



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

**English Language and Literature ELLB1
B**

(Specification 2725)

**Unit 1: Introduction to Language and Literature
Study**

Report on the Examination

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One of the more pleasing results of this summer's paper was that the oft-repeated advice reminding candidates of the necessity to compare the texts in both Question 1 and Question 2 seems finally to have reached home. As a result, there were very few examples of candidates writing separate critiques of the texts with the majority offering some form of comparison in both questions. Of course, there remain the inevitable difficulties for some in comparison. To gain good marks in each question, the comparisons undertaken must be both meaningful and genuine. It certainly pulls no wool over examiners' eyes to lace an answer with discourse markers such as *on the other hand*, *contrastingly* and *in comparison* for example, if these are merely decorative and not signalling insightful comparisons and contrasts. Candidates should also ensure that comparisons are productive. Bland statements like *both writers use words from the semantic field of space travel* when discussing *Dan Dare* and NASA or *there is a mix of compound and complex sentences in both texts* do little to raise a candidate's mark out of the lower bands. Some candidates still seem to think that comparing means writing about the texts in alternate paragraphs leaving the examiner to spot any similarities and differences. Others write about the first text and then introduce the second with something like, "Another text which...." Sometimes there is more comparison after that, but it's not a great strategy because the candidate often runs out time part way through the second text, resulting in an unbalanced answer. The best answers compare throughout, paragraph by paragraph, linking points either by theme (nature imagery, dealing with the unknown, people, landscapes, silence, stillness, noise etc) or by linguistic or literary features (semantic fields, figurative language, grammatical parallelism, phonology). The thematic approach seems good for comparing texts from different genres, where there may be similar ideas dealt with using very different techniques. This approach allows the candidate to stay in touch with what the texts are actually about (or on about). The very best answers, and some of the weakest, used the second strategy. This method of organisation by feature allowed some extraordinarily wide-ranging and perceptive answers, suggesting that the teachers had used the Anthology to teach a huge range of literary and linguistic concepts. This strategy can lend itself to feature-spotting, however, and a loss of focus on the question, or even what the texts are about or "on about".

Given the time constraints under which candidates are working, it often comes as a surprise (perhaps it shouldn't) to examiners that too many answers re-hash information given in the question. To be told almost ad nauseam that *Text A is a space adventure cartoon aimed at boys published in 1950* and that *Text B is about the launch in 2008 of a Soyuz rocket travelling to the International Space Station* may fill up a few lines of the answer book, but won't gain many marks. Most examiners will have read the question and won't need reminding of this information. Similar wastes of time are, particularly in Question 2, taking quite a considerable amount of time and space to establish audience, purpose and genre before even beginning to mention the nerve-racking or relaxing aspects of travel. Conclusions which merely repeat what has already been said in the body of the answer add nothing of any great value to the essay. Nor ought candidates be encouraged (?) to follow a check list for their answers as this can result in their spending far too long on insignificant aspects of a text to the exclusion of their concentrating on more profitable (in mark terms) ones.

Question 1

The pairing of *Dan Dare* with a NASA website worked well and prompted some very good answers. Very few candidates found it impossible to write anything meaningful, though there were some iterated errors which are worth drawing to centres' attention, as they are ones which can crop up quite frequently whatever the texts chosen. When candidates see that the audience for a particular text is children, they go, like *Dan Dare*, into automatic pilot and assume that the language is bound to be simple. They see what they expect without looking closely at what the text actually says. For example, claims that the language of *Dan Dare* is simple because it is written for boys is not borne out by a text which contains *auxiliary rocket boost* and *headquarters of the interplanet space fleet*. Nor do young audiences automatically

require humour, so searches for this elusive crock of gold can prove futile as they did here. Claims that ‘Well, there she goes, Sir – I wonder if she’ll ever come back’ was a side-splitter didn’t really get off the ground. Comic strips are not necessarily humorous. The cynosure of colours and pictures provoked many candidates into an unbalanced response to the text. Here, as with all other texts which contain such elements either in Question 1 or in the Anthology, the trick is to see how the illustrations and the text complement each other and not to concentrate on the one to the exclusion of the other.

One or two other points germane to this particular question: *Eagle* was an English publication, so disquisitions on the bird as a symbol of patriotism and nationhood may have been pleasing to the Republican right in the USA, but are hardly appropriate here. It is also true that this particular episode of *Dan Dare* had no female characters (they arrived in later episodes), but to spend more than a line on this fact and to launch a feminist tirade against the writers for the omission seemed somewhat over the top and unproductive. A number of candidates took this route.

The parallel text from NASA produced fewer issues. It was the brave, though acute, candidate who opined that the text was probably of interest only to space nerds and that for the rest of readers it was likely to prove excruciatingly dull. Weaker candidates concentrated on the two small black and white photographs and did not notice the biographical information provided on each astronaut, but most were able to make useful comparison with *Eagle* in terms of structure and language. This is, of course, the key to success both in this and in Question 2.

Question 2

Very few inappropriate choices of texts! Hooray! Not that they were entirely absent – *Thomas the Tank Engine*, the Railcard leaflet and the ‘Airmiles’ letter did make their customary appearance, but these were very, very much in the minority. Most candidates chose wisely. The most popular and most productive texts were Dickens, Conrad and Edward Thomas as not only do they contain relevant material, but there is a lot to comment on in them. Other successful choices were both of the Clitheroe pieces, the graphic novel, Michael Palin, Dr Johnson, Isabella Bird, ‘Nam, A Wainwright and, surprisingly Dorothy Wordsworth and even ‘Booking Conditions’. Whilst most candidates chose wisely and answered appropriately, there were some who were to claim the most surprising evidence of nerve-racking or of relaxing travel – in other words, they twisted their chosen texts to fit what they needed to find. Never a good idea. Probably only those with a serious piscine aversion would find the consumption of *pesce spada* to be nerve-racking (Text 5) or the fact that ‘the other 4 apartments are all out somewhere’ (Text 3) could induce a nerve-racking sense of isolation. There were a number of candidates attempting to force an interpretation on a text. A surprisingly large number decided that Marlow’s trip up the Congo was a jolly, relaxing jaunt, not unlike punting on the Cam, only with more exotic fauna – the hippopotamus and the crocodile. If examiners hadn’t actually read the text, they might have been convinced, because the candidates made a superficially plausible case, using semantic fields and phonological features taken out of context. These candidates would presumably read Richard Dawkins and assume that he was very devout because he used a semantic field of religion.

Similar contortions could be evidenced for the relaxing nature of travel. It was also important that candidates realised that the nerve-racking or relaxing experience was that of the traveller, not of the reader.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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