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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE

7702/C: NEA - Language in action  
Report on the NEA

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The NEA submissions for this series were put together against a very challenging backdrop of disruption for teachers and students, so we were pleased to see so much excellent work from students this year and some accurate and thorough marking and moderation from teachers and centres.

As with previous years, this report should be read in conjunction with ones from other series (2017-2019) so that key themes and the most useful lessons can be drawn for future series. With that in mind, this report is divided up slightly differently this year to help make those messages clear and to offer advice and guidance for 2023 and onwards. Teachers are reminded too that each centre is allocated an NEA adviser who will be in touch at the start of the 2022-23 academic year and it is strongly advised that you make use of your adviser to seek guidance on language investigation topics and methodologies, potential original writing choices and indeed anything to do with the NEA component. If you are not aware of who your NEA adviser is next term, please contact the advice team at AQA who will put you in touch.

### **Student work: language investigations and what is involved**

While most teachers are clear on the principles of what's involved in a language investigation, it is probably worth reiterating some key points here to avoid misunderstandings about the nature of the task.

Language investigations should involve students asking questions/formulating hypotheses about language, collecting their own data and analysing that data to draw conclusions. The nature of the data can vary enormously – from recording primary data to gathering secondary data – but data is at the heart of the investigation and the analysis of it should form the main body of the investigation. Investigations that simply review what others have said about an aspect of language (eg reviewing what linguists have said about a word's development over time, how English has developed as a language, or how a variety of English has emerged in the UK or abroad) are not collecting their own data and these investigations do not fit the criteria outlined in the specification.

### **Language investigations: useful approaches and ones to avoid**

News stories and political upheavals have always provided good sources of data for language investigations, and the grim events of recent years have certainly provided students with plenty of material to work with and explore from a linguistic standpoint. One of the real strengths of the investigations this time round was many students' ability to apply a critical, linguistic eye to the language used around them, and produce something positive and thoughtful, showing how resourceful and adaptable A Level English Language students can be. Moderators saw some excellent work on Covid messaging from different government bodies and media organisations, analysis of the language practices in online meetings and classrooms, discussion of various resignation speeches, tweets and apologies (or non-apologies) from politicians and celebrities, and some perceptive work on the media (and social media) representations of many of these.

While virtually all topic areas are fair game for the investigation – and they certainly don't have to be limited to what is covered in the other components of the specification – it is worth thinking carefully about the different Assessment Objectives that are used to mark this work and how they might be applied to certain topic areas and kinds of data.

For instance:

- using data that is not in English (either having as a primary focus a foreign language or a constructed, fictional language) will be a problem because this is an English language investigation. However, looking at how speakers of other languages, or multilingual speakers of English code-switch or exhibit translanguaging practices is perfectly acceptable as English is still the main focus
- writing an essay about the development of a slang term or new word in the English language without any data collection on the part of the student is not an investigation
- choosing a purely quantitative approach to data analysis (ie counting linguistic features) is unlikely to be acceptable as this will not allow students to access the AO3 part of the mark scheme where meanings and representations in contexts are credited
- analysing a single text can be problematic, because this often leads to an extended text analysis being produced rather than a genuine investigation where ideas are explored and questions asked about wider language use
- focusing on song lyrics can be productive for some students but often isn't for many others. Many students forget that the lyrics are not always written by the performer, are often part of a broader art form (song writing) and should not always be taken at face value.
- relying purely on questionnaires is not a good idea. The data from questionnaires – particularly when it's just numerical data – is hard to analyse in a way that allows AO3 or AO1 to be credited and even when the data is more attitudes-based, this often results in a more sociological study that does not allow students the chance to analyse language in depth. It is perfectly acceptable – helpful even – to use questionnaires as part of a wider methodology (for example, an identity questionnaire being used as part of a study on language variation), but using them as the main form of data gathering can be a huge pitfall for many students.

