Questions matter

GCSE

English Language

8700C Spoken Language Endorsement

Report on the Examination

November 2025

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Contents

The below table is interactive. You can press the control button click on the title of the question to go directly to that page.

Contents	Page
Summary	3
Introduction	4
Topics and tasks	4
Assessment	5
Management of the endorsement	7
Further support	9
Conclusion	9
Further support	10

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Summary

Outcomes of verification

The verifying panel were pleased to acknowledge the increasing precision and security in the application of the assessment criteria. The vast majority of centre samples received a verify decision, indicating evidence of secure application of the standard and the criteria at each grade submitted.

Practice in the majority of centres was seen to be supportive of student's ambitions and enabling of their success against the assessment criteria.

Areas where positive progress has been noted

- Increasing variety in topic choice suggesting more encouragement of independence and ambition whilst also reflecting the particular nature of the November cohort.
- A very notable reduction in the number of students seen to be delivering written scripts and this attention to being prepared to communicate orally is very encouraging.
- More consistent substantive development of talk with students at pass more regularly talking for 3 minutes plus.
- Questioning has also been improving with clear consideration of the required challenge level and the need to target thinking and reasoning rather than just knowledge.

Areas where further developments in practice are to be encouraged

- Feedback has stressed the need for students to be certain and specific as to their purpose, their reason for communicating, and that this requires them to have considered 'why it matters' and a 'wider frame' of reference to give their talk depth, relevance and authority.
- Recognition that this component is assessed via a competency model is not always clearly evidenced - leading to grades not being supported as not all criteria have been securely matched.
- The use of PowerPoint is increasingly common and the issues this can give rise to merit further consideration in this assessment of oral communication.
- Inconsistent awarding in some centre samples indicates that standardising of recordings may not be undertaken possibly caused by the small numbers of students.

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Introduction

The verifying panel would like to offer their thanks and appreciation to all those teachers who ensured that students were supported effectively in completing this important element of GCSE English Language.

The November series has a unique quality in that a large proportion of students are those who have come to study in the UK and for whom English is not their first language. We are always impressed at the progress they have made in their vocabulary and fluency, and it is always fascinating to hear of their backgrounds and educational experiences. Alongside this cohort, we are also privileged to hear from many mature students following college courses whose life experiences, both academic and professional, are rich and varied and whose topic choices and perspectives are usefully informed by these.

What is common to both and typical of the November entry, is the significant commitment evidenced in the preparation of the presentations delivered and the seriousness and pride with which the assessment is approached. A large proportion of the presentations submitted were being delivered to real audiences which is very pleasing to see as it does encourage more focus on the manner of communication valued in the assessment criteria. It is inspiring to see the support offered to these students and the value being attached to confidence in oral communication recognising the integral nature of such work to the progression of core skills.

Topics and tasks

The variety of topics chosen continues to develop not least owing to the very diverse cohort. Whilst certain topics remain popular, there is much more evidence of independence and individuality as students embrace the opportunity to focus on what is relevant to them and their experience. Their ownership of their topic permitted them to communicate with passion and influence leading to very purposeful and influential talks.

There were as in the summer series, many talks focusing on social media and where these were most effective, students engaged specifically with an identified aspect such as mental health impacts, educational benefits, technological advances and of course, the growing influence of AI.

A number of students presented with influence on issues impacting our world. Global warming and climate change were considered with interesting talks based on the experience in other countries and the social responsibility we should all assume in relation to addressing the concerns. Equally purposeful were talks addressing knife crime, bullying, the importance of progress in vaccines and euthanasia.

Education was the focus of many talks seen this series. Much was learned of the differences in education systems alongside thoughtful explorations of the current examination system in the UK; for example the need for more consideration of the arts, and support of different learners from the perspective of educational support staff.

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Personal interests often lead to fascinating talks on topics ranging from anime to the influence of football or other sports and the opportunity to explore a topic or experience of importance to the individual student was fully exploited in the various presentations focused on specific films, video games or travel experiences.

Assessment

The verifying panel were pleased to acknowledge the increasing precision and security in the application of the assessment criteria. The vast majority of centre samples received a verify decision indicating evidence of secure application of the standard and the criteria at each grade submitted. Where standards could not be verified, centres will be contacted and offered support to address the identified issues. Reference in the details below is made to the 8700C NEA: Notes and Guidance document where full information and support is provided for all aspects of the endorsement.

A key priority underpinning the verification of centre standards, is the recognition of the competency model of assessment which applies to this component. This requires all criteria at a level to be matched by the evidence submitted for the level to be awarded. The model is not compensatory; engaging communication skills cannot substitute for a lack of complexity in the ideas presented. Similarly, a strong response to extended, probing questions cannot compensate for a brief, undeveloped talk.

