**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

English Language B   **ENGB3**

(Specification 2705)

Unit 3: Developing Language

Report on the Examination

General

From the quality of the candidates' responses to this examination, it was clear that they found it an accessible paper for both Language Acquisition and Language Change. The vast majority of candidates were able to engage with the data in meaningful, interested and linguistically informed ways.

As ever, the numbers choosing from the two options for each topic area favoured spoken acquisition strongly and, to a lesser extent, the comparative change question. Perhaps this was less pronounced for change, where many opted for the older data in Question 3, perhaps feeling more comfortable exploring language further away in time from their own experience of English.

It was still often the pattern that candidates performed much better on Child Language Acquisition, resulting possibly from more confidence in analysing the features they selected. With Language Change, there is still the tendency to identify features in a descriptive manner, impacting Examiners' potential to award marks when using the band descriptors. Another contrast was that for Acquisition candidates were selecting salient features of the data to discuss, whereas for Change it was more tempting to try and make the data fit their prior knowledge from classroom study.

A pattern also reported by examiners was that candidates were clearly informed about the different weightings for Assessment Objectives and applied this in their approaches. However, this resulted in some not accessing the 8 possible marks for AO3 (context). For some, there appeared little attempt to either use the contextual information given in the data booklet as a steer for their focus on the data, or to infer relevant situational factors from close engagement with the data. Again, this was more apparent in one topic, Acquisition, rather than Change responses where they seem happier to make generalised comments about audiences and societies of the 18th and early 20th century. This is a synoptic paper, and it is a shame that their close exploration of context for AS is lost completely. Indeed, although only worth a small amount of marks, context integrated with AO1 and AO2 helps to lift the quality of responses overall.

In general, Acquisition responses produced systematic and engaged responses, with less structuring of essays evident for Change. There is no right approach to the questions and formulaic responses based around, for example, language features do not by default score more highly. However, candidates performed best in their Change answers – as with the literacy question - if they had considered the genre of the texts. This then assisted them to focus on interesting linguistic features and select relevant language concepts, instead of feature spotting. Those candidates with an awareness of why writers of texts might use certain language features, or why they might adopt a particular style or tone, could engage both with linguistic choices and make sensible comments on changes over time. Indeed, those who could identify the genre conventions used in Sam's planning sheets and character study, and within the articles or problem page tended to score more highly on AO2. This was much more helpful and relevant than pages of historical summaries from Caxton onwards or feature spotting every non-standard spelling.

Candidates should also be advised that writing excessive quantity is not an indicator of quality. Those who constructed responses based on a methodical approach to reading, annotating and planning their ideas were clearly distinguishable from those who had not practised working with the larger data sets of A2 Language. Examiners felt that some candidates did not view themselves as productive unless they are writing, perhaps lacking the confidence to spend time reading. The result was often long, unstructured answers with superficial or descriptive comments. Conceptualised and integrated responses are often mid length or shorter; here candidates had clearly used their reading time to understand the data.

Question 1

These transcripts were very linguistically enabling for candidates with a range of methods to choose and apply.
The data allowed candidates to view it either as three distinct units, or to work systematically and to cross reference. The strongest responses often choose the later approach, offering planned conceptual answers seeing patterns across the data and structuring their essay accordingly. The linear approach led to much repetition and description. There was a lot of material that candidates could use to consider CDS - some of the best responses used this as a starting point for analysing texts B and C.

The majority of candidates appeared very secure in their understanding of AO2 behaviourist/cognitive/interactional ideas, with stronger scripts developing and integrating meaningful references to language study within their analysis. Features such as the overextension in Text A and her awareness of the teddy's existence beyond her reach were offered as evidence for her cognitive processing of her world, Briony's repetition of 'moose' as evidence of imitation, her utterances as supporting Halliday's pragmatic functions, her awareness of social sayings like 'bye-bye' accompanied by waving as following interactional perspectives and her non-standard pluralisation of 'moons' as evidence for Chomksy. Responses were differentiated by the quality of explanation of complex ideas combined with close analysis of linguistic features. Weaker answers chose to write paragraphs about Chomsky and Skinner with no connection to the data. The AO2 band descriptor looks for the selecting of 'salient examples' to achieve at least 7 marks and the 'anecdotal' paragraphs resulted in lower marks being awarded. As with the gender question at AS, some better responses looked to the data to challenge as well as support acknowledged theoretical perspectives.

Others did not read the contextual information closely and saw the texts as part of a longitudinal study of Briony's development, or interpreted her list of single utterances as representing everything she said to herself in 12 hours. This lack of close reading then saw candidates looking to 'prove' her development from the holophrastic to telegraphic stages between Texts A to C. Those who were more sensitive to the contexts (home, visiting friends, nappy changes, roles, relationships, speakers' purposes), and were tentative about stages, recognised that she didn't neatly fit into one category and produced more subtle analysis of Briony's exploratory language practices.

