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A-Level

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE

7702/C

Report on the non-exam assessment (NEA)

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7702

Summer 2018

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Version: 01

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## General

The second series of the non-exam assessment (NEA) showed again how varied and rich the study of English Language at A-level can be, with moderators commenting on the high quality of the work that they saw for both elements of the NEA. It is clear that teachers increasingly understand the demands of the specification very well and that students are rising to the challenge of the tasks, valuing the chance to pursue their own investigative and creative interests.

There was plenty of evidence that most centres had made use of the (1) Teacher Online Standardisation (TOLS) materials that went online in November 2017, (2) their NEA advisers and (3) the NEA feedback meetings that had run from Autumn 2017. Feedback sessions will again take place online (and face to face) in the Autumn of 2018 and a further set of TOLS materials, based on work submitted this summer, will be made available in late 2018. It was encouraging to see centres referring to the standardising materials in their own marking and internal moderation and it is strongly advised that all centres make use of the materials to provide benchmarks for the marking of the work for submission in 2018-19.

The report that follows will look at the trends in the work seen by moderators, commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of it and advising on ways to improve students' performance in both elements. The 2017 NEA report and NEA feedback meetings give more detail about the individual AOs and how they are assessed (and these can be found on the AQA website).

## Language investigation

It is clear that the principles of the language investigation are well understood by nearly all centres. Most centres have allowed students to choose areas of their own interest, rather than impose a whole-centre approach, and this allows for a genuine range.

In terms of the different sections of the investigation, moderators reported on some of the following patterns.

## Introductions and methodologies

Many of these were concise and very clear, explaining exactly what was to be focused on, how and why data was to be collected, the different variables that were to be accounted for, ethical and methodological considerations and the linguistic approaches to be applied. There was however a significant minority of investigations in which these sections were overly long or largely descriptive.

Key observations:

- Those investigations that led with ILS (Ideas from Language Study) - theory, research, case studies, ideas about language - as a starting point, often developed more fruitfully than those that simply set about analysing some texts.
- There is no fixed requirement to include an aims or hypothesis section, but using one of these can be a helpful way of framing a research focus.
- Some excellent methodologies were seen in which students reflected on how they would collect their data and select from it, justifying the approaches they would be using/had used. Weaker work often described data collection as a purely mechanical process, without

engaging with how data would be selected, what rationale was behind its collection or how it would be analysed.

- In the methodology some students were listing what ILS they were planning to use in their investigations without much sense of how these ideas would be made relevant to the data they were collecting. Some explanation of how ideas will be used is generally required to give the investigation a sense of direction. It then makes sense to refer to these ideas again in the analysis section.
- When discussing which ILS to be used, it is often better to use actual quotations from research, theory or studies than to paraphrase broad ideas. The latter often leads to generalised and half-digested understanding of the ideas and can lead to poor investigations. Quotations do not count towards the overall word count, either.
- Students who created their own mini-corpora were often able to show an excellent understanding of data collection and a clear rationale for the material they had selected.
- Reliance on questionnaires can be very limiting and centres are advised to avoid this unless students can provide sufficient evidence that the questionnaires are providing genuine linguistic data (rather than recycling of social stereotypes, generalised views about language etc.) or the questionnaire is being used alongside another form of data.
- Many students are still trying to apply ideas about gender and interaction to written or scripted texts (eg using Tannen's difference model to analyse written advertisements, using Lakoff's women's language hypothesis to analyse scripted TV shows, or Zimmerman and West to look at dialogue in fiction). This is generally not a useful approach and can often lead to flawed investigations. If language is being used to represent and construct gender, then it is much more sensible to base the investigation in ideas around representation than interaction.
- Linked to the point above, there is a wealth of material on gender and interaction available from a range of sources that can be much more productive to use than Lakoff, Tannen, Zimmerman and West et al. Students who used more up to date research or who focused on very specific features and contexts were often better equipped to tackle the investigation than those who relied on a broad-brush understanding of ILS. Some suggested sources would be:
  - Jennifer Coates, *Women, Man and Language* 3rd edition (Routledge, 2015)
  - Abby Kaplan, *Women Talk More Than Men: . . . And Other Myths About Language Explained* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)
  - Felicity Titjen, *Language and Gender - Cambridge Topics in English Language* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)
  - Mary Talbot, *Language and Gender* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Polity Press, 2010)
  - Jane Sunderland, *Language and Gender: An Advanced Resource Book* (Routledge, 2006)
- It was good to see more students starting to investigate online language and the ways in which people interact and present versions of themselves on social media platforms. Some suggestions for more recent work in this area are offered below and teachers might find it useful to consider these to help inform students' understanding of the field:
  - Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media* (Bloomsbury, 2012)
  - Caroline Tagg, *Exploring Digital Communication: Language in Action* (Routledge, 2015)
  - Caroline Tagg and Philip Seargeant, *Taking Offence on Social Media: Conviviality and Communication on Facebook* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

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- Naomi Baron, *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

## Analysis

Moderators reported that much of the work they saw was well-organised and analytical, making good use of a range of language levels to explore and interpret the data. In a few cases, markers had over-rewarded quite general observations about language and it is worth remembering that both precision and depth are required to access the highest levels of the mark scheme.

