2009   English Language GA 3: Examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

The 2009 English Language examination consisted of three sections. Section 1 had five questions worth a total of 22 marks (30%) and Section 2 had five questions worth a total of 23 marks (30%). Students could choose one of three essay topics in Section 3, which was worth 30 marks (40% of the total marks available). There was one text for analysis in Section 1 and one text in Section 2. The transcript in Section 2 contained 70 intonation units. Students continued to manage their time well, with the majority completing all three sections of the examination. Students generally responded well to the change to the Section 3 instructions, with most making reference to the stimulus material provided.

General advice to students
- Students must read questions carefully. A number of students did not follow instructions where line numbers were relevant and answered on material that was outside the scope of the question.
- The number of lines provided on the examination paper for each response may be used as a guide to the length of response required. It is not necessarily an indication that all lines need to be used and high-scoring responses may or may not use all of the allocated lines.
- In Section 3, students must refer to the stimulus material. This may be one reference, or several references, incorporated into the essay. It was possible for students to meet this requirement by choosing to either refer to the source of the material or by using direct quotations from the material.
- The 'Ability to write responses that are clearly organised, using effective, accurate and fluent language' is an assessment criterion. Assessors take this into consideration and students who do not, for example, spell accurately, will be limiting their achievement. It is important that students do not neglect this criterion when writing their responses.
- Students are encouraged to practise writing essays across a range of topics so they are prepared for the examination. The essay accounts for 30 marks and is an opportunity for students to show knowledge and understanding of a particular topic related to language. It is therefore crucial that students are well prepared before the examination for this section of the paper.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Note: Student responses reproduced herein have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

For each question, an outline answer (or answers) is provided. In some cases the answer given is not the only answer that could have been awarded marks.

Section 1 – Written Text

This section contained a blog called 'Crowded House' taken from *The Age* website. It discussed the experiences of sharing a house.

Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	39	10	15	36	**1.5**

There were several examples of when inference was necessary and these included:
- VBs
- Big Brother
- a passion play.

Students needed to provide an explanation of the role of inference and three examples to achieve full marks.

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	16	17	35	32	**1.9**

Adjectives and adjectival phrases modify nouns and so are able to provide the reader with more information and detail. The article's purpose was primarily to entertain and provide details of what it is like to share a house. The use of irony, sarcasm and humour was evident throughout the text. Examples of adjectives and adjectival phrases included:

- 'passive-aggressive art'
- 'sarcastic note'
- 'Big Brother-style house meeting'.

It was important to clearly identify the adjective or adjectival phrase.

Question 3a-c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	7	11	19	22	21	14	7	**3.1**

Question 3a.
Any two of:
- phonology – 'rolling Rs', 'Austrayan'
- morphology – 'the added "o"'
- discourse – 'the language of silence'.

Question 3b.
The use of compound/complex sentence structure allowed the writer to provide extra information to the reader (in the subordinate clause), while allowing 'tenantese' to be contrasted with other languages.

Question 3c.
The use of listing allowed information to be conveyed economically and concisely. It can also add to the dramatic effect of a sentence.

There were two examples of listing:
- 'rolling Rs and swinging arms'
- 'language of silence, death stares and underlying tensions'.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	26	13	25	18	18	**1.9**

To attain full marks students had to discuss the use of two of the following three discourse features. It was crucial that students clearly identified each example of a discourse feature rather than just providing a line number.

Two examples that could have been referred to in discussing the use of front-focus were:
- line 13 'In a workplace or a family'
- line 14 'Passive-aggressive and cunning enough to be completely denied'

Two examples that could have been referred to in discussing the use of end focus were:
- lines 15–16 'a Post-it note on a housemate's door two days later or a meal prepared for everyone, except the bastard who forgot to feed the fish.' In this case the use of 'bastard' at the end of the sentence provides drama
- lines 17–19 'tentantese might be the language of silence, death stares and underlying tensions.'

