar', 'slang', 'ungrammatical speech' and 'standard English'.

Whilst standard language ideologies are a historical feature of the inspectorate's work (see Mugglestone, 2003, and Cushing and Snell, 2022), our analysis of inspection reports also shows how Ofsted reproduce ideas which conflate speech and writing and promote the unevidenced notion that talking in standardised English bears direct consequences on writing. Our work shows that these ideologies are normalised and embedded within the culture of the inspectorate, spanning multiple decades – as our examples in this section demonstrate. A 2000 report provides an initial illustration, propagating deficit ideologies of linguistic 'restrictions', 'weaknesses' and 'incorrectness' across the speech–writing continuum:

> *Pupils of all ages find it hard to use Standard English in their speech and writing and require adult support. By the age of eleven, standards meet the requirements for the age range when teachers require pupils to speak in formal situations and to answer questions in sentences. Writing meets age related expectations overall by the age of eleven but when writing independently, without adult support, pupils continue to use a restricted range of language and writing reflects patterns of speech which are not always grammatically correct. These are weaknesses for the school to address.* (2000)

The confusion between speech and writing is most apparent in the focus on "full sentences". Some further examples illustrate how this phrase was used to frame pupils' spoken language as "limited", "struggling" or "high attaining", with the patterns of written standardised English often used as a benchmark to rate the audible quality of speech and the ability of children to engage in everyday conversation:

> *Higher attaining children answer in full sentences, whilst the average use shorter phrases.* (2003)

> *Many pupils struggle to answer questions in full sentences and often revert to phrases, one-word answers or gestures.* (2004)

> *All members of staff are highly effective in their promotion of speaking and listening. Children are encouraged to speak in full sentences, and are able to hold a conversation with adults and other children.* (2018)

Whilst a 2017 report commended teachers who were heard to "demand that pupils speak in full sentences, using standard English", a 2018 report praised a school for its culture of "high expectations" and "strong quality of teaching", part of which included policies which policed spoken language and made assumptions that "quality" of talk directly transferred into writing:

> *The executive headteacher and the headteacher have created a culture of high expectations. The exceptionally strong quality of teaching ensures that pupils can meet these expectations. For example, to help pupils become adept at writing in full sentences, teachers encourage them to speak in full sentences. During the inspection, it was obvious that this is the norm. As a result, pupils are very articulate and their writing reflects their strong communication skills.* (2018)

In addition to the policing of "speaking in full sentences", our corpus analysis also revealed how Ofsted surveil features of nonstandardised spoken grammar. Whilst a range of features were marked out as particularly unsuitable (e.g. 'ain't', 'yous', 'we done'), variation in *was/were* received particular attention. In one 2003 report, teachers were criticised for not "drawing attention" to "we was", whilst a 2004 report described how pupils' spoken language "does not conform" to standardised patterns of *was/were*, which was deemed to be "hindering their creative efforts". Ofsted used *was/were* variation to make explicit links between the presence of nonstandardised grammar in speech and writing. The following examples illustrate this:

> *Average and below average pupils in Year 6 still tend to write as they speak: "We got on the carpet easy. It was very hot when we was walking around" or "I went to see my baby cosin and I holded him".* (2001)

> *[…] a minority of pupils sometimes forget to write in standard English and they intersperse their written work with words or phrases that they use in their everyday speech. For example, some pupils write, 'We was going' rather than 'We were going' […] These errors are not addressed by your teachers and so the errors recur.* (2019)

Again, we stress that there is a lack of evidence which suggests talking in non/standardised English bears any relationship to the presence of non/standardised features in writing. As we will show in the following section, these ideologies are also found in teachers' discourse about speech and writing, with Ofsted being just one mechanism named by teachers as an influential factor in the design of local-level school policies.

