A-level
ENGLISH LANGUAGE
Non exam assessment: Language in Action
Report on the Examination

General

The first submission of work for the A level English Language Non-Exam Assessment (NEA) component produced some excellent work from students, some clear and accurate assessment from teachers and showed a sound understanding of the new specification from the vast majority of centres.

There was plenty of evidence that most centres had made use of the Teacher Online Standardisation (TOLS) materials that went online in December 2016, their NEA advisers and the Preparing for NEA meetings that had run from Spring 2016. In addition to this, feedback sessions will take place online in the Autumn of 2017 and a further set of TOLS materials, based on work submitted this summer, will be made available in late 2017.

Moderators reported an encouragingly eclectic range of submissions from centres, with students pursuing their own interests in investigations, collecting some fascinating and varied data along the way, and producing some strong original writing pieces in a range of genres as well.

Before looking at the patterns that moderators saw in the work they assessed and the advice for centres based on this, it might be useful to look at the assessment objectives and how these were interpreted.

Language Investigation
This is marked using AO1, AO2 and AO3. As with the exam components for A level, it is important to understand the distinction between AOs 1 and 3. AO3 – the most heavily weighted assessment objective in this task – is mostly about the creation of meanings through language. As with everything to do with language study, context is important to this, so one of the key descriptors for AO3 in Level 3 is the ability of students to "link context and language features". This is a skill that requires students to use clear examples from their data and explain how language is being used in a specific context.

At other levels, it is also expected that students would consider alternative interpretations of language, exploring and evaluating different meanings and showing an open-minded and tentative approach to their discussions. At the highest level, we would expect to see an exploration of meanings and some evaluation of the wider social and cultural contexts to language use. Given the huge scope for the investigation, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to achieving well in AO3, but moderators pointed to some useful approaches which will be outlined later.

AO1 is primarily assessed on the student's ability to identify and describe language features in their data, using accurate technical terminology to label these features. Again, given the scope of topic choices, the language methods used to analyse data could be drawn from many different areas, but those students who engaged with a range of well-selected methods, suitable for the data chosen, and who showed close focus on language at a micro-level, but also in wider patterns of language use, tended to do very well. AO1 is not just about labelling individual, isolated features of language, but to see bigger patterns and to identify how language works across different levels. Ideally, this would then feed into some close work on AO3 where the meanings and representations created would be explored and interpreted.

A second element of AO1 is related to the student's ability to write a coherent report, organising material clearly, using a linguistic register and presenting a polished overall piece. Moderators reported on work this year that was at both extremes: some exceptionally well-presented and organised, using sensible subheadings and carefully checked before submission, along with others

that had frequent and basic errors in grammar and spelling, and which in some cases were presented as essays or not using any sections.

AO2 covers a number of areas but is primarily related to how the student goes about carrying out an investigation. To this end, a clear methodology is required and a methodology section in the investigation is a requirement of the specification. This would usually be expected to go beyond just a simple account of how data has been collected but also to explain why certain approaches have been used rather than others, to explain the rationale for the data that has been selected and – at the higher levels of the mark scheme – to reflect on or evaluate the validity and usefulness of such an approach, and any ethical or methodological issues that might have arisen.

The other aspect of AO2 is the student's knowledge of ideas from language study – concepts, theories, research, case studies and a grasp of how language works – and how these have been applied to the investigation itself. This can take the form of references to the research or ideas of linguists that might be used as a way of exploring the student's own data; equally, this could be a broader understanding of a topic such as child language and the stages that children go through as their language develops. The most successful investigations showed evidence of a strong conceptual underpinning to the work, while the weakest often showed little evidence that language study was understood at all or that there might be any system to the data collected and how it related to wider ideas about how language works.

Original Writing

This was assessed using AO5 which is made up of three main elements: form, register and accuracy. Choosing the appropriate form to write in – one which allows a student to demonstrate shaping of language for particular audiences and an understanding of genre – is vital. The style model should be an integral part of this choice. Without a good style model, a good piece of original writing is unlikely to be possible.

Commentary

This is assessed using all five AOs:
AO1: ability to analyse the language techniques used in the style model and student's own writing
AO2: understanding and manipulation of genre
AO3: how language has been used to create meanings and representations
AO4: connections across the style model and student's own piece
AO5: ability to write accurately and creatively
As can be seen from the AOs above, the style model is a crucial part of the commentary and references to the two texts (the student's own piece and the style model) need to be organised, detailed, clear and well exemplified for a good mark to be achieved.