Several examples of the use of the passive included:
- lines 14–15 'to be completely denied'
- line 17 'the Italian language is defined by'.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	22	17	16	13	12	9	10	**2.5**

Social rapport was established between the participants in the blog through the use of spoken language features. These features reduced distance between the participants and created a more informal text. Examples of linguistic evidence included:
- contractions, for example, line 32 'It's'
- hedging expressions, for example, line 35 'well' and 'just'
- ellipsis, for example, line 42 'Last straw and moved in with 2 guys...'

All the participants adhered to blog-writing conventions and thereby created a rapport. Non-standard usage of punctuation and grammar also added to the informality of the discourse and again cemented a rapport.

It was important for students to:
- read and interpret the question carefully. Some students drew evidence from outside the scope of the question and wrongly used examples from line 1 to 28
- provide linguistic evidence. Some students resorted to describing how the rapport was created without using appropriate metalanguage or making reference to linguistics.

Following is an example of a high-scoring student response. This example provided some relevant examples of non-standard language and related these to reducing social distance. It could have also provided mention of features associated with spoken language or conversational tone.

The three build a social rapport and minimalise social distance by providing anecdotes of their own experiences in shared houses. Using features of a casual register like onomatopoeia, 'bam!'(31) and personification 'the whiteboard is staring you in the face'(31-32), creates a domain of humorous stories that are also personal. The non-standard punctuation and orthographical simplicity also is a feature of e-communication, yet none of the commenters are berating the others for reductions like 'boyf' (boyfriend) (36), or non-capitalised 'i' (35). Also the multitude of exclamative sentences, such as 'gold I assumed!' (40) and 'heaven!' (42), helps the readers and writers to be involved and share the excitement that the commentators are feeling, and engages them in a sort of dramatic retelling of their own anecdotes which promotes solidarity and mateship.

Section 2 – Spoken Text

The transcript of a television program provided material for students to analyse. The parents and the daughter were involved in an unscripted conversation about preparing dinner. The daughter, an adult who lives with her parents, was unhappy to be staying at home for the evening. The relationship between the parents and the daughter was, at that time, strained.

Question 6

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	11	26	36	26	**1.8**

Between lines 6 and 20 Marta (M) offers alternatives for dinner to her daughter Anielka (A). She does this in an attempt to placate her, alleviate the tension and also move the conversation along by keeping it flowing. Marta is polite and supportive of her husband's attempts to provide food that interests his daughter.

To attain full marks it was necessary for students to discuss Marta's utterances in detail and relate them to the discourse. In doing so, students were able to apply their knowledge to the text.

Following is an example of a high-scoring student response.

In this section, M's utterances include 'You like the dumplings? We have the dumplings (…)' (Lines 11-12). The function of this is to offer A alternative options and to be cooperative, avoiding conflict. This is reflected in her use of the interrogative (rather than imperative) sentence type. This, combined with another utterance in line 18, 'Would you like an avocado?' indicates politeness ('would you like' rather than 'Do you want'). Politeness and cooperativeness are possibly the main functions of M in this section. However, this may be seen to diminish her level of power in the exchange, as she is offering alternatives to suit A and is not being acknowledged by A.

Question 7

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	7	4	29	33	28	**2.7**

Between lines 21 and 55 there were numerous examples of declarative and interrogative utterances that students could discuss. An example of each included:
- interrogative utterance – line 21 'Then why do you ask?' Here Anielka is challenging and being hostile to her father, who is trying to be helpful
- declarative utterance – line 37 'Sometime it a little bit difficult'. Here Oscar (O) is trying to explain himself to his daughter. He is being defensive and trying to get some empathy from his daughter.

It was important for students to apply their knowledge in this question and contextualise the example. Rather than only stating that an interrogative is used to ask a question or elicit a response, high-scoring students related their response to the text and provided evidence of close reading of the material.

