General Certificate of Education

English Language A 1701
Specification A

ENGA2   Representation and Language

Report on the Examination
2010 examination – January series

General

There was a small entry for the AS coursework unit in this series. For many candidates this was a second submission. It was pleasing to note that their choices of topic, both for the investigation and production pieces, were generally securely focused on representation. With production pieces, there was less reliance on celebrity profiling. Moderators were also pleased to see that most candidates are making a careful selection of linguistic features for analysis in the investigations, choosing key examples for representation, rather than simply listing writers' language usages.

This focused approach is what is required if candidates are to remain successfully within word limits. A number of pieces, primarily investigations and commentaries, were significantly longer than required. Generally, this tends to indicate a wordy style, in need of rigorous editing, or, in the investigation, a repetitive linear structure.

Representation Investigation

AO3: Analyse and evaluate the influence of contextual factors on the production and reception of spoken and written language

The more successful investigations focused on individuals, groups, events or institutions about which there exists some kind of controversy. In such cases, candidates selected sources carefully to show a range of different responses to their chosen topic. This helped them to structure their investigation clearly and present a coherent line of argument.

Individuals chosen by a number of candidates included Michael Jackson, Gordon Brown, Nick Griffin and Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, all of whom have featured prominently in news reports in recent months and about whom widely differing views have been expressed by a large number of political and cultural commentators. Other candidates chose to focus on groups, institutions or events with a similarly controversial profile in the media: these included bankers, Islamic dress codes, immigrants, British Airways staff and postal workers. The BBC featured in a number of different controversies, from racism and ageism on Strictly Come Dancing to the inclusion of the BNP leader on Question Time.

All these investigative topics involve complex and challenging issues, almost irrespective of the specific sources chosen, although candidates generally found it easy to assemble a collection of texts which offered a range of both ideologies and styles. The majority of the topics mentioned involve such issues as the relationship between public and private morality; leadership and citizenship; ideals versus the realities of life; the nature and influence of political correctness; and the challenges facing our emerging multi-cultural society. It was a pleasure to see candidates exploring these issues, many presenting a clear analysis of different viewpoints and engaging purposefully with serious public concerns that impinge to some extent on all British lives.

Candidates who, on the other hand, chose very general or very specific topics often found themselves struggling to find a clear rationale for their investigation. A number of candidates, for example, chose to focus on such general topics as obesity, anorexia, dyslexia or terrorism. Even where source texts differed in style, they tended to produce very similar arguments: obesity needs to be dealt with urgently; anorexia is a terrible condition for sufferers and their families, and so on. Candidates were often unable to reach any illuminating conclusion at the end of their investigations. Very specific topics included different reviews, usually from magazines, so fairly short, of a popular film, music concert or novel. These tended to be fairly predictable textual analyses of genre, with little in the way of fresh insights or connecting overview.

This is not to say that such topics are entirely inappropriate; however, they need to be approached with caution. A strong candidate can shape a strong investigation from unpromising sources; however, the vast majority of candidates will find their task much less problematic if they choose their topic and sources with care, actively seeking out areas of public debate, rather than settling for their favourite celebrity or the nearest magazine. A few candidates had chosen obscure, foreign-language newspapers in translation. Given the mass of printed material readily available in the UK, it was often difficult to see why these sources had been selected, as the content and style did not seem to justify their inclusion.

Very few centres imposed a single choice of topic on candidates; most allowed a completely free choice or a choice of several. This made for writing which was fully engaged with the particular controversy or debate. A few candidates became so involved with the issues and arguments, however, that they lost sight of the fact that their task was to carry out a linguistic investigation, rather than to argue for their own particular response to their chosen individual or topic. The investigation needs to be conducted in an impartial manner; the point is not so much to evaluate the arguments themselves, but to explore the strategies and stylistic features adopted by writers, in order to examine more closely the assumptions their views are based on.

The vast majority of sources were, as in the summer, taken from recent newspapers or magazines, increasingly from online versions. Some candidates showed awareness of the fact that the online audience might differ in significant respects and bore this in mind when analysing language choices. Some, even very able, candidates, continue to make crude assumptions about the readership of particular newspapers, rather than constructing the writer's intended audience from the content, tone and style of the writing itself. The word 'tabloid' continues to mislead some candidates in terms of the style to be expected from The Times, The Guardian and The Independent.

