**General Certificate of Education (A-level)**
**June 2012**

# English Language B        ENGB3

# (Specification 2705)

# Unit 3: Developing Language

# *Report on the Examination*

**General Comments**

The entry for ENGB3 has increased slightly with the majority of students taking it as a conclusion to their A level language study. The overwhelming number chose Question 1 for Section A, with those opting for Question 2 more of a minority even than in previous years. Responses in Section B were a little more evenly distributed than with Section A, though Q3 was the least popular choice.

In terms of assessment objectives, AO1 was applied to both topics with varying degrees of success. These ranged from simple identification of features at a vague level (such as referring to 'words') rewarded at the 4-9 band, to identifying some features with more precision for the 10-15 band, and to identifying features with a high degree of accuracy and exploration for reward in the 16-24 bands. Students are clearly taking the 'systematic' descriptor of the 16+ bands to heart but simply having paragraphs that begin 'in terms of lexis/ grammar/ phonology *etc*' is not going to automatically take them to this starting point. Scaffolding answers is useful as it allows answers to see patterns exemplify and analyse but differentiators are precision and sensitivity of understanding. The best responses are the ones that take the most interesting starting points for paragraphs of analysis; these could be linguistically led, theory led or context led. No one model will get all students to the higher bands. At the highest level students are open minded, tentative and selective in what they choose to discuss. They have also spent time reading the data, annotating it carefully to get a sense of overview and have thought about how to structure their answers before putting pen to paper.

If previous series have shown how far students' grammatical knowledge has advanced, June 2012 was the year of AO2. For both acquisition and change, concepts and ideas from language study were usually selected more carefully and relevantly to the actual data. It is now rarer to see extended paragraphs of what behaviourism means or the whole history of Standardisation from Caxton onwards. Impressively students showed selection for Questions 3 and 4 as evidently the earlier texts led to more pertinent discussion of Standardisation, whereas the later texts could focus more saliently on change processes and changes to the advertising genre as well as synoptic topics of technology and gender representation and stereotypes. Synopticity was evident and many students were writing convincingly about features of the change data especially which related to AS topics, such as power, technology and gender. Students who *only* concentrated on AS issues, although gaining credit, perhaps missed out on 'range' because they did not demonstrate their A2 knowledge of change concepts. The only exception to this year's AO2 strength is the unhelpful application of spoken acquisition theories to literacy. There is plenty of current university research into literacy that could be applied usefully to the acquisition of reading and writing.

Whilst the majority of students were aware of the need to consider contextual factors for their AO3 mark, many students wrote about context in their introductions in a rather broad way, identifying significant factors and making predictions about the impact these factors would have on the data, but then didn't really develop this in the rest of the response. This meant ideas were often not really supported or integrated and therefore limited to the 'some awareness' band. Although opening paragraphs outlining broad contextual factors are useful for students to write themselves into their responses, they need to return to contextual factors when analysing the impact context has on specific language features. However, as also highlighted in the January report, hypotheses about what they *might* find, while appropriate for a language investigation, are not going to gain credit here.

A note about standards of expression. On the final unit of an A Level English Language paper it is reasonable to expect high standards of mechanical control and accuracy; this was sometimes not the case, with some students not apparently having taken advantage of the time allowed for planning and proof-reading. The fluency and readability of responses was greatly enhanced where students had learned the basic techniques of quotation and

comment (eg grouping multiple examples of similar features) and were able to use appropriate terminology accurately. AO1 not only encompasses the application of linguistic methods and the use of appropriate terminology but also refers to the need to communicate knowledge with 'coherent, accurate written expression'. Areas of concern arising this year was the failure to spell the word 'sentence' and the development of the word 'relateable' to describe texts which seemed to strive to achieve empathy with an audience. But on a descriptive language change question perhaps this is simply to be embraced.