During the writing of this article, Ofsted (2022) published a "research review" on the teaching of English in schools, which reproduced the same kinds of ideologies about language we critique in this article. The section on spoken language dichotomises "home" and "school" language practices, perpetuates discourses of linguistic "appropriateness" and encourages teachers to "reframe" pupils' spoken language. Deficit ideologies around the so-called 'word gap' are evident throughout. These stances do not just legitimise the policing of marginalised children's language but position this as good practice which then forms part of Ofsted's inspection work in schools. We take Ofsted's (2022) research review of English to be an illustration of how durable and consistent the inspectorate's ideologies about language are, especially concerning the deficit logics that marginalised children must modify the way they speak if they are to succeed in school.

Teachers and pupils' views about language

During the 2020–21 academic year, we worked with Year 5/6 teachers and pupils at a primary school in Leeds to explore pupil writing and elicit their views about a range of language-related issues. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Arts Humanities and Cultures Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds. We interviewed four Year 5/6 teachers and facilitated four pupil focus groups (involving 28 Year 5/6 pupils). We also made copies of pupil written work, which we discuss in the next section. Interviews were informal, semi-structured conversations that took place over Zoom. We asked some prompt questions (e.g. What comes to mind when you think of the phrase 'standard English'? What do you see as the key language issues or challenges in your classroom? Do you think the way pupils speak has an influence on their writing?) but allowed the conversation to follow the teachers' responses and interests. Focus groups were also conducted over Zoom. We displayed prompt words on screen to generate discussion (e.g. 'standard English', 'correct grammar'), and at the end of the session, we asked pupils to comment on news reports outlining dialect 'bans' at schools elsewhere in the country. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed, coded and thematically analysed. For the purposes of this article, we focus on views expressed in relation to language variation in speech and writing, and teacher corrections. Ethical approval requires that we anonymise all examples and quotations to protect the identity of our research participants.

All four teachers felt that pupils' spoken language has an impact on their writing, with this generally being framed negatively – where the audible presence of nonstandardised forms in speech was perceived as affecting the quality of writing:

> *If their speech isn't up to scratch then their writing most likely won't be … a definite correlation.*

> *I think if we don't correct spoken form then it does reflect into their writing, and they do end up writing it incorrectly.*

> *The grammar is as they would speak.*

> *It's just how they speak at home (.) and it just comes through. Then it comes through into their writing.*

A lot of them write how they speak so it. It is really difficult sometimes to be picking them up on the different things that they're, you know that they're getting wrong so that's yeah, that's quite a challenge.

The purported link between speech and writing was justification for a range of corrective strategies, with all four teachers explaining that they would correct pupils' speech as well as their writing, at least on some occasions. Data from the pupil focus groups reciprocated this, where pupils talked about one teacher who had instigated a "ban" on words which were symbolic of spontaneous speech, such as "like" and "basically". When we shared with these pupils news reports outlining school dialect 'bans' (including those discussed in Snell (2015) and Cushing (2020)), they were critical of such policies, which they felt to be suppressive ("putting borders on what you should say"), authoritarian ("no one should tell you how to speak") and potentially discriminatory ("those students or pupils would think that they're talking wrong instead of talking correct").

In reference to top-down policy pressure from mechanisms such as Ofsted, the curriculum and the Teachers' Standards, teachers we interviewed felt that they should themselves model 'correct' speech for their pupils:

you have to use was and were correctly, and if you are not (.) the children use was and were incorrectly and then they write it down incorrectly and then they are suddenly not writing standard English and then they are not at age related expectation.

she [the deputy head at a previous school] had been brought in erm because at the time the school hadn't, hadn't got a good Ofsted, so I think a big focus was English and writing etcetera. So the push was for that writing and a, you know obviously promoting if, you know if the children are gonna be writing things down then we need to be promoting a way in which, you know, that that things should be said because you know children are hearing this all the time and therefore in order to make progress with their writing that, that we need to be you know modelling ways in which speak so as to encourage their, their written work and I suppose it's all down to levels and (.) etcetera etcetera how, how we're gonna make the children move forward with their, their writing.

I think it is just kind of expected (.) that teachers speak (.) correctly and it would be something that was picked up on our teacher standards, if we had an observation and we weren't speaking correctly that would be picked up on.

