

English Language GA 3: Written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

Overall, students' responses displayed better understanding and application of analytical tools and metalanguage than in previous years. Students' understanding of how the language processes work within Australian society had broadened and deepened and a greater number demonstrated that they had moved to a deeper conceptual understanding of socio-linguistics in Australian society. A confidence in the teaching of content, analysis of both spoken and written texts and the focusing on key elements in preparation for the November examination was also evident. There has also been a steady growth in student numbers, with 944 students attending the 2002 November examination.

The examination paper consisted of three sections. Section 1 required short answers to questions on the discourse features of two comparable transcripts. Section 2 required analysis of specific language features of one written text. Section 3 required one essay selected from three options. The marking process was based on both the allocation of specific marks for each question and the published Examination Assessment Criteria.

This report is designed to assist teacher/s and student/s in their assessment preparation and study for 2003. The inclusion of sample responses allows opportunities for discussion on how to effectively revise content and metalanguage (both in broad and specific terms), apply terms of language description and make appropriate analysis. Sample responses also assist in identifying the correlation between points given in sample responses and associated assessment criteria. Chosen responses are used, not necessarily because they are the 'best', but to illustrate the way in which the student has responded to the question and incorporated examples in the answers.

Marks were lost in Sections 1 and 2 because students ignored the requirement for references to specific line numbers. In such questions precise examples were needed and correct identification of specific line references was required. This was requested to avoid students giving block reference in the apparent hope that they might include relevant lines. In Sections 1 and 2, students had to engage with the texts and read carefully the directions given and do exactly as they were asked.

Use of stimulus material in Section 3 was poor and students require more practice in the use of such material. Overall, the essay was better structured than in previous years but there was evidence that some students merely re-adjusted an essay they had previously written on a similar topic to answer the essay topic selected from the examination paper.

Future examination preparation needs to include discussion of examination time management strategies to ensure that time allocation for different questions is commensurate with mark allocation across the whole paper. Where students broke away from the sequence of questions, gaps often occurred which suggested that they lost track of what they had or had not completed. Students are advised to give careful consideration to working systematically through the sections of the examination paper. They should read the whole examination paper carefully during reading time, not only to identify content issues, but also to familiarise themselves with the structure of the paper and how some questions relate to other questions while differing in requirements. Students are reminded that they are often provided with cues to assist in their answering of questions – words such as 'identify', 'explain', 'compare' and 'discuss' should not be ignored when they appear in questions.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Section 1

Questions 1 to 8 were short-answer questions related to Area of Study 1: Language Description, Unit 3 Outcomes 1, 2 and 3 and Unit 4 Outcomes 1 and 2:

- principles of appropriateness
- language use for societal interaction
- group membership and social distance
- the role of language in reflecting personal, social and cultural understandings
- the structures and features of different text-types
- differences in the nature and functions of spoken and written language
- the relationship between context and the features of English involving more than one speaker
- the cooperative principle of conversation
- major conversational strategies and their use in social interaction.

Generally, students used transcription conventions very well. However, other students often failed to give line references where there was an explicit statement to do so. It is evident that, during revision, students require constant practice in identifying and building confidence in writing spoken text analysis.

Question 1 (Average mark 2.11/Available marks 4)

The more successful students presented four clear elements and supported each with a specific line reference.

Student sample:

There are many elements of turn-taking in Transcript 1, due to the context of the quiz show and the structure of asking and responding to questions. The Host makes use of explicit markers encouraging another participant to respond by addressing them by their name, as seen in Line 7. The nature of posing a question is in itself a turn-taking device, whereby each contestant answers a question, then proceeding to the next contestant, as viewed in Lines 9 and 10. Another form of turn-taking is the combination of answer and correction. Once a contestant elicits his response (Line 12), this then encourages the host to speak either stating the answer to be incorrect or correct (Line 13). Another turn-taking strategy is evident at the completion of the transcript (Line 55) when the instructional phrase "It's time to vote off.." eliciting a response from each contestant, a turn-taking, used for effective communication between participants.

Question 2 (3.06/6)

Students needed to recognise that this question required the identification of six features, in this case prosodic features, with the emphasis being on 'frequently used'.

