
GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

8700/C ENEA: Spoken Language
Report on the Examination

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Introduction

The verifying team were eager to reprise their work this summer and what was submitted did not disappoint. There was much to inspire and impress amongst the video presentations sampled and we were reminded once again of how valuable this component is to the independent expression of students' opinions on what matters to them and their futures, offering as it does an opportunity to reflect deeply on their life experiences to date and their evolving sense of self. Topics were many and varied with a significant number of uniquely individual contributions offering insights and education in matters not previously well known, frequently delivered with power and passion. The commitment of teachers in support of such success was obvious and, whilst there is no mechanism to individually celebrate the excellent practice and success achieved in so many centres, verifiers do recognise it and extend here their appreciation and thanks for the notable efforts made.

It bears mention that, just as the GCSE English Language exams are intended to offer an opportunity to demonstrate the skills acquired through secondary schooling, so the Spoken Language endorsement represents the culmination of all that has been learned about communication in the oral mode. As such it merits time spent in preparation, rehearsal and performance and the suggested maximum of 10 minutes set in the specification is a valid threshold to match. This is especially true where students are targeting the higher-level criteria since this will allow for a substantive talk with proper development of ideas and opinions which, when combined with the extended, challenging questioning such levels require, will easily fill this time. It is a formal test of students' spoken language skills fully deserving of a serious and planned approach and a real audience.

The principles which underpin this component are independence, ownership, the opportunity to be heard and listened to and to hear and listen to the opinions and ideas of others as a responsive audience. The topics which lend themselves most effectively to this experience are those that have relevance both to the student and beyond the classroom; to other students, to the wider society and even to the world, since these offer the scope for developed consideration of consequences, of alternatives, of potential changes which may be hoped for or worked towards. Thus, the talk is meaningful, there is a genuine information gap and clear motivation both for talking and listening, leading to purposeful questioning in extended exchanges where the student can properly demonstrate both that they really know their topic and that they have thought through the implications of what they are saying and why it matters. They have an audience ready to listen and with whom they engage through scenarios, questions, direct address and relevant examples, allowing their listeners to feel involved in the performance, for that is what it is, and leading inevitably to positive approbation in the form of well-deserved applause.

The list below aims to illuminate the range and variety of topics seen this series not only from the UK but from centres around the globe.

- Social media in all its many forms was the most frequently addressed topic, its positives and negatives being fully detailed with significant thoughtful concern expressed about its impact on mental health, especially with regard to body shaming. There was pleasing, if perhaps only occasional recognition, that self-regulation is important.
- Concern about inequality in society was much discussed in relation to gender, age, education, neurological difference, disability, sexual orientation and race and there were many powerful appeals for society at all levels to be kinder and more tolerant and for fairness and equality of opportunity to be given more emphasis. The issue of toxic

masculinity was much in evidence and the gender pay gap was also frequently explored, although feasible solutions were rarely offered.

- Human rights were addressed with similar passion with abortion being a frequent subject. There were also many who wished to raise awareness of issues such as period poverty and attitudes to and treatment of refugees, and it was a privilege to hear directly of the challenges faced by those who have lived experience of the latter. The controversy around the football world cup in Qatar was thoughtfully explored in relation to construction workers and intolerance. Concern was noted regarding the vulnerability of young people to gang violence, gun and knife crime and the need for schools, police, governments and society to address these more seriously. Being able to vote at 16 was clearly felt to be important, not least in relation to real social concerns about food poverty, homelessness, education, transport issues, war and conflict, and even the north-south divide.
- Other academic subjects were well represented with interesting talks on science, language and culture, history, technology, sports and the arts, further emphasising the cross-curricular value of this component. Highly informed talks on political and economic systems and philosophical topics such as stoicism, altruism, modern morality, individual freedoms and responsibilities also made an impact. A number of students attempted to answer the elusive question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ where wealth and its impact was thoughtfully weighed.
- The experience of education for this cohort has been different to previous and perhaps this has led to the frequency of more thought-provoking talks about education where, alongside the expected debates about school uniform rules and homework, we have seen thoughtful appeals for the system to become more relevant to students’ future lives; for a reduction in reliance on examinations given the significant stress they give rise and in relation to mental health. One innovative idea which was effectively argued for: a change to the school week to allow Friday to be a ‘free-day’, but not for teachers! Concern was evident about the cost versus benefit of university education and the need for better access to practical courses and trade skills at school level to offer more choice to students considering careers in technology, engineering, or service industries. AI is the new topic of the year and it was interesting to hear how students consider that it offers both opportunities and challenges to society and their future working lives.
- Environmental concerns have always been prominent in topic choices and so it was this series, with very serious and emotional talks exhorting those in power to be more aware and pro-active to ensure the future of the planet. Electric cars were much discussed and often not positively given the scarcity of key resources necessary for their manufacture. Treatment of animals was also often considered with much said about Sea-world and other zoos alongside continuing discussion of animal testing. A new area of focus well represented was that of Fast Fashion, with consideration of its impact not only on the environment but on the workers whose lives are impacted by the fickle demands of society. There were also interesting talks about the potential impact of vegan and vegetarian diets on the environment and the future of our food supply and farming.