Generally, it seemed a very fair paper where students had plenty of scope to show the breadth and depth of their knowledge, skills and sensitivity for language, its acquisition and its changes. As one examiner identified, the dominant impressions are of the perceptive intelligence of some, the diligence of the vast majority and the stimulating hard work of those teachers preparing them. In both sections, the best responses successfully navigated their way through the texts, deftly combining close analysis using a range of language methods with relevant ideas and knowledge from language study. Sequential approaches were unlikely to yield the kinds of systematic, conceptually developed discussions necessary for the upper bands, and could lead to repetitive/descriptive feature-logging accounts.

**Question 1**

Q1 was very appealing. Most students seemed to see this as a 'safe' option and most were able to offer valid observations on the data informed by some relevant concepts and making sensible links both to developmental and situational concepts. Everyone found plenty to say. It was good to see some real attempts to explore the data by most students - especially the last bit of A, which produced some very focused discussion. Overall, there was some excellent performance, demonstrating real insight into the discussion and research pertaining to the topic as well as strong analytical skills.

Another noticeable trend was students' willingness to attempt discussion of precise grammatical components. Students who attempted to make the distinction between, for example, the possessive –s inflection and the plural were rewarded. Students who could then use this to discuss theory and/or context with more precision performed even better. Some responses from very able students were hampered by a lack of exemplification. Even when points were thoughtful and considered, the lack of exemplification led to a lack of precision.

More obviously 'concept-led' answers handled the material more effectively than they have done in the past, with a good proportion making fairly clear and consistent links to the data – as highlighted in the general comments there were fewer cases of theories/studies being loosely referenced. The 'fis' study was often applied well to analysis of Jess' phonological development with reference to the interaction with her mother over 'igloo'. Most students were able to access the data appropriately, with good evidence of effective AO2 teaching and the students' sound understanding. Bruner et al were relevantly applied, with sometimes accurate AO1 analysis of CDS features. The strongest answers applied concepts and theories critically, weaker responses tended to spend much time commenting on the lack of reinforcement in the data, seemingly disappointed by the inability to find examples to mention Skinner. The most able could comment on the mother's other strategies and were open minded to her language choices but some became distracted and found her blameworthy for not doing so.

The child's language was often explored sensibly in relation to developmental stages, with more evidence of precise description of features, or attempts at such, than noted in previous series. Many were able to analyse Jess's language choices to show her stage of development, eg not just noting that some words were omitted in her sentences or even precisely what those words were but identifying auxiliaries and determiners that change

utterance from telegraphic to conventional.  More generalised responses assessed her at the Post- telegraphic stage due to her age, whereas more open- minded and thoughtful answers looked at the evidence and decided on the telegraphic stage.  Many students had obviously been trained to look at inconsistencies and variation across the data and those who could do this came- up with some interesting evaluation about Jess's phonological development, for example.  It was good to see references to comparatively recent research, such as Usha Goswami, as well as the old favourites.

Often AO3 was the area that students neglected.  There was little attention given to the influence of the different activities that Jess was participating in, and often students expressed their disapproval of her mother's lack of attention to grammatical errors but overlooked the nature of the activities as helping her lexical/semantic and social understanding.  Contextually, Mum's strategies were well interpreted by many, Jess's by fewer.  Some students pointed out that, though – aside from Pingu - penguins don't actually live in igloos, this exchange, like many others was helping to develop in Jess a network of vocabulary and understanding.

A linear approach – and this applies to all the questions – led to repetitive responses.  Pleasantly, examiners noted fewer running commentaries than in the past.

**Question 2**

Fewer students attempted this question but it is clear that some school/colleges are now teaching this aspect of the specification with growing assurance, leading to some very well-informed and data-focused responses.  The small number of students choosing this option may be because some were reluctant to leave the security blanket of CLA theories or perhaps dismissed the data because it focused on children at the top end of the literacy age range.