Student sample

The host uses several distinctive prosodic features for different purposes. Primary accent in intonation units are used to: emphasise important words (L4), focus contestants' attention (L8), or make the answer to their guess clear (L 9). She also uses lengthened vowel sounds for dramatic purposes, "Let's pl=ay 'The Wea=kest Link'" (5), to emphasise important aspects of questions, "tri=cycle" (L 7), "sore hea=d", and to highlight important words, "corre=ct" (37), "six thou=sand" (49). Noticeable intakes of breath (L 11, 31, 19) focus contestants' attention before each question is asked. Surprisingly for the nature of utterances, most interrogatives asked by the host end in terminal pitch direction (L 7, 11, 15, 9), possibly a feature of the host's idiolect or style.

Question 3 (2.34/6)

Students were required to demonstrate that they understood the cooperative principles and how they operate, but many did not connect cooperative principles with Grice's maxims. Both Questions 3 and 6 (Transcript 2) were good discriminators of knowledge as the responses fell into two broad camps: those students who knew the maxims and those who did not; and those who were confident in applying and using the maxims, i.e. applying analytical tools and using metalanguage, and those who were not.

Teachers need to ensure that they teach the maxims thoroughly, as they are an important foundation for learning and understanding the principles of the course. Also, those students who did know the maxims would have been more successful in gaining more marks if they had taken the time to deal with each maxim and provided an explicit example from the text. Few students commented on the parody in *The Weakest Link* where application in the extreme is evident.

Student sample:

In a quiz show, co-operation is vital in the participants' understanding, facilitating in effective communication. The maxim of quantity is encased, with the one word response offered by the footballers, which is sufficient in gaining the required answers, ie. Line 8. In this situation which is time bound it would be inappropriate to give a detailed answer, as the action doesn't conform to the game objective. The maxim of quality is the key objective of the game show, hence in order to succeed it's in the best interests of the footballers to reply with a response they deem correct, ie. Line 44. Although the answer was incorrect, the participant attempted to provide the correct answer. Once again due to the game show being time bound, all responses must be orderly and brief, not subject to ambiguity, therefore the objective is to not waste too much time in answer questions. This maxim could be broken by Max (Line 36) who allows 4 seconds to pass before eliciting a response. Due to the nature of the show, based on the contestants' ability to answer questions, it's crucial that all answers be relevant to the task otherwise the game's consequences could place a burden on the respondents, ie. not winning the money to be donated to charity.

Question 4 (2.05/4)

Students were required to identify four features of turn-taking, with reference to specific line numbers where each feature occurred.

Student sample

The use of adjacency pairs is evident in Text 2 in Lines 2 and 3. This format encourages the conversation to flow by the co-ordination of answering and responding. The use of explicit markers, incorporating a participant's name in a question draws them into the social interaction (Lines 12-13) encouraging them, in this case, to provide an answer to a question. The use of fillers in Line 18, "or" signals to the Host that Duncan is trying to provide a response and is perhaps seeking a clue or reassurance as observed in Line 19. There is also evidence of overlap in Lines 42 & 43, indicating that at times turn-taking is not orderly.

Question 5 (2.43/5)

As students were required to select the prosodic features 'frequently used' by Host, some discernment was required.

Student sample

The Host uses many prosodic features frequently throughout, such as the terminal pitch direction following a question (Lines 2, 14); this denotes the end of the Host's turn, eliciting a response from the caller. The Host uses both lengthened vowel sounds and primary accent in intonation units to highlight important or content words (L 1) or the most relevant words in a question (L 2). Like the Host in text 1, intake of breath prepares the caller for the next question (L 36), while answers are spoken loudly and excitedly to emphasise them, 'The Brown Bomber' (L 26).

Question 6 (1.67/5)

Responses were expected to deal with each of the four maxims and indicate, with reference to specific line numbers, how they operated in the transcript.

