**To what extent does the attainment of a Level 2 English qualification affect teaching and learning in Further Education?**

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**Abstract**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 teachers in order to explore the question 'To what extent does the attainment of a Level 2 English qualification affect teaching and learning in Further Education'? The outcomes of these interviews were characterised by four overarching themes: the question of the validity of assessment techniques; a confusion of Key Skills and Functional Skills; concerns about the different funding allocations of schools and further education institutions and accountability pressures.

**Introduction**

The Level 2 English provision of the compulsory and post-compulsory education sectors is largely composed of GCSE and Functional Skills qualifications in 2014. Arguably, there are two major education reform acts that have had an overarching impact on the approach to the teaching and learning of English in England. Firstly, the introduction of the National Curriculum  in schools as 'parliament passed the 1988 Education Reform Act, which established the framework' (The Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2008-2009, p. 10) formally introducing the national GCSE qualification. The need to teach English systematically using standardised teaching and learning was established. Secondly, the incorporation of the Further Education sector four years later, following the Further Education and Skills Act of 1992, marked the beginning of a paradigm shift in the sector towards accountability measures.

The introduction of Functional Skills qualifications is demonstrably a result of the combined impact of both the National Curriculum and the incorporation of the Further Education sector. Despite these two reforms explicitly affecting two separate sectors of education in England, the overlap is particularly relevant when discussing the Level 1 and 2 provision provided by both the compulsory and post-compulsory sectors. The major reforms affecting the teaching and learning of English in the decade between the implementation of Key Skills and Functional Skills, involves: a shift in terminology, a shift in emphasis and a shift in requirements. The requirements also include enhancing the basic skills of adults, However, there is not scope within this research to also cover this reform in provision.

Following the development and implementation of the National Curriculum, another major change in the curriculum included:  'a new Key Skills qualification… (was) to be implemented from September 2000' (QCA, 1999, p. 3). According to the main findings of the Moser Report in 1999, 7 million adults were considered to be functionally illiterate and a direct comparison with the literacy levels in Germany and Canada was used to highlight the English deficit (The Moser Group, 1999, p. 1-2).

The Key Skills drive was used 'to encourage all young people to develop…essential skills' (Ofsted, 2001, p. 1) in communication, application of number and IT. The use of the word 'encourage' is of relevance here and is also underpinned by other key skills terminology such

Cogger, L. (2014) 'To what extent does the attainment of a Level 2 English qualification affect teaching and learning in Further Education?' *The STeP journal*, 1(1), pp. 36-47.

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as 'working with others, and improving own learning' (Felstead and Unwin, 2001, p. 104). Comparatively, the functional skills implementation was concerned with a more directly instructional approach. As staff who 'may feel that functional skills are not their responsibility; if this is the case, their perception will need changing' (LSIS, 2012, p. 8).

In the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper, the beginning of a shift in terminology is apparent as the term 'functional' is used to describe functional literacy as opposed to functional illiteracy, as early as 2005, becoming 'the heart of the 14-19 phase' (DfE, 2005, p. 5). Education reform began to be based upon terminology more typical of business rather than previous notions of key attributes or key skills of individuals. Moreover, the Collins Dictionary outlines 'operational' and 'workable' as synonyms of 'functional', implying functions usually associated with the attributes of machinery. Using 'functional', a word previously discussed as usually used in reference to machines, marks a shift in terminology and emphasis for the teaching and learning of literacy.

The concept of 'functionality', in terms of basic skills of society, prefigures the actual qualification name change but indicates a cultural shift towards providing and assessing the functionality of the skills of students at Level 2. This is also seen in the piloting of the Functional Skills qualifications solely being a requirement of apprenticeship students in 2012 (LSIS, 2012, p. 3)

According to Taylor and Geranpayeh, this type of shift towards the functionality of skills indicates a result of a 'needs analysis' (2011, p. 90) when concerning qualification content. Noticeably, course content 'driven by real needs' (Alexander, 2012, p. 101) was being used since the 1970s, largely concerned with the teaching of English to those for whom it is another language and required English for business purposes only. The shift in the function of the English language for business purposes was a prelude to the same shift in compulsory education in England.

A shift in emphasis, as a result of a needs analysis of the content of literacy courses, '(pointed) to the fact that all stakeholders(seemed) to be in general agreement that students should be trained in logical thinking and problem-solving' (Flowerdew, 2005, p. 139) implying a need for a workforce with transferable skills rather than key skills. A definition of a functional skill is considered to be 'skills that will help (students) to tackle (and) select from the range of skills in which they are competent…and apply them appropriately' (DfES, 2007, p. 12). This implies a shifting work force needing transferable skills to be able to keep up and compete in a global market.