### **Language investigations: project design and ideas from language study**

Moderators reported that the best investigations had a clear 'project design', were informed and underpinned by an understanding of ideas from language study and were focused from the start on clear linguistic aims. This is mostly part of AO2.

In practice, this often meant that good investigations did the following:

- set out to explore a bigger question about language use (eg how power was manifested through language; how variation was evident (or not) in language use of different groups or individuals; how certain agendas were advanced in creating particular representations of people, issues and events; how conversational or persuasive strategies were employed in spoken or online discourse)
- explained clearly the rationale for their data collection, considering aspects of validity and reliability
- analysed the data with a clear linguistic focus before evaluating their findings and concluding their report.

Many of the best investigations drew on wider reading from the rest of the course and beyond, applying research and theory to the data analysis in ways that illuminated the analysis or helped to challenge and evaluate different ways of interpreting the data. The nature of these 'ideas from language study' can vary a great deal and there is no fixed list of relevant ideas to offer because

the range of the investigations is so large. However, some pointers are offered here based on what moderators have seen this year and in previous series.

- Carrying out a literature review before settling on a research question/aims/hypothesis can be an effective way of identifying the most useful Ideas from Language Study (ILS) for an investigation.
- Applying and integrating those ILS in the analysis can be a very effective way of hitting the higher levels of the mark scheme, whereas simply reporting on what linguists have said/researched/ theorised without application to the investigation's focus is not very productive. "Connect theories, ideas and research with data" is an AO2 descriptor in Level 4, so this is something to bear in mind when making use of ILS.
- Making use of ILS from relevant and up-to-date sources can be very effective. Too many investigations continue to rely on very old linguistic work – Lakoff, Zimmerman & West, Tannen, Chomsky and Skinner, for example – often missing the chance to use more specific and contemporary sources that can be much more useful. Some suggestions have been offered in previous reports and more are included at the end of this one.
- Using old, and often outdated, studies and observations to form the basis of research questions is not helpful to many students. It has to be time to move beyond Lakoff's observations about female speech and look to more relevant work from more recent times. Likewise, trying to shoehorn very general ideas about gender and interaction into investigations about sexuality and sexual identity, or even power dynamics in interviews or online interactions, is often unsuccessful; it's much more useful to find more specific studies and ideas to support such investigations.
- Having a manageable data set is important for the success of the investigation. Transcribing long stretches of speeches or interviews can be very time-consuming and this time is often wasted if only small parts of the transcripts are analysed. Narrowing down the data to a more focused data set can be one way of managing the task. On the flip side, choosing data to match a preordained hypothesis is not a helpful way to approach the task.
- Taking a purely quantitative approach to the data is unlikely to yield good results for the investigation. Simply counting features (like first person pronouns, simple sentences, modal verbs or tag questions) and then presenting the figures in a table or chart often prevents close analysis of the language features themselves or the contexts in which they are used. Quantitative approaches can be much more effective when combined with qualitative methods and where specific examples can be explored in their contexts.
- Corpus approaches can be extremely effective in allowing for bigger picture conclusions to be drawn alongside more tightly focused analysis of specific language examples. Some excellent examples were seen this year, including work on a corpus of Barack and Michelle Obama tweets, the prevalence of metaphor when discussing cancer in different sources and the language of protest signs in BLM demonstrations.

### **Suggestions for updating AO2**

Language, gender & sexuality

Coates, J. (2015) *Women, Men and Language* 3rd edition, Routledge

Baker, P. (2008) *Sexed Texts: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, Equinox

Sauntson, H. (2020) *Researching Language, Gender and Sexuality*, Routledge

Kaplan, A. (2016) *Women Talk More Than Men: . . . And Other Myths About Language Explained*, Cambridge University Press

Titjen, F. (2018) *Language and Gender - Cambridge Topics in English Language*, Cambridge University Press

Sunderland, J. (2006) *Language and Gender: An Advanced Resource Book*, Routledge

Harvey, K, and Shalom, C. (Eds). (1997). *Language and Desire: Encoding sex, romance and intimacy*. London: Routledge

