



The Leverhulme Trust

YOT Talk: The Impact of Communication in Youth Justice Interviews

Practitioner Report

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Contents

YOT Talk: Initial Practitioner Report	2
1. Context.....	2
2. Project aims.....	2
3. Methodology.....	3
3.1. Data.....	3
3.2 Data Analysis Process.....	3
4. Results – Themes	4
4.1 Assessment Tool	5
4.2 Assessment Environment.....	7
4.3 Eliciting Information.....	8
4.4 Topic Management	9
4.5 Conversational “Flow”	9
4.6 Ensuring Understanding.....	10
4.7 Negotiating Meaning	13
4.8 Building Rapport	14
5. Conclusions	16
5.1 General context and quality of communication	16
5.2 Tension between assessment interviews and AssetPlus.....	16
5.3 Improving communication in assessment interviews.....	16
References	17



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YOT Talk: Initial Practitioner Report

1. Context

Assessment interviews are integral to the youth justice process. They are the main method by which practitioners gather information about a young person's life, experiences and the influences on their behaviour. They are therefore key to building a constructive relationship with a young person. While there have been previous studies of the effectiveness (or otherwise) of communication between young people and professionals in other parts of the justice system (e.g. in police interviews and court settings), none have examined the use of communication in youth justice assessment interviews.

This is an important knowledge gap given that responsibility for engagement is placed upon young people, 'engagement' in this context being meaningful and positive participation in the intervention process (Stephenson et al 2011: 75; Hart and Thompson 2008:9). This was identified by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) as one of the key elements of effective practice. Communication difficulties in this context are typically discussed in relation to 'Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties' (Taylor et al 2014; Talbot 2010) rather than derived from critical exploration of the nature of professional practice (Case and Haines 2015).

Our project addressed this knowledge gap by systematically investigating how a range of factors affect communication in the context of youth justice assessment interviews.

2. Project aims

- To identify and examine patterns of **effective discourse** within assessment interviews, that is, the communicative moments where young person and YOT practitioner succeed in negotiating meaning in relation to expected goals;
- To identify and examine patterns of **problematic communication** within assessment interviews, that is, the communicative moments where young person and YOT practitioner perceive that their interaction is failing to provide the expected goals (as above);
- To **link communication features to the context**, such as the interview environment, the role of other professionals, the assessment guidelines, the opportunities young people are given to present their perspective in the interview, and so forth;
- To develop guidance for effective communication between young people and YOT practitioners from which **concrete, applied interaction protocols** can be derived and embedded within practice.

3. Methodology

We employed an innovative methodology, combining participative survey (questionnaires, interviews, focus groups) and linguistic (Corpus and Conversation Analysis) methods.

Conversation Analysis is the study of sequences in communication and how speakers express not only what they mean, but also their identities, roles, and relationships with each other through language. Corpus Linguistics involves the construction and analysis of searchable language databases. Using corpus software, it is possible to search for frequent words and phrases both within individual texts and across texts. In this study we looked at how frequent words and phrases were used in assessment interviews, and whether they appeared in instances effective or potentially problematic communication.

We also asked young people and practitioners about their experiences of communication in assessment interviews through questionnaires (young people, practitioners) and focus groups (practitioners). We worked with the Youth Offending Teams to make sure that the questionnaires and consent forms were suitable for the participants and guaranteed their anonymity in this process.

This combination of methods was particularly well suited to our aims as the linguistic methods allowed us to come to the data with as few preconceptions as possible and produce a balanced picture of interaction in the assessment context, while the participatory research methods made sure that the views of all participants remained at the heart of our research.

3.1. Data

Data	Data size
Assessment interviews¹ recorded + observed (total time / word count)	19 interviews (c. 16.5 hours / 93000 words)
Questionnaires	67 (23 Practitioners/ 44 Young People)
Focus Groups	2 (x 5 Practitioners each)

Table 1 - YOT Talk Data and Analytic Process

3.2. Data Analysis Process

The assessment audio recordings were transcribed into text format. These also preserved information regarding non-verbal communication features, such as pauses, intonation, speed of delivery and so forth. These provide crucial cues about interpersonal dynamics in communication.

