



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

English Language B

ENGB4

(Specification 2705)

Unit 4: Investigating Language

Report on the Examination

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

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General

There was a slight increase on entries this summer for ENGB4, with approximately 15,000 candidates submitting coursework for this unit. The **Investigating Language** unit is now very well established and moderators remarked that there was clear evidence of very good practice in the delivery of this unit for the majority of centres. In the main, centres were very organised in their administrative practices and this allowed for a very smooth moderation process. Moderators also remarked that where centres were able to send work promptly to their moderator this allowed for the swift sampling of candidates' work and the prompt resolution of any administrative issues. This professional approach to coursework is something that is encouraged for all centres.

The Language Investigation

Moderators continue to be impressed by the quality and range of language investigations produced by candidates of all abilities. It is clear that a strong emphasis on independent learning underpins success in the production of this piece of coursework, and moderators remarked that where there was a genuine sense of 'learning' seen in the investigations, candidates tended to perform to the best of their ability. Conversely where candidates were restrained in some way: by topic, prescribed numbers of research questions, set numbers of language methods or by methodology types, performance was adversely affected – particularly at the top end of the mark ranges. Centres are reminded that this unit should allow candidates to pursue 'interesting questions about language in use' independently. Teacher support and guidance should enable candidates to perform to the best of their ability – it should not limit candidate performance with unhelpful restrictions.

Moderators commented that in centres where good practice was in evidence there were some very engaging topic focuses reflecting personal interest and this was most encouraging to see.

Particularly interesting topics to be mentioned here are:

- the use of language in the comedy of Tim Minchin (exploring a balance of humour, word play, lyrics and taboo language)
- language used whilst on-line gaming
- does the language used by the Daily Mail seek to promote racial prejudice?
- language and contextual changes affecting the English Dictionary (comparison of 1979 & 2002 Concise English Dictionary)
- how was language used in the local and national press to report the West Cumbria shootings in June 2010?
- do TV chefs demonstrate 20th century ideas of power and gender?
- an investigation into stereotypical toy packaging
- changing language in family letters from early 19th century and early 21st century (an effective use of very personal data)
- propaganda and mass manipulation in fiction and non-fiction (how far are strategies used in Orwell's 1984 used in modern political rhetoric?).

There was also clear evidence that centres were encouraging candidates to think very carefully about the use of language theories (AO2) to shape their language investigations. Interesting examples:

- do Lakoff's findings reflect male/female language use in cartoon films?
- can Tannen's difference theory be found in pre-teen mixed conversations?
- to what extent can Labov's theory of divergence and convergence be found in a classroom interaction?
- are David Crystal's theories on technology still valid?

- to what extent did the World Cup Cricket commentaries conform to Adrian Beard's theories about sports commentaries?

The specification clearly states that the Investigation should be organised under subheadings, and this was adhered to by the majority of centres. Centres are reminded that these subheadings are a specification requirement, they are not optional.

Introduction

These were mostly well formulated, with clear indication of personal interest and a clear rationale for focus of investigation. Most candidates included very clear aims and/or hypothesis; not all were followed throughout the body of the investigation, but candidates seem to be responding well to the word limit and thus this section was suitably precise and controlled.

Some centres, however, tended to set unrealistic aims for their students. One centre adopted a whole centre approach of including up to 15 aims. Such ambition is clearly not going to enable students to achieve across the assessment objectives, particularly under the AO2 assessment objective. Moderators also commented that some investigations tried to prove something whilst others tried to find something out – both approaches worked very well as they both showed evidence of candidates having learnt something.

Methodology

Moderators remarked that this often proved to be the most problematic section for many candidates. This series the majority of methodologies were concise, but with mixed success. Some candidates referenced their approach clearly, taking into account ethics and variables as appropriate. However, for some candidates, the methodology was overly brief, with a narrow explanation of form of data collected (eg magazine articles) without specific detail offered. This meant that methodologies were sometimes vague; offering only limited insight into reasons for data collection. One positive aspect, however, was that there was very little evidence of the lengthy mechanistic approaches evident in previous series. Centres are obviously acting on advice in the support meetings and candidates are avoiding providing unnecessary detail in this section of the investigation.

Worryingly, some candidates did not include separate methodologies, instead including a rationale for data collection in the introduction. This is problematic for two reasons. The first is that the specification clearly states that an Investigation must include a methodology sections, and more importantly it is important that candidates consider their choices of approach or data selection carefully as a sound methodology often resulted in a strong investigation overall.

Approaches taken varied according to topic choice, with a nice balance of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Case studies were used where appropriate – particularly when considering Child Language Acquisition or Second Language Acquisition. The use of questionnaires was often helpful as a source of contextual information as well as a method for the collection of primary data. Unfortunately, there was evidence of some 'unhelpful' methodologies this series. In a small number of centres candidates discussed at length their 'ethnographic' approach to their data collection, and, unfortunately, it was clear that neither the candidate nor the centre had a full understanding of what this approach to data collection actually meant. Centres are reminded that if they are uncertain about a candidates' approach to data collection, they should contact their allocated Coursework Advisor to clarify approaches and issues.

Data

There was some very interesting data collected from a wide range of topics, from the representation of murder victims in the Suffolk murders of 2006, to a comparison of Cameron & Clegg's linguistic style pre- & post-formation of the coalition government. However, there were more 'routine' topics such as the comparison of women's lifestyle magazines or gender patterns in social networking. The language of education was a popular choice this series, with a number of interesting approaches, from EFL to teaching children with learning difficulties.