There was a notable number of students who appealed to their audiences to not under-estimate the young and their capacity to succeed, and, given the thoughtfulness and reasoning witnessed and evidenced above, we should certainly agree. Presentations given by FE and adult students were equally inspiring with their maturity of positive benefit in often very extended talks about their

careers and life experiences and here, verifiers reported a slight tendency to under-award the quality of skills on display.

Assessment

Verifiers were able to support the application of the standard in the majority of centre samples seen. Where centre assessments were not fully supported, 3 key aspects of the criteria either singly or in combination were seen to be significant: ideas and their development, manner of delivery and engagement with the audience, and questioning. On occasion, the samples submitted suggested that not all centres are undertaking the required internal standardising informed by the published standard. It is to be reiterated that pair and group work or one-to-one interviews are inappropriate for this component; all students must give an extended individual presentation. Where this is challenging for particular students, extended discussion can serve as a support but there should always be a prepared opening statement from the student. This approach is effectively modelled in the recordings for Josh and Holly in the standardising materials.

Topics and tasks

Knowledge and information are not the same as ideas or issues and this is often where disagreement in assessment at higher levels arose. For students to match the ‘challenging’ and ‘sophisticated’ descriptors, they need to show that they can use information effectively to inform and shape their ideas around a topic, that they can explore, interrogate an issue and present interpretations and/or solutions. That topic needs to offer scope for such independent enquiry and go beyond the reporting of personal experience to offer relevance to a wider audience through objective exploration. It necessarily follows that talks targeting Merit or Distinction do need to be substantial, to show depth of detail and reasoning and many seen at these levels this year were too short to permit this.

Where the teacher’s involvement is to be encouraged is in the approval of the student’s choice of topic in relation to their ability and to their clarity of purpose for their talk. The emphasis in all presentations should not be ‘what I know or have learned about’ but rather, ‘what I want you to understand about this topic and why it matters’, an understanding of how to give their talk external relevance. This is why presentations based on a question or polemical statement were often more successful as evidence and examples were selected and adapted for purpose much as they would in a piece of expository writing for the written examination. The specifics of the criteria are such that any talk based on description, narration or information sharing alone is unlikely to move beyond the pass level however detailed and complex the information may be, whilst if a student wishes to challenge an existing social, cultural or political phenomenon, they need to have considered potential alternatives and the teacher’s guidance can be valuable here whether provided individually or within class teaching as part of the necessary preparation for the assessment. The criteria need to be known and understood. Even better is the provision of an opportunity for students to work with the criteria in relation to viewing recorded presentations and discussing the outcomes. There are a wealth of appropriate real-life examples freely available online. Modelling effective questioning can be accommodated here. Whilst there may be concerns that the topics presented in the standardising material are now several years behind the priorities of young people today, several remain relevant and fully so in informing teachers of the standards. However, the best resource for inspiring students and illuminating discussion of what is required, is that being recorded and collated every year in centres and how better to celebrate the ambition and independence shown and the successes achieved.