Next, we developed a coding framework of notable communicative features which was informed by our literature review and an examination of the transcribed assessments. We also ran corpus analyses of the transcripts to identify and examine frequent words and phrases across all of the assessments. We also separated out practitioner and young person language so that we could compare them. Finally, we analysed the questionnaire and focus group responses thematically

¹ **Case type:** 4 Prevention; 1 Youth Conditional Caution; 6 Referral Order Initial; 2 Referral Order Review; 4 Pre-sentencing Reports; 2 End of Order Reviews

drawing upon the communicative features coding framework. Figure 1 offers a schematic of the data analysis process.

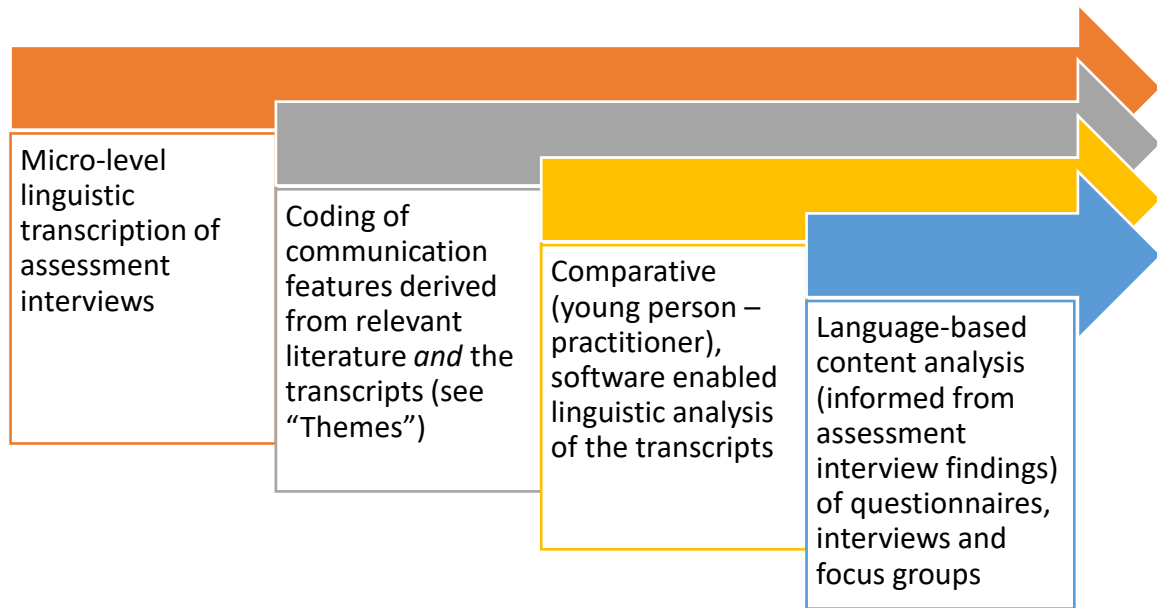


Figure 1

4. Results – Themes

The results were grouped under the following themes, which reflect recurrent elements of the assessment interview process:

- 4.1. Assessment Tool
- 4.2. Assessment Environment
- 4.3. Eliciting Information
- 4.4. Managing Topics
- 4.5 "Flow"
- 4.6 Ensuring Understanding
- 4.7 Negotiating Meaning
- 4.8 Building Rapport

4.1 Assessment Tool

A range of issues emerged regarding the inherent challenges in the youth justice assessment interview context (from the environment, to time constraints, to the AssetPlus framework itself) and the impact these factors can have on young person-practitioner communication and young person engagement.

