



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

**English Language and Literature B ELLB3
(Specification 2725)**

Unit 3: Talk in Life and Literature

Report on the Examination

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SECTION A: The Plays

Candidates focused enthusiastically and effectively on the steer of their chosen question, although thoughtful points were not always well illustrated with evidence from the extract. It is essential that some linguistic, rhetorical or literary features are pinpointed in order to support a discussion; otherwise the essay becomes general and assertive. Close textual analysis is needed. For example, to speak of Hamlet's attitudes as changeable - from anger to affection and then disgust - is apt, and some credit will be given for such judgements. But when supportive evidence is offered the essay becomes much more convincing.

At the other end of the spectrum, some weaker scripts became bogged down in the detail of analysing an interaction and identifying features such as topic shifts or modes of address, with the consequence that the dramatic impact of the scene was forgotten. This was particularly true of some of the *Hamlet* scripts which ignored the emotional impact of the scene and treated the piece more as an exercise in feature-spotting.

Better scripts provided a balanced approach: addressing the steer but not forgetting to comment on dramatic effects, and citing devices and conventions which reveal these effects to the audience. Candidates who remember that the extract is from a play which is to be seen, heard and performed, are better able to comment on dramatic effects.

Hamlet

Quite a few candidates were insecure about the exact context of this question and they did not realise that Hamlet had just seen the Ghost, and that he had already murdered Polonius. This led to some strange interpretations of 'bodiless creation' and some misreadings of 'For this same lord, I do repent'. However, despite this, most candidates were aware that this was an emotional encounter, and a private encounter, and they were all able to comment in some depth on Hamlet's attitudes to his mother. There were some excellent answers which analysed Hamlet's changeable tone and fluctuating attitudes. Many candidates took the opportunity to make helpful links with other areas of the play such as the recurring imagery of disease. For some candidates there was a tendency to skip over the second speech of Hamlet, but candidates aptly focused on the last speech and were able to comment on the impact of 'reechy kisses' and the 'bloat king'.

Some candidates were wrong-footed by the fact that the passage did not give them the opportunity to comment at length on, for example, adjacency pairs and other interactive features. Also, there was some remorselessly forced use of theory which did little to illuminate the extract. For example, comments on negative and positive face theory, or Hamlet's flouting of Grice's maxim of quantity were often divorced from any meaningful discussion of dramatic effects. There were, of course, exceptions: candidates who confidently integrated mention of theory (such as politeness principles and Hamlet's flouting of and adherence to such principles) and the consequent insights which the theoretical awareness gave us.

Less confident candidates often tended to paraphrase the action and seemed uncertain of the sense; but even the less successful scripts did have something to say about Hamlet's attitudes.

A Streetcar named Desire

This was a popular choice and it produced some very good answers. Candidates were able to integrate their wider knowledge of the play and their understanding of Blanche's character into a cogent essay on Stella's views on marriage.

There may be a tendency with an accessible play like this to do a running commentary and to forget that the language and the interactions between characters have to be commented on – not just the conclusions that are drawn about Stella's views. There was, in fact, plenty to explore in this extract including Stella's apparent hesitancy; the use of anecdote; lexis and imagery – in particular the 'powder keg' and 'lamb' images. Good answers also made use of Blanche's contrasting views in order to highlight Stella's attitudes.

Translations

This question prompted some very good answers and candidates found the passage accessible. 'The sense of fear' steer was carefully addressed and supported with close reference to textual features such as: pace of exchanges; the use of silence; stage directions; the sinister reference to the Donnelly twins and topic shifts to avoid Owen's persistent questioning. Candidates who had clearly imagined themselves in the audience listening to the exchanges and hearing the description of the advance of the British troops were well able to appreciate the dramatic effects.

There were no answers seen on *The Rivals*.

SECTION B: the comparative question

Nearly all candidates now compare the two texts in a sustained way. There were very few scripts where the comparative element was forgotten, although some candidates do still struggle with this and rarely move beyond identifying surface features (eg: overlaps and pauses). They forget that the question is asking them to compare the differences and similarities between talk in life and literature, not just to outline talk features in A and the lack of such spontaneous features in B.

The transcript was long enough to allow all candidates to have something to say about the interaction, and there were some very good answers that always bore in mind that this was a transaction in a shop and that the context clearly influenced behaviour. There was room for very different views on attitudes and values. Some felt that the salesperson was rude; others saw her as just being professional. There is room for differences of interpretation as long as views are supported with convincing textual reference and explanation.

The attitudes and values revealed by the sisters in the Eliot extract were explored by the more confident candidates and they clearly understood and appreciated the impact of having a narrative voice. Those who grasped Celia's intentions and understood Dorothea's teasing tone, as well as being able to explain how Eliot crafted the language (such as her use of descriptive detail and the sisterly modes of address) were able to produce very good essays.

SUMMING UP

In Section A the most successful scripts were those which closely engaged with the given extract, and focused on what the question required. They showed secure knowledge and understanding of the play studied, together with a willingness and enthusiasm to explore the extract and to explain and justify points made. In Section B better scripts focused on the heart of the question: comparing real and fictional talk, always using specific supportive examples and addressing every aspect of the question. Obviously candidates need to know how to analyse 'talk' for both A and B questions, but being able to identify features is a starting point. Simply recognising 'hedging' or use of 'tag questions' is not enough: it is much more fruitful to reflect on what such features reveal in the context.

Theory can be a thorny issue and many candidates seem unsure what to do with theories, and uncertain about how and when to include such references. If a theory helps the reader/audience to appreciate and understand the dramatic impact of a scene, or the nuances of a dialogue in a novel, then mention the theory.

However, merely saying that a character flouts some of Grice's maximums does not tell us very much; explaining how and why they speak at length or brusquely, and the effect of such 'flouting', is much more illuminating.

One last note: some candidates misjudge the register of their essays. It is best to avoid a very informal, colloquial register such as referring to Hamlet's 'Mum', or in Section B talking of 'George's novel'.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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