Josh Coombs:
Teacher and Writer



MEET THE PROFESSIONALS



Josh Coombs

What made you want to teach Linguistics to primary and secondary children?

For one of the modules on my English undergraduate degree, I had to design a research artefact that had a public-facing element to it. In my own education, I only became properly familiar with Linguistics as a discipline when I took English Language at A-Level, and so I wanted to have a go at producing linguistics lessons for a primary school in my hometown, to see if younger students would click with the subject like I did. The lessons went down a storm with teachers and pupils, and after I achieved a first-class result for the module, I realised it was something I was both interested in and fairly good at.

This interest continued when I began my Post Graduate Certificate in Education in teaching English. I continued to write essays about the benefits of teaching Linguistics to English students, and devised a few more technical research projects in order to investigate further. Ultimately, it all came from my love of the subject, and a desire to teach as many people about it as possible.

Why did you decide to start creating resources for A-Level English teachers?

As an early-career teacher, I've been to quite a few professional development sessions to develop my practice teaching A-Level English Language. I'm fortunate enough to have a background in Linguistics, and therefore my subject knowledge was fairly up-to-scratch prior to teaching.

From these sessions, however, it's become alarmingly clear that there are many teachers out there, new or otherwise, who have been given the responsibility of teaching English Language despite having almost no background in the subject. As a result, they are having to learn an entirely unfamiliar discipline on the fly, and therefore dealing with a lot of unnecessary stress in a profession that already demands a lot of them. I thought I would use my expertise as a

relatively recent graduate to provide advice on what they should be looking out for, in the hopes of making their lives easier!

What are the benefits of teaching primary and secondary children about Sociolinguistics?

Lots of evidence suggests that a real linguistics education can have a significant impact on students. For example, research by the American sociolinguist Julia Sweetland suggests that students who have a sufficient knowledge of sociolinguistic issues tend to outperform other students in written assignments, so on a practical level it has benefits.

Plus, you'd be hard-pressed to find an individual who has absolutely no interest in language, whether that be accents, slang or language change. Researchers have found that students who have been taught a scheme of learning that tackles issues like language change and language death tend to have a perpetually high level of engagement with the subject matter, while also becoming more aware of the multicultural and multidialectal society in which they live. Unfortunately, thousands of students dislike the English subject in its current form in the UK, but those same students may take greatest interest if they were taught *Linguistics* instead!

How do you make difficult linguistic concepts accessible for new students?

Linguistics is a subject that is applicable to many people's lived experiences. This makes it easy to explain linguistic ideas to people, through anecdotes and relatable situations. In my primary school teaching, we talk about accent bias in the UK, and I use examples of Disney villains like Scar (The Lion King) and Jafar (Aladdin) to explain how certain accents are made to sound 'villainous' by major corporations. This resonates with them due to their personal relationship with these films.

In A-Level Language, I get my students to act out roleplay scenarios to understand concepts like style-shifting and occupational register. I get them into pairs and have one student act as a disgruntled retail customer, and the other as a retail worker trying to navigate the situation in a professional way. The results are often hilarious, and it gets them thinking about some of the linguistic habits that they might utilise in their lives without thinking about it!

What are some of the problems that may be preventing Linguistics from being officially added to the curriculum?

One problem is the lack of linguistics-trained English teachers, and the lack of subject knowledge support sessions offered to non-experts. Marcello Giovanelli's research suggests that most English teachers have honours degrees in either English Literature or an adjacent subject, rather than in English Language or Linguistics. As a result, we have an excess of literature teachers, but only a minority who feel confident delivering linguistics lessons. Another problem is the common assumption that English Language as a discipline is simply grammar drills, which puts a lot of people off the topic. While grammar is an important aspect of the course, it is not the only one.

It also doesn't help that universities across the UK are dissolving arts and humanities departments, many of which are home to Linguistics teams, on the basis of them 'not being economically viable'. Fewer chances to study it at a higher level means less people who are trained to teach it at a lower level, creating a vicious cycle.

Should Linguistics be a core part of the English national curriculum in the UK?

Yes. In the national curriculum for English, the Department for Education recognises that spoken language is a vital skill that is conducive to a students' cognitive, social, and linguistic abilities. However, there is no mention of Linguistics needing to be taught to students. Once, students were explicitly taught about spoken language as a weighted part of their English Language GCSE. Now, aside from the pitiful speaking and listening assessment that all students are required to do, the odds are very much stacked against Linguistics as a subject.

I'm not calling for a massive change overnight, as logistically this would be difficult, but there ought to be extra support from the Department for Education, helping to make Linguistics more salient. With this would come the need to support teachers, helping them to deliver these lessons. It shouldn't just be down to external charities and individuals to support teachers – the government should be doing this too! ¶

Josh Coombs is a qualified A-Level English Language teacher/examiner, and a MSc linguistics student. He is interested in the teaching of Language & Linguistics in the UK at all Key Stages, and helps new teachers of A-Level English Language to deliver content with confidence. You can follow him on Twitter at @Qwep210 and on LinkedIn.