In the first example, *was/were* variability in a teacher's speech is presented as having stark consequences, leading ultimately to pupils performing at below "age related expectation", and thus demonstrating the intense pressure on teachers to monitor both their own and their pupils' speech. One teacher described this as a "domino effect" in which "you then feed that expectation (.) down because you've had that expectation put (.) upon yourself".

Whilst teachers felt that they needed to correct pupils' speech, they also expressed respect for the local dialect and its links with local pride and identity, as well as the idea that "everybody has their different ways of speaking (.) that's not necessarily a bad thing". As a result, they felt conflicted:

When I correct them, I don't want them to be ashamed of who they are or where they're from, or change how they speak but maybe just be aware of it for formal situations.

It's done in a jokey way, in a friendly joking kind of way. I would never (.) I wouldn't want to make somebody feel bad for how they speak.

And I don't want them to think they can't be proud of where they're from just because they don't (.) erm sort of speak (.) correctly I suppose. But it is, it is where we're from, that's who we are and everybody around them speaks like that.

This conflict was resolved, discursively, by categorising features typically corrected as "not even a dialect thing … just completely incorrect", "grammatically wrong" or "terrible mistakes". These features included *was/were* variation (see below); nonstandardised past tense forms, especially *writ* (rather than 'wrote'); and nonstandardised past participle forms that are the same as standardised past tense forms (e.g. *I have came*). Again, data from the pupil focus groups reciprocated such views, with one pupil describing how a teacher was "crazy about that kind of stuff". The following section examines the presence of nonstandardised features in pupils' writing.

Nonstandardised grammar in writing

Unlike previous studies, which have typically sampled a small number of written extracts from pupils produced at a single point in time (and often under controlled conditions), we examined pupils' day-to-day English workbooks across an extended period. The first set of books was collected by one of us during

ethnographic fieldwork in Year 5/6 classrooms at an East London primary school during the 2008–09 academic year. This fieldwork was part of an ESRC-funded project (RES-061-25-0363) on classroom discourse and dialogic pedagogy (see Lefstein and Snell, 2014, for details). For the purposes of this article, we examined the work produced by 26 Year 6 and 25 Year 5 pupils across an academic year (approximately 120,000 words). The second set of books was collected from Year 5/6 classrooms in the Leeds primary school described in the previous section between September and December 2020 (up until the third national lockdown that began in January 2021). We sampled books from 13 pupils across a range of abilities (approximately 25,000 words). Collecting new data in Leeds extended the geographical scope of our analysis and further made possible a comparison over time (e.g. allowing us to consider whether an increased focus on grammar and 'standard English' in post-2010 policy reforms has led to a decrease in nonstandardised grammar in pupil writing). Moreover, it allowed us to conduct interviews and focus groups with teachers and pupils at this school to help us contextualise our analyses of pupils' writing.

Across both corpora, we coded deviations from standardised grammatical usage, drawing on the categorisations developed in Hudson and Holmes (1995) and used by Constantinou and Chambers (2020). Our analyses confirmed conclusions from earlier work, highlighting the verb phrase as the most profitable area for teachers to focus on where the aim is to develop command of standardised grammar in writing. In the London data, 84% of all instances of nonstandardised grammar related to the verb phrase, and for the Leeds data, this figure was 79%. Such occurrences were still relatively infrequent, however, as indicated in Table 1, which shows the most common nonstandardised forms across both corpora. In addition to the forms highlighted in this table, the following nonstandardised forms occurred more than twice in either the Leeds or London data, but none occurred more than five times (including in the larger London dataset): multiple negation; use of object pronouns in compound subjects; adjectives used as adverbs; and use of 'should of' (and other parallel forms) in place of 'should have' (which we included to align with the categories used by Constantinou and Chambers, 2020). It is clear, then, that despite the attention it receives in state policies and teacher discourse, nonstandardised grammar is not a major issue in relation to developing children's writing. As in previous studies, much more prevalent were issues related to spelling and punctuation, and pupils' ability to write fluently and conform to generic conventions.