Student sample

The host and Duncan use similar co-operative principles to those used by participants in Text 1, but they pay less attention to the maxim of quantity, preferring to go through their individual thought processes out loud (L 15-25). Duncan takes time and incorporates unnecessary information into his utterance, thereby flouting the maxim of relevance, i.e., 'I'm having a bit of trouble..' (L16), 'I know I've heard the name" (L 40). The maxim of manner is adhered to by the host as she tries to give as much helpful information to assist Duncan. The maxim of quality is also adhered to by the interlocutors. They both say what they think, especially Duncan, e.g., 'I don't think..' (L 45). But evidently, both participants are content that the maxim of quality is upheld, that what is said is what the speaker believes to be the truth.

Question 7 (3.37/6)

For Questions 7 and 8 students needed to read the question carefully. The length and structure of response needed to be proportionate to the marks allocated for the question. Responses were required to cover all aspects of the question and, in this case, deal with both transcripts. Some students did not realise that they could comment on discourse features already drawn out by earlier questions, and so did not give enough substance in their answers.

Student sample

In Text 1 the relationship between host and contestants is quite a formal one. There is no unnecessary communication and all utterances are quickly ended, suggesting that those speaking are quite distant from each other and thus are expected to not discuss anything personal or irrelevant. In contrast, Text 2 contains many examples of informal conversation, such as colloquialisms like 'okay' (L9-10), fillers which serve to present silence while one is thinking (L34) and frequent pauses, which do not appear in Text 1 except when a contestant needs time to think of an answer. In text 1, the turns in which host and contestant speak is clearly defined whereas in Text 2 the turns are less structured and sometimes even overlap. Thus, while in both texts, the relationship between the host and the contestants is quite distant or it is unlikely that they are familiar with each other, Text 1 presents this relationship as a very formal one while Text 2 attempts to show that it is friendly.

Question 8 (1.98/4)

Less successful responses to this question focused on relationships rather than purposes, despite relationships being an aspect of the previous question. Some students were unable to clearly ascribe different purposes to the two texts, while others searched for different ways to deal with relationships after doing so in Question 7.

Student sample

The purpose of the quiz show in Text 1 is primarily for competition and entertainment. Whilst the atmosphere is of a serious competitive nature. Hence, it would not be appropriate for the host to establish a very informal relationship with the contestants as it may appear that she is being bias. Also, there are time restraints imposing on this game, that thus, no time for 'chit-chat'. On the other hand, the competition in Text 2 is of a much more informal nature and primarily serves the function of entertainment. That thus it is appropriate for the host to establish an informal relationship with the contestants through an informal tone as the element of competition is not as serious as in Text 1. Also establishing a personal relationship with the contestant makes it more interesting for the listener.

Section 2

Questions 9 to 14 related to Area of Study 1: Language Description, Unit 3 Outcomes 1, 2 and 3 and Unit 4 Outcomes 1 and 3:

- distinctive features of written English texts
- structures and features of different text-types
- relationships between words and meaning
- discourse features of written texts and their purpose/s
- language use for societal interaction
- language variation reflecting its users.

Question 9 (1.64/2)

Students were required to identify two purposes of the text.

Student sample

The purposes of the text is to inform its audience about the census and also to persuade them to participate in it.

Question 10 (1.28/2)

Students were asked how the structure of the text supported the purposes they identified. Specific reference to the correct structural feature supporting the purpose identified was required. Students were expected to refer to, for example:

- the first column of the text is structured into a question and answer format which attempts to persuade the reader of the value of the census
- the second column is instructional in that it deals with the procedural processes of filling out and collecting the form.

Question 11 (0.58/2)

Questions 11 and 12 were good discriminators as most students understood the effect of the feature identified, but the better papers differentiated between the particular examples and gave a range of specific and different effects. Many students appeared not to know what is a second person pronoun and gave 'your', and in some responses 'he' and 'she'. There was confusion over both person and what constitutes a pronoun and an overall lack of accuracy about parts of speech/word classes. Students were required to identify two instances of 'you' (not 'your' which is the possessive pronoun) in two different sections of the text with reference to the line numbers in which they occurred.

Question 12 (1.73/5)

Some students were able only to talk about distance and authority in general ways and few scripts registered each sentence as having different intents and marking different relationships:

- there is an implied threat in lines 23–26 and this threat is made less severe by avoiding directly addressing the reader as the 'you' who may be prosecuted under the Census Act. The abstract notion of 'The Act' becomes the agent in the sentence
- in lines 52–55 on the other hand, the Tax Office is an agent who is represented as powerless, through the use of the negative modal 'cannot'. This is seen to protect the implied 'you' as the reader from abuse of their information.

