



GCSE

English Language

8700/C: Non-exam assessment

Report on the examination

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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 the 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 centre 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. 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. Contemporary issues were also represented, for example, a discussion of the moral dilemmas of nuclear warfare arising from consideration of the popularity of the film 'Oppenheimer', reminding us of the value of the endorsement in affording an opportunity to reflect on and make sense of important issues affecting society now.

Common topics seen in this series are as follows:

- Challenges presented by social media, particularly in relation to mental health.
- AI – now a real and pressing preoccupation of many as they embark on their working lives, not least in specific sectors such as art and music. However, the positive support it can offer in our daily lives, and particularly in health care, was also celebrated.
- Equality of opportunity is a genuine concern of many, informed by their experiences of education and life. Gender equality was a notable focus, affecting both educational and life experiences across the world.
- Global insecurity – whether it be wars and conflicts or environmental issues, such as fast fashion and nuclear power, were addressed with reasoned and sobering reflections.
- Consideration of the different educational and social experiences resulting from home schooling.
- Detailed and frequently engaging presentations on countries of origin.
- Sports and hobbies.

The necessary specificity of titles to provide a purpose for the presentations was seen to be generally recognised, with many students clearly considering the key question to underpin successful presentations, 'why does it matter?' Where this was not the case however, the challenge to develop and shape a talk for influence was much greater.

Again this year, there were many instances where newly arrived students were encouraged to talk about how they came to be in the UK, when more interesting use of their experience is possible. For example, by comparing cultures and society. Questioning is typically obvious and content focused instead of encouraging sharing of ideas. As such, attainment is capped at Pass level, when language skills and maturity/life experience could allow for so much more. It bears repetition from last year's report, that an assumption that these students will be best served by focusing on their own experience, is misplaced and can serve to limit attainment for this cohort of students.

For example, students who had been advised to present accounts of their home countries or their journeys to the UK, inevitably produced extensive narrative and descriptive detail, where the focus lay on information and not on ideas and opinions. These were more focused when a comparative frame was introduced, especially where this was specific. For example, talking about the challenges being posed by tourism, climate change, employment and educational opportunities, generational attitudes and experiences. What can lift these talks is where the students actually evaluate the significance of the features described in relation to social

structure, culture and beliefs, and thus engage in thoughtful reflection on the impact on the individual. One approach seen was to explore environmental issues in relation to their home countries, many of which are facing significant challenges. Such an approach allowed students to be more structured and specific in their talk, therefore employing a wider range of vocabulary, and to achieve a powerful impact on their audience through giving the known issues a real context. Centres are urged to encourage ambition in all students and to recognise that a cultural difference can be an enriching, rather than a limiting, factor in this component.

Assessment

The verifying panel were pleased to acknowledge the increasing precision and security in the application of the assessment criteria, such that the vast majority of centre marking was verified. There were again instances where qualitative performances were under-rewarded apparently on the basis of EAL (English as an additional language) interference affecting fluency. Centres are reminded that where a student speaks clearly and intelligibly using language which is appropriate, the general criterion of using 'Standard Spoken English' is fulfilled and occasional lapses in grammar and pronunciation are acceptable, especially where English is a second or even third language.

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 in order 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.

Where standards could not be verified, the following issues were found to be at cause:

- 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. These talks were often without a clear and specific purpose.
- Presentations were too short to allow for the proper depth and reasoning necessary to match the criteria for higher level awards.
- Students were reliant on reading, use of scripts/PowerPoints, such that the key criterion relating to 'using a range of strategies to engage' was not matched.
- Questioning was not given due attention in terms of the challenge of questions asked and the quality of responses given.
- There remain centres where students are interviewed rather than delivering an individual presentation. This is not compliant with the rubric and does not allow the student to demonstrate the independent control of structure and ideas, as valued by the criteria at all levels.

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.

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**. Further detail on all of these aspects is contained within the Non-examination Assessment Guidance document available from the main website and a link to this document appears below.

Quality of information/ideas

Disagreement against this criterion was the main reason for Merit and Distinction awards not being supported. Students who present factual or personal information, with the emphasis on description/narration or straightforward explanation, are not readily able to meet the 'challenging' or 'sophisticated' thresholds of the higher levels where detailing ideas is expected. To progress the complexity of ideas, students need to be encouraged to identify a clear purpose/reason for their talk which moves beyond 'what I know'. The teacher approval phase is intended to ensure that students have chosen an appropriate focus to allow them to demonstrate their skill levels and should include consideration of the 'wider-frame' and 'why it matters' principles detailed in the Notes and Guidance document. This will inevitably permit greater selectivity in their use of examples as they seek to 'prove' their argument. This progression is illustrated clearly in the presentations by Zain (pass), Beth (merit) and Laura (distinction). At the higher levels, consideration of alternatives/solutions are expected and this should be specific, reasoned and plausible and questioning can usefully build on what has been suggested.

