



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

A Streetcar Named Desire was the most popular choice with *Hamlet* a close second, followed by *Translations*. Only a small number tackled *The Rivals*. Overall, students were well prepared and used the 'steer' effectively to give their answers a framework. It was a pleasure to read enthusiastic, individual responses to the extracts. The best answers explored the texts, analysed the discourse confidently and linked their observations of a range of features to the creation of dramatic effects. Weaker responses tended to forget that they were dealing with a play which has to be seen, heard and performed. Such responses often relied on re-telling of the plot and identification of features such as agenda setting, but seemed unable to do anything with such identification. Knowledge of talk features or, for example, recognition of rhetorical devices and figurative language are only the starting point of the question. It is pleasing, however, to see that many students have grasped this: they are able to use their observations to draw conclusions about how and why the playwright is shaping the scene, always linking points to the 'steer' and the overall dramatic impact on the audience.

Hamlet

Most students were clearly aware of how cleverly Claudius manipulates Laertes. They were able to comment on his appeal to Laertes's vanity and his skills at arousing Laertes's curiosity by revealing information slowly. Most students recognised how Laertes's grief had made him malleable, but only the better answers recognised the threat that Laertes posed to the King. They were able to link this threat with Claudius's response: his ability to think on his feet and to quickly devise a strategy to take advantage of Laertes's anger and eagerness for revenge.

Many students handled the steer well but skimmed over the discourse and spoke generally about manipulation. Some were confused about who Lamord was; and few tackled the youth/age speech. There was also some confusion about the exact context. Many thought that we already knew that Ophelia had drowned, although this inaccuracy did not usually affect the conclusions drawn. There was some forced finding of lexical fields, and some misinterpretation of 'weeds'.

The best responses were able to unpick the discourse; they attempted some discussion of images such as 'no wind of blame' or hyperbolic lexis such as 'gallant' and 'wondrous' and they analysed Claudius's measured syntax and his use of rhetorical devices, as well as highlighting the impact of the collaborative stichomythia. There was much to comment on, but many students had difficulty in understanding the detail of the speeches although they appreciated the sense and the dramatic impact. There were a number of misreadings in connection with Lamord's skills. Many thought he was some kind of witch rather than a man who had magical abilities in horse riding.

A Streetcar Named Desire

This was a popular choice and it was heartening to see some refreshingly thoughtful and interesting responses that did not rely on too many pre-digested notes about the text, but which grappled sensitively with the given extract. Many showed a real understanding of the complexity of the interactions and were able to explore not just what was happening to Blanche but the subtle nuances in the exchanges.

Better responses often argued for Blanche as a tragic figure – vulnerable and fragile - rather than sweepingly dismissing her as totally insane (which many did). There was some interesting analysis of language and discourse features: from the upward convergence of Eunice, to the close exploration of Blanche's lengthy, romantic speech with some perceptive discussion of the sea metaphor, use of colour and images of purity. Some students effectively analysed Blanche's imperative 'help me' and the ironic use of 'trap'. Also, there was some apt exploration of stage directions and use of symbolism.

Weaker answers tended to spend too much time on the historical context and on references to Williams's sister's lobotomy. Or, they simply explained the action – giving a running commentary without any close discussion of literary, linguistic and rhetorical features. On a positive note, all students were able to comment on tension in the scene and dramatic effects were well handled.

The Rivals

This provoked some interesting discussion about girls' education and most students clearly understood the tone of the passage; although not all were aware of Sir Anthony's gentle mockery of Mrs Malaprop. However, most responses showed a secure knowledge of the play and an awareness of the context.

Strong responses were able to comment closely on the language and explain the lexical choices of both characters: Sir Anthony's hyperbolic exclamations and his comical use of biblical references; Mrs Malaprop's hilarious errors and the use of incrementum in her long speech. There were some insightful discussions of humour and students had clearly engaged well with the extract.

Weaker responses tended to dwell on the historical and social context (often interesting and often relevant – but overplayed). Many recognised that Mrs Malaprop was being mocked, but they could not quite explain the source of the humour or the use of 'malapropisms'. However, they were able to make some comments on the dramatic quality of the scene.

Translations

The steer – colonialism – was used and aptly interpreted by most students. Some, however, became bogged down in trying to define it which left them with less time for close analysis of the given extract.

There were many very good responses which showed a perceptive grasp of issues and an awareness of the nuances in the dialogue. For example, better answers were able to comment – and speculate – on Hugh's interjections and to discuss the ambiguous position of Owen and the nature of his translations. They were also able to comment closely on the imperialistic, often Latinate lexis used by Lancey and compare this with Owen's simpler, more positive lexis.