A few candidates made unwise choices of source material, in some cases because the chosen texts were too simple or similar to facilitate useful analysis, but occasionally because they were too sophisticated in content, tone and style for the candidate to assimilate. In these cases, candidates struggled to follow the writer's argument or misrepresented it entirely, which invalidated much of their investigation. A weakness in a few folders was that, when analysing, for example, a news report about a celebrity, the candidate gave equal weight to the language of the writer and the quoted utterances of the celebrity subject. Unless the candidate has a specific point to make about the writer's use of quotations, this suggests to the moderator that the candidate is not fully in control of their task.

The most successful investigations were able to provide a clear introductory overview of the particular issues that were the subject of debate, whether current or changed over time. They developed a clear line of argument, based on a range of differing sources and supported with a wide range of linguistic features. The effects of these were carefully and succinctly explored in order to reveal attitudes and assumptions beyond the simple surface meaning. Conclusions were therefore well prepared, insightful and persuasive. Weaker responses tended to consist of unconnected lists of features, whose effects were formulaic and perfunctory. Such investigations generally lacked any clear sense of overview or context and led to bland conclusions, if any.

AO1: Select and apply a range of linguistic methods, to communicate relevant knowledge using appropriate terminology and coherent, accurate written expression

Here, some candidates' marks were limited either by a narrow range of features being selected or by labelling errors. In order to achieve half marks for these Assessment Objective, candidates need to be able to identify word classes accurately; if they can identify these in detail (ie types of noun, verb, adverb and adjective) they will reach the 7-8 band. Top band marks are for those who are able to identify accurately sentence and clause types.

Most candidates who attempted sentence analysis were able to identify a simple sentence and its effects, although minor sentences were sometimes quoted as examples. Identification of compound and complex sentences was less secure, with mixed compound-complex sentences frequently being given to exemplify a single type. Main and subordinate clauses were often inaccurately labelled. The most able candidates commented productively on specific clause types: relative, adverbial and non-finite. These were linked (for AO3 credit) to a close examination of effects: for example, the ways in which relative clauses were used adjectivally, to add a telling descriptive detail; how adverbial clauses allowed writers to expand on specific details of context and circumstance; and, as a general point, that sophisticated texts involve complex linguistic forms as well as ideas. In some cases, sentence or clause types were identified in a semantic vacuum, with no accompanying point about the effectiveness of the writer's syntactical choices.

Most candidates were able to identify noun and verb phrases successfully, although a few, uncertain perhaps of the difference between phrase and clause, tended to identify any linguistic sequence involving a noun or a verb as a noun or verb phrase. Adverbial phrases were less secure, although the confusion between an adverbial clause element and a prepositional phrase used adverbially is understandable at this stage of learning. Minor slips of this kind would not unduly affect a candidate's AO1 mark.

Tense and aspect continue to present labelling problems to many candidates. Present participles of verbs were often wrongly identified as progressive 'tense', the error often invalidating the conclusion to be drawn from it. A number of candidates were evidently confused about the different roles of be, have and do as either main or primary auxiliary verbs, and since these subtleties of grammatical function are rarely significant for the meaning of a clause, they seemed an odd choice of feature to include. Passive and active voices of the verb were frequently confused; those who did succeed in identifying passives, however, were often able to make shrewd comments about their functions: to obscure agency, foreground something other than the unmarked subject, or convey a detached, formal tone, for example.

There is a widespread confusion about types of noun: a large number of candidates identified any noun with an 's' inflection as a 'collective' noun, rather than a straightforward plural. Abstract and concrete nouns also caused confusion. Some students began confidently, identifying accurately several key word classes and their effects, but made errors about the same features later in their investigations, thus weakening the overall impression of their grasp of grammar. Careful checking and proofreading might have enabled students to avoid weakening their analysis in this way.
Decontextualised or partial quotations were unhelpful, when it came to assessing the effects of selected word classes or sentence types. It is time-consuming for moderators to check the accuracy of a candidate's labelling in the absence of a full quotation; yet without the broader context, the labelling cannot be credited, as the stated effects have not been clearly demonstrated.