The only way to correctly assess students is to apply the criteria in sequence, considering the available evidence. Centres should ensure that the first bullet is given priority since, without the ideas and substance in the presentation, the grade cannot be secured. It may be helpful to reflect on the degree of independence and complexity demonstrated in the stated purpose of the talk; students whose focus is exposition without a clear agenda may well show engagement with some of the complexities of the topic through the range and illustration of their arguments, allowing them to match Merit criteria, but are unlikely to be demonstrating sufficient evaluation, reasoning and analysis to match the 'sophisticated' descriptor.

Where standards could not be verified, typically at Merit or Distinction grade, the following issues were identified:

- Specificity is key to the achievement of the criteria beyond pass level where purpose and depth of detail in ideas is expected, rather than breadth of coverage. Students were not seen to organise their ideas and information against a clear structure or agenda; there was no definitive opinion/conclusion to give direction to the talk. As noted in previous series, students need to be talking **for** rather than just **about** as this will provide a focus both for selective use of the expected research and for the structure of their presentation, whilst allowing them to reach a reasoned conclusion. The formulation of a question to address was typically seen to be supportive of higher achievement. Pages 13 and 15 of the NEA Guidance address this important stage of planning from topic to task.

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- Presentations entered at Merit or Distinction focused on information sharing, narrative or descriptive accounts of personal experiences, hobbies, passions without sufficient external reference via consideration of the 'wider frame', the social, moral, political or global significance of the topic. Encouraging students to reflect on the wider issues arising from their experience and how other people view these is an important marker of progression towards complexity. Pages 12 and 17 of the NEA Guidance offer specific models to support this element of preparation.
- Presentations were, for the reasons above, too short, sometimes only just over a minute long, to allow for the proper depth and reasoning necessary to match the criteria for higher level awards. Evidence against the criteria relating to range of vocabulary, control of structure and use of a variety of strategies to engage the audience is therefore insufficient. It is challenging to find the evidence of substantive reasoning and argument in a talk of less than 3 minutes. Centres may wish to reflect on whether their guidance to students establishes appropriate expectations to support those targeting higher level awards where it would be expected that the talk would be longer than this base threshold.
- Students were reliant on reading, using of scripts or PowerPoints, such that the key criterion relating to 'using a range of strategies to engage' was not matched. This can be complicated by the inevitability of teacher only audiences. Consideration of the multiple ways in which this criterion can be fulfilled, and the importance of rehearsal opportunities, are detailed in the NEA guidance on pages 21 and 23 respectively.
- Questioning was not given due attention in terms of the challenge of questions asked and the quality of responses given. The principle here is that the questioning should be managed by the assessor/teacher but owned by the student meaning that they need to be aware of this being their opportunity to demonstrate their authority and ownership of their ideas. There were instances where only 1 question was asked, or the questions were generic - 'why did you choose this topic?' rather than arising spontaneously from the presentation. On occasion, the questions focused in on the personal experience of the students rather than offering them an opportunity to extend their thinking against a broader frame. Page 25 of the NEA Guidance details how this element should be approached.
- Conversely, the range and challenge of the questioning students received was such that they were able to engage with complex detail and demonstrate reasoning and argument beyond what had been demonstrated in the presentation. Sometimes, the questioning was of longer duration than the original talk which is not as expected. The response criteria were therefore matched at a higher grade, and this was seen to unduly influence the final grade awarded in this competency model of assessment.

Centres are reminded of the JCQ regulations relating to the administration and assessment of NEA components whereby internal standardising, informed by a review of the official AQA exemplars, is required to be undertaken, the signature on the Centre Declaration Sheet serving as confirmation that this has been completed. Such a process can serve to ensure consistent application of the standard by all teachers in a centre which was not always seen to be secure.

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It is useful to explore the issues above in relation to the specific criteria being mindful of the progression from the descriptor 'straightforward' at PASS to 'complex/challenging' at MERIT and rising to 'sophisticated' at DISTINCTION. What these terms mean specifically in relation to the ideas/information criterion, has been detailed in previous reports – see June 2024 page 8.

Further detail on the assessment criteria expectations is contained within the Non-examination Assessment Guidance document on pages 8 and 9 with detailed illustration of the skill strands being assessed at each level in Appendix 4, where assessment grids for Laura (D), James (M) and Zain (P) are included.

Management of the endorsement

As already observed, centres offered appropriate contexts for the assessment in the majority of samples reviewed. However, there were some issues of practice which merit reporting.

- Although teacher only audiences might be inevitable where the entry is small as is often the case in November, it was pleasing to see more than one teacher present. In a number of centres, small group or whole class audiences were provided which is to be encouraged, not least for the positive feedback the students were then seen to receive on their talks. The expected formality of the talk is typically more easily matched where a real audience is present.
- Sound and visuals were typically effectively managed. There were many recordings conducted as part of a teams' meeting with multiple participants and the adjustment of the viewing window was helpfully adjusted to permit a clear focus on the speaker. There were however a number of such meetings where power-point presentations were shown and here, the student was not appropriately foregrounded in what is an assessment of oral communication.
- The use of PowerPoint presentations was itself more extensive this series and they were not always supportive of communicative success with students using them as scripts and not speaking out beyond the screen. It was clear that considerable effort had been invested in the design and construction of what can only be a visual aid as it has no tangible weighting in the final assessment. Discussion of how PowerPoint can be an aid is an important consideration in the preparation phase in order that appropriate emphasis be placed on the skill of presenting.