Question 8

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	15	11	27	25	23	**2.3**

Students were required to identify two examples of non-fluency features and discuss the function of each. There were numerous examples to choose from. Examples of non-fluency features included:

- repairs
- false starts
- repetition
- overlaps
- silences.

Again, the students who applied their knowledge to a discussion achieved high marks. Students who discussed features in general terms and did not relate this discussion to the text were not awarded full marks. A number of students confused false starts with repairs.

Following is an example of a high-scoring student response.

'Well ah-ah-ah...' (Line 34) Pause filler. O is not sure of what he is about to say. By using this pause filler he is able to hold the floor as he thinks about what he is going to say.

There are frequent occurrences of overlap in the conversation, as can be seen in lines 49-50, 'O: Yeah but, A: Where there is a diff.' This is an indication of the uncooperative nature of the conversation, as each overlap has the function of the speaker trying to take control of the floor, to the extent that they cut each other off twice before O secures control in line 51.

Question 9

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	13	4	9	14	23	18	20	**3.6**

Students were required to identify three different prosodic features and discuss the functions of each. Possible features included:

- fast speech
- elongated vowels
- volume: soft or loud
- stress.

Following is an example of a high-scoring student response.

Stress is used frequently throughout the transcript, by all the participants of the conversation but especially A, in utterances such as '^that's ^reheating' (line 48), 'Of ^ course we're ^not going to ^like it' (line 52) and 'For ^who' (line 38). Stress is used as a marker of anger, disbelief or rebuttal in the conversation, and is intended to emphasise and strengthen the points of each of the speakers. Even M, the least dominant of the participants, uses it on occasion. Additionally, the use of a rising pitch can be seen in O's speech, in utterances such as 'let's see what happens [see]/' (line 35), 'Well, you want to go out/' (line 60) and 'somebody say ^yes (.) you know/' (line 24). Though this use of rising pitch invites an adjacency pair response in phrasing the utterance as a question, often O will go on to answer his own question, as in 'you go out\' (line 60), or use it as a function with which to imply his own displeasure. It can also be interpreted as a marker of his ethnolect. Along with these, O uses elongated sounds, e.g. 'We'll see=' (line 41), and 'Ah' (line2), as a method to hold the floor while he is still thinking about his next utterance.

Question 10

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	9	15	24	21	18	10	5	**2.7**

The relationship between father and daughter was strained. Although a close relationship between a daughter, particularly one who lives at home, and her parents may be assumed, the relationship in this discourse was not harmonious. Anielka dominated the conversation and controlled most of the turn-taking. She interrupts her father on several occasions and also overlaps him to take the floor. Conversely, Oscar is often hesitant and defensive, suggesting he was scared of further upsetting Anielka. However, Oscar regains more control of the turn-taking towards the end of the discourse due to anger and frustration, and it is he who has the last word.

Students who were awarded full marks for this question understood what the relationship was like between Oscar and Anielka at that particular time. It was not sufficient to comment solely that, as both interlocutors were related and lived

under the same roof, the relationship was close. Analytical skills were required to explain how the turn-taking evolved, how each interlocutor used turn-taking and how this reflected on their relationship. Students who resorted to providing a synopsis of what was said, without applying linguistic knowledge, did not score highly.

Following is an example of a high-scoring student response.

> *At first the turn taking appears quite even between A and O, consisting of some adjacency pairs like, 'What's for dinner?' (1) and 'a little bit o' pasta' (4). O complies with A's comments about her hunger (6) and the conversation appears to be quite cordial and cooperative with a question and answer like format from lines 21-25. However, a multitude of unfilled silences, minimal back channel signals and numerous overlaps in the discourse implies that the relationship is quite sharp and strained, as neither A or O want to relinquish the floor between themselves, with A interrupting O with a loud voice in lines 44-45, while O interrupts A in line 51. The silence that appears after A's outburst or phonological 'Grrrrfff!' (55) indicates that neither party wants to make up or use politeness strategies such as 'I'm sorry' to fill the silence. It is O who raises his voice, 'I cannot stop you' (66) in an almost threatening way to reaffirm his dominant role as the girl's father.*

Section 3

Essay chosen	0	1	2	3
%	1	40	11	48

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Average
%	1	1	2	4	5	5	9	11	14	14	10	9	7	5	3	1	8.2

Section 3 of this year's paper contained three essay topics. The instructions for Section 3 required students to refer to the stimulus material provided. Students should use these prompts to stimulate and inspire further discussion, rather than relying solely on this material to form the majority of their response.