Moderators found that candidates' errors were frequently left unmarked or ticked as accurate. Since labelling is either right or wrong, in most cases, it is important that this aspect of candidates' work is rigorously checked; moderators do check each example given and, where there are frequent errors, the mark for this Assessment Objective will be limited. At the other extreme, some teachers were unduly harsh in penalising candidates for showing a narrow range, even when that range included one or two word classes. The marking grid on page 10 of the Specification is quite explicit: candidates who demonstrate knowledge of word classes and/or sentence functions must be given a mark of 5 or 6 for this Assessment Objective, unless errors are so widespread as to call the knowledge into severe doubt.

Technical inaccuracies and flaws in expression also need to be taken into account when deciding whether a candidate is at the top or bottom of a band. A surprising number of candidates made spelling errors which suggested a lack of familiarity with formal vocabulary, or that their vocabulary had been acquired aurally rather than visually. This refers to fairly common usages, not an esoteric academic register: words such as predominantly (frequently written as 'predominately'), authoritative ('authoritive') and definitely ('defiantly', in a surprising number of cases). Candidates need to practise reading the types of text they are likely to encounter in examinations, as well as use in coursework, to become more proficient in using a formal register. Others frequently confused words: manner/manor, peace/piece, woman/women, bare/bear, for example, may have been straightforward word processing errors; nevertheless, they are unacceptable at this level and, if frequent, they detract from the total effect of a candidate's work. Proofreading is a necessary final stage of the coursework submission; given that candidates have several months in which to complete and correct their work, they need to ensure that it is as flaw-free as they can make it.

To end this section on a more positive note, however, there was much writing that was extremely accomplished: succinct (as it needs to be, for word limits), precise, clear and fluent; in short, a pleasure to read.

Successful candidates:

- gave careful thought to their choice of topic and sources
- engaged productively with a range of complex and challenging issues and debates
- structured their investigation to present a coherent line of argument leading to a prepared conclusion
- selected a range of key word classes for detailed analysis of representation: abstract nouns, superlative adjectives, adverbials of time and place, emotive nouns and adjectives, verb forms
- identified, exemplified and explored significant uses of specific sentence and clause types
- wrote clearly and accurately.

Less successful candidates:

- chose topics which were not particularly relevant to the theme of representation
- chose sources which were too similar, simplistic or complex to facilitate useful analysis
- wrote a series of separate textual analyses, with no introduction, overview or sense of context
- adopted a repetitive, linear structure rather than selecting key aspects for detailed investigation
- used decontextualised examples or failed to exemplify points made
- made frequent labelling errors
- showed weak control of sentence punctuation, spelling and expression.

Representation Production

AO4: Demonstrate expertise and creativity in the use of English in a range of different contexts, informed by linguistic study

A: Form and Content
B: Style and Structure

Genres from the print media were again the most popular choices: feature articles, reviews, reports and a few editorials. The most popular exception to this was again the dramatic monologue. Overall, the choice of topic was very varied and included, among the more inventive: arachnophobia, women's football, a defence of 'toffs', Britain's compensation culture, parents' rights, social networking sites, the NHS, burlesque dancers and the credit crunch. The writers of these pieces were frequently knowledgeable about their subjects, either from research or through personal experience. They carefully constructed a convincing voice and used a range of strategies to persuade or appeal. Quite frequently, a specific publication was cited briefly at the start as the context for the piece, either a national or local newspaper or magazine.

Such pieces tended to be much livelier and more engaging than predictable and derivative celebrity profiles; the latter recycled ideas already available in the media in language closely modelled on that used by journalists. For their production piece, as for the investigation, candidates would be well advised to choose an individual, group or topic they consider to be under- or misrepresented rather than overexposed celebrities whose every action has already been exhaustively commented on in the popular press.