Often a crucial discriminator is the section of linguistic methods (AO1) and, pleasingly, Briony's phonological skills were a topic of detailed discussion from interpretation of her use of 'mok mok' to the phonetic representation in the nursery rhyme. Stronger candidates used linguistic methods/features as a springboard to explore different interpretations. These included the possible parental influences and 'baby talk' of 'mok mok', or Briony's substitution of easier sounds linked to phonological development. The nursery rhymes were variously explored as showing Briony's recognition of her own name, offering familiarity and fun, as features of social experiences outside the home, as functioning as both a CDS teaching strategy and a distraction tool for Briony's discontent. This type of open-minded approach models the integrated approach to all AOs as good practice characterising top band responses.

What was also apparent in the candidates' often confident discussion of laterals, alveolar fricatives and bilabial plosives was the rigorous teaching of early language development, which perhaps they had not been able to demonstrate in past exam data sets. Also, examiners noted the lovely analysis of 'What's the magic word?' with engaged discussion of pragmatics and the context in which this utterance was used. Most candidates were able to discuss the issue of politeness at some level. Weaker candidates tended to be less tentative and assumed that Briony was unable to say please. Some sensibly considered the 'pl'

exchange between mother and child as further evidence for her phonological development. Others recognised that she might simply have chosen not to!

Question 2

Although fewer candidates chose this question, it is clear that some centres are now teaching literacy with more confidence and expertise and those who chose this performed well.

Sam's *Flat Stanley* pieces enabled candidates to show their understanding of features characterising early literacy development and early literacy strategies. Responses which fully engaged with the data were able to apply their knowledge of the stages of Kroll, Rothery and Gentry to explore lexical, syntactical and discourse features within Text E. They used AO2 as benchmarks rather than as absolutes. However, some candidates can sometimes rely too heavily on these the theories of 'stages', meaning they then try to fit the data to suit the points they wish to make.

Weaker candidates tended to apply spoken acquisition theories unhelpfully to the data, almost suggesting that they perhaps had chosen the wrong question, or did not understand that literacy development could not be directly related to spoken acquisition. While Vygostky and Skinner, and ideas about the teacher's positive reinforcement, were often thoughtful and relevant, Chomsky and references to the spoken acquisition stages were unsuccessful.

Most candidates were able to make meaningful observations on the nature of the teacher's reinforcement, whilst some candidates used either their own classroom observations experiences or close reading of the contextual information to evaluate *Flat Stanley* as stimulus and Text D as valuable preparation before writing. Stronger responses tended to consider the school context and the drafting process with the difference between the two texts providing some interesting comparative analysis. For example, the differences in neatness and the adjectival changes from Text D to Text E as given as evidence both of Sam's understanding of the writing process and his awareness of audience. More successful candidates were able to explore the close relationship between reading and writing by showing contextual understanding of the nature of the task set and the influence of the *Flat Stanley* story.

Much was made of the noun phrases and use of premodifiers to describe Flat Stanley's character in both physical and more abstract forms. Good responses interpreted the adjectives tentatively in terms of Sam's understanding of the genre he was writing in. With equal validity, evaluative comments were made about the simplicity and repetitiveness ('very', 'big') alongside the ambition ('mysterious', 'incredible') as possible evidence of either his literacy development, or a desire to impress his teacher, or indicative of the 'word banks' offered to children at Key Stage 1. If nothing else, the spelling of the many adjectives allowed for some discussion, but this can be handled quite descriptively and examples provided as tenuous evidence only for a discussion of accent and as a phonetic strategy. Sometimes spelling was the only linguistic method applied to the data, which was self-limiting.

Few understood Sam's syntax error at the end, but many gained credit for their attempt to explore it. Perhaps he didn't mean 'telling them off' but 'telling of them' as in 'I'm telling of you'. As there is often ambiguity in children's written and spoken language, this simply exemplifies that successful responses result from the candidates' willingness to think about the data and interpret it convincingly – analysing and evaluating, rather than describing and dismissing the errors.

Question 3

Examiners reported the responses to this were often a pleasure to mark, demonstrating genuine engagement – and even surprise – with an 18th century problem page sharing similarities with those of today. Of the section B questions, this one seemed to be tackled more successfully across the ability range as it offered both straightforward points on the long S and spelling, as well as offering the opportunity for stronger candidates to comment on more subtle points like tone, grammar, figurative language and humour.

This question produced clearly differentiated responses. In the top bands, confident AO2, including Standardisation issues and the debate on attitudes to language, supported systematic AO1, where candidates felt able to cross reference between the various texts and explore areas of lexis/semantics, discourse and grammar.