The most common feature in both corpora was nonstandardised subject–verb agreement, most frequently (98 of the 111 occurrences) related to *was/were* variability. Typically, this meant the use of *was* where standardised English would have *were*, that is, with a plural or second person subject (e.g. *Her eyes was shining, Was you scared?*) or with 'there' and a following plural (e.g. *There was shadows in the alley*). This feature is often highlighted as a 'problem' within school-designed language policy (see Cushing, 2021b, p. 332; Levey, 2013[2]) and by individual teachers, including the teachers we interviewed in Leeds (see also Alim, 2007, pp. 164–65; Levey, 2012, p. 408). One Year 5 teacher told us:

> *I personally don't think there's ever an excuse not to use 'was' and 'were' correctly. But that's my personal opinion. Erm just because it's, it is in-, it's incorrect is not it. If you say 'we was' it's j- grammatically it's wrong […] I would kind of say grammatically it has to make sense so i-, 'was' and 'were', for example, 'was' is singular, 'were' is plural. So if you are saying 'we was', it's just not co- correct […] Whereas if they were using kind of stuff from their own dialect, or words that were particularly Yorkshire […] that would be OK.*

A second Year 5 teacher highlighted the prominence of *was/were* variability in writing as well as speech:

> *'was' and 'were' are* huge *and they come through* massively *in writing as well. I don't know whether it's a Leeds thing, a Yorkshire thing, an English thing, 'was' and 'were' they find really difficult and we do try and correct that erm as much as we, we possibly can erm […] in both speech and writing (emphasis in original).*

Interestingly, despite this teacher's perception that *was/were* variability is a "huge" issue that comes through "massively in writing", we found only 17 examples of nonstandardised *was/were* in the Leeds data (an average of 1.3 per pupil, and less than 1 per 1,000 words). Likewise, in the London data, nonstandardised *was/were* occurred only 81 times across the work of 52 pupils (an average of 1.6 per pupil over an academic year). We argue that teachers are particularly sensitive to *was/were* variation because it is highlighted as an issue in educational policy and evaluative mechanisms. The current National Curriculum states that it is a 'statutory requirement' that pupils be taught to use "*we were* instead of *we was*" (DfE, 2014, p. 77), and this is tested as part of the national GPS tests (grammar, punctuation and spelling) taken in Year 6, with some questions requiring pupils to 'correct' any nonstandard instances. One Year

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[2]'They was' is the first item in a list of 10 'damaging phrases' identified by a primary school in the Black Country as part of their 'zero tolerance' policy on local dialect and nonstandardised forms (Levey, 2013).

Table 1: *Most common features of nonstandardised grammar in pupil writing*

	London		Leeds	
Nonstandardised subject–verb agreement	92	58%	19	45%
Nonstandardised past tense form	29	18%	9	21%
Nonstandardised past participle form	5	3%	2	5%
Missing or nonstandardised auxiliary form	9	6%	3	7%
	135	84%	33	79%
Total nonstandardised forms	160		42	

6 Leeds teacher told us: "they do have grammar tests, so we need to teach them the correct ways of using the wases and weres […] to pass the test". Previous iterations of the National Curriculum have highlighted nonstandardised *was* as "common non-standard usage" (e.g. DfEE, 1999, p. 45). Ofsted reports have criticised teachers for not "drawing attention" to the presence of nonstandardised "we was" (see above and Cushing and Snell, 2022); and, up until April 2020, it was included as part of the "Professional Skills Test" in literacy (DfE, 2015), which asked pre-service teachers to identify so-called 'errors' in nonstandardised constructions (Cushing, 2021a, p. 9).