All Focus Group practitioners felt that AssetPlus is too long

Focus Group 1

PR3: "it's the same information that we put in the new Asset really [as in the original Asset form], it just takes four or five times as long. The most important thing about our job is to work with the young person, but we're not seeing them as much as we were"

Focus Group 2

PR2: "it's long and it's long, and it's long. And there's the biggest problem."

AssetPlus encourages practitioners to address desistance factors.

Practitioners addressed desistance factors in every assessment we observed.

On average 11% of the time in assessment interviews was spent discussing desistance factors (highest 28% of the assessment dedicated to desistance, lowest 3%).

While practitioners acknowledged that AssetPlus makes you address desistance factors, some felt that their inclusion was "supplementary", and did not reflect a significant shift in the focus of the assessment

- **Focus Group 2**

PR1: "it does make you look at positive factors because obviously you have to look at reasons for desistance and against desistance don't you? So it does, it does make you look at things positively, it does"

PR3: "it feels like a little bit of an afterthought, an add on though, rather than that's the whole point and the drive of the whole thing, because of the amount of stuff in there that's got nothing to do with desistance factors"

Practitioners also reported that the late placement of desistance factors and goals in the assessment framework, coupled with the tendency to work through the assessment in a linear fashion, meant that they and/or the young person may be fatigued by the time they reached it.

- **Focus Group 2**

PR1: "...[My Future] is towards the end isn't it? by then you're kind of fed up of filling all these boxes up, oh my god another one!"

AssetPlus is still risk and offence-focused.

While, as noted in the previous section, practitioners in every assessment addressed desistance factors to some degree, the areas which received the most discussion were still risk factors and the offence.

- **50% of the time was spent discussing personal circumstances** (living arrangements, lifestyle, substance use, health...)
- On average, **38% of the assessment time was dedicated to discussing current and previous offences.**
 - The words “offence” and “offences” were both highly frequent in practitioner speech when compared to the language used by young people.
 - Five out of nine of the questions in the “My Future” section of AssetPlus self-assessment are framed in terms of “offending” and “problems” and how to avoid them. Two of the questions are closed questions about whether the YOT are in a position to help. This leaves just two open questions about the young person’s interests and goals.

Practitioners in Focus Group 2 noted that the risk factor and offence focus of AssetPlus also carries over into the nature of the intervention

- **Focus Group 2**

PR2: “[the focus on risk factors] tends to feed into the sort of things we’re proposing as work once the order commences really, y’know, victim awareness, things to do with your thinking behaviour that leads you to offend, they seem to me to be the things rather than say more constructive things that are not to do with your poor behaviour”

Practitioners expressed awareness of and dissatisfaction with the offence focus of assessments

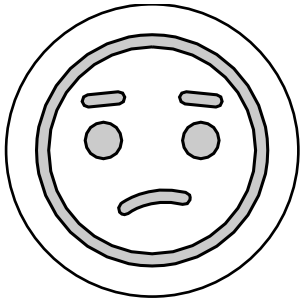
- **Focus Group 2**

PR1: “We’re constantly criminalising them, aren’t we? And they’re having to talk about what they’ve done”

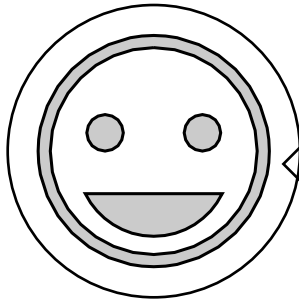
PR3: “Instead of like, okay we’re moving on, it’s like no we’ve gotta relive this over and over...”

Practitioners have a good understanding of which topic areas young people find easy/difficult to discuss

- **There was an 88% correspondence between the subject areas that practitioners and young people identified as being easy/difficult to discuss.**



Practitioners and young people agreed that ***New Offences, Past Offences, Mental Health, Drugs, Drinking, and Smoking*** were difficult to talk about.



