General Certificate of Education

English Literature
Specification B

LITB4   Further and Independent Reading

Report on the Examination
2010 examination – June series

Introduction

Summer 2010 completes the first two years of specification LITB, and so for the first time there are full reports on all four units, with each unit being taken by a large number of candidates.

It is important that as many teachers as possible read these reports, ideally as a complete set of four: even though an individual teacher may not have taught a specific unit, it is well worth knowing and understanding that for candidates the four units are connected in many ways.

This specification, when it was designed, had a number of overarching principles, based on a coherent set of views as to how English Literature can be taught and assessed. Like all specifications it draws on different ways of reading and how that reading can be assessed. As you read through these reports as a whole, a number of messages will be repeated; one, for example, is that we do not reward bolted on historical context; another is that we aim in nearly all tasks to encourage candidates to debate meanings.

As there are principles that run throughout the specification, then inevitably there are links across the units. For example: a close study of narrative in LITB 1 will help students with texts in all other units; looking at tragedy as a genre in LITB2 has a direct link with genres in LITB3, but can be relevant in the other two units also. The theories looked at in the critical material of LITB4 can be applied to LITB3. The ways texts are connected in LITB1 is similar to the process of LITB3. The issues around categorising texts in LITB3 can help with direct comparison in LITB4.

So, we hope that you find these reports illuminating, and urge you to read them as a whole so that the common messages, which are ultimately the most important ones, are made clear.

General

The unit's title, Further and Independent Reading is a clear statement of where it fits in the concept of the specification as a whole. The unit is designed to encourage candidates to read more widely than the 'set' texts and to respond in personal and individual ways: in doing this they will address the issues of 'stretch and challenge' which are now required at A Level.

Training and standardising meetings over the last three years have stressed that there is no single model for the way this independent reading should be delivered, because we acknowledge that A level English Literature covers a broad spectrum of candidates with wide ranging differences in interest and ability. This diversity is seen among centres, and of course often within centres too. What we have consistently asserted though, is that there is no room for whole cohorts to be doing the same text, the same task and the same modelled answer to that task. Fortunately we saw little of this practice, but where we did, it inevitably depressed the moderator's ability to reward positively.

Essentially we saw three broad models for approaching this unit. The first gave complete freedom of text choice to the candidates, with teaching time directed to reading, negotiating tasks, thinking about issues in the anthology, and improving writing skills. The second gave some freedom of text choice, but limited the range, so giving some fixed teaching points, as well as some opportunity for more independent work. The third model gave candidates little choice in the selection of texts, but devised a range of tasks which made sure that candidates, who in such cases tended to be towards the lower end of the ability range, still responded with some degree of independence.

Clearly, while the notion of independent reading is a positive one, it is not a trick to be pulled out of the hat, exercised briefly, and then put away again. The skills required for adopting a personal yet academic voice to make responses to sharply focused questions and issues, supported by relevant reference and quotation are complex and need to be worked on and developed. If acquired they will be as fruitful in LITB3 as they are in LITB4.

Drafting

All our training and standardising so far has urged the requirement (and value) of a single draft of coursework. Centres will have been used to this already via LITB2, but it was pleasing to see that centres were not making references to endless drafts, and that candidates were writing, in most cases, without straitjackets.

It was also pleasing to see teachers making every effort to ensure that candidates were working within the given word counts. These are designed to give not only parity for all, but to give focus to candidates' writing. Where word counts were exceeded, this nearly always disadvantaged the candidate, and in a few cases took the centre's marks out of tolerance and so affected others.

At the opposite end of the spectrum moderators were aware that some candidates had put pressure on their teachers by failing to meet the centre's final deadlines, meaning that folders could not be carefully scrutinized and assessed. Such candidates can place teachers in a difficult position and potentially compromise the centre's submission. This can be a difficult issue around coursework, but centres should try to ensure that there are clear in- house rules governing the deadlines for submission of work to enable teachers to verify its authenticity and include it within their internal moderation process. If candidates are made aware of procedures, preferably in writing, the responsibility lies with them to meet the department's internal dates for submission of work.

Text Choices and Tasks Set

The unit involves choosing two texts for comparative work, and a further text for the anthology response.

There were many interesting pairings of texts, and more importantly many interesting reasons for comparing texts. Where the two texts were about the same 'thing' (madness, war, love…) there was always the danger that this theme would become the main or even only focus for the writing. The standard task 'Compare the ways authors x and y write about topic z' did not always work well. (see below). Where a more literary connection (eg unreliable narrators) or a more cultural connection (eg books that have been perceived as dangerous) was made, the responses tended to work much better.

For the anthology response, it is not just a case of any text will do. In fact texts which were clearly in the domains of Feminism or Marxism often produced quite routine responses, whereas texts not necessarily thought of as belonging to such categories often produced more interesting work.

Overall it was at times disappointing to see so many texts from the other units appearing in this unit. The legal allowance is that one text previously studied can be revisited here, so any infringement of this ruling would lead to disqualification. Choosing texts from our other lists is in one sense quite flattering, suggesting that we have produced some interesting choices, but there is a lot of literature out there not covered by this specification, and this unit offers the chance to explore it.

One worrying aspect of the comparative piece was that in some centres candidates wrote about single short poems as one of their texts, or in a few cases as both. This is not permissible. Even if candidates write about full texts for the anthology, they must still compare two full texts comparatively. Inevitably where candidates did write about single poems they often had far too little to say and so gave very unequal responses.