Sociolinguists have shown that w*as/were* variation is common to dialects of English worldwide and patterns systematically according to social and linguistic constraints. Three major patterns have been identified: (i) levelling to 'was' across grammatical subjects in both positive and negative contexts (widespread, as documented in Anderwald, 2001); (ii) levelling to 'were not' in negative contexts and 'was' in positive contexts (e.g. in Reading (Cheshire, 1982), outer London (Cheshire and Fox, 2009) and York (Tagliamonte, 1998)); and (iii) levelling to 'were' across grammatical subjects in both positive and negative contexts (e.g. in Bolton (Moore, 2011)). Studies have shown that *was/were* variation is conditioned by linguistic factors such as subject type (e.g. noun phrase versus pronoun), polarity (positive or negative) and clause type (e.g. interrogative or declarative). Nonstandardised *was* is particularly prominent in existential contexts (e.g. *There was a few other speakers*), where variation is found even in standardised varieties (Cheshire, 1999). Social factors, such as age, sex, ethnicity, social class and local identity, also condition patterns of *was/were* variation (Levey, 2012; Moore, 2011). We do not have the space to go into detail about these constraints, but two key points are worth underlining. First, nonstandardised *was* (used frequently in speech by pupils in Leeds and London) is not a grammatical "error" for which there is "no excuse"; it is a variant traditional to many dialects of English which patterns systematically in relation to linguistic and social constraints. Second, given the complex factors involved

in *was/were* variation, it is not surprising that confusion arises for pupils who are corrected (often without explanation) for using nonstandardised *was* in their speech and writing. We explore these corrections and their consequences in the next section.

Language corrections and dialogic pedagogy

In the London[3] corpus, teachers typically corrected nonstandardised *was* by underlining this form in red and writing 'were' in the line above or in the margin. A comment was occasionally added to the end of the work, such as "Be careful with your use of was and were", and there are two examples in which an explanation was offered in relation to subject type, such as:

> were – plural (more than one)
> was – singular (one)

Williams (1989b, p. 196) has questioned the efficacy of teacher corrections of dialect grammar. In her study in Reading, these sometimes led to "hypercorrection" in pupils' writing, as in the following example: "We ~~was were~~ was in the park" (Williams, 1989b, p. 196). Similar confusion is evident in the London corpus of writing, with one pupil crossing out *was* four times before finally settling on it as the most appropriate form. To further investigate the utility and impact of corrections, we present three episodes of spoken interaction from Year 5 classrooms.

The wider London dataset includes video-recordings of Year 5/6 literacy lessons (see Lefstein and Snell, 2014, for further examples and more detail about data collection). Episode 1 comes from a Year 5 lesson in which the pupils have been asked to write a recount of their experience of school swimming lessons. The teacher, Mr Robbins, has asked one pupil,

[3]There were many fewer teacher corrections in the Leeds corpus for two reasons. First, teachers had limited contact with pupils' books because of concerns around the transmission of Covid-19. Second, this school had a policy of providing continuous feedback on writing during lessons, rather than marking completed work. This feedback was often given orally, with pupils encouraged to edit and correct their own work.

Craig, to read out his work (produced in collaboration with Asha). As Craig reads, the teacher types out the paragraph on his computer and projects it onto the whiteboard. Other pupils in the class are then invited to give feedback. Episode 1 begins as Craig reads out the last line of the recount: "when we was in Year 4".

Episode 1: 'Some of us can swim, not like before when we was in Year 4'

```
1    Craig:       when we was in year four
2    Asha:        when we were in year four ((hits her head with her hands
                  in a manner that suggests frustration))
3    Craig:       we (xxxxx) we
4    Asha:        we were
5    Craig:       for when we was
6                 why don't that make sense
7    Mr Robbins:  right
8    Asha:        exactly
9    Mr Robbins:  so we need to change was into::
10   Asha:        were ((holding up her hands to signal exasperation))
11                (2)
12   Craig:       we
13   Anon:        (xxxxxxxxx)
14   Asha:        were
15   Craig:       before WE WAS IN YEAR FOUR ((shows whiteboard to Asha))
16   Asha:        because WE WERE
17                (1)
18   Mr Robbins:  thank you Craig (.)
19                right yeah it should be were
20   Asha:        [exa::ctly ((leans forward raising her hands))
21   Mr Robbins:  [>when we're talking about more than one person
22                °it's not was it's were°<
23   Asha:        ha
24   Mr Robbins:  are there any words in there
25                that you think we need to change
26                I think there's (.) maybe one or two bits
```