Practitioners and young people were agreed that ***Plans/Goals, Hobbies, House, Local Area, Jobs, Friends, and Physical Health*** were relatively easier to talk about.

The only areas where the results differed were that overall practitioners identified *School* as an area that young people like to talk about while it received a neutral rating from young people. Practitioners also noted that *Family* is an area that young people do not like to talk about, whereas young people identified this as a positive area of discussion.

The relative ease/difficulty in talking about topics will depend on the young person but it is a positive finding that practitioners are on the whole sensitive to the areas young people will and won't want to discuss.

4.2 Assessment Environment

The majority of the assessment interviews carried out by the participating YOTs are done at the young person's home, largely due to practical factors concerning the location or facilities of the YOT.

In the Focus Groups practitioners identified a number of pros and cons of conducting interviews in the home, which included:

Pros

- Young people are more comfortable at home
- Even if the young person doesn't engage with the assessment, the way that they engage (or fail to engage) with others in the home environment can provide valuable information (*Focus Group 1, PR5: "If you get the engagement, great! If you don't, what's going on?"*)
- The Home environment is less pressured setting to start building a relationship and provides clues as to young person's interests (e.g. films, sports trophies, pets...etc).

Cons

- Family members, or other visitors to the house can interrupt or distract from the interview
- Some young people take the interview less seriously at home. This can manifest in young people not attending or turning up late, even when they are already at home.

While Practitioners expressed no clear preference in terms of interview venue and, as with 'topic', this is a factor that will differ from case to case, the overall consensus was that young people are more likely to be comfortable and communicative at home (or on "neutral ground" such as a youth centre if there are problems at home) than they are in a YOT office.

4.3 Eliciting Information

We looked at the form questions took, and how this affected answers. We also asked practitioners how they go about formulating questions and examined the AssetPlus tools that inform the questioning. The themes that emerged were as follows:

Assessment interviews are practitioner led

- **94% of all questions were asked by practitioners**

Assessments were characterised by closed questions and minimal answers

The majority the questions that appeared in the assessment interviews were closed (that is, can be answered by minimal yes/no answers). These closed questions tended to elicit minimal responses, meaning that the dominant question-answer style was that of a questionnaire/checklist.

- **71% of practitioner questions were closed questions.**
 - Likely reasons: the closed nature of the questions in the AssetPlus framework; the length of the assessment and resulting time constraints on practitioners (closed questions are a more efficient way of eliciting the varied and specific information required to complete an AssetPlus form).
 - Observed impact: Use of closed questions decreased subsequent engagement level: **80% of closed questions were met with minimal responses.**

- **29% of practitioner questions were open questions** (“what do you think...”).
 - **Observed impact:** In 59% of cases open questions received an extended response. **Open questions were three times more likely to receive an extended response than closed questions**, though it should be noted that 41% of open questions also received minimal responses.
- Some practitioners reported that, even with more open questions, the risk-focus of the assessment is disengaging

PR3: “I think it tries to be general yeah? Like “How are things at home, at school”, but it’s clinging on to the 12 points from the old Asset, education, home... It’s still there, those risk factors.” (Focus Group 2)

4.4 Topic Management

We looked at how topics are managed, who introduced, developed and concluded each area of discussion and what factors determined this and found that...

All practitioners introduced and concluded each topic in the assessments

- **In the majority of cases the topic structure of AssetPlus is adhered to**
 - In 62% of cases practitioners addressed topics in the order in which they appear in AssetPlus materials (self-assessment and YOT/practitioner-produced prompt sheets).
 - This may have a negative impact on opportunity to cover desistance adequately (see section 4.1)
 - Where topics were introduced by the young person or guardian “out of turn” practitioners steered the assessment back to the original structure, minimising the young person’s influence on the direction of the interview.
All focus group practitioners noted that there are compliance issues for them in terms of making sure they address every area in AssetPlus, so they do not feel able to skip areas that they feel don’t apply. This may also impact their ability to let the young person guide the focus of the assessment.

