

**How do teachers communicate to students about forthcoming GCSE exams?:**

**An observational study**

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### **Abstract**

High-stakes exams, such as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), have significant consequences for students and educators, which affects how teachers communicate to students about these exams. This study aimed to explore communications about exams, in the classroom.

Observations were conducted within 30 lessons in a secondary school in the North West of England. Thematic analysis of the data produced 4 higher order themes: Instructional practices, Grade point, Direction of message, and Efficacy appeals. The analysis suggests that teachers may use communications about exams for a variety of different purposes, including: motivating students to revise for their exams, controlling in-class behaviour, and providing guidance to students about preparing for their exams.

## **I Introduction**

This observational study formed the pilot of a series of studies for a PhD research project exploring teacher communications to students about high-stakes exams. As results from high-stakes exams have significant consequences for both students and educators, it is important to consider what is being communicated to students in the classroom, and the impact of these communications for students. A body of research has focused upon teachers' use of timing and consequence reminders. However, there is little exploration of what else is being communicated to students regarding their forthcoming exams. This study aimed to use observational analysis to provide an insight into the high-stakes exam classroom, and explore what teachers say to students about exams.

At the end of secondary schools, all students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are required to sit General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations. The results of these exams have consequences for both the students and their educators, and therefore are considered as, 'high-stakes exams'. For students, these exams are often considered a passport to future endeavours, as passes (previously a grade 'C', now a grade '4') within certain subjects, such as English and Maths, are required for entry into employment or further education (Denscombe, 2000). For schools, the cost of 'failing' to deliver results in these exams is high, with sanctions including: written warnings from the government; increased OFSTED inspections; removal of the headteacher; closure of the school and replacement with an academy (Hutchings, 2015). Due to the implications for schools of poor results, teachers are often put under pressure to meet targets, causing them considerable stress (Hutchings, 2015).

A body of research has explored how these pressures have impacted upon teacher's communications about exams, through their use of fear appeals. Fear appeals are persuasive messages which describe how a particular course of action may lead to negative consequences, and how an alternative course of action can avoid these consequences (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). Within the context of high-

stakes examinations, these are often understood as messages which highlights how failure can have negative consequences for educational attainment, occupational aspirations, one's self-worth, or social concerns (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). Research has explored the impact of fear appeal communications on a variety of educational factors such as: student engagement, academic self-efficacy, examination performance, test anxiety, and academic motivation (for a review, see Putwain, Symes, Nicholson & Remedios, in press).

Although research has explored the mechanisms of fear appeal communications, there is a lack of research exploring whether there are other ways in which teachers communicate to students about their GCSE exams. Therefore, this study aimed to use classroom observations to explore how teachers communicate to students about their forthcoming exams.

## **2 Method**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained by the Research Ethics Committee at Liverpool John Moores University. Consent was provided by each member of staff whose lesson was observed. Observations were conducted over a two-week period in a secondary school in the North West of England. The school runs a 3-year GCSE programme, with students starting their GCSEs in Year 9. Also, within the school, students in all years undertake regular testing in six-week cycles, therefore because all students are exposed to regular testing, observations from all year groups (Year7-11) were conducted, however no messages relating to exams or tests were observed in any Year 7 or 8 classes. 30 observations were conducted, within a range of subjects, including: Maths, English, Science, History, Geography, Spanish, French and IT.

Due to the exploratory nature of the research, unstructured observations were undertaken. Any communication from the teacher regarding students' forthcoming tests or exams were transcribed verbatim, along with any contextual information which would aide analysis.

## **3 Analytical Method**

139 quotations were recorded and subjected to thematic analysis. This approach was selected for its ability to summarise large amounts of data into key features, whilst retaining rich data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysis was initially informed through a bottom-up approach, which formed concurrent ideas and sub-themes. Higher order themes mostly emerged through a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches, with themes emerging from the data, underpinned by theoretical perspectives.

## **4 Analysis**

Four higher order themes emerged from the data. These were: Instructional Practices, Grade point, Direction of message, and Efficacy appeals (Appendix A provides a visual representation of the data within a thematic map).

### **4.1 Instructional Practices**

This theme represents teaching practices used in the classroom. The first two sub-themes related to ways in which teachers attempted to motivate their students to engage in certain behaviours, such as on-task behaviour during lessons, or engaging in achievement-related activities. The final sub-theme discusses how teachers differentiate between accountability and the onus of responsibility for the completion of tasks or behaviours.

#### **4.1.1 Adopting a Controlling Style**

This sub-theme describes a teaching style aimed to motivate students by pressuring them to think, feel and behave in a certain way (Reeve, 2009), and is further subdivided into: pressure and exam timing messages.

##### **4.1.1.1 Pressure**

This sub-theme relates to using pressure inducing language (e.g. 'should', 'need to') to get students to think, feel or behave in a certain way, e.g. *"We're heading towards the end of year 10, rapidly moving towards year 11, this is stuff you should know by now"*.

Additionally, threats were used to control behaviour, e.g. *“Do you think you’re going to get your GCSEs and A levels by saying I couldn’t fit it in my book...This is going to be on your test, you’re not going to be able to do well by having done 2 questions”*.