Manner of delivery and engagement

Giving a presentation is different from reading a speech but there were many centres where reading appeared to be normalised, whether from a script on paper, notecards or a screen. Although the JCQ guidance makes clear that there are no restrictions on the form of notes a student can employ, it also stresses the teacher's role in making sure students understand that reading entirely from pre-prepared notes is unlikely to enable them to access the criteria for the higher grades, which require engagement with the audience. This assessment relates to spoken language and as such, reading a text aloud is inappropriate. Appreciation of the difference between spoken and written communication was too often seen to be lacking. Similarly, where a PowerPoint presentation is the talk, the incentive to actually listen to the speaker is diminished and the students themselves were often more focused on the technology than the audience. PowerPoint slides can offer a valuable support to a talk where, for example, images are pertinent to the arguments being expressed, but what is being said should always matter more. Appropriate use of a PowerPoint is modelled in the recording of Laura in the standardising materials.

The nature of the audience for student presentations matters greatly since they are intended to be a performative act and the criteria value both content and engagement. It bears mention that, since these talks are being recorded, there is an audience behind the camera who also need to feel engaged. Where the physical audience is the teacher alone, as was seen frequently, there is little incentive for a student to purposefully plan to engage since the teacher has to listen. Where a student presented to their class and their teacher, with consequent varied and extended questioning, students were seen to be employing a range of strategies from direct address, imagine scenarios, audience relevant examples, emotive descriptions and anecdotes alongside purposeful variation in intonation, pace and expression. This went beyond the expected structural signals and cohesive devices which also matter when communicating in the oral mode. It is worth mentioning that an audience does need to be receptive and supportive to a presenter and this was an area where again there was scope for improvement. Although recent challenges may have enforced 1-1 presentations, it is to be hoped that those centres still conducting the assessment in this way may reflect on whether this is in the best interests of the student when 'engagement with the audience' is a key criterion. Such a context, in the specification, was conceived as the exception rather than the norm and was stated as being conditional on there being a notional context beyond speaker and listener. Moreover, the range and thoughtfulness of the talks seen, merit a wider audience and can positively contribute to the much-prized cultural capital of all students as they prepare for their adult life whilst also offering a meaningful forum for developing thinking skills and ideas to support preparation for the English Language paper 2 writing task. Such experiences are of value to students' developing social skills, an area of concern in this post-COVID world. It is to be noted that in the majority of FE contexts sampled, students were seen presenting at length to their class group with extended purposeful discussion.

Questioning

The most frequently observed factor detrimentally affecting student outcomes was the insufficiency of meaningful, open, appropriately challenging questioning. The standardising materials model effective questioning at all levels. The criteria specify 'questions' in the plural yet all too often, students were asked only one, especially if their talk had been substantial in length. We have been privileged to see many extended recordings this series where at least 3 or 4 minutes have been allowed for detailed, probing and thought-provoking questioning, from students and teachers, based on what had been presented. This is what the specification intends. The students were thus allowed to expand on their ideas, showing their knowledge and understanding of the topic and addressing opposing viewpoints, demonstrating the detail and perception commensurate with the

questioning criteria at Merit and Distinction levels. Where only one question is asked, this criterion is unlikely to be matched above Pass level especially where that question is non-specific to the presentation as, for example, the commonly asked ‘Why did you choose this topic?’ Similarly, where questions and answers have been prepared in advance, the criteria cannot be said to be matched. The role of the teacher is crucial here in ensuring students who have demonstrated skill levels of Merit or Distinction are asked questions appropriate to that level whilst equally, supporting pass students by re-framing questions when hesitancy occurs. This becomes even more important where students have been reliant on notes or a script and have not therefore fully matched the criterion relating to ‘use of strategies to engage the audience’ at a level equal to the content, vocabulary and structure of their talk. There have been many instances this series where students have spoken passionately about their chosen topics, often demonstrating high level skills, especially at merit level, but the questioning has been minimal and pedestrian thus affecting the final level they can be awarded. The verifying team would very much like to encourage centres to address this missed opportunity.

Asking meaningful questions is an integral part of the speaking and listening curriculum and is definitely worthy of more attention and modelling as it supports critical thinking skills of value across the whole curriculum.