4.5 Conversational “Flow”

To get a sense of how speakers take their turn to speak in assessment interviews, we also looked at each instance of overlapping speech and how it was used to support or interrupt the other speaker. In addition to this, we looked at gaps in the flow of the assessment by examining where and why long pauses occur.

Long pauses

Long pauses in communication in the interviews generally resulted from the practical challenges of interviewing and recording information rather than lack of engagement from the young person.

Long pauses due to writing and topic transition

- There were on average 15 long pauses (over 2 seconds) per interview. *Maximum 34, minimum 4*

- **77% of the long pauses that occurred were in practitioner turns**, marking topic transition points and breaks in the assessment where the practitioner had to write down information.

Long pauses as a sign of sympathetic pacing

- The third most frequent function of pauses in practitioner speech was to slow the pace of the interview when addressing more sensitive topics. In 45% of the assessments we also observed practitioners speeding up the pace of to move quickly through “tick box” screening tools.

Interruptions and overlapping speech

Interruptions and overlaps were a frequent feature of the interviews, with combined practitioners and young person interruptions occurring on average 37 times per interview (*maximum 109, minimum 6*).

Interruptions and overlapping speech mostly evidenced supportive and collaborative communication

- **89% of overlapping practitioner speech was supportive, e.g.**

Assessment interview data (020)

YP: *I'm polite (-) erm (-) kind (.) [caring] (--)* erm (1.4) *I can be a laugh (-) sometimes (-)*
PR: *[mhm]*

- **76% of overlapping young person speech was supportive, e.g.**

Assessment interview data (086)

PR: *erm impulsive means that (-) you act first (-) and then [think] later*
YP: *[yeah]*

Young people used more non-supportive overlapping speech than practitioners.

- Given the control that practitioners have over the exchange it's perhaps not surprising that young people have more reason to use non-supportive overlapping speech to resist or dismiss a line of questioning, e.g.

Assessment interview data (088)

PR: *a- any drinkin:g out on: the street [with anyone? (-) no] you don't do that*
YP: *[wouldn't do that (.) it's scummy]*

4.6 Ensuring Understanding

Language in the legal domain is notoriously difficult to understand. We asked young people and practitioners about their experiences of understanding in assessment interviews. We also analysed the language in the assessment interviews to identify ways in which practitioners and young people made sure that they (and the other speaker) are understood.

Complexity of language in the assessments

Young people and practitioners broadly agreed that the language difficulty level in assessment interviews is appropriate

- 73% of Young People responded that they found assessment interview questions Easy, or Very Easy to understand, with the remaining respondents answering, “sometimes easy, sometimes difficult”.
- 70% of practitioners responded that young people sometimes have difficulty understanding questions. 13% felt that young people frequently had difficulty understanding, and 17% felt that difficulties were rare.

These figures reflect a wider tendency in the questionnaire data for young people to respond very positively while practitioners gave more measured responses. As practitioners administered the questionnaires it may be that young people felt some obligation to give a positive answer and/or wanted to avoid the longer discussion that a negative answer may start. It could also be that practitioners’ recognition of the potential difficulties in understanding mean that they ask questions in a way that is easy to understand.

Our lexical analysis of the assessment transcripts confirms that the language used is of a suitable complexity level

- **At least 95% of practitioner language in the assessments we observed was at an appropriate level for 13-18-year olds**

We compared the language used in the assessments to two databases of contemporary written and spoken English. On average 95% of the vocabulary used appeared very frequently in these databases (the assumption being that words that are more frequently and widely used are easier to understand).

Once we had also factored in proper names and features of spoken language (e.g. filler words like “er” and “um”), 99% of the language practitioners use was identified as age appropriate for the average vocabulary level of 13-18-year olds (Coxhead et al., 2015).