Candidates also need to know their genre. As preparation for the production piece, candidates should study closely the differences between report, feature article, editorial and review; and, in their writing, show their familiarity with layout conventions as well as language and style. Feature articles, for example, are the work of named writers, whose topic and role are identified in a sub-editorial third-person introduction, which follows the main heading. Too many candidates still launched into their articles after a perfunctory, essay-like heading, without attempting to provide the reader with clues as to what they were about to read. Editorials are never written in the first person and, like feature articles, need to have a very precise sense of the appropriate content, tone and style for their particular audience and purpose.

Monologues, too, have formal conventions that need to be observed, such as third-person stage directions, designed to guide actors and directors. Some candidates used these inappropriately to address the audience, as if the text were intended for publication rather than performance. There were some skilful portraits: of the elderly, members of teenage sub-groups, victims of violence, for example. These monologues foregrounded members of society that have in the past been ignored, neglected or marginalised and in many cases made persuasive appeals on their behalf. Some candidates used humour to good effect and proved adept at writing 'literary' versions of naturalistic speech. Others were less successful, either because they recycled existing stereotypes, say, of the homeless or single mothers, or else because candidates were a little out of their depth in relation to their chosen social group: the representations of prostitutes, murderers and terrorists, for example, tended to rely on imagination alone and were rarely convincingly authentic voices.

A minority of candidates chose to write leaflets (for example, how to choose or look after a particular type of pet, usually the very familiar cat or dog) or travel guides to well-known holiday destinations. These often included sophisticated, computer-aided graphological features and so were able to score highly for form; content, however, as in the celebrity profiles, generally tended to be closely reliant on existing models and limited the mark awarded. The language of leaflets, too, tends to be fairly straightforward, bland or formulaic and so is not the best vehicle for demonstrating a candidate's command of style. Travel guides were only a little less predictable and often lacked any personal input to make them distinctive.

Accuracy and fluency are requirements of AO4B as well as AO1; writing which had not been proofread or which contained frequent basic errors and flaws limited the mark available for the piece. The work of the best candidates was flawless; most was acceptably accurate and fluent. A small minority of candidates needed to plan their time more carefully to allow for final corrections and amendments to be made.

C: Commentary

Most candidates made representation the unmistakable focus of their production piece; a few lost sight of this key aspect of the task, even to the extent that it wasn't clear who or what was being represented. Occasionally, the commentary was able to shed some light on the writer's intentions but often the uncertainty of the production piece itself was mirrored in the commentary.

As well as clarifying the representational purposes of the production piece, the commentary is designed to enable candidates to show the conscious linguistic decisions and choices they made in the writing process. The most successful commentaries linked these two aspects closely together, making subtle points about representational purposes, illustrated by key linguistic points. Candidates should be encouraged to go beyond describing their representations as simply 'positive' or 'negative'.

As in the summer, commentaries were frequently over the required length, with candidates mistakenly trying to complete a full analysis of their text in 400 words, clearly an impossibility. The word count (of 400 words) is there to encourage candidates to be rigorous about the selection of features to include. As for AO1, the marking grid on pages 10-11 of the Specification explicitly refers to a hierarchy of linguistic skills. In order to attain a high mark, therefore, candidates should try to include at least some points which identify and explain their use of some of the following: specific, detailed word classes; clause elements; clause and sentence types.

The best commentaries were admirably succinct, confident in their identification of linguistic features and able to present a persuasive account of their intended representation and its purposes in a broad context.

Successful candidates:

- were aware of the formal requirements of their chosen genre
- used a variety of inventive and engaging strategies
- thought carefully about viewpoint and voice
- varied their syntax and included lively, convincing vocabulary
- produced balanced, cohesive production texts which addressed appropriate issues in depth
- in the commentary, identified key strategies used and analysed specific examples
- demonstrated good control of accuracy and expression.

Less successful candidates:

- produced a text similar to one or more of the sources
- omitted or paid scant attention to the specific issues raised in the sources
- failed to create a convincing voice
- used a very simple style with limited use of appropriate strategies
- made frequent errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Presentation

The advice about selection and presentation of sources given in the summer 2009 version of this report was carefully noted by the majority of centres. Most candidates chose source texts which were of manageable length and clearly labelled these as Text A, B, C and so on. Sources were either stapled to the investigation itself or included as a separate collection of papers at the end of the folder. This made it much easier for moderators to access them in order to check quotations.