The use of pressure inducing language and threats to control behaviour have been conceptualised as facets of a controlling teacher instruction style. Reeve (2009) posits a number of reasons why teachers may adopt a controlling motivating style, which are categorised in three main categories: pressure from above, pressure from below and pressure from within.

### *4.1.1.2 Exam Timing Messages*

This sub-theme describes communications relating to the proximity of forthcoming exams, often referred to as exam timing messages (Putwain et al., in press) e.g. *“You’ve got 5 months until your exam now, but we’re not going to be going over this stuff again”*. These messages may act as a prompt to support the regulation of students’ preparation for forthcoming tests, both within the forethought phase and performance phase within the self-regulated learning model (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018)

### **4.1.2 Encouraging Competence Motivation**

This theme describes a teaching style aimed to motivate students by increasing their feelings of confidence (Urda & Turner, 2005). Urda and Turner (2005) use the phrase ‘competence motivation’ as an overarching term to describe the impetus to develop or demonstrate competence. This sub-theme was further divided into 3 sub-themes: rationale, reassurance, and empowerment.

#### *4.1.2.1 Rationale*

Teachers used reference to forthcoming exams in order to provide a rationale for current tasks and activities, e.g. *“The reason we are using error board technique today is because no GCSE exam is going to be perfect and error free but you can still get your highest possible grade with a percentage of errors.”*. Providing rationale for tasks is conceptualised within both Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT: Eccles, 2005). SDT and EVT accept that not all

tasks students undertake within the classroom can be intrinsically interesting, and teachers may have to turn to strategies which relate learning and current tasks to those required for their exams in order to maintain student engagement and motivation; because, in theory, students value achieving well in their exams therefore they should value a task which is essential to achieving well in their exams.

#### 4.1.2.2 Reassurance

This theme relates to teachers using reassuring messages to increase students' competence motivation e.g. *"This is hard, don't worry if you don't get it, we're going to keep doing these...Don't worry if you can't do it, we're going to do a lot more practice of these...By the time it's your exam we will have done lots of practice"*. Providing this type of positive message, which encourages students to recognise that they have control over their learning is an important feature within Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985).

#### 4.1.2.3 Empowerment

This sub-theme describes how teachers used messages which appeared to try and empower their students e.g. *"This is your maths exam book to success...let's start with a positive look on life...Or call it the journey to grade point 6..."*. Having control over one's learning is a key component within Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985). By using empowering language and providing students with a sense of control over their learning, this can increase their motivation, and generally results in higher levels of achievement (Pintrich, 2004).

### 4.1.3 Onus of Responsibility

This theme depicts how teacher use different language to indicate who is responsible for learning. Two distinct differences emerged for responsibility of learning in the classroom. Some messages directly implicated students for taking the responsibility for their learning, e.g. *"This is something that we have done for 2 learning cycles now, you shouldn't be getting this wrong. If you don't know it then you*

*need to go and learn it*". Whereas other messages appeared to suggest a more collective responsibility e.g. *"We can find out gaps in knowledge so we can work harder for our exams"*.

Research into the distinction of personal pronoun use in the classroom suggests that they can have differing effects. The use of the pronouns such as 'you' can distance teachers and students and tends to establish a more authoritative social relationship (Oliveria, 2010). Whereas, words such as 'we' can promote solidarity between teachers and students and help to promote a cooperative atmosphere in the classroom where teachers and students work together on a common goal (Oliveria, 2010).

#### **4.2 Grade Point**

Although many of the quotations within this theme, span other higher order themes, it also warranted a theme of its own because it was interesting to consider how teachers are using reference to student's grades within the classroom.

Within the observations, the reference to grade point was used in a variety of ways. For example, it seemed to be used to encourage students by setting a goal to work towards e.g. *"This is your maths exam book to success...let's start with a positive look on life...Or call it the journey to grade point 6..."*. Using a grade as a target in this way, may be seen as an example of goal setting within the self-regulated learning framework (Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003).

Reference to grade point was also used to distinguish between students within the class, e.g. *We're prone to writing things quickly, especially the GP 6/7, we need to be checking what we have written*". Using reference to grade in this way, may limit students' perceptions of their capabilities and in turn impact upon their educational outcomes. When viewed in relation to student's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), which proposes that individuals acquire information about their capabilities by comparing themselves to how others perform, it could be suggested that by teachers pre-classifying students by their respective target grades, students may make negative comparisons and limit themselves.

#### **4.3 Direction of Message**



Messages were delivered within several ways within the classroom: to the class as a whole, as part of a narrative/commentary, and to individual students.

#### **4.3.1 Class a Whole**

The majority of the messages observed were directed to the whole class whilst the teacher held their attention.

