General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011

English Language A   ENGA4

(Specification 2700)

Unit 4: Language Investigations and Interventions

Report on the Examination

General

This second summer entry for ENGA4 showed most teachers and students growing in confidence in their ability to tackle the demands of the specification with well-focused investigations of spoken language and judiciously balanced contributions to language debates. The very best work in both components was lively as well as thorough, making the most of the opportunities for investigation and creativity which this unit aims to encourage.

Language Investigation

Productive areas for investigation included:
- gender differences when giving praise or criticising, when giving excuses, when engaged in problem-solving
- dominance and politeness in a range of contexts (television interview, classroom, professional peer group)
- differences in mode and medium (comparison of a phone call with face-to-face interaction, comparison of supposedly spontaneous arguments in soap operas with the non-fluency of a real argument)
- occupation, gender and age (chefs, estate agents)
- interviewer strategies
- political interviews and debates (which proved much more productive than political speeches)
- idiosyncratic speech patterns revealing underlying attitudes or absurdities (Vicki Pollard, Hyacinth Bucket).

The best investigations were clearly structured. They had:
- clear linguistic aims
- a methodology which explained why the data had been chosen and considered variables and ethical issues
- a central analysis section which explored the significance of the data by systematically addressing each of the aims
- a conclusion which made clear what had been discovered about each of the aims
- an evaluation which commented reflectively on the limitations of their methodology and their conclusions, and which suggested further lines of investigation to extend or refine the conclusions.

Typically the most successful investigations demonstrated a strong grasp of mode features and of interactional and transactional functions, and the majority of candidates were clearly aware of the requirement to conduct an investigation into language that was intended to be spoken. Some candidates, however, appeared to think that they were expected to repeat the ENGA2 investigation with its focus on representation, and this was disadvantageous when it led to a narrow conception of the significance of the chosen data. A small number of centres had to be reminded that there are differences between the marking criteria for ENGA2 (which has AO3 as the dominant assessment objective) and ENGA4 (which gives equal weighting to AO1, AO2 and AO3). Another misconception was seen in the work of candidates who chose to investigate language change without a specific focus on changes in spoken language.

Candidates benefited from establishing at the outset the linguistic frameworks which they judged appropriate to underpin each investigation, and the best did not allow themselves to be side-tracked into displays of irrelevant labelling. Some candidates made use of tables which purported to show, in numerical or statistical form, the occurrence of specific linguistic items or features. It was not always clear, however, that the initial identifications had been accurate, and in the worst cases there was a total failure to provide supporting evidence for page after page of graphs and tables. Centres should note that lack of convincing evidence

of accurate identification tended to reduce candidates' prospects of success in meeting the demands of both AO1 and AO3.

Two other issues relating to data collection deserve attention. To be convincing, investigations based on accent needed to be based on phonetic transcriptions. Without such accurate recording of primary data, investigations into accent quickly lost a precise linguistic focus and drifted into impressionistic assertions leading to unverifiable conclusions. In a similar way, the use of questionnaires could be a distraction from genuine linguistic investigation. Primary data is essential.

The ability to recognise the influence of contextual factors characterised the investigations of stronger candidates. In addition to considering a range of sociolinguistic variables such as gender, age, occupation and status, they realised that the circumstances under which the data had been collected was a key component of the context, and this enabled them to address the assumed spontaneity of constructed situations and the 'reality' of reality tv programmes. Weaker candidates, by contrast tended to assume that a variable such as gender could be expected to operate independently and predictably, and they saw their task as one of asserting its operation.

Many candidates demonstrated an impressive grasp of research and achieved an illuminating overview of the issues and arguments. In particular, they were able to escape from the limitations inherent in an uncritical adoption of the oversimplified and unsubstantiated assertions of Zimmerman and West and of Lakoff.