An effective approach was selecting a few interesting features from the texts, which candidates then explored in more depth. These were often stronger than those produced by candidates who felt that they had to write about a wide range of linguistic methods in little depth, or who described each text one by one. There were quite a few descriptive linear answers that were close to paraphrase at times; at the other extreme, some answers totally ignored contextual features of the data and simply commented on random examples of change processes – mostly from their practice of previous papers, as seen in references to 'chav' etc. While relating language change to modern-day examples is acceptable with the single text (or single source of this data), they have to be relevant and not just evidence of past-paper practice.

Good responses, for example, selected words that could exemplify semantic change or the influences of other languages on English were able to meet all the AOs, if developed. Some strong responses looked holistically at the texts, grouping ideas together. For example, the language-based problems (the alphabet and 'hackney') were used to link effectively to AO2 prescriptive/descriptive debates or as exemplifying people's ongoing interest in the English language. (As with 'go bo-bo' in Question 1, 'hackney' also showed a north/south divide with some candidates understanding the current usage or meanings of these words and others not.) Understandably, the women's matrimonial or clothing problems were used to discuss gender, power and social changes (AO2/AO3, depending on whether the supporting discussion focused on theoretical or contextual perspectives), as was the narrowing of 'handsome' to men over time.

Given the date of the texts, candidates were able to shoehorn it into their knowledge of the standardisation timeline. As ever, weaker answers do not see standardisation as a gradual process or that there must have been some standard styles and grammatical practices for contemporary audiences to even understand what was written. Many recognised the relevance of their knowledge of 18th century prescriptivism but could not always link this sufficiently closely to the texts, despite the subject matter of two of the letters lending itself to this consideration. As in previous examinations, prescriptivist ideas tended to be falsely attributed to Aitchison. On the other hand, there were real stretch and challenge opportunities in the data that allowed the best candidates to produce synthesised, wide-ranging and perceptive responses using spelling, grammar and lexical/semantic features as evidence for the ways language changes.

Open-mindedness to the texts was a key discriminator in awarding marks even with bands. Stronger responses were able to see the liveliness within the style, whilst weaker scripts focused on features which were considered formal or archaic and generalised contextual gender references. Examiners noted that candidates seem to be more confident in identifying the French and Latin roots of words, often supported in accurate examples. Some, however, view all monosyllabic lexis as deriving from Old English and all differences in spelling a result of not having Johnson's dictionary.

Question 4

Once again, the best candidates started with a consideration of the genre, together with an exploration of contexts of production and reception. This question provided a real opportunity for candidates to use their synoptic knowledge, exploring the effect of technology. However, it also attracted weaker responses which focussed largely on the subject matter, tracing very broad links to social contexts without showing a great deal of relevant linguistic understanding. Weaker responses often explored one text then the other; stronger responses often took a comparative stylistic approach from the outset.

Many found interesting evidence for language change if they looked carefully at the data first. Otherwise they confirmed their preconceptions about "polysyllabic" lexis in Text L and "colloquial" lexis in Text M without entirely convincing evidence. This was based on the focus on 'proving' informalisation when, in fact, there was some contradictory indicators in both Texts L and Text M. Reliance on prior knowledge of informalisation/ synthetic personalisation was helpful to an extent, but sometimes led to superficial generalisations. If candidates had thought about the possible similarities in the *Daily Telegraph* audience over time, or the nature of the journalistic register, or indeed the genre, this was often avoided. Finding patterns between the texts (for example, Meteorological Office to Met Office and the use of the word 'deluge' in both) allowed for the helpful consideration of levels of formality, similarities in genre or the impact of a similar readership for the *Daily Telegraph* - again interweaving the AOs, sometimes seamlessly. Answers which tended to stay in the lower bands produced responses with rehearsed AO2, not fully related to the data and the selection of linguistic features that matched their view of what should be the changes between 1903 and 2007. Similarly, paragraphs about where the text comes, date wise, in relation to Standardisation/dictionary/printing press are usually unhelpful and act as a distraction rather than enhancing the response.

Exploration of individual lexical items proved fruitful. The word 'yob' led to some interesting developments, with weaker candidates seeing it as evidence for a colloquial style, although few understandably pinpointed its origin to 19th century back slang. Stronger candidates using it to blend the assessment objectives; most considered it to be a neologism, some developed it to attitudes in the media towards young people. One candidate noted that it was '*arguably a borrowing since it is the existing word 'boy' spelled backwards'*, with the sensible development allowing credit; this was not a unique deduction.

There is still the temptation for candidates to describe the layout of older change texts in a rather deficit way, reading them from their modern perspective as 'boring'. In contrast, many made interesting points about the brevity of the paragraphs in Text M, citing the online reading experience as the cause of this change with technology causing a traditional broadsheet paper to change to a more 'tabloid' style. Such observations demonstrated genuine thinking about the data and differentiated between those candidates who were able to engage beyond superficial feature spotting. Again there seemed a temptation to overstate assumptions, especially about gender. The names and gender of the co-writers in Text M were used to illustrate social change and occupational roles, although for those who mistakenly identified Text L's writer as June Deluge this was not an option.

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:

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