#### **4.3.2 Narrative/Commentary**

This sub-theme refers to teacher's providing a commentary whilst they were otherwise engaged in another task. These messages were sometimes merely communicating additional information to students e.g. *"Why do I want this question to come up in every exam...because your answer is always going to be the same"*, other times, they contained a request for the students to do something e.g. *"You're never going to have this much time to do it in the exam so you need to speed up a bit"*. What is most poignant about this theme is the possible implications that the different methods of transmission of messages may have upon students' interpretation and appraisal of the message. For example, it is unclear whether students acknowledged messages more if the teacher was directing messages to the class as a whole more so than when they were said in more of a narrative manner.

#### **4.3.3 Individual Students**

Although infrequent, there were some instances of teachers communicating to individual students whilst the class were conducting independent work. For example individual interactions where used to encourage individuals e.g. *"Adding in that extra information will get you that A\*... [student looks at teacher disbelievingly] ... come on you already got one in your mock"*, or to motivate students to work, e.g. *"Come on (student's name) it's important now, it's GCSE work"*

#### **4.4 Efficacy Appeals**

Many of the messages from the observations related to practical skills and methods for students to use in order to achieve the best grade in their exam.

Although not a new field of research, (Amrein & Berliner, 2002) a unique theoretical approach was adopted when considering the overarching theme of these communications: efficacy appeals. The term efficacy appeals derives from the Extended Parallel Process Model (Witte & Allen, 2000). This theory posits that a person's perception of threat and their feelings of efficacy to avoid the threat are important to how messages are interpreted. Efficacy comprises of response efficacy (beliefs about the effectiveness of the response in deterring the threat) and self-efficacy (beliefs about ability to perform the recommended response to avert the threat).

Several studies have extended the research of efficacy appeals into the educational context. Putwain and Roberts (2012) define efficacy appeals in the educational context as messages which communicate to students the ways in which they could develop mastery, efficacy and self-regulated learning, they propose the following as examples of efficacy appeals: explaining assessment demands required by types of examinations questions, explaining how marks would be awarded for exemplar questions, communicating to students the importance of such preparatory practices in avoiding failure.

The efficacy appeal theme is further subdivided into skills and techniques, and the importance of preparatory practice.

#### **4.4.1 Skills and Technique**

The majority of the efficacy appeal communications relate to the skills and technique subtheme, which is further divided into 6 themes. This theme encompasses types of skills and techniques important for students for success in their exams.

##### *4.4.1.1 Time Spent in Exam*

This theme relates to how long students should spend on questions in their exam e.g. *"You have 12 minutes to write this, that's about 1 and half minutes a mark"*

##### *4.4.1.2 Specific Answers*

This theme encompasses how students should answer practice questions if they appear on exam e.g. *“Somewhere within the first sentence you need to mention that place that you have studied...Then you need to use tourist numbers”*

#### *4.4.1.3 Exam Consent*

Exam content relates to signposting topics or areas which may appear on exam e.g. *“It comes up time and time again, so you have to know this”*

#### *4.4.1.4 GCSE Changes*

At the time of the observation, the new style GCSE exams were introduced, and there was communication from teachers about how the exams had changed, and what this meant for students in terms of understanding what was required from them from the new specifications e.g. *“That’s the step up from old spec to new spec so you need to know it”*.

#### *4.4.1.5 Exam Strategy*

This theme relates to techniques, hints and tips to help students achieve highest grade possible e.g. *“In Maths now, it’s really important to communicate, be really specific, use key terms.”*

#### *4.4.1.6 Mark Allocation and Maximisation*

This theme relates to how marks are awarded and how to maximise marks e.g. *“So why I am so bothered about your spelling? 9 SPAG [Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar] marks on each paper. The paper is only worth 80 marks plus 9 for SPAG, and you do 2 tests so that’s 18 marks, it’s like free marks that we need to nail”*.

### **4.4.2 Importance of Preparatory Practice**

This sub-theme relates to teachers’ use of communication to explain to students how important it is for them to prepare for their exams.

These messages, although grouped within the same theme due to their similar intention, were communicated in different ways. Some messages were communicated in a more positive tone e.g. *“This is the start of working hard and revising for the exam...This is day one of exam prep”*. Whereas, others were communicated with a more negative tone e.g. *“Numbers are a huge part of your GCSE, some of you are not very strong on it and we really need to improve on that very quickly”*. In contrast, other messages were said in a more neutral tone e.g. *“Structure is a big emphasis on the new exam...We’re good on language but we need to not forget about structure...Make sure we are revising structure in our revision guide”*.

It is interesting that these messages all appear to have the same aim: to communicate to students the importance of preparing for their exams, however they are delivered in a variety of ways, and therefore may be viewed by students in different ways.

### **5 Implications and Future Research**

The observations and analysis from the pilot study focused the aims of the doctoral research. The theme of ‘Efficacy Appeals’ was of particular interest. The remainder of the doctoral research involves the development of a questionnaire to explore teachers’ use of and students’ interpretation of efficacy appeals. The questionnaire will then be used to understand the impact of efficacy appeal appraisal upon fear appeal appraisal, student engagement and grade. By understanding the mechanisms of how students respond to communications, this can support teachers in modifying their language in order to better engage students in exam preparation practices, which should in turn, boost educational attainment.

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## TEACHER COMMUNICATION FOR FORTHCOMING GCSE EXAMS