In 2006, 'economic growth (was) unbroken for 14 years, the longest period of economic expansion on record' (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006, p. 6). However, following the recession the language describing the necessary skills of the workforce included notions of application and transferability to cope with the changing economic foundations. Firstly, the terms 'English' and 'Maths' were re-established rather than 'literacy' and 'numeracy'' (BIS, 2011, p. 11) and occupational uses for language were to be in 'both formal and informal situations (this isn't specified in the key skills) as well as unfamiliar subjects in which the students needed to communicate' (LSIS, 2012, p. 10) so as to reinforce the transferability of skills acquired and to fit a multitude of situations required for a changing labour market.

The criteria were finalised in 2008 and piloted by a number of institutions (DCSF, 2008, p. 33) and 'the full qualifications (were) introduced for first teaching in 2010' nationally for apprenticeship students only (QCA, 2006, p. 3). Finally, in 2012, the expectations were that

all students 'up to 19 who do not have an A*-C in GCSE English or mathematics will be expected to continue to study towards these qualifications' (DfE, 2013, p. 1). Those who achieve a D are expected to re-take the GCSE alongside their other courses, and those with lower grades are now expected to take Functional Skills classes, alongside their others courses also.

**Principles of Assessment**

When discussing the principles of assessment in relation to the effect on teaching and learning in Further Education of the attainment of a Level 2 English qualification, it is necessary to discuss the types of assessment being applied at both an individual and institutional level, the C grade as a benchmark and the impact of grading in general.

The AQA English Language GCSE Specification lists reading, understanding of texts, selection of material and explanation of linguistic features as the main criteria against which the students are assessed (2014, p. 18). Students who meet these criteria in their annual examinations will be awarded the grade that is associated with the level of sophistication of their response, from A*-G and 'the grade awarded will depend on how well the candidate has met the assessment objectives' (AQA, 2014, p. 29).  This type of assessment is referred to as criterion-referenced assessment as it 'measures how an individual has performed, quite independently of how others have performed' (Habeshaw et al,  1993, p. 135) and is largely reinforced by the idea that  'it is theoretically possible for all candidates to pass' (Shorrocks-Taylor, 1999, p. 73).  'Criterion-referenced assessment is consistently rated as the most useful, both for understanding the child's abilities and needs' (Freeman and Miller, 2010, p. 10) and it is upon this that the GCSEs qualifications are based in the forming of assessment.

However, following the implementation of the Key Skills qualifications, not only has the terminology and emphasis shifted towards the concept of 'functionality' of skills but the benchmark for what is to be considered as a pass has also shifted. That industry and commerce have influenced educational reform in England is apparent in the creation of the Level 2 benchmark being from an A*-C. According to the Leitch Review, 'qualifications form a major part of employer recruitment strategies, especially screening candidates prior to interview' (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006, p. 6). The strong influence of industry and commerce on the new Level 2 benchmark is particularly apparent as the screening process at large companies such as Tesco require applicants to have attained a C grade in Maths and English. In 2006, The Leitch Review implied the culturally accepted benchmark grades but by 2011, in the Wolf Report, the transition was full and the A*-C grade were referred to as 'the key indicators of acceptable levels of attainment, used by gatekeepers to sift, select, and determine access' (The Wolf Report, 2011, p. 170).

According to Habeshaw et al 'much of the assessment which takes place in education is norm-referenced' (1993, p. 135) and can be considered to be characterised by the use of grades, which in and of themselves to do not explicitly indicate a set of skills obtained by the student. For grades to be set 'judgements must often be made to what is a reasonable expectation for performance- the norm' (Shorrocks-Taylor, 1999, p. 71). This norm does not refer to average but to a performance norm for each grade boundary, thus grading practices would not exist without performance norms ((Dalbert et al, 2006, p. 41-42).

Despite the intentions of the Level 2 exams, including GCSE, to assess students independently of one another  using criterion-referenced assessments, the use of grading and especially a grade benchmark results in the interpretation of results as being more

indicative of norm-referenced assessment (Lissman and Paetzold, 1983, p. 211). The combination of grading and 'the fixing of 'cut-off scores'' (Brown, 1981, p. 25) is referred to as norm-referenced grading, rather than norm-referenced assessment.