Length of talk

As has already been mentioned, brief presentations cannot readily achieve beyond Pass level. The specification sets a 10 minute allocation for each student to include both presenting and questioning so it is reasonable to set an aspiration of 5 minutes for all students noting that when not reading, what might appear to be brief talks, actually take time to deliver effectively.

However, in this series we did again see many talks which far exceeded the 10 minute limit. Whilst it is pleasing to see such time being allocated to students to present their ideas and

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engage with their audiences in extended questioning, centres are reminded that this is a formal assessment with rubric which needs to be observed.

Students should therefore be advised to plan the length of their talk to permit appropriate questioning within the 10 minutes allocated. Teachers should ensure that there is a fixed end to the formal assessment once appropriate questioning to secure the response criteria at the level targeted has been completed.

On many occasions, the length stems from an aspiration to include everything rather than selecting according to purpose and this can negatively affect audience engagement and success in influencing their understanding. Selectivity is a higher-level skill which should be encouraged within this context as it requires exercising judgement as to what level of detail will be effective which is a skill relevant in all examination writing responses. Less can be more, but students need to be 'empowered' to omit/re-order details as part of their final planning for the presentation. This has implications for the way that students conduct their research and support of this skill is important not least given the need to understand how to use AI appropriately.

Administration

The verifying panel offer their sincere thanks to all those centres who submitted their marks and uploaded their samples by the deadline of November 5th. However, there were many centres who did not meet this expectation, and centres are encouraged to ensure that timely submission is prioritised to support the completion of the verification in what is a short window of time for this series.

The delays in some submissions clearly resulted from a lack of security as to which students needed to be assessed and which could instead 'carry forward' their grade from a previous entry.

If a student is not carrying forward their level but submitting a new performance, then this must be provided to AQA for verification in accordance with the published deadline in order that students are not disadvantaged. Many samples were submitted late possibly owing to a lack of clarity as to which students needed to undertake the assessment, and this sometimes resulted in undeveloped/improvised talks or interviews as centres rushed to provide the required sample. Early identification of 'live' students is recommended to support timely submissions. Such an approach would hopefully serve to reduce the relatively significant number of 'Not Classified' entries seen in the November series.

The link below can assist centres in identifying these students at an early point in the entry process:

AQA | Exams admin | Non-exam assessment (NEA) | Carry forward of marks

However, carry forward is not automatic and where a student has previously been awarded NC (Not classified) it is to be hoped that they may be given another opportunity by completing a new presentation such that they may showcase their skill progress.

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There were a number of centres who submitted audio only recording or paper records instead of the required video evidence. Where there are legitimate reasons for special consideration to be applied, centres need to submit a request for this in advance of the series by emailing moderation@aqa.org.uk.

Indexing of candidate recordings

There were again a significant number of recordings which did not contain the required information in the file labelling. Most notably, the grade awarded was often missing from the file name and, as per all NEA elements, it is the grade on the work which is subject to verification as this has been awarded by the subject specialist. It is also important that there is a clear identifier hence the request for both candidate number and name in the label.

The format of the labelling is as follows:

12345_8700-C_0001_Jane Smith _ Pass

Thank you to centres in anticipation of your addressing this small but significant issue for future series.

Further support

Centres are reminded that they can access all necessary information about this endorsement from the NEA section of the AQA website. Here there are links to the JCQ rubric documentation, the standardising exemplars and the **NEA Notes and Guidance document**. This aims to support teachers in all aspects of the endorsement, offering practical suggestions and classroom activities aimed at securing positive learning and assessment outcomes.

Information is also available here to support those centres working with students where access to the qualification may prove challenging.

Where assessments have not been verified or concerns have been identified in relation to the management of the endorsement, letters explaining the issues found will be sent to centres in January in order to support an appropriate review of practice to allow for future submissions to be fully verified.

Conclusion

Once again, the panel would like to offer their thanks for the commitment and support shown to students in their work for this endorsement. The many stimulating and accomplished presentations seen are a tribute to all and serve to evidence this invaluable opportunity for students of all ages to use their voices and be heard.

It would be helpful if all teachers of the 8700 specification could be given access to this report.

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Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades
Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the results statistics page of our website.

Enhanced Results Analysis (ERA)
Use our exam results analysis tool to create and customise as many different reports for comparison as you like.

Contact us

Our friendly team will be happy to support you between 8am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

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