Most students were careful to collect usable amounts of data and had been clearly advised by their coursework tutors. The quantity of data was mostly well managed; candidates clearly were able to work with their data, and there was careful and judicious selection of examples to support assertions/observations. Centres are reminded once again that where candidates have too much data to work with they are unlikely to be able to make tentative or perceptive comments, and they run the risk of losing marks under the AO2 assessment objective, as in extreme cases the methodology could be assessed as 'inappropriate'.

Analysis

The majority of candidates adopted a fairly systematic approach to their data analysis using a range of linguistic methods. Moderators were pleased to note that this was apparent at all levels of ability this series. It is clear that the reduced word count has meant that candidates are increasingly avoiding lengthy descriptions of their data and this is to the advantage of all candidates. It remains the case that the best candidates are able to extract examples from their data to support their comments, and where candidates fail to do this it has an adverse effect on the candidate's performance. Centres are also reminded that there is not a prescribed numbers of methods for the analysis section – some centres appear to think that candidates should always use three methods to analyse their data regardless of the focus or data type. This is an unhelpful restriction for the majority of candidates.

Most centres encouraged students to use subheadings to shape their analysis; often this was organised according to linguistic methods (eg graphology, lexis etc.), but some centres encouraged their candidates to shape subheadings into clear questions that could then be explored. This proved fruitful and avoided a descriptive approach. Indeed, it encouraged an open-minded approach, leading to a tentative exploration of ideas and concepts. Some candidates did not use subheadings to shape their analysis, and this section became similar to an extended essay, with little system demonstrated. This approach should be discouraged by centres.

Conclusion and Evaluation

For the majority of centres this section is now a productive and interesting end to the language investigation, focusing on a discussion of the findings of the investigation and/or an evaluation of the success of the investigation. This series there was a distinct improvement in the quality of the evaluations which reflected on the investigation process rather than simply outlining scope for development/improvement.

Marking of the investigation

Mostly marks were awarded fairly for the investigation. Centres are obviously fairly confident with this element of the coursework and this was reflected in the accuracy of marks awarded. AO1 was mostly accurate, with some over-rewarding in the top band where on occasion marks in the 17-20 band were not always linked to perceptive or tentative development. However, the majority of AO1 marks were accurate which was very encouraging. AO2 was sometimes over-rewarded, particularly for those investigations that were very brief and didn't therefore provide reasons for data collection beyond a superficial description. Conceptual understanding was impressive for the majority of students, but some centres over-rewarded the use of language concepts, particularly where there was simply a description of the concepts rather than a sense of how the concept illuminated the data analysis.

AO3 was also sometimes over-rewarded (although not as significantly as in previous series); marks were sometimes awarded at 7-10 for investigations which covered context in the introduction or methodology only, rather than considering an integrated approach. Moderators commented that marginal comments and internal mark sheets were very useful in illustrating how marks were awarded. In a small number of cases centres only identified AOs in the margin – rather than identifying the quality of the writing. Where this approach was taken, moderators noted that there was more likelihood of differences between the centre mark and the moderator mark occurring. So, although this approach to annotation is perfectly acceptable (and it is certainly better than no annotation at all), it appears that assessment is more secure where centres take a more conceptualised approach to their annotation.

This series there was often clear evidence of internal moderation, with centres using their own internally devised mark sheets. These proved extremely helpful. Some centres, however, adjusted their candidates' marks (usually to a higher mark) prior to submission, but without any comments about reasons for changes made; it would be helpful for centres to indicate these clearly. It was positive to see an increasing number of centres reference the centre standardising material, although sometimes comments did not really reflect the standards established in the standardising material.

Media Text

This series saw a significant development in the range and quality of Media Texts produced by candidates. Moderators remarked that it was clear that centres were encouraging their candidates to be more creative in terms of chosen genres and audiences for this text and therefore the quality of writing was much higher than in previous series. Disappointingly, in a small number of centres candidates are still being advised to link the Media Text to the Investigation very closely rather than take a 'broad topic' approach. Some candidates clearly felt constrained by this approach, and more problematically, this approach does not work for all topics. Centres are reminded that candidates may choose a different aspect of their topic area to discuss in their Media Text if they wish. For example, a candidate investigating the representation of gender in the advertising of children's toys, may then discuss male and female speech styles in their Media Text, as this is linked by the topic of **Language and Gender**. Similarly a candidate considering the language of text messages, may choose to discuss any aspect of **Language and Technology** for their Media Text, they are not limited to text messages only. This is not a new message for the majority of centres; however, for new centres if there is any uncertainty about this link, please consult your Coursework Advisor.

Moderators were very pleased to report that there were fewer pieces than in previous series that contained no language content – fortunately it was the exception to find pieces such as ‘Top 10 football ground in England’.

Interesting tasks this series included:

- the art of letter writing – an article exploring the benefits of letters over technology
- a satirical comedy sketch to explore gender roles on TV
- magazine quiz: What does your language reveal about you?
- Private Eye satirical article
- Cosmo magazine quiz: 10 ways to tell if you are being manipulated by your boss!
- *TES* article: How to keep control in your classroom: a guide for new teachers.

Marking of the Media Text

The Media Text is assessed through three strands under the AO4 assessment objective, and moderators were pleased to see that more centres were using the three strands to annotate and assess candidates’ work. In simple terms the three strands cover:

- audience, purpose and genre
- register
- transformation of ideas and concepts from language study (original materials).

Problems in assessment usually occurred when a centre failed to consider all three aspects of the Media Text. In a very small number of cases this problem was compounded by a lack of precision in defining the chosen audience and genre. Where centres did not clearly state the intended audience and genre precisely, the quality of the candidate’s writing tended to be less shaped and controlled and far more complicated to assess (by both the centre and the moderator). For future series centres are advised to use the three strands to annotate and inform the summative comment as there is clear evidence from all previous series that this improves the accuracy of assessment across the mark range.

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