General Certificate of Education

English Language A 1701
Specification A

ENGA1   Seeing Through Language

Report on the Examination
2009 examination - January series

General

This was the first series of this examination and many candidates displayed pleasing familiarity with the main linguistic, modal and contextual features of the two texts offered for analysis, as well as impressive knowledge of the ways children acquire both spoken and written language. All questions in the examination enabled candidates to demonstrate an appropriate range and depth of skills, knowledge and understanding relevant to the Unit's Assessment Objectives.

Question 1 required candidates to analyse two texts: a website offering advice to men about how to begin conversations with women and a transcript of the end of a telephone call between a woman and a man who are conducting a secret romance. To access the higher mark ranges for AO1, candidates are expected to analyse both texts systematically by identifying, illustrating and examining key graphological, phonological, semantic, grammatical and syntactical features. To access the higher mark ranges for AO3i (mode), candidates are expected to examine the main mode characteristics of the texts such as synchronicity, permanence, proximity, framing and interactivity. To access the higher mark ranges for AO3ii (meaning), candidates are expected to identify and explore contextual features such as participant positioning, relationships, functions, tenor, structure, topics, topic management and the various meanings both literal and pragmatic constructed by the writer of Text A and the participants in Text B.

Part A of Questions 2 and 3 required candidates to study a data set on children's acquisition of either speech or writing and comment linguistically on five different features of language use which they found of interest. To access the higher mark ranges for AO1 candidates are expected to describe each of these five linguistic features precisely and accurately.

Part B of Questions 2 and 3 required candidates to write an answer on either the extent to which children learn language by creative experimentation or the extent to which learning to write is a mechanical process of copying out symbols. To access the higher mark ranges for AO1, candidates are expected to spell and punctuate correctly, write in complete sentences, use an accurate linguistic register, express their ideas fluently and structure their answers cohesively using topic paragraphs. To access the higher mark range for AO2 candidates are expected to examine particular linguistic features and contexts appropriate to the requirements of the question as well as showing understanding of language issues, theories, research and debates.

In light of candidates' answers, examiners noted some issues related to the amount of time spent by candidates on each component of the examination. There is a lot of information in this paper for candidates to assimilate and it is recommended that they spend 30 minutes reading the paper in order to understand its requirements as thoroughly as possible. There is a parity of marks between the two sections and it is recommended that candidates spend 45 minutes answering each section. It is important for candidates to realise that the data analysis in Questions 2 and 3 a carries a maximum of 10 marks. Given this proportion of the whole mark for the question, candidates should spend about ten minutes analysing the data and make five precise and concise points. The most successful candidates accomplished this in five sentences but examiners noted that some data analyses were one and a half pages long. Too much time spent on Section A takes valuable time away from Section B which carries a maximum of 35 marks.

Candidates are advised to:

- time their answers to manage the demands of the data and tasks
- explicitly analyse the mode of the texts in Section A as well as how they create meanings
- identify five features from the data sets in Section B precisely and describe them linguistically in a brief and focussed answer.

SECTION A – Language and Mode

Question 1

The matey, interactive, speech-like persuasive strategies and tempting offers of Text A as well as the intimate romantic tenor of Text B proved to be contexts familiar to all candidates. There was clearly sufficient variety of linguistic features, modal and contextual issues in the texts for candidates to make purposeful and interesting comments.

The most successful candidates:

- identified key linguistic features correctly and gave precise quotations to illustrate them
- explained how these features contributed to the construction of meanings and management of topics within the texts
- explored the main mode characteristics of the texts
- examined how various modal and contextual factors combined to shape the interaction.

These candidates gave close attention to semantic fields in the texts and were able to conduct an assured examination of topics such as effective chat-up lines, subscription, secret and frustrated romance and internet/telephone technology. The most successful candidates were able to identify a range of semantic patterns with some skill. The most successful candidates examined how women, men and the e-book were represented by the author of Text A. At this level of attainment candidates offered detailed accounts of the interactive features of Text B such as listening, monitoring, feedback, minimal responses and turn taking. These most successful candidates identified and examined grammatical features such as the use of modal verbs, verb tenses, adverbs of time, manner and degree, evaluative and comparative adjectives and dynamic and stative verbs. These candidates explored syntax by noting the presence of ellipsis, interrogatives, declaratives, imperatives, clause types and clause linking. The most successful candidates were very well prepared to explore and conceptualise the mode of the texts and were able to talk confidently about spontaneous, ephemeral, permanent, a/synchronous, interactional and transactional features.