Student sample

The absence of personal pronouns makes the guide more formal and business-like, as it sheds its helpful tone. The information contained, for example, in Lines 23-26, is much more legal in nature. The absence of personal pronouns makes the relationship seem more less personal and much more serious, especially since the content is about punishment that could occur to the reader.

Question 13 (1.53/3)

Some students experienced difficulty in identifying compound sentences well. Simple and complex sentences were generally accurately identified.

- the three main types of sentences were: Interrogative, Declarative and Imperative
- simple, compound and complex were also acceptable.

Question 14 (1.79/6)

Some students did not appear to recognise either the syntactic or lexical features of written texts. Students could have referred to:

Lexical features

- technical terms indicative of a bureaucratic register, e.g. 'populations', 'vital planning information'
- some 'colloquial' language, e.g. 'a lot of homes to visit', indicative of an 'everyday' or 'familiar' register
- abstract terms for referring to people, e.g. 'The Collector'
- politeness markers, e.g. 'please'.

Syntactic features

- mixture of active and passive voice depending on purpose
- varying modality depending on purpose.

Student sample

The text is an official document that is part of an official event. Thus the writer employs an official lexis to add credence to the text while formalises and "officialises" the content. Lexically the text contains specialised vocabulary, particularly to the domain of politics and consensus in particular: 'act', 'local governments', 'Tax Office', 'household'. Thus the writer employs an official lexis to add credence to the text while formalises and "officialises" the content. Proper noun phrases such as, "Census Inquiry Service" (L 23-24) and "the Census and Statistics Act" (L 23-24) create an authoritarian stance adding to the style and contributing to the purpose of the text. The use of several colloquial phrases, "snapshot of the nation" (L12), "The Collector has a lot of homes to

visit”(L61) give the Guide a more relaxed tone thus encouraging readers to read it. Syntactic features include fronting that shift the emphasis of the sentence thereby altering the semantics of the text, e.g., “If your form..” (L67-68) emphasised the form rather than the phone call. This sentence is in the active voice which adds to the imperative nature of the text as the active voice is direct.

Section 3

Assessment in this section was global. The sustained response should demonstrate all the general qualities indicated in the Examination Assessment Criteria in terms of knowledge and analysis of relevant content, effectiveness of organisation and control of the conventions of English language. The more successful responses distinguished themselves in particular by their capacity to:

- demonstrate a sound understanding of the metalanguage and be able to use this appropriately to support the contention
- select and synthesise the appropriate features of the work covered throughout the year to support the chosen contention
- organise the chosen material into a coherent, sustained response which addresses the chosen question, i.e. an introduction, development, and conclusion.

Overall, students demonstrated an improved understanding of what constituted an essay in English Language. Essays of high quality included support statements with examples, reference to other texts and quotations. Most essays reflected a broad consideration of the course content. Spelling errors and inaccurate copying of the key phrases of the topic were common and very few essays demonstrated a solid grasp of fluent expression and skilful management of the topic. A number of students tried to synthesise information across the outcomes and this made for much more interesting reading. Occasionally some original writing appeared where a student responded with flair and style. Many students could put down the structure of expository writing and most responses clearly followed the pattern of introduction, three to four paragraphs of discussion and then a conclusion drawing together components. Students frequently had trouble sustaining relevance in their responses.

Question 15

Students were expected to offer a **justified** viewpoint as to whether they agreed that Australian English is still distinctive and at least make reference to the influence of international, popular and technological cultures. The quotation led students into discussing Australian English, the processes of language change, societal interaction and how language reflects society.

Comments

Essays would have been improved by including more specific references and examples, as too often they offered a general discussion on the topic and lacked a foundation in detail. Students showed that they understood the ideas related to the topic but the more successful responses were able to support their understanding with varied references and quoted examples.

The sample essay provided is in the middle to upper range and demonstrates: engagement with the topic; a developed line of discussion justifying the student’s viewpoint; knowledge of content and reasonable use of metalanguage and analytical tools from Area of Study 1: Language Description.