For literacy a mechanistic approach to AO1 (grouping by language methods/feature) is usually less helpful than engaging with the context or the genre first and then applying language methods to support observations.  A number of responses did not always pick the most useful language methods when considering the context.  Lengthy comments on handwriting and motor skills were not productive.

Q2 was ideal in many ways, for students who were interested in the structure, form and accuracy of children's writing and who were technically – eg in their own literacy skills - able to evaluate them.  The best responses tended to be those which went beyond simply identifying and discussing the surface features of the data (spellings, lay-out, handwriting, etc) and really engaged with how the young writers of the texts were creating meanings and forging a writer's 'voice'.  The best responses gave full credit to D's ability to engage an audience and, diagnosing his weaknesses, suggested strategies he was adopting to overcome them.  Many preferred, and some overstated, the accuracy of C.  Some students saw her letter 'k' as a minor blip on a smooth cursive hand but few commented on what might be the teacher's strategy in using the word 'brilliant' both to praise and to inform the writer.

However, a lack of awareness either of spelling or sentence construction limited some answers and it was often approached in rather pedestrian fashion, with only a few responding to the ways in which the recounts reflected not only the linguistic skills but also the personalities and interests of the young writers.  Some students did not really understand spelling strategies, often categorising any error as a phonetic error.

There was still evidence amongst less successful students of inappropriate application of spoken language acquisition theory to written texts, and also disproportionate time spent

describing surface features.  In contrast there was some effective use of Kroll, usually used as a mere label - 'clearly in the differentiation stage.' - but here there was some investigation of the ways in which the writers were moving away from spoken language.  It was nice to read those responses that did engage with genre features and genre theory alongside spelling, lexis and grammar.

Context is often quite speculative when applied to literacy with very broad comments about tiredness and time constraints.  It was disappointing that many did not make the easier contextual points about audience, purpose and about the nature of the activity itself that produced the writing.

**Question 3**

As with Q2, the best responses went beyond the surface features which were relatively easy to identify and discuss, and also engaged with the underlying pragmatic and contextual issues.  Most students attempting this question were able to make some valid links to their understanding of trends in language change in the 18th century and beyond, and there were far fewer attempts simply to reproduce a chronological history of English than on previous years.

For AO1 there was plenty to select.  Less structured responses identified individual features that could evidence formality or change processes and tended to write either short paragraphs or went through each text individually and repetitively.  Other stronger responses looked to apply methods by looking at grammar, particularly syntax and sentence complexity or chose to take an issue such as formality/informality and illustrate this through a variety of linguistic features.

There were many solid answers with a good balance between context and text.  More successful students really considered the implications of the persuasive linguistic aspects of the letters with the devices Ashworth chose to use to elicit the sympathy of the landowners, who were of a different class.  This led to sensible links to politeness, formality and the whole genre of letter writing.  There were opportunities for some to see the non-standard feature, such as abbreviations, as simply as indication of his lack of education (or lack of a printer), while others more subtly could interpret these as indications of different language conventions, speed or cost of paper and see parallels with the implications of recent technology (texts messaging/emails) and the narrowing of letter writing to business contexts.  Sensitivity to the particular contexts of production and reception as well as broader social and gender issues resulted in marks in the highest bands.

The data yielded some well-informed and open-minded responses, with some students sensitive to the gradual process of standardisation.  There was some impressively rigorous collation of non-standard features, often combined with intelligent speculation about explanations for the writer's language usage.  The most successful responses gave due consideration to the contextual hints within the data rather than relying on broader contextual knowledge. However, some still thought that Dr Johnson et al had instantly transformed and found the non-standard features difficult to account for.  Similarly, the valedictory 'your humble servant' was a convention familiar to few and the source of quite a lot of misunderstanding.  Stronger responses credited the term 'freind' with asserting a different relationship between writer and recipient and were subtle in linking language choices and the circumstances that provoked them.  Gender issues were interesting too in a world where as one put it, 'the boy was sent to Hulton [perhaps to school?] while the girls were simply innoculated'.  When 'Power' was considered, this led to some engaged analysis, along with ideas about Ashworth's changing tone within the letter sequence and the implications for 'face' and positive and negative politeness.  Indeed some lovely answers showed students really considering the letter sequence.  This led to some interesting insights into the writer's

status and orthographical choices for example. A number of responses also tackled the similarities and differences across the sequence as a whole, which again led to some fruitful analysis of changes in politeness and tone. Less successful students sometimes used the sequence as evidence for language standardisation, seeing them as a progression and misinterpreting language choices as Ashworth's own standardisation.