Most candidates showed understanding of the purposes of the writer of Text A to use the vast reach of the internet to entice web browsers to subscribe to the e-book in order to improve their love life and the participants in Text B to overcome the distance between them using technology in the form of a telephone call to re-affirm their mutual feelings. Most candidates commented clearly on the structure of the phone conversation by identifying adjacency pairs, questions and answers and examining the initiation, response, follow-up pattern. These candidates also commented clearly on the structure of the web-site by identifying its two distinct sections: the first luring browsers with promises of romantic success and the second encouraging them to part with their money.

Less successful candidates made broad assertions about the texts without proof or exemplification. There was also a tendency for candidates to describe everything that was colloquial as 'non-standard English' or 'idiolect', from contractions to ellipsis and from slang to slightly technical lexis. These candidates were able to identify one or two pronouns or one or

two word classes without linking them to meaning. A minority of candidates offered narrative commentaries on the texts. In terms of written accuracy, there were some very weak responses and there was little consistency in spelling of some very basic words: imitation/immitation; writer/ writer, etc. Many candidates found it difficult to structure grammatical sentences and the use of splice commas was evident in many scripts, eg 'Text A is a page off a website, it is in written mode.'

Examiners noted that there was often an imbalance in coverage across the two texts, with the written text generally receiving more attention. This is understandable as it is the longer text. There is no stipulation that candidates should give equal attention to the two texts. It is the overall quality of their analyses which examiners assess. However, if candidates only answer on one of the texts, then their ability to reach the higher mark ranges will be impaired. Structural features such as discourse markers, adjacency pairs and closing sequences were rarely commented upon in the spoken text, but one pleasing aspect was that some candidates were able to apply their understanding of face and accommodation to draw interesting ideas from the interaction.

The most successful candidates:

- began with an overview of context, modes and topics thus supplying a context which informed subsequent analysis of language features
- identified and described sentence types and functions, clauses, clause elements, pragmatic features, structural features and grammatical ellipsis
- identified and described types of nouns, adjectives and adverbs, verb tenses, aspect, voice, modality, interactive features
- linked these linguistic features closely to the purposes and meanings of the texts
- conceptualised characteristics of mode in terms of such factors as synchronicity, permanence, proximity, framing, interactivity, planning and structuring
- explored the message/social orientation of the texts: 'I share with you', 'we must get some sleep'
- gave examples of personal and direct address: 'To make sure you receive your ebook', 'darling'
- examined the topics of the texts: sales, chatting up, farewells, love
- explored the persuasive functions of the texts: 'a PROVEN winner', 'hopefully talk to you in the morning'
- analysed the expressive functions of the texts: 'I LOVE THIS ONE', 'adore you'
- examined identity markers of age and class: 'your dating life', 'all right darling'
- explored references to the channel/medium/technology of the texts: 'download Double Your Dating', 'press the button'
- examined the use of informality, both semantic ('kicks ass') and syntactical ('adore you (.) night')
- examined examples of interactiveness in Text A: 'OK, ready to order …?'
- analysed the replication of spoken voice in Text A: 'This is a killer, by the way'
- analysed representation of women and men in Text A: 'I like to start by asking a woman for her 'opinion' on something', '100% satisfaction guarantee'
- presentation of eBook and chat-up strategies as free, easy, pleasurable, successful: 'I know they can work for you too'
- explored implications of tips/techniques model of relationships: 'They usually grab the ball and take off into the conversation with just that'
- examined nature of romantic values in Text B: 'don't want to say goodbye'
- considered the co-operative nature of closing strategies in Text B: ('all right darling')
- examined facework in Text B: 'love you forever'

- analysed specific expressions of feelings: love, reluctance, endearment in Text B, eg 'my darling', '[*blows a kiss*]'.