Student sample

In spite of influences from other cultures and external factors such as technology developments, which have led to a change in the social attitudes and beliefs and ultimately the language we use, there will always be the Australian ‘lingo’ and an unforgettable monotone of drawn out vowels that is distinctive of Australian English.

Indeed as we progress into the new millennium the Australian culture has become a mixture of many multicultural influxes and with it their own social beliefs, values and word associations. Ultimately as Australians are exposed to such differences in beliefs and lexical choice, it somehow forms part of our vernacular. For example the influx of the Italians brought many meanings into our culture, ‘pasta’, ‘spaghetti’, however although Australians have borrowed such words, we have ‘bent’ some lexical items by collocating them with Australian slang. For example spaghetti may be referred to as ‘spag’, a unique Australian variation.

Part of the richness of Australian vernacular is its ability to adapt to new word associations then by interpreting the lexical item in a way that characterises Australians, ‘inventive”. For instance Australia has adopted the traditional ‘o’ ending for many colloquialisms such as ‘garbo’. ‘servo’, and even ‘ambo’ (ambulance assistant). Several of these lexical items may be unknown to Americans for example, as the Australian jargon is an effective tool for insider communication. Due to the inventiveness of Australians, I believe we’re reluctant to directly borrow foreign word associations. Instead, Australians seem to add a dimension to lexical items characterising them with a different semantic meaning. Such as the difference between America and Australia, seen in the following lexical items – rubbish bin (AE), trash can (American English).

We like the fact that ours is a 'larrikin language' characterised by humorous clichés, "up shit creek in a barb-wired canoe" and slang which is well known all over Australia.

Although, I believe the inevitable Americanisation of Australian language is putting our resistance to change to the ultimate test. With the constant magnitude of TV shows and movies, which Australians are exposed to, many of the teenagers are adopting many American influences, for example in the cult groups such as 'skaties' and 'surfies' as well as the associated jargon that it carries with it. In this example many Australian lexical forms have been taken new semantic meanings. "wicked" for teenagers has the connotation of being 'great', quite different to its original meaning. However, the publishing of Australian material in TV shows and in movies such as 'The Castle' seem to be very popular, as Australians are proud of their language and ultimately their national identity.

Now with the introduction of modern technology, many new semantic fields are being established, e-commerce, cyberspace, infrastructure, much to the annoyance of purists of the Australian language. However language change is constant and with it our national identity will also be influenced, but the unforgettable touch of Australian lingo or slang associations are never far from making an impression on those influences of Americanisation and technological change.

I think, Australian English will always be present, even though society is changing rapidly. Although some pessimists continue to bemoan the demise of Australian language and with it our identity, we as citizens are holding such views back. With the Sydney Olympics, such TV ads with the familiar title "G'day" were published, and were even being used by people from foreign nations. However Australian English must never be underestimated. Our traditional slang and clichés are now being used by our youths of today and although our society may be changing, its traditional vernacular will still be distinctive, due to its unique features and characteristics that have reflected Australia's history and constructed its sense of identity.

Question 16

An expository response was required that discussed how written language could be used as a tool for exercising power and authority in Australian society. Students were expected to offer a contention, draw on the examples given and add specific references from knowledge and material gained from their study.

Comments

Although this was a clear and direct topic, many students who chose it did not get to the underlying issues of language and power. Students either pointed out the features of the language in the text or seemed to read the material and then launch into a general discussion on broad ideas relating to it.

The sample provided is in the middle to upper range and engages the topic. Consider how effective the Introduction and Conclusion are.

Student sample

Introduction:

Language is a powerful tool in developing and maintaining dominance or authority in society. The formality often associated with the written mode coincides with the powerful effect writing can have. Writers' ability to craft and structure their language, the permanency and the possible impersonality of written text makes written language an excellent method of exercising power.

Further examples of how written language is used for power and authority are mentioned in a later paragraph, but not enough detail is included. For example, consider the references to 'subordination, embedding clauses and other complex sentencing' and what examples could have been given here.