Students were able to make interesting points about changes to the word 'tease', especially in its association with an illness. There was relief for some that political correctness had brought an end to servants, and disapproval that a man could have several wives, let alone mistresses, in 1779. There was much talk of Jean Aitchison's Crumbling Castle, usually unhelpfully to the data given its era and the language used within the letters, although some made more critical and evaluative observations of this to show the texts as 'descriptivist' in their time and brought comparisons to modern technological language use .

**Question 4**

This was the more popular question in Section B and was probably the one most enjoyed by students. The texts proved highly accessible to all students, and also discriminated effectively between students who compared the adverts superficially in terms of their differing uses of graphology and basic lexical choices, and those who were able to see the texts conceptually as illustrative of larger processes of language change.

Some superb answers showed sophisticated awareness and linguistic knowledge. A range of linguistic methods were applied effectively to the data, particularly comparing the sentence complexities and sentence functions used in both texts H and I and the underlying pragmatics of these, such as the minor sentences connoting the pace and speed of a mother's morning routine. Representation by graphology was a popular approach to H but its lexis and discourse, too, the subject of much productive scrutiny: 'fit for service' having WW1 connotations, loan words showing the cachet that France still had/has for the English were among penetrating observations. Text I engaged most students. All recognised the advertiser's strategy, some articulating it as selling 'time' rather than 'prestige'. The description of capitals as being 'for pseudo prosodic effect' typified the more impressive responses as these could be identified in both adverts but interpreted as the mother's voice in Text I and the advertiser's emphasis in Text H. Many students noted sexual stereotyping as something shared by the advertisements, sometimes seeing the modern male representation of the husband as an extra child/burden in Text I as very contrasting to the 1930s representation as an all powerful head of the household. Many answers demonstrated synopticity in a number of AO2 areas – technology, because of the affordances of modern mediums unavailable to Vauxhall in the 1930s and gender, not only because of the representation/stereotypes but also as evidence/challenges for some of female/male language choices.

Unfortunately many students lost potential marks for AO2 because they treated the question as purely an exercise in stylistic analysis or because they did not include examples of lexical and semantic change or refer to the processes of change. A substantial minority of responses, however, tended to lack enough focus on language change issues. This had implications for their overall mark and potentially their overall grade. There were fascinating analyses of advertising strategies and contexts of production, but students do need reminding that this is a language change question. Some were able to see how Text H was from a more 'prescriptive' time in its use of more correct sentence formation in contrast to the 'descriptive' advertising style of Text I. Informalisation, conversationalisation, colloquialisation were used to good effect but ranged from more implicit in references to the spoken style of Text I, the lexical choice of 'cuppa' and the informal/formal lexical choices in a range of examples from both texts.

Contextual comments covered, for example, the economic conditions of the time periods, the car industry, representation of gender and advertising change in a fresh, perceptive way. Some responses tended to over-state or simplify gender and class issues in AO3 but they could be credited for 'some awareness'.  Responses that scored less highly often included lengthy digressions addressing either concepts/theories or contexts which moved away from the data towards much broader socio-historical-cultural -linguistic theory.

It was a pleasure to read some fresh and engaged responses even from less successful students. The best responses were highly sophisticated in applying critical discourse analysis methods to the texts, as well as exploring instances of semantic change with knowledge and insight.


**Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**
Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results statistics page of the AQA Website.