Choosing texts and framing tasks go hand in hand, which is why they have been put together here. Advisers, who have been very busy with this unit this year, report that they quite frequently get requests which say something like 'I've taught text x so now need some tasks'. The ideal of studying a text without knowing what tasks will emerge from the work is a strange one.

It has been stressed at standardising and elsewhere that this specification as a whole favours tasks which require some sort of critical debate. In this way the second part of AO3 *informed by interpretations of other readers* leads the candidate to meaningful work in AOs 2 and 4, realising that they are not dealing with fixed meanings and interpretations. Devising tasks with such debate works well in both parts of this unit.

It was said above that the task 'Compare the ways authors x and y write about topic z' did not always work very well. The reasons for this are clear. Candidates often struggle to make presentation (AO2) a main focus, so instead they revert to writing about themes (which does not appear in any of the AOs). If we take topic z to be *love*, for example then we have typically seen the task:

'Compare the ways Shakespeare (in Much Ado) and Ishiguro (in Remains of the Day) present love'

What we have been urging centres to do, instead, is to create a debate, so a much better task might be:

To what extent would you agree that both authors show men as those who have to learn to love, and that women have to teach them.

Or

Is it fair to say that the worlds of both texts are ultimately shaped not by love but by war?

Having all AOs assessed at the same time, in equal proportion, does allow some flexibility in task setting and writing, and provided candidates know that they must write about form/structure/language, and that they need to contextualise their ideas, using debate as a starting point does seem to produce more interesting and ultimately more successful responses.

The Comparative Piece

This report has already highlighted some issues regarding the comparative piece which was, for some moderators, the less successful of the two responses. Too often, it seemed, candidates were engaged in the task of comparing texts because they had to, rather than because in comparing texts, interesting ideas can emerge as connections are made.

Ironically the most mechanistic and least interesting responses were often those which mechanically worked through a list of likenesses, trying to discuss both texts at the same time. The more successful responses tended to look at each text for a fair amount of time, building up

an interpretation, before then moving onto the second text and finding some similarity but also some difference.

As all the assessment objectives are tested here AO1 cannot be ignored. Band 4, for example, requires clear argument and use of critical vocabulary expressed accurately. Higher Band responses, therefore, need to be well structured, cohesive and in Band 6 technically fluent.

The Anthology Piece

This is of course a new element at A level and it really does seem to have worked well. In the best cases, candidates drew on the critical anthology for their core ideas, read and thought a little more widely about some key concepts and then made the text under discussion carry the bulk of the analysis.

On the political readings section (Feminism and Marxism), the most common section that was used, many centres had listened to the advice that setting the task 'Do a feminist analysis of text x' could lead to some fairly sterile box ticking and instead set a task which asked a question such as 'To what extent does a feminist critical approach help in your understanding of text x?'. Problems arose where tasks were too general or candidates focused on explaining and discussing critical theory without applying it to a text. In some cases it was difficult to see how marks could be justified when there was very little textual analysis.

The metaphor section worked well at times, but only when candidates were being asked to debate the potential significances of the metaphors and symbols which they were identifying. Merely identifying metaphors did little when judged against the marking criteria.

Although least used, the critical value section often led to some of the best work, including some passionate advocates for the current vampire vogue to be reflected in set book lists. Here, for once, candidates felt enabled to write with a personal voice – what a shame they don't feel so enabled elsewhere in the specification!

Assessment

The moderation process is designed to ensure parity across centres and a fair deal for all candidates. The best folders for moderation purposes were those with clear and <u>critical</u> marginal annotation, clear and <u>critical</u> summative evaluation and some sense of the dialogues that took place within internal standardising. In centres where this is all shown, then moderation is usually very straightforward.

To be critical of a piece of work is not to damn it, yet there are plenty of centres where there seems to be no culture whatsoever of criticising work. Not surprisingly these centres tended to be over-generous with their marking compared to those who were prepared to disclose both positive and negative points. Centres are reminded that the annotation on a script is aimed at the moderator, not the student.

It was pleasing to see that few teachers, at this stage anyway, seemed worried by using mark criteria rather than grade criteria. An open and thorough explanation of how final grades are arrived, for all subjects at all levels, would surely be helpful in the long run, though.

Bibliographies

While we are not, at A Level, asking for the referencing conventions of higher education, we do require bibliographies which let us know which texts have been read, which editions of those

texts have been used, and what supportive critical material (including that given out in class) has been accessed.

Administration

Moderators understand that much of the admin these days is undertaken by exams officers, but there are certain aspects of administration which do help us greatly. In no particular order these are:

- Marks on the cover sheet should be correctly added up and match the marks on the mark sheet
- Where there are 20 or fewer candidates, all folders should be sent by the deadline, with the mark sheets
- First class post should be used for all communication – anything that needs signing for can be a real problem because it inevitably ends up in a depot somewhere
- Folders should be secured with a staple or tag: loose pages are a nightmare and plastic folders horribly inconvenient to handle

Conclusion

It was most encouraging to receive messages from centres during the year, in which they said how much they and their students had enjoyed working on this unit for the first time. Equally, many moderators have reported that they have seen much interesting and challenging work, suggesting that the teaching has often been refreshing and thoughtful. This report inevitably has focused on areas for development/improvement, but overall the unit had had a most encouraging start which can now be built on further.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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