



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

English Language B

ENGB4

(Specification 2705)

Unit 4: Investigating Language

Report on the Examination

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General

Once again moderators reported that the majority of schools and colleges had worked diligently to prepare their students for both elements of this unit, as well as applying the assessment criteria very accurately. This series, moderators saw some exceptional. In particular, schools and colleges should be congratulated on the range of topics covered for the language investigations and on the imaginative links between the investigation and the media text.

However, this series also revealed that a minority of schools and colleges are still allowing students to submit work which did not conform to the specification requirements. The most common rubric infringement identified was a lack of language content in the Media Text. Moderators were very concerned to see this misinterpretation of the specification, given the amount of advice offered in all previous reports and teacher standardising materials. Schools and colleges should make use of the coursework adviser system if they have any concerns about aspects of ENGB4.

Approaches to the Investigating Language Unit

Moderators remarked that this series it was very clear how hard many schools and colleges had worked to allow students to pursue language topics which were of interest to them in terms of:

- hobbies (eg The Language of Gaming, Sport)
- work (The Language of Chefs, Taxi Drivers)
- links with other academic interests (eg Language Change, Political Language)
- insights into areas of future academic interest (eg Child Language Acquisition, the Language of Law, Psycholinguistics)
- personal enjoyment (eg The Language of Humour in QI, The Language of Vampire Fiction).

While this is not the only way to approach this unit - across the mark range it was apparent that those students who were fully engaged with the topic focus often produced the most interesting and successful pieces of writing.

In addition, moderators were very pleased to report that fewer schools/colleges were taking a 'template' approach to the Language Investigation. (This approach is usually characterised by all students using the same language methods to analyse their data regardless of the type of data collected or the topic focus.) In the past this approach has often been accompanied by a sense of hierarchy in the language methods chosen to analyse the data, based on the misunderstanding that some language methods, usually grammar, are worth more marks than other methods. Once again it is worth reiterating that this approach is very unhelpful and is very likely to inhibit student performance; in addition, it does not encourage independent approaches, something which is central to the spirit of the ENGB4 unit.

As highlighted in all previous reports, students should select and write about the methods which support their chosen focus, rather than choosing language methods before they fully understand their data or findings. Practically this means that after students have decided on their topic focus they need to choose an appropriate methodology to collect their data. Then gathering the data, organising and analysing it - before deciding which methods will be the most profitable in the writing up of their findings. Leaving out less interesting or illuminating sections will usually improve the quality of the investigation.

Moderators were very clear that where this approach is taken, students maximise their marks across the whole ability range. It is also worth highlighting that this approach encourages both independence and enquiry-led learning, both of these outcomes underpin this unit and are in keeping with the spirit of the specification.

Many previous reports have focused on the individual components of the investigation and the media writing. However, for the remainder of this report, the focus will be on identifying the main characteristics of students' performance in the higher and lower mark ranges, as well as advice for future submissions.

The Language Investigation

Successful investigations tended to:

- **Reflect the interests of the student**
As highlighted in the previous section, once again this was a central element of successful investigations this series. Work in the higher bands was always carefully focused by linking the interest of the student to salient language concepts and ideas. This means that the supervising teacher(s) will need to carefully facilitate the language focus, making sure that the approach meets the needs of a language investigation. If teachers have any concerns about the credibility of an investigation, they are advised to contact the Coursework Adviser before the student begins work on the investigation.
- **Use an appropriate methodology**
Selecting an appropriate method for data collection is at the heart of all successful investigations. Moderators were encouraged to see that schools and colleges have continued to work hard to help students shape methodologies to suit the word count, allowing them to work with manageable data sets. Interestingly, students who worked hard to meet the word count for the investigation demonstrated an increased analytical rigour when compared with those students who wrote lengthy unfocused pieces of writing. Given the word count, schools and colleges must make sure that the methodology is very precisely focused resulting in a sensible data set for analysis. Where students are comparing data sets (eg male vs female language use) the contextual pressures surrounding the data must allow for valid comparison. For example, considering male vs female language use, issues such as age, group sizes, activity etc must be balanced in order for any sensible conclusions to be drawn.
- **Select appropriate methods for data analysis**
This is a fundamental element of a successful analysis section. Moderators remarked that students tended to produce much higher quality investigations when they were able to extract the most significant linguistic details from their chosen data set and chose them as a starting point for analysis. This was often reflected in the use of relevant subheadings to scaffold the analysis section. In addition, the best quality investigations tended to use subheadings which were more precise than a simple method, eg reader – writer relationships, semantic field of ... etc, rather than simply listing the broad language methods, eg lexis, grammar etc. Schools and colleges are reminded that given the word count students cannot be expected to cover all aspects of their data set, so some careful decisions about which methods/subheadings/questions reveal the most interesting aspects of the data set enable students to access the very highest mark bands.
- **Consider contextual details in the light of language features**
A key distinction of successful investigations was an understanding of the link between the use of language and context. Students who were able to extract language detail to support a contextual point or vice versa tended to produce investigations which were evaluative, rather than simple identifications of language detail. This Assessment Objective remains problematic for some schools and colleges, and it is worth noting that the very best investigations considered context throughout the investigation rather than limiting the focus to one section or to concluding comments.
- **Use language concepts to illuminate the data analysis**