This suggests that lexical complexity is not a major reason for lack of engagement in this context. However it should also be noted that our comparison figures were taken from a study of ‘typical’ high school students. A level of complexity that is appropriate for them may still be too advanced for young people who have learning difficulties and/or fallen behind at school.

While very little complex vocabulary appeared in the assessments, most of the complex vocabulary that was used related to offending, intervention, and youth justice

The analyses we ran on the assessments identified the following words as being relatively low frequency/high complexity,

Impact, regret, adjourn, behaviour, conviction, convicted, caution, consent, joint enterprise, interference, curfew, perpetrate, exclusion, conclusions, coping mechanisms, accusation, consequences, consequential, restorative processes, token gesture, remorseful, confidentiality, incriminate, agitated, barrier, impulsive, impulsivity, reparation, mindset, inappropriate, eczema, dyslexia, dyspraxia, anorexia, hyperactivity, assessment, diagnosis, substance abuse,

decriminalisation, fluctuation, timescale, routine, achievement, apprenticeships, literacy, numeracy

Some of this vocabulary was isolated to individual assessments, however some of the concepts such as impulsivity, consequential thinking, and restorative processes were used across assessment types and locations.

There was also some inconsistency in practitioners' approach to addressing offence-related word. Complex words that related to part of the young person's order (e.g. "consequential thinking", "restorative processes") were always explained, e.g.

Assessment interview data (017)

PR: so **restorative** is about looking at when (.) when harm's happened when something's gone wrong °h so like (.) you ((committing offence)) and then (.) looking at how we can make it right

Where complex vocabulary occurred in the assessment form it was less consistently explained, e.g.

Assessment interview data (077)

PR: (1.5) do you have (.) erm symptoms of **overactivity** (.) **inattention** (.) **impulsivity**

YP: (-) no (1.7)

PR: okay

Spending time explaining legal and intervention-related vocabulary inevitably increases the offence focus of assessments which is not ideal. However, given that a significant proportion of the assessments are dedicated to discussing risk factors and offending behaviour, it is crucial that young people understand the relevant vocabulary.

Strategies for ensuring understanding

Overall, we found that both practitioners and young people made efforts to ensure their own understanding and the other speaker's understanding by using the following strategies

- **Other-comprehension checks** (*Speaker 1 checking that Speaker 2 understands*)
- **Self-comprehension checks** (*Speaker 1 checking that Speaker 1 understands*)
- **Clarification requests** (*Speaker 1 asking Speaker 2 to explain*)
- **Repetition requests** (*Speaker 1 asking Speaker 2 to repeat*)

While both young people and practitioners employed all of these strategies to some degree, **young people were more likely to check practitioner understanding, than they were to check their own.**

In the assessments we observed, practitioners frequently checked both their own understanding and that of young people., young people checked practitioner understanding three times more often than their own.

This tendency was also reflected in the questionnaire responses, where more young people said that they would use multiple strategies to correct practitioner misunderstanding (13) than their own (10).

4.7 Negotiating Meaning

As well as ensuring simple comprehension, speakers in assessment interviews are ideally also trying to establish a shared understanding of an offence and why it may have happened.

Practitioners may have some understanding of the young person's personal circumstances and the events surrounding the offence prior to the assessment interview from social service records and the police account, but they are also heavily dependent on the young person to communicate honestly and openly about themselves and how they came into contact with youth justice services.

As we have seen, the offence-focus of the assessment can be disengaging, and there are other factors that may influence the young person's willingness to communicate including previous experiences with professionals, and the degree to which they feel the intervention will make a positive difference.

In trying to establish a shared understanding the main tasks that we observed for each speaker were:

- **Practitioner:** information gathering (749); explaining [assessment and consequences] (95); summarising (151).
- **Young person:** answering: explaining [personal circumstances, attitudes, goals] (107); resisting (108).

83% of the instances of resistance (that is, where one speaker disputes or rejects something the other person says) were attributable to young people.