Structure and vocabulary

It is typical of most presentations seen that vocabulary is ranging and qualitative, often matching a higher level than the substance of the talk itself. Attention to structuring a talk is not always explicitly considered and, given the importance of supporting audience engagement, attention to using key structural techniques, is to be further encouraged. It can sometimes be frustrating to hear well-crafted openings and then observe the talk petering out with no shaped conclusion. Clarity of purpose is again fundamental to supporting success against this strand.

Using strategies to engage the audience/achieving purpose

It was very pleasing to see the confidence and 'presence' demonstrated by students in this series even where, as often necessitated by the small number of entries, students were presenting to a single teacher audience. The age profile is clearly a factor here as is the increased maturity, but one factor noted was the consciousness shown by the majority that they were presenting to and communicating with an audience. Rhetorical techniques were confidently employed, pace and intonation used to emphasise intention, and there was clear consideration of the contents of the talk and how they might secure the desired impact. The high prevalence of reliance on scripts or PowerPoint presentations seen in the June series, was not found to be as significant in the November sampling and this is a very positive indicator of the value attributed to success in oral communication by both students and teachers. However, there were still many instances where students read verbatim from scripts. The ethos of the spoken language component is that students will give a presentation

to an audience and that this will be a prepared spoken presentation intended to be both heard and seen. The JCQ guidance states that although students are able to access notes, *teachers should advise them 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, not only in the room, but also beyond the camera.

Questioning

This element is still an area of concern and was seen to affect students' opportunities to secure awards appropriate to their skill levels. This element of the assessment criteria is integral to a student's achievement and must be given proper attention. The principle is that students need to be aware that they are fully accountable for what they say and must be prepared to explain/reason/justify their point of view. It should be understood that students are responsible for developing their responses fully, even where the questions seem 'limiting', since it is part of their assessment. The following points need reiterating here:

- The requirement is for questions: a single question is not sufficient and is not appropriate given the status of the assessment. The time allocated should be proportionate to the presentation given; a long talk still needs meaningful questioning.
- Questions should arise out of the talk: this means they need to be spontaneous – not pre-prepared or planted, and specific – 'why did you choose this topic?' is not therefore appropriate and is actually reductive, devaluing the communicative efforts made.
- Questions should always target thinking and reasoning rather than just factual knowledge and answers should be valued, acknowledged and where appropriate, subjected to further enquiry.
- Teachers should be involved in questioning: in order to ensure that students have the opportunity to match the response descriptors, (straightforward, detailed, perceptive), they need to receive questions which challenge both knowledge and higher-level reasoning.
- Assessment Objective 8 refers to both listening and responding, so it is expected that teacher questions in particular will require careful processing. This is exemplified in the questioning of Charlotte and Laura in the standardising materials.

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 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 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. Rehearsal groups can support this by inviting feedback from audiences as to sustained understanding and focus against purpose. This practice can also prove valuable for less confident students who are unsure as to how to develop their talks to achieve impact. This approach is detailed further in the NEA guidance.

Procedures

Many entries for the November series are 'carry forward' and it is helpful for teachers to be able to quickly identify those students who are not eligible for this. The link below can assist in this:

[AQA | Exams admin | Non-exam assessment \(NEA\) | Carry forward of marks](#)

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, often leading to undeveloped/improvised talks or interviews, as centres rush to complete a sample. Early identification of 'live' students is recommended to support timely submissions in what is a short moderation window. Such an approach would hopefully serve to reduce the relatively significant number of 'Not Classified' entries seen in the November series.

Where a student is re-sitting GCSE English Language and is therefore able to carry forward their endorsement grade, if that grade is 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.

The Digital Media Portal and Indexing

The introduction of the AQA portal has been welcomed by centres and verifiers and we offer our thanks to those centres who continue to manage this process successfully.

It remains the case, however, that insufficient clarity of indexing of samples was the cause of a large number of centres being referred. We acknowledge that there has been some confusion here but the key principle pertains: verifiers need to be able to confidently match the video evidence uploaded to the individual student by centre name, student name, student number and level awarded.

Just as with written NEA, the mark on the work itself is the mark which is deemed correct since it has been awarded by the assessor who has signed the Centre Declaration Sheet to attest to their adherence to the specification rubric. The format of the labelling is as follows:

54321_8700_0001_Jane Jones_ Pass

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

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 the valuable opportunity afforded by this component and its relevance to students of all ages.

Further support

Centres are reminded that they can access all necessary information about [Non-exam assessment guide: Spoken language endorsement](#) from the AQA website where the **NEA Guidance document**, published in September 2023, can be found. 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.

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

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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