



General Certificate of Secondary Education

English 3702 *Specification A*

3702/CS Coursework (Speaking & Listening)

Report on the Examination *2007 examination - June series*

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REPORT ON EN1 SPEAKING AND LISTENING: SPECIFICATIONS A AND B

Autumn 2006 saw the beginning of the second cycle of visits to centres for Speaking and Listening. The vast majority of visits were positive in atmosphere and successful in their outcomes. This is pleasing testimony to the seriousness with which Speaking and Listening is taken in the English curriculum at Key Stage 4.

Standardising across centres is delivered in three ways: by use of the inter-Awarding Body DVD; by the cycle of advisory visits; and by the Autumn Teacher Standardisation Meetings held each year. At this year's meetings use was made of the new inter-Awarding Body DVD produced by WJEC. The general view was that this was a helpful resource, but in some meetings there was surprise at what was seen as low assessment for Raj.

Raj is certainly an interesting candidate. He is pleasant, involved and has moments of real humour. Where meetings went back over the DVD a second time, however, they realised that the positive qualities shown by Raj in terms of personality and willingness were not always matched by the quality of language he used and meaning he made. There are times on visits where advisers see over marking because candidates are being rewarded for enthusiasm rather than quality. It is important to stress that the marking criteria focus above all on the quality of spoken language and listening. Candidates are required, among other things, to respond to ongoing talk from others and formulate clear ideas themselves.

One issue which arose in a handful of visits, but which is worth stressing again, is the use of written material to support speaking and listening activities. It is worth stating here that reading from a script is inappropriate in all three contexts. It is not the case that talk, especially more formal talk, does not need to be taught, practised and prepared: what it is the case is that reading from a script, even if the candidates have written the script themselves, is not allowed within the criteria by which candidates are judged. The extent to which candidates use cue cards or PowerPoint when talking in Individual Presentations and the extent to which they have prompts for group work are part of the process for teaching Speaking and Listening. Reading scripts, though, is not allowed.

As part of the ongoing training and standardising of teachers for coursework in English, AQA this year gave a prominent focus to aspects of the Group Interaction context. This input was much appreciated by those teachers who attended Autumn Teacher Standardisation Meetings. It is important, though, that information and ideas discussed at these meetings are then disseminated to other colleagues in the centre. In a number of centres visited in 2007, teachers in charge of Speaking and Listening had no knowledge that such training had taken place, despite someone from their centre having attended the meeting.

As always, the training sessions emphasised that En1 should be an integral part of the whole English curriculum with frequent opportunities for students to learn, practice and be assessed. En1, while having its own importance, should be integrated with other aspects of English to make the subject a coherent whole.

Advisers generally reported that centres are showing considerable commitment towards the teaching and assessment of the En1 component. Most centres have a definite strategy for standardisation and the vast majority of centres use a format that records attainment across all classes and across the three contexts as well as the skills triplets. However, the standard of commentary in such records can sometimes vary, both within and across centres. Best practice is where it is possible to see how marks have been awarded through reference to the criteria tailored to the performance of the individual.

A number of advisers reported how English teachers were pleased to be given the opportunity, via an 'official visit', to give some time and thought to how En1 works within their centre. Advisers were aware that in a number of centres staffing turnover makes the management of En1 quite difficult – but centres were generally able to maintain acceptable procedures.

As has been noted before, the candidates who take part in adviser visits are almost without exception willing, talented and engaging. The fact that these candidates are usually selected for their positive qualities does not hide the fact that advisers have a really pleasant experience when meeting these representatives of the centre.

Drama Focus

Although there has been general improvement in work seen in this area, there is still some insecurity about the teaching and assessment of the Drama Focus activity in certain centres. One problem tended to arise when otherwise able candidates had not been given substantial enough activities, or opportunities consistent with their abilities. This led to the centre marking on expectation of student performance, rather than on the evidence of the performance itself. There were also some cases of inappropriate 'casting'. How well you can perform in Drama Focus does depend, at least to some extent, on the role you are given or choose.

The most successful activities had been prepared and thought through in advance, but at the same time gave scope for improvisation. Solo and paired work were often successful. Where centres opted to select stimulus material which allowed students to work with particular speech genres, this too worked well. One Adviser reported seeing an excellent drama focused activity where on a 'Newsnight Special' the anchor interviewed characters from the film *The Truman Show*, generating considerable tension and conflict.

As is stated above, performance of a published play script is not permissible within this context. Nor is the discussion of a play, or a planning session of how a play might be turned into a film – although both of these might be suitable group activities.

Individual Extended Contribution

In the vast majority of cases, this context was delivered through a formal talk to the class or group. This does not have to be the case, but many teachers clearly feel that addressing a group formally is a useful life skill.

The best sessions were where individuals introduced their peers to topics that they knew well and which would hold their attention. Less successful were talks which had been researched for the occasion, but on topics which seemed to carry little real interest for the speaker or their audience.

Group Interaction

After Advisers indicated last year that this context had led to some disappointing work, it became the focus for training at the Autumn Standardisation Meetings. A number of issues were stressed in this training material, the main one being that group work will not merely happen by putting candidates together and expecting them to get on with it. Group work needs exemplifying and its skills need drawing out before assessment begins. Groups need focused tasks with definite end results, and individuals within the group may need to assume certain roles, such as chair, initial speaker, summariser etc.

There can sometimes, though, be over preparation of the actual task itself. Such cases result in a hoped for ‘discuss, argue, persuade’, transmuting into a series of solo presentations better matched to ‘explain, describe, narrate’.

Teachers at the Autumn Teacher Standardisation Meetings came up with many interesting ideas for how to structure group work, with simulation tasks being especially popular, not least because clear roles could be assigned and end results achieved.

The size of the group is always an important issue – for our purposes a group is two or more people. It was noticeable in some adult centres, though, that because groups of between 8-10 students comprise the whole class, the class tended to stay together as a single group when it came to this context. Generally speaking, group work succeeds with relatively small groups. Certainly groups as big as eight or more are unlikely to be very effective in terms of possible assessments.

Record keeping/standardisation

In an area where, by definition, there can usually be no permanent record of the talk itself, record keeping is an important aspect of the process. Generally record keeping was thorough and consistent, although there were some cases in which the manner of record keeping varied across the centre. This is not encouraged, because it makes standardisation difficult and can lead to uneven assessment within the centre itself.

Standardisation is a requirement of the specification and must involve some form of cross-moderation. It is recognised that this requires support from senior staff, who must be encouraged to see En1 as a vital part of this core subject. The inter-board DVD also helps with standardisation, as does any recorded material made by centres themselves.

Administration

A number of advisers have noted that although visits are nearly always conducted in a very pleasant atmosphere, actually arranging the visits can take a lot of time and effort. It would be much appreciated if centres could ensure that they respond quickly to the initial contact by their adviser and that they make sure the En1 co-ordinator can be easily contacted thereafter. The more ways of contact the better: email can be especially effective.

Conclusion

The following comments are taken verbatim from reports sent in by advisers. They support the idea that Speaking and Listening is a valued part of the English curriculum, with much to offer to students of all backgrounds and abilities:

‘The teachers I met were uniformly positive about Speaking and Listening, and I saw some exceptionally well-motivated and enthusiastic students.’

‘We really enjoyed our visits and were much impressed by how hard teachers and students worked to do things properly and to do them better. How tolerant and friendly they all are, despite our intrusion into their daily routines!’

As ever, the Principal Moderator and the whole team thank centres for their co-operation in ensuring the continued success of this component.