Conversely, there are researchers who maintain a purist attitude towards norm-referenced assessment and focus on the immediate ranking of each cohort as a characteristic of norm-referencing (van der Linden, 1982, p. 99 and Brown, 1981, p. 15). Truly, if a student demonstrates the skills consistent with the grading boundary of a C grade, for example, this grade will be given prior to a comparison of others thus not being wholly norm-referenced. The norm-referencing comes in the form of culturally hegemonic expectations of standards (Lissman and Paetzold, 1983, p. 210), particularly, since the grade C in and of itself does not indicate to various stakeholders the actual skills of the student.

When comparing the impact of the two opposing assessment models (criterion-referenced and norm-referenced) research shows that students feel that criterion-referenced grading is the most just and the norm-referenced as almost unjust (Dalbert et al, 2006, p. 420). The opinion of students and grading systems are also particularly relevant when considering that these norms are used to assess 'teachers, schools and in effect the whole schooling system' (Shorrocks-Taylor, 1999, p. 84).

A major reform following 'The Importance of Teaching' document released by the Department for Education in 2010 was that of a new floor standard 'which sets an escalating minimum expectation for attainment' (DfE, 2010, p. 13). The floor standard is concerned with the percentage of students achieving the new Level 2 benchmark of an A*-C grade in English. The floor standard is the expectation that no 'fewer than 40% of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 (achieve) 5 or more GCSEs A*-C...including English and Maths GCSE' (DfE, 2014, p. 1). This means that slightly less than half of the student population are now required to achieve within the new 4 grade benchmark, with arguably severe consequences for both student and institution if not.

Both the research of Carey and Carifio (2012) and Van de Poel and Gasiorek (2012) indicate that grades, specifically low grades, can have serious detrimental effects on student motivation and confidence in their abilities. This is furthered by the use of a new benchmark of attainment as the C and above grades become fetishised and 'hold strong symbolic value' (Pulfrey et al, 2013, p. 40) more so than of a more diverse grading system. The combined impact of grading enhanced by a benchmark for grade attainment that is then assessed against floor standards imposed on schools will inevitably affect the teaching and learning of English in Further Education.

**Method**
According to Sosu and Gray 'sophisticated epistemologies… (refer to) truth (as) relative, changing and actively constructed by individuals and learning' (2012, p. 81). To discuss the impact of the attainment of a C grade in English on teaching and learning in Further Education, I found that my preferred methodological approach, to embrace sophisticated epistemological views, was to attempt to ascertain the individual beliefs of those within the sector. As 'studies which employ qualitative strategies to explore…beliefs will be more productive' (Phipps and Borg, 2009, p. 388) I decided to use qualitative data to ascertain the beliefs of participants. As a result of the choice of qualitative data and the inevitable small sample size of this form of data collection, I am aware of the potential to produce deterministic and generalised assumptions. Noticeably, this type of criticism is levied at

many forms of educational research due to the individual nature of education and its application to the entire populace.

Moreover, following the decision to use qualitative data and to focus on the beliefs of teachers in the Further Education sector I found that 'commonly used techniques for eliciting beliefs are self-reports (and) semi-structured…interviews' (Borg, 2006 cited in Alexander, 2012, p. 103) which led to the decision to use semi-structured interviews as my research methodology. Mirroring the work of Wingate (2012) I used a series of closed-response questions and a series of open-response questions to form the basis of the interview. The purpose of the aforementioned closed questions was to map narratives of the teachers and how this could affect their beliefs (Alexander, 2012, p. 104).  The open-response questions were expanded upon and clarified if necessary, mirroring the methodological approach of Borg (2011). The term 'literacy', rather than 'English', was chosen purposefully to mirror the language of the Schemes of Work used in the Sixth Form College.

I actively chose the participants of the interview process to include teachers of courses for which a C grade in English GCSE was not required to enrol on the course, teachers of courses that require an ideal minimum of a C grade in English for students to enrol and teachers of GCSE English and Functional Skills in a Further Education College. The choice of contrasting geographical areas, outcomes for learners and type of institution were chosen specifically to research into the possible parallels between the beliefs that the teachers of these contrasting conditions may have. Deciding on a variety of participants was the most important way in which the small sample was addressed. Rather than being able to '(draw on) on a substantial database of semi-structured interviews' (Borg, 2011, p. 370) I was able draw on an increased breadth of participants.