There were other obstacles to success which might also have been avoided. Despite advice in previous reports there were still candidates who persisted in choosing topics and data which have proved notoriously unproductive. Guidance during task setting should include warnings about choosing data in the form of song lyrics, lists of taboo language, stand-up comedy routines and football commentaries; even when such data was spoken, candidates struggled to meet the demands of the assessment objectives, especially AO3. Candidates who were eager to study political discourse tended to be rewarded more highly if they focused on interviews or debates rather than speeches. In a similar way, football phone-ins commonly provided material of greater linguistic potential than match commentaries for those who wished to explore interactional issues from this field. In terms of satisfying the criteria and scoring higher marks, candidates who chose data which demonstrated spoken mode characteristics in an interactive context were clearly and consistently putting themselves at an advantage.

The most successful candidates:
- chose data which repaid investigation in terms of its communicative significance in a specific context
- formulated precise linguistic aims and hypotheses
- explained their reasoning in the methodology
- selected frameworks which illuminated contextual and communicative issues
- drew linguistic conclusions related to the aims and hypotheses
- evaluated the extent to which it might be appropriate to generalise from the conclusions
- outlined promising lines of further enquiry.

Less successful candidates:
- chose data on the basis of subject content
- proposed non-linguistic aims
- paraphrased the data
- took little account of the context
- ignored the participants` roles and intentions
- asserted the significance of arbitrarily-chosen variables

- looked at what was said but not at how it was said
- demonstrated no awareness of the limitations of their findings.

Language Intervention

The key to the intervention component is to guide the non-specialist reader through a well-informed debate. Successful candidates provided balanced coverage of thoughtfully-held, conflicting attitudes in a form and style likely to engage a general reader who is interested in ideas and opinions but who does not have a detailed knowledge of linguistic concepts and terminology.

Productive interventions included:
- book reviews (comparing two contrasting viewpoints)
- broadsheet opinion pieces (on linguistic censorship, on accent, on new words, on establishing an English Academy on the lines of the *Academie Française, on 'Apostrophes – do we need them?'*)
- beginners' guides (extracts or booklets)
- radio scripts (for Radio 4's *Bleak Expectations* about attitudes to language change)
- a guide to anti-languages for the BBC education website
- a *Private Eye* piece on updating the OED.

Successful candidates gave a balanced account of conflicting viewpoints on an issue of linguistic variation or change; they represented the views of linguistic experts clearly and accurately; they expressed their views in a form which could accommodate serious debate and in a style which engaged the interests of the chosen audience. They devised a range of strategies to be entertaining while conveying information, and they experimented with a variety of potentially productive media. Radio scripts offered a promising opportunity for meeting all of the demands of the task at a high level but it was clear that earlier warnings need to be repeated: candidates should distinguish clearly between presenters (whose words the candidate will rightly script) and linguistic experts (whose contributions ought to be introduced as sound clips, quoted, read, or summarised accurately with an appropriate attribution).

Less successful candidates tended to give only one side of the argument, sometimes in the form of an opinionated rant. They commonly chose to place their pieces in unsuitable publications which would not be likely to deal with language issues unless they were handled in a way designed to exploit and reinforce stereotypes. High marks were not appropriate for pieces that did not focus on a debate, pieces that had no clear form, and pieces with minimal linguistic content, nor did candidates deserve to be rewarded substantially for crude and ill-informed pieces on political correctness 'gone mad' or polemics which relied exclusively on out-of-date examples of sexist language.

Moderators appreciated the contextual information which some candidates provided to clarify their intentions with regard to genre, purpose, audience, where the piece would appear and which language issues were being addressed. Declaration of such information will be a formal requirement in future examination series, and AQA will provide a context sheet for the purpose. The importance of meeting this requirement will be reinforced at the Autumn standardisation meeting.

The most successful candidates:
- identified a serious linguistic debate (from amongst those covered in Unit 3)
- chose a convincing form and context in which to represent the debate
- provided a well-documented account of the principal differing points of view, and the arguments and evidence used to support them, in language accessible to a non-specialist audience
- established a clear line of argument leading to conclusions based on sound linguistic evidence
- employed a range of structural and stylistic features appropriate to the chosen genre, audience and placement.