Craig's use of 'we was' is corrected in the first instance by his classmate Asha (line 2). However, Craig appears not to understand the point she is making and simply rereads from his whiteboard, asking 'why don't that make sense' (line 6). Mr Robbins signals his agreement with Asha (lines 7 and 8) and encourages Craig to reformulate (line 9). The elongated vowel in 'into::' indicates to Craig that he should complete Mr Robbins' utterance with the appropriate word, in this case 'were'. Asha steps in to answer immediately, but it is evident (through the pause and Craig's subsequent response) that Craig either does not agree or does not understand the point Asha and Mr Robbins are trying to make (lines 10–12). Asha continues to take responsibility for correcting Craig, causing tension between them to escalate (indicated through their raised voices and hand gestures), each unable to understand the other (lines 14 to 16). However, only Craig is reprimanded (albeit softly) by the teacher (line 18). At this point, Mr Robbins steps in to settle the dispute – right yeah it should be were – validating Asha's contributions and explaining quickly (and with decreased volume): 'when we're talking about more than one person °it's not was it's were°'. He then moves on rapidly to direct pupils' attention to other aspects of Craig's writing.

Given the confusion expressed by Craig in lines 3 to 16, it seems unlikely that Mr Robbins' explanation is effective. Likewise, we have no evidence that Asha understands *why* 'were' rather than 'was' is 'correct' in this instance, given her inability to explain this to Craig. It could simply be that her home dialect favours use of the standardised form and thus 'we were' is

habitual in her speech. We would suggest that if the aim here is to help Craig use the standardised form in writing, he requires a more detailed explanation, one that is sensitive to his local dialect, classroom relationships and his burgeoning confidence as a writer. Note also that the explanation which is often given regarding plurality breaks down in relation to the second person subject, which has 'were' in standardised English regardless of whether 'you' is singular or plural. Such idiosyncrasies in standardised English tend to be overlooked because of the dominance of the standard language ideology (i.e. the belief that standardised English is the only 'correct' form of English).

Episode 2 comes from the same classroom and this time illustrates teacher correction of spoken dialect grammar. Prior to the start of this episode, the class had watched Aiden Gibbon's short animation *The Piano* and pupils had worked together in pairs to come up with a word that might sum up the emotion in the film. One of the pupils has just given the response 'sad'.

Episode 2: 'He ain't got a smile on his face'

```
1    Mr Robbins:  put your hand up if you think he looks sad
2                 ((Around 9 pupils raise their hands. After 5 seconds
                  Freddy joins in))
3    Mr Robbins:  Freddy why do you think he looks sad
4                 what makes him look sad
5    Freddy:      because he's-
6                 he ain't got a smile on his face
7    Mr Robbins:  ain't got a smile on [his face
8    Asha:                             [((laughs))
9    Freddy:      he (.) has (.) not got a smile on his face
10   Mr Robbins:  okay
```

Just over half a minute before Freddy speaks on line 5, Mr Robbins had called upon him to report on the words he had written down to describe the emotion in the film. Freddy had replied: "I've come up with one thing but I don't think I'm going to say it out loud". Mr Robbins had accepted Freddy's reluctance to speak and moved onto another pupil. When Freddy does later speak (in lines 5 and 6 of Episode 2), Mr Robbins' immediately corrects his grammar through marked repetition of the nonstandardised form. Freddy recognises the need to reformulate and demonstrates in his response that he has access to the standardised form (line 9). But why was this reformulation necessary? Freddy's initial answer is relevant and makes sense. Moreover, it signals that he is now willing to participate in the discussion; had the teacher probed the content of Freddy's answer rather than the form of expression, there might have been opportunity for sustained interaction. We know that this correction will have no impact on Freddy's writing, because, in line with previous studies, 'ain't' did not occur at all in the writing we examined at this school. Children understand that this form is unique to speech. The most plausible motivation for the correction is that only

answers given in standardised English function as legitimate contributions in this classroom. We argue that this approach is likely to close down interaction, making clear to pupils that their home dialect (which has strong links to their own identity) has no value in the educational domain, and this may be detrimental to their confidence and sense of self. Notice that Asha laughs during the correction of Freddy's utterance in a manner that suggests she's laughing at his 'mistake', rather than at Mr Robbins. Corrections, reformulations and disapproving looks are hard to resist (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 51), and ultimately, speakers like Craig, Freddy and Asha buy into a system of linguistic evaluation that works against them (see Snell, 2013).