Moderators still prefer open plastic folders or treasury tags to plastic pockets or cardboard wallets, which are fiddly and more time-consuming to open. In a January series, with a relatively small entry, this is not a serious issue, but centres might bear this plea in mind when planning for the larger summer entry.

Only a few candidates followed the hint in the last report about including a Bibliography. As well as being a good preparation for university assignments, this was helpful to moderators. When attached to a production piece, for example, the Bibliography showed where factual or statistical information had come from and allayed any suspicions about over-reliance on sources.

Finally, it would be helpful if candidates could be reminded to use a standard font in 11 or 12 point.

Administration

Moderators reported a significant number of late withdrawals, which may have been a result of the snow closures at schools and colleges at the start of the new term. Weather conditions certainly disrupted normal procedures; an unusual number of centres omitted to send essential paperwork, such as CDS, CMF and CRF forms with their candidates' work.

Most centres wrote brief summative comments on the CRF, providing more detailed comments on front sheets attached to candidates' individual pieces of work. It was particularly helpful to moderators when a breakdown of AO4 marks was given, as was most often the case, together with a brief accompanying comment.
Annotation of candidates' work varied a great deal in its attention to detail. Some centres annotated work thoroughly to show checking for accuracy as well as evaluation of the standards achieved. Many larger centres had clearly conducted an internal standardisation check, with a signature and comment by more than one teacher in a team. In such cases, moderators were guided to a clear understanding of how and why marks had been awarded. Where differences from the standard arose it was possible for moderators to explain them clearly on feedback sheets.

At the other extreme, some work had only ticks or double ticks to show the teacher's estimation of the work; occasionally, these did not seem to correlate with the marks given. When candidates' technical or labelling errors were left unmarked, moderators were not able to assess the extent to which these had been taken into account. Some markers simply wrote AO1 or AO3 in the margin as a reason for crediting an aspect of the work; given the range and complexity of the marking grids, this was not very illuminating for moderators.

Moderators will use the summer standardisation meetings to expand on key issues raised in this report and to provide examples of some of the points made.

Summary of Key Advice

It is very helpful to moderators and/or candidates if teachers do the following:

a)   General

- advise candidates at first draft stage to meet length requirements as nearly as possible
- remind candidates at final draft stage to proofread carefully for technical and labelling errors and, if necessary, edit or extend their work
- familiarise candidates with marking grids
- annotate candidates' work to identify strengths and weaknesses, so that moderators understand the rationale for marks given
- show the breakdown of marks awarded for AO4 A, B and C
- ensure that marks on candidates' work are consistent with marks on CRFs
- ensure that source texts for investigations are clearly identified and included at the end of investigations/folders
- discourage the use of complicated folders
- remind candidates of appropriate fonts, layout and type size
- consider the use of internal summary sheets
- remember to include Centre Declaration form.

b)   Representation Investigation

- encourage candidates to engage actively in researching topics and texts
- exercise quality control of final choices, in order to ensure texts are not overlong but sufficiently challenging in content and style
- check that candidates have a clear sense of focus on representational topics and issues
- ensure candidates are aware of the need to consider relevant contextual factors and shape a coherent argument
- encourage exploration of strategies used for audience positioning
- emphasise the need for careful selection of features for analysis in order to produce relevant analyses and stay within word limits
- discourage line-by-line analysis or feature-spotting
- emphasise the need to explore how social values are produced or challenged
- encourage candidates to link linguistic analysis with close exploration of meanings produced
- emphasise the need to exemplify linguistic points.

c)   Representation Production

- encourage candidates to consider a range of genres, not necessarily the same as used for the investigation
- check that candidates have a clear idea of a specific context of use for their work, in terms of publication and audience
- identify cases where a bibliography might be advisable
- encourage students to place their representation within a wider context of social issues
- urge candidates to work on style and expression as well as on content and argument
- emphasise the need for succinctness and careful selection of a range of key features in the Commentary.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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