Less confident responses spent much time analysing features such as Lancey's pauses or counting the number of turns whilst not always drawing conclusions from their observations. Disappointingly, quite a few students did not recognise that Jimmy was speaking Latin, which led to some strangely skewed conclusions. But most students did recognise the child-like style of Lancey's initial speeches and the patronising tone.

Overall, dramatic effects were addressed and there was an awareness of tension and conflict, and the undercurrents in the scene.

SECTION B: The Comparative Question

There were some impressively detailed and perceptive answers to this question. Most students made comparative points and the vast majority tackled the task in a clear way: comparing aspects of each text as they progressed through the essay, rather than dealing with the whole of one text and then the second. The second method can often lead to a candidate spending too long on the first text and then having to compress important points of comparison at the end.

The rubric: Students need to read this carefully. They were told that Pat is a woman; several students spent time trying to identify male gendered talk in Pat's story. Also, we know that A is a transcript, so spending time proving it to be real talk is not necessary.

Good responses spent an equal time on each text and they were able to apply narrative theory – using the theoretical information to illuminate how each speaker tells the story, and to highlight differences between real and fictional talk. The very best answers recognised that there was no resolution or coda in each text, and that in the poem such lack of conclusive information (who are the speakers; what are these mysterious creatures; what happens next) added to the mysteriousness of the bizarre incident. Better responses also supported points with close reference to each text. In A, for example, Pat's hyperbolic use of onomatopoeia is part of her story telling technique to hold the audience's attention. In the poem, the main speaker's simple descriptive lexis together with the use of triadic structures and the listing and slow revealing of information, create suspense and intrigue for the dual audience. A few students recognised the Welsh influence on syntax.

Weaker answers often skimmed over the poem, clearly unhappy that it did not have conventional stanzas or that it did not rhyme. They offered only the general point that it was crafted, without analysing any of the features that mimicked or were adapted from real talk. There was much to comment on in the poem, but less confident responses shied away from discussing the language – apart from mentioning archaic lexis. Dated or old-fashioned lexis would have been more appropriate terms. However, even the less confident responses were aware of the questioner's role in the poem, the dual audience and the sense of frustration felt by the questioner and the reader. Text A was better handled and there was an understanding of Gary and Pauline's role and some interesting discussion of Gary's use of 'brand'. However, weaker answers tended to identify features (particularly pauses) but then drew no conclusions linked with context, purpose or audience; neither did they address the heart of the question: the differences and similarities between crafted and real talk. Also, there were some assertions, without explanation, that the interaction in A was purely phatic. Many students spent too long trying to force a theory into their discussion, which – if not qualified - can lead to some less than illuminating statements. For example, many referred to the main speaker in each text as flouting (or often mistakenly flaunting) Grice's maxim of quantity. But they did not link such an observation with purpose and the context: the story teller in each situation was holding the floor, so speaking at length is often expected and acceptable in that context. Just citing Grice is not enough. On a positive note, however, there was some good discussion of Pat's stereotypical deprecating gender role within her narrative; and sensitive application of Labov's narrative theory. Overall, students were well prepared for the task, with more competent responses showing an ability to closely engage with the texts and to provide supportive evidence for points made. Discussion of attitudes and values was generally well done. Students seem to relax when they reach this section of the task and are prepared to explore tentatively and draw interesting conclusions.

Summing up

A few problem areas include the recognition of differences between 'tag' and rhetorical questions and simple interrogatives. Also, some students find it difficult to adopt an appropriate register. 'Claudius kisses up to Laertes' or a colloquial phrase such as 'Stanley was a pretty bad guy', or referring to Graves as Robert (as if he were a personal friend), can undermine a serious argument. Lively, engaged writing is to be encouraged and we do not want to stifle creativity but too much informality can sound flippant. An example of an appropriate phrase might be 'a spree of negative lexis' which is imaginative but concise, conveying a sense of unrestrained excess. On the other hand, 'loads and loads of negative lexis' sounds conversational and less considered.

Overall, the most successful scripts focused closely on the questions set, providing textual evidence for points made. In Section A wider references and allusions often enriched an essay, as long as the references clearly linked to the debate. In Section B, better answers addressed the heart of the question: comparing real and fictional talk. They did so deftly and answers included in-depth analysis of the poem's language and structure, as well as a confident discussion of how Pat structured her anecdote.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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