Less successful candidates:

- simply identified graphology/complexity/formality
- used frameworks with minimal accuracy achieved or quoted judiciously without linguistic description
- made basic errors which hindered clear communication
- labelled texts only in terms of writing and speech
- offered unanalysed quotations
- paraphrased the content of the texts
- wrote only about the first half of Text A
- presumed that Text B was a scripted conversation
- wrote only about one of the texts
- misunderstood audience, purpose, context, content, meaning significantly.

Advice to candidates

Do:

- begin your answer with an overview of context, modes and topics
- identify key language features using appropriate linguistic terms
- explicitly comment on the mode features of the texts
- identify and explore key topics in the texts and the meanings they convey
- explain how these features contribute to the construction of meanings
- write about both texts
- plan and structure your answer systematically using paragraphs with clear topic sentences.

Do not:

- summarise the content of the texts
- treat written texts like Text A as a face-to-face conversation
- label spontaneous spoken texts in transcription, likeText B, as an article or a script
- leave out comments on the meanings and effects of language features you describe.

SECTION B – Language Development

Question 2(a)

Many candidates were well prepared for this component and were able to identify a range of features from the data concisely and accurately. There was often good understanding of over-generalisation, overextension and telegraphic syntax. Some candidates, however, just paraphrased the data without linguistic precision, while others were confused about naming word classes.

The most successful candidates clearly identified features such as:

- inversion – 'colour Sonny bear'
- semantic overextension – 'bite' for 'kiss'
- imperative function – 'don't eat chip'
- implied interrogative function – 'daddy go'

- declarative function – 'mommys talk mens'
- simple sentence structure – 'I play this'
- ellipsis – 'block top'
- primacy of lexical over grammatical word choice – 'block top'
- multiple pluralisation – 'mens'.

Question 2(b)

This question proved to be by far the more popular of the two offered and produced some highly knowledgeable, detailed and sustained answers. The most successful candidates explicitly explored the concept of 'creative experimentation' and considered active and deductive processes, the nativist model, cognitive development, seriation, interaction and the limits of reinforcement and imitation. These most successful answers identified specific examples of children's language including grammatical rules and virtuous errors. These answers contained clear evidence of the study of English Language in the form of empirical observations and specific reference to appropriate and particular research such as that of Skinner, Vygotsky, Bruner, Lennenberg, Chomsky, Thompson and Chapman, Piaget and Berko and Brown.

Most candidates demonstrated some knowledge of key theories of language acquisition but there was a lack of examples of children's language in many answers. Generic 'theories and stages' responses did not really address the question. Examples of data and processes such as application of plural, past tense, comparative and superlative rules helped supply the necessary focus. Examiners commented that, given the wealth of data presented to candidates in 2(a), much of which they analysed well, it seemed strange that more examples of children's language were not forthcoming.

Less successful candidates struggled to address the concept of 'creative experimentation' at all and offered a very generalised account of one or two aspects of early sound production. Some took the question to refer to 'creative experiments' and listed case studies that they could remember, while others opted for a generic 'stages and ages' approach.

The most successful candidates:

- explored the concept of 'creative experimentation' and considered active and deductive processes, the nativist model, cognitive development imitation and correction
- commented on a range of well selected examples of grammar, syntax, semantic relations, morphology, types of extension, pronunciation features and negation
- explored links between cognitive theory and linguistic development
- evaluated the roles of input and imitation
- gave examples of correction and children's reaction to them by, for instance, examining Thompson and Chapman's 'fis' research
- examined some rules and principles applied by children, eg tense formation
- considered plurality by examining Berko and Brown's 'wug' research
- developed a clear view of the nature of the acquisition process, eg rejecting simple behaviourist views
- considered the role played by virtuous errors in the process of language acquisition
- described holophrases and some of their pragmatic meanings
- explored the range of word classes used by children
- gave detailed and accurate explanations of over and under extension
- considered the Critical Acquisition Period by examining research on 'Genie' and 'Jim'
- used their knowledge of researchers such as Skinner, Chomsky, Bruner and Piaget to explain and illuminate the acquisition process

- assessed research and theories critically, using evidence to evaluate them
- showed insight into the roles of environment and interaction in the development of grammar, syntax, vocabulary and understanding by considering ideas such as the Zone of Proximal Development, Language Acquisition Support System and the role of the More Knowledgeable Other.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote general essays outlining the theories about child language acquisition without specific attention to creative experimentation
- gave a broad account of stages of development, especially pre-verbal stages
- identified very few features of children's language
- showed some familiarity with names of researchers and broad awareness of theories
- did not focus on linguistic issues and gave generalised discussions of children's development without a language focus
- wrote answers entirely about phonological development
- confused the ideas of different researchers and theorists
- suggested mutually contradictory models of the acquisition process.