Work this year: language investigation

It was clear that most centres had prepared students very well for the language investigation. Moderators reported on a range of different topics, with language change, gender and children's language development all remaining popular from the legacy specifications. The new specification's weighting of AO3 appeared to have influenced many centres to focus on investigations that foregrounded meanings and representations, and in many cases, this led to projects that focused on how people, events and issues are represented through language, but also how individuals use language to represent themselves in various forms of communication

(online forms proving popular this year) or how characters are represented in fictional works (both literary and media-based).

Given the recent political upheavals around the world and in the UK, it was no surprise to find political figures and movements under scrutiny and there was some excellent work on the changing representations of Donald Trump in the media, in his own tweets and in debates, the representation of Hillary Clinton by the UK and US media, along with several on the changing representations of Jeremy Corbyn, David Cameron and Theresa May. Elsewhere, there was some engaged and aware work on the language of the alt-right, Brexit and online discussions about feminism and oppression. The best of these showed a clear grasp of wider political and social contexts, a systematic analysis of the ways in which language creates and shapes meanings, how language users adopt positions and position their text receivers and some well-chosen examples.

Moderators also reported some strong work on computer-mediated communication styles, second language acquisition and code-switching, children's literacy, how accents and varieties of English are represented in films, representation of gender roles in historical and/or children's fiction and the language of Dr Who assistants over time.

Some other observations are summarised below.

The more successful investigations:

- were led by a student's genuine sense of interest in a topic
- had clear aims and/or hypotheses, which were linguistic in focus
- selected salient linguistic methods to analyse data
- collected data with some kind of system
- selected data of appropriate length to be able to respond to the aims set at the beginning
- drew on existing research, theory and thinking to explore language use
- reflected on and evaluated the methodology used, considering alternative approaches
- used their data to challenge established sociolinguistic findings. The ones who did this showed that they were genuinely engaging with both their data and the theory
- analysed and described language using accurate and appropriate linguistic terminology, selecting salient material to discuss
- analysed language patterns – grammatical, lexical, semantic, phonological, graphological, structural – to examine how meanings are created across whole texts
- considered meanings and representations
- understood that form and function vary depending on context
- linked language and meanings to specific contexts
- presented quantitative data in helpful ways
- organised the analysis under sensible sub-headings
- concluded and evaluated by reflecting on the success of the investigation
- wrote clearly and with a suitable academic register
- included a bibliography
- stuck to the word count

The less successful investigations:

- trawled data with no clear sense of a linguistic aim

- struggled to articulate a research question or posed a question so broad as to be of no help at all
- wrote an essay or did not use the sections outlined in the specification
- described language generally, using terms such as 'lexeme', 'word', 'short/long sentence' or 'phrase', and/or not clearly exemplifying language features when they were described
- tried to 'prove' or 'disprove' a linguistic theory, making the data fit a particular, narrow perception
- tried to apply research on gender and interaction to represented speech or written texts: there is plenty of relevant research on the representation of gender that would be more useful
- collected far too much data or made sweeping conclusion based on very little data
- discussed data in a narrative fashion, describing rather than analysing it
- relied on quantitative approaches to data analysis that ignored meanings and/or context
- ignored context
- interpreted language as having a fixed set of meanings (e.g. pronouns always make things 'personal' or tag questions always show insecurity)
- didn't evaluate: while there is no requirement to include an 'evaluation' section, the mark scheme does indicate that evaluation is an important part of the higher levels
- went well over word count and/or lost focus on the aims set at the outset

Assessment of the investigation

Most moderators reported a clear understanding of the assessment objectives on the part of the markers, but varying methods of commenting on students' work. There appeared to be some misunderstanding on the part of some centres as to the function of AO3, with some markers simply referring to 'context' for the comments on this AO. Likewise, AO2 is not just about 'theory', but can be used to credit a student's methodology and wider conceptual understanding.