Lucy Jones' blog: <https://queerlinglang.wordpress.com/>

Deborah Cameron's blog: <https://debuk.wordpress.com/>

#### Online communication

Zappavigna, M. (2012) *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media*, Bloomsbury

Tagg, C. (2015) *Exploring Digital Communication: Language in Action*, Routledge

Seargeant, P. (2019) *The Emoji Revolution*, Cambridge University Press

Bou-Franch, P & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, P. (2019) *Analysing Digital Discourse: new insights and future directions*, Palgrave Macmillan

#### Representation and discourse analysis

Jones, R. (2012) *Discourse Analysis: a resource book for students*, Routledge

Cushing, I. (2018) *Text Analysis and Representation - Cambridge Topics in English Language*, Cambridge University Press

Hodson, J. (2014) *Dialect in Film and Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan

Bednarek, M. (2021) *Creating Dialogue for TV: Screenwriters Talk Television*, Routledge

#### More broadly

University of York English Language Toolkit: <https://englishlanguagetoolkit.york.ac.uk/>

QMUL's Teach Real English: <https://www.teachrealenglish.org/>

Lancaster University's Corpus for Schools: <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/corpusforschools/>

Because Language podcast: <http://becauselanguage.com/>

BBC's Word of Mouth: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qtnz/episodes/player>

The Vocal Fries podcast: <https://vocalfriespod.com/>

En Clair forensic linguistics podcast: <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/enclair/>

Lexis podcast: <https://anchor.fm/lexispodcast>

#### Analysing the data

Moderators reported on a range of productive approaches to data analysis in work this year but also had advice about approaches that were much less useful.

#### What worked:

- Clear linguistic aims established early on that allowed for detailed and wide-ranging discussion of the data in the analysis section.
- Clear use of contextualised examples from the data, allowing for discussion of how meanings and representations were created in their specific contexts of production and reception.
- Open-minded and reflective interpretation of potentially different meanings of features and examples discussed.
- Choosing the most relevant language levels and methods for the analysis of the students' own data rather than applying a 'one size fits all' approach to the whole cohort.
- Integrating and evaluating relevant Ideas from Language Study (ILS) as part of the analysis, linking this discussion back to the aims and objectives of the investigation.

- Using subheadings for the analysis that link to the project question/aims/hypothesis outlined in the methodology.
- Exploring and interpreting patterns of language at work across the texts and data.
- Considering carefully the contexts of production and reception of the data.
- Connected to the point above – bearing in mind the contextual factors that might be at work in televised and edited TV interviews, reality shows and the like, such as selective editing and/or expectations of exaggerated performance for audiences.
- Showing an informed understanding of the scripted nature of TV and film drama and not treating it as genuine, spontaneous speech.

What caused problems:

- Treating all second person pronouns as examples of ‘synthetic personalisation’.
- Mislabelling all questions (or statements that might be interpreted as questions) as ‘tag questions’.
- Overinterpreting fillers and pauses.
- Treating scripted data as spontaneous speech.
- Counting features such as first person pronouns and then concluding that these show self-obsession or narcissism on the part of the speaker/writer. A useful follow-up question to this would be “What else could the speaker have used here?” and considering what choices and alternatives are open to speakers in these instances.
- Presenting quantitative data that is not supported by evidence from the data or that is based on a misidentification of features in the data (eg counting up sentence types or word classes but mislabelling them and then drawing erroneous conclusions from the patterns observed).

## Conclusions, evaluations and bibliographies

While the specification does not insist on a separate evaluation section, most students choose to offer some kind of evaluation as part of their conclusion, and often elsewhere as part of their analysis. However, it is clear from the mark scheme that students should evaluate and reflect on their findings, so they should be encouraged to address this as part of their work.

Moderators reported on most students including bibliographies as part of their submissions, so this is something to be credited and to encourage in future series. On a few occasions, the only books referenced were course textbooks or class notes, so it would be more use for these students to actually reference the studies they were citing.