The final episode comes from another Year 5 class in this school. It takes place 45 minutes into a lesson on *Charlotte's Web*. Pupils had been put into small groups to discuss the themes emerging from the first five chapters of the book, and as Episode 3 begins, the teacher attempts to draw together the groups' ideas. She had overheard one of the groups talking about suspicion as a theme and picks up on this idea, turning to Mark for further explanation.

Episode 3: 'Fern like says that ain't true'

```
1    Ms Leigh:   actually you've had a good idea here about (.) erm
2                what we thought of friends
3                but you came up with the word suspicion
4                and suspicion was a theme that kept on appearing in the text
5                do you want to tell us more Mark
6    Mark:       erm
7                (1)
8                so it was like
9                Templeton yeah
10               just like wants to get the eggs and then eat them
11               because it's like
12               it's like this
13               because- because the-
14               because Templeton told the goose that erm
15               that Fern has like the collection of like stuff
16               yeah
17               and then
18               goose said it to Fern
19               and then Fern like says that ain't tru:e
20               and then
21               Templeton is trying to get the goose attention (xxxx friend)
22               and then
23               and so the rat
24               and so Templeton can get the egg and then eat it
25   Ms Leigh:   okay
26               so how was that suspicious
27   Mark:       erm
28               (5)
29               because
30               (5)
31   Ms Leigh:   would you trust a friend who tries t- to [steal your toys
32   Mark:                                                 [no
33   Ms Leigh:   maybe your baby brother
34   Mark:       yeah [((laughing)) I would
35   Ms Leigh:        [or- you wouldn't mind
36               ((laughs))
37               okay does that appear anywhere else((still addressing Mark))
38               because somebody else earlier mentioned on som-
39               another character was suspicious as well
40   Mark:       Charlotte
41   Ms Leigh:   okay
42   Mark:       because
43               she could-
44               so it could be like
45               Wilbur is out walking
46               and then
47               without Wilbur noticing
48               Charlotte could just jump on her back
49               and just start rapping her up (xxxxxx)
50   Ms Leigh:   okay so we've got the dilemma in both characters now
51               like you were saying
52               actually can we trust them a hundred percent
53               even though they're trying to make friends with other people
54               and trying to be around other people
55               can we give them our hundred percent trust
56               or are they going to do something terrible
```

The interaction displays several characteristics of dialogic discussion. Pupil contributions are valued, and,

likely as a result, responses far exceed the one- or two-word answer that is typical of whole-class discussion. The discussion is purposeful (in Alexander's (2020) terms), moving towards an understanding of one of the central themes in *Charlotte's Web*. The teacher directs the discussion, probing Mark's responses and ensuring that he is held accountable to knowledge and to standards of reasoning (e.g. lines 26 and 36–39 (Michaels et al., 2008)). She provides support where it is needed (e.g. on lines 31 and 33 after Mark stalls in lines 27–30) but stays with Mark, even during the long pause in lines 28–30, and, ultimately, they gain some clarity around the theme of suspicion and the two characters most connected with it (see also Snell and Lefstein, 2018). At the same time, we should note that Mark speaks with an East London accent and uses fillers, discourse markers and nonstandardised grammar. In contrast with Episode 2, Ms Leigh does not 'correct' Mark's use of 'ain't' (line 19), nor does she 'correct' his repeated use of other features that have been 'banned' or discouraged in schools elsewhere, such as 'like' and 'yeah' (see, e.g. Coldwell (2013) on Harris Academy and George (2019) on Copthorne Primary School in Bradford). Ironically, when Copthorne Primary School in Bradford banned the use of 'like', they linked it to their wider aim of improving pupils' speaking skills and encouraging them to extend their responses, going beyond single-word answers. It is surely more difficult to meet these aims where pupils' language is strictly policed. In relation to Episode 3, we might ask: What would have happened to Mark's unusually long responses if Ms Leigh had stopped him at his first use of 'like'? What might have happened to Mark's confidence in articulating his thinking in front of the class if he had been 'corrected' or asked to self-correct every time he used a nonstandardised form or a filler or started an utterance with 'because'? We cannot know the answers to these questions, but it seems likely that the interaction would have taken a very different turn.