Where there were problems with assessment, this often came in centres over-rewarding candidates for AO1 where there was not sufficient range or depth to hit the highest levels, with AO2 where there was no sense of challenge or overview, and in AO3 where meanings and representations were not evaluated. The TOLS folders for 2016-17 and for the forthcoming year will again be useful yardsticks to judge whether work hits these highest levels, and centres would be strongly advised to make use of them in preparation for the next series.

While there is not a single, approved way of annotating investigations, some examples of good practice are suggested below:

- using formative annotations that identify strengths **and** weaknesses in a candidate's work (e.g indicating where an accurate label has been used but also where an error of labelling has been made)
- making summative comments that are not simply descriptors from the mark scheme but reflect some engagement with what the work is doing
- using a cover sheet to organise marks, comments and any internal moderation decisions
- avoiding references to student absences, missed deadlines or wider qualities/perceived weaknesses of the student: it is the NEA work that needs to be assessed, not the students themselves and while we are all human, the comments ought to reflect this.

Work this year: original writing and commentary

There was some genuinely excellent work for this part of the NEA and many moderators commented on the range of writing, the quality of the work and the understanding of the role of the commentary. Where there were problems, it was generally related to the commentary and a lack of clear connections between the style model and the student's own piece in the commentary. The style model (and it should be a single style model) is a vital part of the original writing process itself and should not just be seen as a tacked on 'extra' for the commentary. In the best work, it was clear that students had read and used style models as a way of understanding the genre that they were writing in; they then made use of the style model in their commentary, making detailed reference to the two pieces and allowing close comparison of language, meanings and genre.

Among the work seen this year, moderators commented favourably on some of the following forms: openings to dystopian novels, extracts of historical fiction, travel writing that offered a novel angle on a location and opinion pieces on social, cultural and political issues.

On occasion, some forms were less successful, but this often depended on the understanding of genre and audience – something that often differentiated much of the work that was seen. Where genre was really understood, students wrote some excellent pieces – revealing a real grasp of how generic conventions might be used or manipulated to either emulate or adapt a given form. Where it was not understood, it often resulted in rather unsophisticated pieces. Speeches and blog posts were a case in point, with some showing an acute sense of context and audience, but others were very generalised and showed little sense of where a blog post might appear or who a speech might be addressed to.

More successful original writing and commentaries:

- showed clear evidence of style model use
- were polished and carefully crafted
- considered the genre being used and successfully emulated or manipulated this
- thought of the needs of the reader and/or audience
- showed originality, engagement and interest
- developed and sustained a voice
- made detailed reference to the style model in the commentary
- used quotations from the two pieces to comment upon language, genre, meanings and representation
- discussed the intended audience and purpose of the pieces
- used detailed discussion of language techniques to comment upon the two pieces
- was within the word count
- provided suitable references

Less successful original writing and commentaries:

- produced writing with no clear sense of audience or purpose
- made no reference to, or use of, a style model
- failed to include a style model in the submission
- referred to multiple style models

- stayed very close to the content of the style model without aptly demonstrating that the student's own piece was genuinely original
- bore no relation to the style model
- were careless with basic expression and proofreading
- were derivative and overly-reliant on factual content drawn from other sources
- were significantly over or under the word count

Some final points

Word count (2000 for investigations and 750 for each of the original writing and commentary) was generally adhered to by most centres, but there were cases of whole centres going well over the limit. In most cases, these will have been identified in centre feedback, but as an overall rule, while the word count has been advisory this year, moderators will be asked to look at it closely next series and it should be adhered to. More details about this will follow via NEA advisers and the AQA website.

Folder presentation was varied across centres and moderators have requested that more precise guidelines are given to centres about how work should be submitted. These guidelines will be passed on later this year through NEA advisers and via the AQA website.

Key advice to students

- choose a focus for your investigation that genuinely interests you
- make sure you have clear, tightly focused linguistic aims for your investigation, framed as research questions, hypotheses or aims
- offer a clear rationale for your methodology
- read and make use of linguistic theory and research to inform your study
- organise your analysis under suitable subheadings
- analyse language for meanings and using the most appropriate language methods
- evaluate throughout and consider the success of your project in the conclusion
- be sure to reference your sources
- be clear on the concept of genre - what it is and how you can make use of it in your original writing
- look at a range of style models and select one that works best for your writing
- refer to both your own text and the style model in detail in your commentary
- check expression, spelling and punctuation before submitting your work
- stick to the word counts for each piece

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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