The interview process in and of itself may present the problem that participants tailor their answers to meet the perceived needs of the research(er). This has been counter-balanced by controlling variants such as the conditions of the interviews and an original framework of open- response questions. The conditions of the interview were always informal and private; the informality of the process was arguably enhanced by my use of touch typing during the interview. However, this affected the process by not being a true representation of a conversation as interviewees were aware that their responses were being explicitly recorded. All participants had access to the transcript following the interview, all were comfortable with the information recorded and none made alterations to the transcripts. I found that participants were wary of being recorded when discussing a fairly contentious issue. Thus, the touch-typing and privacy of the interviews acted to alleviate this concern. Following the work of Wingate (2012) and Borg (2011) I then applied a thematic analysis to the participants' answers on their beliefs regarding the impact that attaining a C grade has on teaching and learning in Further Education and attempted to draw parallels between the two distinct groups of teachers.

### Discussion

Following a thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews carried out there are four key themes relating to the question 'To what extent the attainment of a Level 2 English qualification affects teaching and learning in Further Education?': the validity of assessment involved; a confusion between Key Skills and Functional Skills; concerns about the different funding allocations of schools and Further Education institutions and accountability pressures (appendix 12)

The teachers of the Further Education College refer negatively to the skills of their Functional Skills and GCSE students, with 2 teachers referring to 'gap-filling' as a role of Level 1 and 2 teachers in the college. The gaps were in reference to the English skills of the students, including knowledge of grammar, and other formal linguistic elements. Improving basic skills of young people is a key aim of FE (Felstead and Unwin, 2001, p. 107) and for those involved in the Level 2 provision this may seem a logical analysis.  However, all of the SFC teachers interviewed were also negative about the English abilities of their students. Many described students as 'struggling' when concerning their English abilities. For most of these teachers, they had a very small number of students re-taking GCSEs or taking Functional Skills classes for English.  The implications are that the students concerned have mostly attained Level 2 in English. Interestingly, 5 of the teachers, across both sample institutions, explicitly referred to an inability to write sentences as a key gap in their students' abilities.

According to Broadfoot (1986) 'test results: …are not necessarily a valid indicator of what a pupil can do' (cited in Shorrock-Taylor, 1999, p. 25) and this seems to be the major issue broached by the interviewees. The issue is that grades are not 'clearly (communicating)…what the student has learned' Deddeh et al (2010, p. 58) but are simply adhering to a culturally acceptable standard or norm in terms of grades. Noticeably, advice given by Ofsted to the FE College to improve functional English success rates was 'to use the results of diagnostic assessment when planning learning' (Ofsted, Further Education and Skills inspection: The FE College, 2013, p 2). This type of reliance on diagnostic assessment highlights the lack of faith held in the grading systems of GCSEs and the implied competencies of students.

According to the DfE this issue was raised and 'it was possible for young people to achieve grade C…without having a satisfactory standard of literacy' in 2004 by Tomlinson (DfE, 2007, p. 7). This has far reaching implications for not only the validity of assessments, but now that the A*-C benchmark has been set for Level 2 the validity of the grading system. According to Shorrocks-Taylor, the type of summative assessment may be at fault as a two hour written exam 'can seldom cover all the skills and understandings required' (1999, p. 168)

This 'gap-filling' approach, from those interviewed, raises two issues: namely the expectations of student ability from teachers and the perception of the Level 2 provision in compulsory education. Firstly, when 'the focus (is) on learner "needs", "gaps", or "deficiencies"…that can contribute to student failure or poor performance' (Helmer, 2013, p. 275) the focus can only be on the deficit in skills, based on low expectations of teachers. Although, one teacher interviewed, recognised and proposed using reward 'to draw attention to a paragraph without mistakes' rather than simply circling errors.

Secondly, there is an implied perception that schools may be '(cutting) corners and even (manufacturing) outcomes' (Felstead and Unwin, 2001, p. 101) due to external pressures. The two most senior of the interviewees referred directly to the extra support students received to achieve Level 2 in English in school that does not exist in their institutions, even going so far as to refer to this support as 'spoon-feeding' and 'hoop-jumping' and 'teacher assistants who sat and did it for them' to attain the C grade and above. 'With school sixth forms being funded on average £280 more per student than general FE colleges and sixth form colleges' (DfE, 2010, p. 79) it is clear as to why this extra support, regardless of the ethical implications, is available in one type of institution and in others not.