Writers may use a variety of effects to shape their writing and the prolonged development of the text allows for this. Subordination, embedding clauses and other complex sentencing allow for much information to be packed into a sentence. Information and knowledge are indicators of power which the writers are able to exercise as they carefully choose the suitable lexis, syntax and other cohesive devices to build an authoritative stance. The tone for instance is greatly influenced by the register. In the interaction between Ms Smith and Paul Jones, the writer uses an extremely formal register by using titles "Ms Smith" which officialises the context, again aiming to build and maintain an authoritarian stance.

Conclusion

In conclusion we observe that written language is permanent thereby maintaining and enforcing orders from authority; written language can be crafted with lexical and syntactic choices that create an authoritarian tone and mood; written language can also be impersonal thereby distancing the relationship between the interaction participants and making it easier for companies to issue orders or statements with no social obligation. Thus writing is an integral tool in exercising power and authority in society.

Question 17

An expository response was required that focused on how changes in lexicon and syntax become codified. Students needed to demonstrate their knowledge of the processes of codification and standardisation of Australian English. Students were expected to refer to the examples given and include specific examples from their own knowledge.

Comments

Few students answered this question, but those who did understood the concept of codification quite well even though the idea of a process was not always explored fully

The sample essay is in the middle to upper range and achieves effective structure and style and engagement with the set topic as demonstrated in this introduction.

Student sample

Language, a reflection of society, is integral to its functioning. The language used by a society is reflective of its values and ideals. Thus as society evolves and moves forwards, it is only logical that its language will co-evolve with it. We do not speak the language of our ancestors, due to linguistic evolution and a need to change our language to accommodate elements of our changing world. Lexemes such as “wicked” are prone to change and semantic shift as society moves into the future.

Changes to old lexemes and neologisms firstly become standardised and are eventually codified so that they are formally accepted as constituents of the standard variety.

Whilst much of the slang or colloquialisms used today are considered by prescriptivists to be “wrong” or grammatically “deleterious” some are inevitably destined to become codified. For example words such as “piano”, “pants” and “zoo” were once standard slang until such time that their usage became so commonplace that they were included in the dictionary and thus codified. Nowadays, people could be forgiven for not realising that a lexeme such as “zoo” was once a non-standard slang item. Similarly, we no longer say “runneth” as many of our ancestors may have, but we instead say “run”. Colloquial variation in spoken Latin, over 2000 years ago, considered by prescriptivists as “bad Latin” eventually evolved into such languages as Italian, French and Spanish. Language is destined to evolve and the semantic shift from evil to “cool” exemplified by the word “wicked” and its codification supports this fact.

Variety is the key to change. Australia encompasses a vibrant variety of languages and ethnolects. For example, the 1996 census indicated that 14.6% of Australians spoke a language besides English at home, whilst 25.4% of Melburnians spoke a language other than English. In order to communicate readily and successfully in society today, we must be able to communicate with all Australians on a basic level. Hence, the average Australian has adopted many “foreign” lexemes such as “pizza”, “pasta”, “polenta”, “kebabs” etc. as part of their idiolect. Thus, such words have become standardised Australian English and as a result many are now codified and can be found readily in the dictionary.

The age of technology has seen the need for the creation of neologisms such as “DNA recombinant technology” and “RNA” etc. to enable successful communication regarding new scientific, medical and technological discoveries. The media plays a large role in causing many neologisms such as “transgenic organisms” and semantic shifts such as in the conversion from a noun to a verb of the word “network” to become standardised leading to eventual codification. Without contractions such as “she’ll” and “it’s”, acronyms such as “laser” and “Qantas”, “CBD” and “GST”, communication would be a much lengthier and even costlier process! Consider the cost per word of an advertisement or a mobile phoneme message for an example. It is unlikely that we would prefer to use standard English when we can communicate with greater brevity and cost efficiency without detriment to semantics, using non-standard forms. As evolution is a process by which only the “fittest” survive, perhaps we will eventually see morphological non-standard forms such as the reduction “cos” become codified as legitimate standard Australian English lexemes.

Linguistic changes come as a result of societal progress. History has proven that change is inevitable and that language will co-evolve with society. Thus we will expect to see many more standardised lexemes end up codified in the dictionary.