Resisting negatives

- As we might expect, this resistance occurs in relation to questioning and summaries that frame the young person's actions or motivations in a negative way, e.g.

Assessment interview data (021)

PR: (.) d'you think that you ever (-) if something (.) say something happens at home to piss you off d'you ever go out looking for trouble almost to sort of (-)

YP: = **nah**

PR: = deal with (-) what's going on (.) at home (-) no? (.) don't take it out on other [people] or anything (.) okay (-) .hh [s-]

YP: [I only] take it out on other people if they get involved (-)

Resisting positives

- Perhaps the bigger surprise, and the bigger challenge for practitioners in promoting positive interventions is that young people also resisted *positive* generalisations about themselves. This tendency was noted by practitioners in focus group and questionnaire responses, and was also observed in the assessment interview data, e.g.

Focus Group 1

PR1: "I've got some that don't like saying anything good about themselves and find it really uncomfortable"

PR2 "accepting praise... 'cause they're so used to getting negative feedback and stuff like that from school, parents, police"

PR1: “you sometimes need to tell them what the good things are because they might not see it as something positive”

Assessment interview data (089)

PR: .h right .h (.) we (.) did speak a bit about (.) y’know (.) friends in general and stuff and what you told me was that erm (-) you’re often the one to calm things down (-)

YP: **Sometimes not all the time (.)**

PR: okay (.) but the ability to do that (-) is really important (-) yeah?

Pointing out positives

Young people may need help identifying positive elements of their own behaviour or circumstances, e.g.

Assessment interview data (089)

PR: ...it does show (-) y’know that you did use some of th- your thinking skills (.) because you put other people’s (-) feelings (-) into the equation didn’t ya?

There was evidence in the language of the assessments we observed that practitioners help young point out positives.

- **In 64% of the assessments we observed contained** the practitioner praised some element of the young person’s behaviour.
- In our examination of frequent words and phrases “**that’s good**” was identified as a frequent phrase in practitioner language.

4.8 Building Rapport

The element of the assessment task that was identified again and again by practitioners as the most important was relationship building. Through surveys, focus groups and examinations of the interviews we identified some of the strategies that practitioners employ to facilitate this.

Rapport building through accommodation

The most frequent strategy we observed for building rapport was accommodation, i.e. altering the way you speak to fit in with the other speaker.

- **96% practitioners surveyed felt that they altered their speech to mirror the young person in some way**, most often by simplifying their language or employing slang terms where appropriate (see section 4.6 for results regarding simple language)
- There were 47 occurrences of lexical accommodation in the assessments we observed.
- The majority of the lexical accommodation (77%) was done by practitioners, adopting the young people’s choice of both individual words (e.g. “weed”) and longer phrases that reveal something about the young person’s perspective (“how did you feel when he **bumped into ya?**” 086 “why does he **do your ‘ead in?**” 019 [emphasis on accommodated words]).

- The 23% of the accommodation by young people occurred where young people adopted the practitioner’s wording of the question in their answer. This suggests that, in addition to resistance strategies that we observed in in Section 4.7., young people employ co-operative strategies when they agree with the terms of the question.

Self-reflexivity

All practitioners in the Initial and Prevention assessments commented on the assessment and their assessor role during the assessment interviews.

- Most frequently (in 82% of assessments) this meta-discourse was used to guide the young person through interview, either in general terms (“I’ve got some questions...”), specific terms (“okay so the next one is smoking drinking and drugs”) or both.
- Other frequent uses of these self-reflexive commentaries were (% of assessments):
 - 64% to offer an apology (for topic, assessment length, writing)
 - 64% to explain the assessment process
 - 55% to frame the question in terms of professional obligation (“I have to ask”), and/or ascribe the question to the assessment guidelines (“it’s asking you...”)
 - 45% to frame sensitive topic areas (in four cases asking permission from the young person to address a topic).