Part of the AO2 credit for the investigation is awarded for the use of appropriate methodologies, and part for the use of concepts to support the data analysis. Successful investigations demonstrated a strong awareness that published theories could be challenged when appropriate, as well as being used to support data analysis. Crucially, these students were able to understand and use the concepts learned from published theories, therefore avoiding too much 'content' and description of AO2. Students seem to benefit from using language theories/concepts to provide the shape for the investigation, either by providing the basis of subheadings in the body of the investigation or through the use of a question, eg *How far does tennis TV commentary conform to Beard's theories about the language of sport?*

Less successful investigations tended to:

- Have an inappropriate methodology for data selection
Often this was in terms of the quantity of data that a student was attempting to analyse, through imprecise or overly ambitious methodologies, eg attempting to analyse whole novels, or too many children reading, or historical data sampled from too many dates. This led to students becoming overwhelmed by the quantity of data to analyse. As previously indicated sometimes the use of a comparative methodology was problematic. Moderators felt that some students chose to compare data where the range of contextual variables was too challenging, eg attempting to compare men and women's text messages when the data set for the males was taken from a sample of men over the age of 35, and the women's was 16-25, and 'age' variable was then entirely overlooked.
- Use inappropriate language methods to analyse the data
Students who used a simple list of language methods, eg grammar, pragmatics, graphology etc, often tended to overlook the most significant features of the data. Occasionally this approach also led to students discussing what was not contained in the data, or writing simplistic or inaccurate comments such as, 'there is not much grammar in my data'. Moderators also remarked that some students chose language methods which did not provide any evidence for the language question at the start of the investigation, eg counting the number of words in a magazine article when the primary focus was the representation of women in magazines.

NB: in this specification there is no requirement to use a prescribed number of language methods, nor is there a hierarchy of methods in terms of difficulty. For further guidance please refer to the ENGB4 section of the specification.

- Lack evaluative comment
In less convincing investigations many students were overly reliant on tables, charts and lists as an approach to data analysis. Frequently the lack of discussion about what their tables revealed about the data, or their investigation title, meant that students were not able to demonstrate 'the beginnings of an evaluative approach' which kept them in the lower bands for the AO1 mark.

Media Text

Successful media texts tended to:

- Have a clear language focus
To fulfil the requirements of the specification the media text needs to be focused on the 'broad subject focus' of the investigation and highlight the surrounding 'language ideas and issues'. The most successful texts tended to have a well-judged balance between the amount of language information contained in the text and the needs of the intended audience and genre.
- Demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of genre and audience
Students are allowed to select their own genre and audience for the media text offering them greater scope and personal engagement with the writing task. Texts which fulfilled the criteria for the higher bands were able to establish a credible relationship with their intended audience, and were also able to craft their writing to meet the needs of their chosen genre (in the higher bands this always went beyond a simplified awareness of the visual aspects of the genre).
- Demonstrate 'effective and sustained' adaptation of the language details
Students who were able to sustain their adaptation of language concepts and ideas usually produced the most effective texts. In these texts there was a clear understanding of how writers shape and structure an argument, guiding their audience at every stage; complex ideas were carefully explained or exemplified, and language detail was woven throughout the text rather than placed in 'chunks' or sections. Schools and colleges are reminded that ENGB4 is a synoptic unit, so students need to provide evidence that they are building on their writing skills demonstrated in the ENGB2 unit, as well as showing that they can cope with the additional challenge of writing about language concepts and ideas.

Less successful media texts tended to:

- Overlook the needs of their intended audience
Moderators felt that this was a key discriminator in terms of the quality of these texts. Often students underestimated the intelligence of their intended audience, which led to a patronising tone, or they overestimated the determination an audience would need to engage with the quantity of information offered. Practically this difficulty can be overcome by making certain that students choose an appropriate audience for their language topic.
- Demonstrate an oversimplified awareness of genre
In these texts genre awareness was often reduced to some layout, images and colour. Clearly these elements are significant in some genres, however, to meet the language needs of a genre, students needed to engage with the more sophisticated aspects of the discourse conventions of their chosen genre. Again students need to draw on the knowledge gained from their AS studies.
- Overlook the need to 'inform' about language
The media text needs to inform a new, non-specialist audience about the 'broad' language issues surrounding their investigation topic. Unfortunately some students failed to do this. As stated throughout the teacher standardising process, students who fail to offer language detail in their media texts cannot be placed above the 13-15 band. It cannot be argued that 'source materials have been shaped' (band 16-18) if the text does not contain any language detail.

Administration advice for future submissions

- The Language Investigations should always be organised as highlighted in the specification. Schools and colleges are reminded that there is no need to include drafts in either the media piece or the investigation. Neither should style models be included for the media piece.
- Please use a cover sheet (either produced in school/college or the AQA coversheet) to identify the genre and audience for the media text and the link to the investigation – this is crucial for an effective moderation

Advice for centre assessment

- The assessment criteria for the investigation awards individual marks for the three assessment objectives – moderators need to see a comment relating to each assessment objective to see how the individual marks were awarded. A generic comment about the overall quality is rarely helpful on its own, as are simple identifications of AO1, AO2 etc in the margin.
- This series some moderators found that schools and colleges had begun to use photocopied assessment criteria with highlighted sections to indicate the quality of a students work. This is not an effective method of assessment when used in isolation. Schools and colleges should provide some type of summative conceptualised comment linked to the assessment criteria to allow moderators to understand the reasoning behind the marks awarded.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.