Less successful candidates:
- selected a favourite topic rather than a debate
- chose to write for a publication which would be unlikely to feature a serious debate
- adopted a one-sided or over-simplified point of view
- imported passages of course notes expressed in specialist linguistic terminology
- made a limited (or no) attempt to produce a coherent and cohesive text.

Administration

Most centres submitted marks and samples promptly, and ensured that candidate record forms were completed with the appropriate details and signatures. They ensured that each folder was arranged with the work in logical sequence and was packaged in a secure and user-friendly fashion. They annotated the work with detailed comments, highlighting strengths and weaknesses, and added a summative comment to explain how they had reached their final decisions about marks. Many left a clear evidence trail of rigorous internal moderation.

Judgements about achievement were most convincing when they acknowledged candidates' lapses and deficiencies as well as their successes. Misapplication of terms (sentence/clause/phrase/utterance, past/passive, correct/hypercorrect, 'sentencing types') and conflation of terminology (abstract verb, past tense noun) needed to be challenged, as did instances of less specifically linguistic confusion (manor/manner, Manchurian/Mancunian, martial/marital). Some researchers and linguistic experts were particularly prone to misnaming (Fishman/Fisherman, Lakoff/Layoff, Tannen/Tanner/ Tannes/Tanning), while Jean Aitchison (Aitcheson/Aitchinson/Aitchenson) was frequently misrepresented as the author of views with which she does not agree.

Advice to candidates

To maximise your success you should try to do the following:

Language Investigation
- Keep a focus throughout your investigation on the requirement that the data is intended to be spoken.
- Select data which has a precise context with clearly identified audience/participants.
- Line number your data so that the evidence quoted can be checked easily and without risk of misunderstanding.
- Explain why you have chosen to explore and compare particular pieces of data and participants.
- Explain how you intend to control variables.
- Formulate clear and precise linguistic aims and hypotheses.
- Select frameworks which will help you reach conclusions about your aims and hypotheses.

- Focus on interactional and discourse features when analysing speech.
- Draw cautious conclusions about what you discovered, commenting explicitly on how far you have achieved your aims and tested your hypotheses.
- Ask yourself about the extent to which you can generalise from your conclusions, and consider further lines of investigation which might allow you to refine or extend your conclusions.

Language Intervention

- Choose a debate which is characterised by clearly distinguished points of view. It should be part of the subject matter studied for Unit 3.
- Decide where in the real world your intervention piece(s) might be published/broadcast.
- Use a cover sheet for your language intervention piece(s) and give clear information about what kind of piece you have written, who you see as the audience, what purpose(s) you aim to achieve and where you intend it to appear. You should also make clear which language issue you are covering.
- Identify the characteristics and conventions of the genre in which you intend to present the debate.
- Cover the principal points of view and arguments.
- Use engaging, non-specialist language.
- Be prepared to challenge arguments and assumptions.

Things to avoid:

Language Investigation

- Avoid data which doesn't have clear potential for linguistic analysis.
- Avoid vague and non-linguistic aims and hypotheses.
- Avoid paraphrase when you comment on the data.
- Don't treat the evaluation as an opportunity to make claims about how much better you would have done if you had been allowed more time, space and data.

Language Intervention

- Avoid topics which are not specified as part of the subject matter covered in Unit 3.
- Don`t expect anyone reading your work to be prepared to guess the answers to questions about audience, purpose and genre if you don`t know yourself (and haven`t made those answers clear).
- Don`t claim that you intend to place your piece in a publication which would be unlikely to print it.
- Avoid over-simplified or trivialised views about language.
- Avoid the temptation to indulge in a rant.
- Avoid relying on untransformed class notes.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by visiting the link below:

www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.