Use of directed, common or GCSE English Literature based tasks

As the list of topics seen confirms, many centres and students are taking full advantage of the fact that, in this qualification, the choice of task is the responsibility of the student themselves, independence to be celebrated. It follows therefore, that any task or topic directed by the teacher is not appropriate and this is a key reason why the many talks we saw based on literary texts studied were unhelpful to student outcomes. Inevitably, such tasks focus on knowledge rather than ideas; led the student not towards what interests them or an audience, but to what is right or ‘correct’ and questions are almost invariably governed by English Literature assessment objectives. Whilst more able students might well be able to assert their independent opinions and engage in meaningful analytical comment on the significance of what they have observed with possible extrapolation to a contemporary world, this is not easily attainable across the ability range and many less confident students will revert to what they know to be right, that which has been discussed in class. The inevitable result is common content which reduces the opportunity for these students to express their own ideas, thoughts and feelings. Invariably, for some students, this then becomes another ‘test’ of their learning rather than what is intended, an opportunity for them to showcase their knowledge and experience of something that matters to them and over which they have control and, most importantly showcase their oracy skills. The principle of equality of entitlement is relevant here.

Where literary texts are used as a springboard for ideas, outcomes tend to be more independent and engaging, as with discussions of poverty, private education or inequality, themes prominent in current set texts. It remains the case, however, that centres directing their students to base their talks on literature, need to reflect on whether it is beneficial for students at all levels. Similarly, common tasks seen, set for partial or whole cohorts, based on work experience, room 101, bucket lists or provocative quotations such as ‘why are expensive holidays unnecessary?’ are to be discouraged in favour of individual choice. This should extend not only to the content but also the choices made regarding structure since this is integral to the assessment of students’ use of strategies to engage the audience.

Practical Matters

- The only evidence required for verification is the memory stick containing the appropriate number of student videos. The JCQ record of assessment sheet is for centre use only whilst Centre Declaration Forms are to be sent digitally to NEAdeclaration@aqa.org.uk and are not required by the verifier.
- There were many instances where the audibility of students presented challenges for the verifier, either with the speaker themselves or the questions asked of them by other students. We do ask that the video and audio quality of samples is checked prior to submission and that all recordings are complete with questions included. Also, in relation to technology, if a PowerPoint is central to the talk being delivered, it is helpful if we are able to see it clearly.
- Encryption of data is not required for this component and seeking passwords is time-consuming given the number of samples in a verifier's allocation. If a centre does feel that encryption is required in their context, AQA issue a series password which we ask be used.
- Accessing samples can also be complicated where a centre has used compression software such as .zip folders to allow all their samples to be stored on one memory stick. Extracting/downloading can be problematic; the ideal situation is for a verifier to be able to immediately access the recording for a student, with the name, student number and level awarded being clear and matching what has been entered on the subs listing. Guidance on recording and storing of samples can be found on the NEA web page for the Spoken Language endorsement.
- We appreciate the care and commitment of centres who choose to send their samples using 'signed for' postal services. This is however, not necessary and can result in significant frustrating chasing where verifiers are also working teachers.
- Two last pleas: that centres check that the levels entered online match the work submitted for verification and that centres send their samples promptly in accordance with the published deadline.

Further Support

A new Guidance document is to be published in the autumn offering practical advice and activities to support successful delivery of the endorsement and this will be available from the NEA page on the website.

Each year some centres will receive support from an AQA verifier to help them with their future submissions. From this year onwards, these visits may be conducted either as in-person visits or via Teams. Centres will be informed of these visits in the Autumn.

Conclusion

Centres are thanked for their efforts in completing and submitting evidence for the series. The verifiers appreciate that the work involved is significant but the outcomes fully merit the efforts. The unique nature of the component, where full independence is offered and clearly appreciated by young people across all contexts, guarantees a stimulating and inspiring experience for the whole verifying panel.

The verifiers enjoy the privilege of hearing the views of young people, of seeing young people share their views about local and global issues, listening to how well-informed they are and how

they want to see change in society. It would be helpful if all teachers of the 8700 specification could be given access to this report.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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