## Original writing and commentary

Moderators reported on many fewer issues with this part of the NEA than in previous years and centres and students are to be congratulated for the wide range of engaging and interesting work submitted. The idea of the style model and its role in both the writing of the original piece and the commentary seems to be well understood now and it was evident that some of the best commentary work was much more alert to the need to discuss form, genre and structure.

Some of the most interesting pieces of original writing included an election letter to constituents, a reworking of an extract of *Heart of Darkness*, a student using an extract of a Haruki Murakami novel as a style model, several speeches with very clear ideas of context (eg a speech to a select committee and a speech to school leavers), and many effective op-eds and columns for broadsheets and online publications where a genuine voice and style was evident, along with a

variety of screenplays and opening chapters. There was also some really powerful poetry, although this can be difficult to pull off within the wordcount.

Where problems arose, they were often linked to one or more of the following areas:

- Poor choice of style model. Self-published online pieces or websites where stories or poems of very dubious quality are published can be a real problem for students. If the style model is of dubious quality, the original writing is very likely to suffer as well.
- Choosing to write in a different form to the style model. This goes against the idea of using a style model and creates problems for most who attempt it.
- Referencing a style model briefly at the beginning of the commentary but then failing to quote directly from it or analyse it. The mark scheme refers explicitly to 'two texts' so students need to discuss both texts together throughout and with detailed discussion of the language of both texts.
- Choosing to write in the same form and genre and on the same topic as the style model. As noted in previous reports, this rarely allows students to create an original work with a genuine sense of their own voice.
- Trying to adopt a persona such as Jeremy Clarkson, Piers Morgan or Donald Trump and creating a text (an article or a speech) as if they are that person. These rarely work and should be avoided.
- Writing a transcript, complete with micropauses, false starts and other non-fluency features when the chosen task is to write a speech. Transcripts are a written record of speech: far better to write the speech itself.

## Marking and moderation

Moderators reported on some accurate marking, helpful annotation and clear evidence of moderation from many centres. Where there were issues, these normally fell into the following areas:

- Over-rewarding investigations for AO1 where there was insufficient evidence to support descriptors such as the need for detail, depth or 'establishing patterns of use and engaging with complexity'.
- Crediting inaccurate language descriptions.
- Over-rewarding AO2 where there had been little or no discussion of why data had been selected.
- Over-rewarding AO3 where there was insufficient evidence of evaluation of different contexts, or where students had adopted largely quantitative methodologies that prevented close engagement with examples of language.
- Over-rewarding original writing as either 'convincing' (Level 4) or 'creative and innovative' (Level 5) when it was – at best – 'competent' (Level 3). One of the key questions to ask at the top level is if the student has managed to create work that has developed a voice of its own or is simply an effective or skilful replica of the style model.
- Crediting commentaries in the wrong band when the connections between the texts were not clearly exemplified or developed.

## Folders and submissions

Many NEA folders were helpfully laid out and organised into the right sections, but many others were submitted in a way that made moderation a much more time-consuming and laborious process. As a quick reminder, please do the following:



- Hole punch and treasury tag work for ease of access.
- Do not use staples or plastic wallets.
- Please put work in the right order in the folder: cover sheets, language investigation (and data), references/bibliography, original writing, commentary, annotated style model, references.

Annotation, comments and moderation notes are all helpful ways of allowing moderators to see the thinking behind each centre's marking decisions and so are welcomed. It is much harder to agree a centre's marks if the decisions are opaque or unexplained. Some suggestions are offered here about good practice seen this year:

- formative annotation that indicates not just where an AO has been met but at which level (eg AO1 L4)
- formative annotation that comments on the work both positively and negatively, identifying errors or areas that could be further developed alongside achievements that can be credited
- summative comments that reference the mark scheme's wording and interpret this in relation to the work seen
- summative comments that reference the work in the TOLS folders (eg "Close to TOLS folder 4 for AO1 but higher for AO2")
- clear moderation comments that explain why certain marks might have been changed.

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

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