

GCE English Language

Case Study

Queen Elizabeth College, Darlington

Unit 4 Coursework

Investigation and Presentation

Edexcel is grateful to the staff and students for their collaboration in supplying guidance and examples of student work



Laurence Job, Paul Heselton, Kath Lee, Mary Smith

Unit 4

Introduction

The English Language Investigation and presentation unit faces students with new challenges in their educational experience. In most cases, this is the first time they have been asked to work independently on a research project. Students who carry out this process successfully develop a range of important transferable skills including the ability to devise and carry out research, to use research tools and resources, and develop a much greater understanding of the nature and complexity of language.

How can centres support their students in completing this unit successfully, given the conflicting demands of linguistic expertise and independent work? Problems and concerns centres have identified include:

- timetable pressure
- problems identifying research topics
- expertise of teaching staff
- value of the unit in terms of progression

This case study looks at the way one centre that has been very successful in Unit 4 approaches this unit.

Queen Elizabeth College, Darlington

Overview

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College is a highly successful college, specialising in post-16 education for students in Darlington. The College has over 1700 full time 16-19 year old students, the majority of them studying at the College for 2 years on advanced level courses. The academic results of students are among the best in the country. The majority of 'A' level students progress to university with 98% achieving their first choice place. The college was awarded Beacon College Status following an OFSTED inspection in November 2007 where it was awarded the top grade 1 across the whole of its provision.

The college takes about 1,000 16-19 full time students a year from a wide area that includes south west Co. Durham, North Yorkshire but most are from partner schools in Darlington. All the partner schools are state comprehensives and the college takes a small number of students from three small Independent schools. The students come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, some from some of the most deprived wards in the country, and many of the 750 – 800 students that progress each year to Higher Education will be the first in their family to do so. There are a small number of Adult Education courses including an Access to HE course and a programme of evening classes. All 16-19 full time students will complete a programme of 3 or 4 AS levels and an Enrichment subject (Critical Thinking/ General Studies/ Skills for Independence) in their first year and most complete 3 A2 courses in their second.

English Language GCE at Queen Elizabeth

Four members of staff make up the English Language team. From l to r: Laurence Job, Paul Heselton, Kath Lee, Mary Smith.

Student numbers on the English language course in a typical year are 122 A2 students (39 male) with an average GCSE score of 6.0 and 183 AS students (52 male). These numbers have been relatively consistent over the last three years.

Teaching Unit 4

Timetabling

Unit 4 is taught in the autumn term. This seems to be the practice in the majority of schools involved in this specification, with a small number allowing the unit to run into the spring term.

Queen Elizabeth allows approximately 12 teaching weeks for the completion of the unit, running from week 1 of the autumn term to week 15 when completed first drafts of the coursework are submitted. Unit 4 is introduced in the first week of term and early Unit 4 sessions teach research skills, data identification, selection and collection. Students are then given time to consider their topic choices. By week 5, students are expected to put forward a research proposal, and a preliminary outline for their investigation. They also begin work on Task 1, which is submitted by week 8. During this time, students are working on refining their research proposal and are using Task 1 to help them in this process, so data identification and collection is ongoing during this time.

The deadline for having data collected is half term, by which time they will have spent three weeks researching and writing the text of Task 1.

The centre works informally on outline sheets for types of data. Kath Lee says, 'I can envisage them listing key theories and approaches and language features and contextual questions that they could try on to their question to see if it would help address it, so they shouldn't be sitting there clueless while you're dealing with others.'

The students have 4.5 hours of class contact during this period, and the centre does include Language Development sessions in this term when the students are working more independently on their investigations.

There is no formal teaching timetabled for the unit post-Christmas, and the students submit their completed folders in week 19.

Research topics and teacher expertise

Students are allowed to choose their own topic areas. Kath Lee says, 'We work hard to give students entirely free choice in terms of selection of area of study and emphasise the importance of their investment in it, but we do try to guide them in the way they refine their research questions.'

Student ownership of and involvement in the research is seen as essential. The importance of choosing a topic that will engage their interest and motivate them for the duration of the unit is strongly emphasised. The team recognise the challenging nature

of the task. Guidance is given. For example, students who are heading towards a career in primary teaching are guided towards school-based studies.

Three members of the team are involved in supervising Unit 4. Kath Lee believes this helps them to offer free topic choice. 'Together we have considerable expertise and I think this is what allows us to say students can do anything.' Group work and peer support is central to these early stages of the process, both for staff and students. Kath Lee again: 'We meet quite a lot in the early stages and run ideas past each other. We also swap and read and help each other quite a lot if there are problematic ones.'

Topics in previous years have included the language of emergency phone calls, with a focus on how the level of threat affects the language of the speaker, the language of siblings, with a focus on the way this close relationship links and affects language forms, the language of Prime Minister's question time, with a focus on the way this is used to score party political points. At most levels of the achievement range, the students seem well able to focus their research into a clear question, so the analysis has a direction and doesn't become an amorphous analysis of all possible aspects of the language that leads to no clear conclusions.

Some of the topics currently underway include:

- An analysis of the representation of Britain and India in Lord Curzon's 1923 speech to the Imperial Legislative Council at Simla, justifying the cost of the Delhi Coronation Durbar.
- A comparison of the newspaper representation of two female murderers. (Amanda Knox and Rose West)
- An analysis of Richard Littlejohn's opinion column on the subject of Wayne and Colleen Rooney's marital problems.
- Why and how bad French is funny in 'Allo 'Allo.
- An analysis of the strategies used in the summing up of the Prosecution and Defence lawyers in the O.J. Simpson case.
- A comparison of four transformation scenes from 'Gothic' novels. (Jekyll & Hyde, Dorian Gray, Wagner the Werewolf and The Great God Pan)
- A comparison of the sex scenes in two famous banned novels. (Fanny Hill and Lady Chatterley.)

These are topic choices, not exact wording of titles. Students will focus these into clearer research questions as their investigation work develops.

More mainstream topics include analysis of various aspects of the language of football, and Child Directed Speech is becoming very popular.

Progression

Experience at Queen Elizabeth, and in other centres shows that AL English Language allows progression to a range of HE areas. At Queen Elizabeth, progression in the past two years has been:

It is commonly thought that English attracts very few males to the subject. This is not our experience as can be seen from the data supplied below:

2009:

123 completers (including 30 male students), of whom 39 continued to English related degrees:

- 9 to single honours English (English Studies, English Language and Linguistics)
- 4 to joint honours courses (1 male)
- 11 to Journalism (single, joint and specialist – 2 males)
- 3 to Creative Writing/Media Writing (1 male)
- 2 to Primary Teaching
- 10 to other mostly Media/ Communication joint honours courses

2010:

133 completers (including 30 male students), of whom 40 continued to English related degrees:

- 8 to single honours English (English Studies, English Language and Linguistics)
- 8 to joint honours courses (German, History, Politics, Music - 1 male)
- 8 to Journalism (single, joint and specialist – 2 males)
- 11 to Primary Teaching
- 5 to other mostly Media/ Communication joint honours courses