Discussion and conclusion

We have argued that good quality classroom talk is a powerful tool for learning, cognitive development and educational equity, but that efforts to foster and sustain this kind of talk are being hampered by prescriptive and misguided educational policy on standardised English. Teachers face pressure to police their own and their pupils' speech from a range of policy and surveillance mechanisms, including Ofsted, statutory grammar tests (DfE, 2019b), national curricula (DfE, 2014) and writing assessment frameworks (STA, 2015). Throughout policy, written and spoken grammar is conflated, and 'standard English' is framed

using evaluative adjectives such as 'correct' and 'proper', rendering 'nonstandard' English as 'inappropriate' and 'incorrect'. These language discourses permeate local school policies and practices, where teachers feel compelled to police nonstandardised grammar in classroom talk, often with the assumption that this will improve literacy rates. Yet, there is no evidence that the policing of oral language will help children conform to the conventions of written standardised English. Moreover, as our analyses have shown, features of spoken dialect grammar are relatively infrequent in pupils' writing. Where teachers want to help pupils develop their use of standardised grammar in writing, the most profitable area to focus on is the verb phrase, especially subject–verb agreement. However, interventions without clear and detailed explanations are unlikely to work and may be detrimental to pupils' confidence and/or lead to confusion and hypercorrection. More productive and descriptive approaches to writing (e.g. Myhill, 2021) have shown the power in conceptualising grammar as a series of choices to be made, as opposed to prescriptive and tightly regulated rules.

Oral corrections and other forms of language policing may have inadvertent and undesirable consequences, most notably closing down opportunities for pupils to hone their thinking. At the end of one of our Year 5 focus groups, the teacher present admitted that she had previously banned words such as "so, like and basically" in her classroom, explaining:

> but we had, we had children who would come in and go:: <mimics children> {so like erm basically this thing happened, and so like, and so::, and like erm basically} and I said a-, all what you have just said was a waste of breath almost, you have used words that are unnecessary vocabulary.

However, as one pupil made clear to her, "sometimes you've got to like (.) think". Pupils need space to process information and develop their ideas – to think out loud – during challenging classroom discussion, and thus, their speech will include hesitation and fillers, as well as features of their local dialect, where these are routinised as part of their everyday language. This teacher admitted to feeling "guilty" about the ban, with pupils playfully suggesting that she "go to court". Of course, the aim of that discussion (and indeed this article) was not to make the teacher feel guilty – as we have emphasised throughout, teachers' actions are rooted in the broader policy environment – but there was clearly value in this teacher having a conversation with the pupils about the ban ("it's been really interesting for me to hear (.) some of the children's opinions on things and their thoughts"). We suggest that such discussion should take place in schools as a matter of course; that is, that language itself should be a topic for dialogic discussion. To facilitate this, teacher professional development should include "knowledge about language" (as advocated some time ago by the Language in the National Curriculum Project (Carter, 1996)) so that teachers gain an awareness of the full potential of spoken language, including an understanding of regional, social and stylistic variation in grammar, and the relationship between speech and writing. Likewise, pupils should have the opportunity to learn about their local dialect and its relationship to standardised English and be encouraged to reflect on their language choices and abilities. Valuing the dialects and languages pupils use at home and making them a legitimate object of study is likely to develop pupils' confidence and make them more likely to participate in class discussion.

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Conflict of interests

The author(s) declare none.

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