This was a frequently occurring way in which practitioners sought to empathise with young people regarding the difficulties of the context and content of the assessment interview.

It is difficult to say how far this is an effective strategy, though it is evidence of the responsibility that practitioners take in guiding young people through the process. The level to which practitioners reflect on their institutional role rather than just perform it also stands in contrast to the results of language studies of other professionals in the legal context such as police officers and lawyers.

Humour

- **62% of the practitioners employed humour as a rapport building tactic.**

This approach was mostly received positively, particularly in review assessments where there were shared understandings and experiences to draw from. Even where the attempt at humour fell flat, it did not lead to any noticeable disengagement by the young person.

Use of inclusive language

In a context in which it’s important that young people don’t feel that the intervention is just something that happens to them, we found evidence that **practitioners use inclusive language to present the intervention as a collaborative task.**

Our linguistic analysis showed that “we” was most frequently used by practitioners inclusively to refer to themselves and the young person: in the immediate interview “*what we’re gonna do is just start with...*” (021); proposing courses of action “*so if we took out nicotine and we eventually stopped...*” (019); (in review assessments) referring back to previous shared experiences “*do you remember the conversation we had coming down the hill...?*” (088).

5. Conclusions

5.1 General context and quality of communication

The results of the current study indicate that there are a number of factors aside from Speech and Language Difficulties that might create communicative barriers in assessment interviews. The observations, focus groups, and questionnaires indicated that the main focus of assessment interviews continues to be risk factors and offending behaviour. The same sources also suggest that offending is often the last thing the young person wants to talk about. It is the only topic that repeatedly led to clear and sudden disengagement in the assessments we observed. We also found that some young people struggle to recognise, let alone talk about, their positive traits. This poses a major challenge when trying to make assessments more engaging and desistance focused.

Furthermore, the limited timeframe to complete an assessment combined with the amount of information required by AssetPlus mean that there is very little time to build relationship and trust with a young person. This can compound the challenge of eliciting open and honest answers to personal and potentially uncomfortable questions.

Despite these challenges, the quality of communication in the assessment interviews we observed was generally good. Practitioners used age-appropriate language and, for the most part, took care to explain complex vocabulary. Our results suggested that practitioners have a good sense of the topic areas young people do and don't like to discuss and the difficulties that young people might have in communicating in this context. Practitioners are also aware of and make efforts to reduce the inherent power imbalance in assessment interviews through familiar address terms, inclusive language, and accommodating and guiding young people through the assessment process.

5.2 Tension between assessment interviews and AssetPlus

A number of the communicative challenges that practitioners face seem rooted in the assessment guidelines. The practitioners we spoke to in the focus groups felt that there is an essential assessment task that they wouldn't change, that is, talking to the young person about themselves and their circumstances. They felt that this is the only way to gather this kind of information and start to build a relationship with the young person. However, there is an ongoing tension between this 'essential' task and the work that has to be done to complete AssetPlus.

The majority of the assessments that we observed exhibited the structure, offence-focus and closed questions that appear in AssetPlus. The sheer length of the AssetPlus form and the compliance issues for practitioners if they do not address every question mean that the interactions are largely practitioner-led, and the questioning style tends towards the 'tick-box' questionnaire style. This style of questioning tends to elicit minimal answers. While practitioners noted that, once completed, the form is a useful source of information, in its current form AssetPlus is a significant source of communication barriers in assessment interviews.

5.3 Improving communication in assessment interviews

The factors that determine effective communication will differ from case to case and, as we have seen, the requirements of AssetPlus put communicative constraints on interviews. However, there were a number of positive strategies recommended by practitioners and observed in these assessment interviews which could form the basis for guidance for good practice.

These strategies form the basis of the 'YOT Talk Toolkit' and 'YOT Talk Toolkit: Extended Version', both of which are available from <https://yottalk.wordpress.com/resources-2/>.

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