Despite the conflict between sectors concerning funding, both are subject to stringent

target-setting and governmental pressure to achieve results, specifically concerning the attainment percentage of the Level 2 provision. Two of the teachers of Functional Skills and GCSE in the FE College both refer to the monetary importance the government has placed on the Level 2 provision. With this type of investment from the government, to up-skill the young generation, the price is increased accountability and perceived pressure to produce results for the education sectors. According to LSIS 'there (is) a spotlight on how your organisation teaches and assesses functional skills' (LSIS, 2012, p. 19). The implied accountability for the provision is palpable and keenly felt by those involved with one of the teachers going so far as to say 'these days you just feel like you're under a magnifying glass'. The implications for teacher professionalism are particularly detrimental.

When considering the purpose of education in general it feels almost a truism that 'the purpose of teaching is not to assist learners in obtaining scheduled targets' (Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu, 2011, p. 51). However, the influence of marketisation and consumerism is keenly felt in the sector, and is largely characterised by pressure for performance table positions and performance data, and may 'be incompatible with the extension of the principle of equity' (Nind et al, 2005, p. 156). This is despite the assurance that the government 'will no longer impose top down skills targets' (BIS, 2010, p. 49). However, there are explicit punishments outlined in 'The Importance of Teaching' White Paper (DfE, 2010) for government intervention if a school is not performing well enough. Remarkably, the performance tables have been reformed to indicate the progress made by students at the schools to combat the 'severe injustice to schools with certain kinds of pupil intakes, namely those in socially deprived areas with disadvantaged pupils' (Shorrocks-Taylor, 1999, p. 135).

The push for accountability measures after the Further Education incorporation seems to have been a catalyst for this type of approach to the skills of students. Two of the teachers, from the different institutions, referred directly to data and statistics. One of the teachers considers the GCSE to have more worthwhile content than the Functional Skills course content but admits that students with an E grade in their Key Stage 4 English GCSE 'are too risky' to be placed on GCSE courses as they 'don't want (the) statistics to look bad'. This indicates a conflict felt between what is believed to be more worthwhile for students and what courses are an actual reality for them due to performance data restrictions. The 'commitment to publishing the results obtained in English…by students who failed to achieve English…GCSE at A*-C at KS4' of the Department for Education (DfE. 2014, p. 1) seems to be conflicting with the more holistic attributes of education.

Four of the teachers interviewed in the Sixth Form College were confused as to the difference between Key Skills and Functional Skills. Mostly this was demonstrated by their using the terms interchangeably, or confusing the start dates of either qualification. This has implications for the success of the functionality of English and Maths embedded into the curriculum. For example, all of the teachers referred to written literacy skills solely in terms of the course requirements rather than in terms applicable skills. Basic skill provision has shifted towards transferability of skills in practical contexts (DfE, 2007, p. 10), however the lack of clarification on this important point puts into question the authenticity and functionality of the skills being embedded (Dovey, 2006, p. 365). The confusion as to the new functionality of basic skills may be largely to do with the fact that employment is consistently conceptualised in various documents on the subject. The Functional Skills Support Programme document, released by the DfE in 2007, outlines the skills 'employers are looking for' (2007, p. 22) without clarifying what form of employer or employment is being referred to or what students are being prepared for (see also BIS, 2011, p. 9, the Leitch Review, 2006, p. 4 and NIACE, 2011, p. 7).

**Conclusion**

The conclusion of this research is that there are epistemic doubts concerning the Level 2 provision (Sosu and Gray, 2012, p. 82) from various stakeholders, including those interviewed. This is regardless of governmental assurances that this is no longer the case as students are becoming equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge (DfE, 2010, p. 48). The major concerns raised by those interviewed were centred around the formal language elements, such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure as major deficits in the skills of students. This also raises concerns about the validity of the skills the new Level 2 benchmark is demonstrating. Furthermore, the authenticity of the functionality of the skills being embedded in the curriculum was also brought into question. The perception of extra support in schools is affecting the perceived reliability of the Level 2 outcomes, as a result of accountability measures. The aforementioned accountability measures are keenly felt by those interviewed affecting the appropriateness of the courses in which students are enrolled, causing unnecessary strain on both students and teachers.

As 'reading and writing are learned in large part from interacting with other readers and writers' (Whitescarver and Kalman, 2009, p. 511) reducing language and communication to solely functional elements discards some of the most important reason as to why communicating effectively could be of benefit to the young generation. The concept of lifelong learning is not being enhanced by an emphasis on, firstly, the 'functional' and secondly, an emphasis on the norm. Arguably, 'in a constantly changing environment, the most valued attribute is the ability to learn how to learn' regardless of standards and norms (Dovey, 2006, p. 391)

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