Advice to candidates

Do:

- read the question carefully and identify the issues to which it refers, eg the extent to which children learn language by creative experimentation
- plan and structure an answer which clearly addresses those issues
- examine some key features of children's language acquisition (such as negation, tense and plurality) using correct linguistic terminology
- use examples from the data in question 2(a) as well as your own prepared examples
- examine relevant research findings and theory in detail
- evaluate research findings and theory, evolving a balanced and clear line of argument.

Do not:

- make sweeping and unsupported assertions
- summarise a range of research superficially with no reference to the question
- forget to include some examples of children's language such as tense formation
- write only about pre-linguistic sounds.

Question 3(a)

Only a few candidates answered this question. Some candidates described the data without much linguistic insight simply describing mis-spellings or making broad comments about the writing being wrong.

The most successful candidates clearly identified features such as:

- compound sentence – 'one was cooking and the other one was crouching'
- tense variation – 'was'/'is'
- semantic precision – 'flap'
- number for word – '4'
- adverb use for descriptive effect – 'cautiously'
- adjective use descriptive effect – 'inomes'

- past tense – 'opened'
- missing sentence punctuation – '…the tent she spoted'
- orthographical variants– 'over wone' for 'other one'.

Question 3(b)

Very few candidates answered this question but examiners noted that some candidates answered with knowledge and understanding by citing a variety of relevant research and identifying, illustrating and discussing particular features of children's writing. Most answers to this question, however, were very limited and contained little understanding of the process of written language acquisition.

The most successful candidates explicitly explored the concept of 'just a mechanical process of copying symbols' and the role it plays in how children acquire language. These most successful answers integrated specific examples of children's language such as handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammar and syntax into their answers. These answers referred confidently to the work of researchers such as Kroll, Vann and Bereiter and clearly identified and evaluated a variety of written acquisition models such as cognitive, physiological, experimental and developmental.

Less successful candidates found difficulty in relating the issues specified in the question to anything within their knowledge or experience. These candidates either applied generic theory models from spoken interaction or discussed, very narrowly, the imitation model. Examiners commented that it was difficult to identify where any study of written language was evident in some answers.

The most successful candidates:

- evaluated the relevance of explaining written language acquisition as a practised motor skill
- explored links between cognitive theory, developmental theory and linguistic development.
- evaluated research and theories about writing acquisition critically, eg Vygotsky, Piaget and Gundlach
- assessed the contribution of reading, drawing and narrative to the development of writing skills
- examined links between speech and writing
- considered writing as representing communicative power
- examined some features of handwriting, formation of letter symbols and punctuation
- considered relationships between sounds and symbols
- examined features of syntax, semantic relations, negation, systematic orthographical variation
- identified some rules and principles applied by children, eg word order, negation, agreement of word classes and tense
- considered written language acquisition as an active and deductive process, eg experimentation, correction
- evolved a view of the nature of written language acquisition as an interactive, developmental and cognitive process.

Less successful candidates:

- gave a broad accounts of stages of acquisition of writing skills
- identified very few features of children's writing
- showed familiarity with names of researchers but limited awareness of their theories
- demonstrated no understanding of the process of written language acquisition.

Advice to candidates

Do:

- read the question carefully and identify the issues to which it refers, eg the extent to which learning to write is a mechanical process of copying out symbols
- plan and structure an answer which clearly addresses those issues
- examine some key features of children's written language acquisition such as formation of letter symbols, punctuation, syntax, semantic relations, negation and systematic orthographical variation using correct linguistic terminology
- examine some relevant research findings and theory about acquisition of writing
- evaluate research findings and theory, evolving a balanced and clear line of argument.

Do not:

- make sweeping and unsupported assertions
- use research about acquisition of speech
- forget to include some examples of children's writing such as spelling
- ignore the importance of social interaction in the acquisition of writing skills.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the **Results Statistics** page of the AQA Website