Key observations:

- Students need to be linguistic in their focus. Analysis that adopts a very general register of ‘words’, ‘long sentences’ or that simply describes content is unlikely to leave the low levels of AO1.
- AO1 is not just about labelling individual, isolated features of language, but about seeing bigger patterns and to identify how language works across different levels.
- This should be the main section of the investigation and it helps to subdivide the analysis using subheadings linked to the aims of the investigation.
- Linguistic focus can take a number of forms, and students should be encouraged to think carefully about the most useful approaches. Selecting the most helpful language frameworks/methods/levels for the data they are analysing and the questions they are asking is an important part of a successful investigation.
- Wherever possible, students should try to link their analysis of language to the meanings and representations created and the contexts of the language. Those students who linked AO1 and AO3 were more likely to achieve higher marks than those who treated language features and contexts as separate elements.
- Contextualised quotations from the data are more helpful than single words or phrases because they often allow for closer discussion of both meaning and context (AO3).
- Quantitative data needs to provide clear evidence that the categories/descriptions have been understood by the student (i.e. that the graphs accurately reflect the nature of the data). Quite a few students presented tables where they claimed that **x** used more adjectives/1<sup>st</sup> person pronouns/complex sentences than **y** but the data showed the opposite (or that they weren’t clear what an adjective/1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun/complex sentence was).

## Conclusions

There is no formal requirement for an evaluation section, but this can be useful when considering the success of the investigation and ways in which the work might have been developed. The mark scheme refers to ‘evaluation’ in AO2 and AO3 so it is important to make sure that evaluation takes place in other parts of the investigation if an evaluation section is not used.

## Original Writing and Commentary

Moderators reported back on some excellent and varied work in a range of forms.

Key observations:

- There was a much clearer understanding of need for a (single) style model for the original writing and commentary tasks this year. Where students did not use a style model or refer to one at all, the highest mark that could be awarded in the commentary was 7/25.
- It is a good idea to allow students to choose their own style model (with some guidance). There is nothing wrong with looking at a range of style models to begin with – in fact, this can help with understanding the genre more fully – but ultimately the student must choose **one** style model to refer to in the commentary.
- Good style models can really help students write well for the task itself, and good commentaries can help support the original writing (and the marking of it).
- Style models where the topic was the same as the student’s own writing were often limiting because they didn’t generally allow much creativity with the material. Similarly, style models that were from a totally different genre often didn’t allow scope for much useful comparison.
- Discussion of genre, structure and form in the commentary can really help students hit the higher bands and can be useful for students in showing that they understand the form they’re writing in. This was probably the biggest weakness in many commentaries and centres would be strongly advised to consider genre more clearly with students.
- Travel writing and dramatic monologues were very popular forms. Travel writing often relied too much on facts about a place and it was sometimes hard for students to develop a clear personal voice. It’s a useful form but students need to show some creativity and originality to hit level 5. Dramatic monologues were often good on character and voice but not so strong on the dramatic elements.
- Attempts to “script the unscriptable” such as writing a transcript of a speech, a TED talk or chat show interview are best avoided.
- Written accuracy and proof-reading need to be foregrounded when students redraft and check their work.

### Assessment of the work

Most moderators reported a clear understanding of the assessment objectives on the part of the markers, and some helpful internal coversheets. There are still varying methods of commenting on students’ work and while there is not a prescribed method of annotating and commenting on work, it is clear that moderators find it easier to agree centre marks where the comments help to justify the marking decisions that have been made and where the comments refer to both the strengths and weaknesses of work.

As a reminder, it is worth noting that AO3 is about meanings and representations, as well as context and that AO2 is not just about ‘theory’, but can be also used to credit a student’s methodology and wider conceptual understanding.

Where there were problems with centres’ marking it often came from the following areas:

- Using last year’s grade boundaries rather than the mark scheme levels to award students’ marks.
- Over-rewarding AO1 without sufficient depth and detail in students’ work.
- Over-rewarding AO3 where there was insufficiently detailed focus on meanings and contexts.

As with last year, it is important to refer to the AQA TOLS materials to benchmark centres’ own marking and internal moderation and to ensure accurate marking.

## **Wider points**

### **Bibliographies & references**

Moderators were pleased to see detailed bibliographies being submitted by the majority of students. As mentioned last year, it is not good practice to simply reference online presentations in the bibliography, as the quality and accuracy of these cannot be verified.

### **Word counts**

Overall, it was clear that the specification's requirements relating to word counts (2000 for the language investigation and 750 for each of the original writing and commentary) were generally being followed quite closely. Moderators are generally advised to allow 10% either way and there are no fixed penalties for exceeding word counts, but in a few cases where word count has been greatly exceeded, moderators have added comments on the feedback forms to remind centres that overly long work might not meet the criteria for AO1 and AO2 of the mark scheme that refer to focus and organisation.

### **Organisation of folders**

It assists moderators if folders are put together in the following order:

- language investigation
- bibliography
- copies of the data (clean or annotated depending on your preference)
- any appendices (keep to a minimum wherever possible)
- original writing
- commentary
- annotated style model
- references for original writing

We would also ask that work is hole-punched and treasury tagged rather than left loose, stapled or put in folders.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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