High-scoring essays were not only fluent and cohesive but contained a range of relevant examples that showed a strong understanding of the topic. Incorporating pre-prepared paragraphs into an essay response is not recommended as such practice often fails to engage and address the subtleties of the topic. Students need to be clear about the definition of terms before starting an essay. A significant number of students did not fully understand Standard English as a notion.

Question 11
Relevant topics explored included, but were not limited to:
- taboos
- politics
- Australian society
- the military.

This topic required an understanding of how euphemisms are used in society and why they are necessary in providing social accord. Most students recognised the role of euphemisms in today's society, with the more able students also commenting on how euphemisms can be used to disguise truths and prevent clarity of meaning. There were many examples taken from the military and some of these were contemporary and relevant, for example, water-boarding and rendition. Other interesting examples were provided from the 'Bushfires Royal Commission Interim Report' that stated, 'Warnings must use clear language, avoid euphemism and contain explicit information.' However, students also discussed the role of dysphemistic language and its effect, while pointing out that appropriateness is a deciding factor in usage.

Following is an example of a high-scoring response which shows a good awareness of how euphemisms promote social harmony and strengthen the social fabric of our society. Key terms like 'taboo', 'dysphemism', 'political correctness' and 'appropriateness' are discussed in a response that is well structured and cohesive. The example from the TAC was a good example and was followed by a perceptive appraisal. However, in providing an example of medical euphemism it is doubtful that the lexeme 'terminal', in this context, could be considered euphemistic. Spelling was not always accurate and this will have been taken into consideration in the assessing process.

> *Euphemisms both help and hinder our want to strengthen social bonds and harmony. In one way, euphemistic terms can be deemed appropriate in emphasising social niceties. They allow us to be sensitive to other's situations. However, euphemisms can also be used to trick and obsfuscate seemingly negative terms. Euphemisms on the whole are a very context sensitive tool.*

> *Euphemism can be a tool to promote social appropriateness in different situations. They can often soften harsh criticisms, or depressing or taboo subjects that would not be appropriate to reference in certain contexts. For example, in the locale of a family*

picnic, it may not be appropriate to discuss such taboo subjects as drugs or sex, inviting such euphemistic terms as 'hallucinary agents' or 'doing it' for sex. These euphemisms avoid offence and strengthen social harmony by not providing social awkwardness that may follow a dyphemistic saying for sex as 'banging'. Similarly, euphemisms may provide oppurtunities to appear sensitive to an 'aspect of life that is indelicate', death. Saying that someone 'passed away' or is 'not with us right now', can be called tact and helps you familiarise and strengthen bonds with people through your sensitivity.

Political correctness, under the hypernym of euphemistic and appropriate language, can also promote social harmony and awareness of the different kind of social values that people can use to denegrate. Politically correct terms such as using 'chairperson' instead of 'chairman', and 'African-American' for a black person living in America (and even 'Indigenous Australian' for Aboriginal) can help to equalise and promote an equal sense of social class, gender or age etc. However, political correctness is a term which comes under criticism for obfuscating language and controlling people's choice in language. At the same time as creating sensitivity towards different minorities, (or similar), PC language can also be used to create social distance, being overly touchy in a choice of words that may be tautologic at best. Euphemisms and PC language can sometimes be used to create social distance, being unclear and using flowery language to obscure 'unpleasant truths'.

Euphemisms can also be a bad thing, as well as covering up 'offensive and unsavoury' taboo items, they can be used to excuse actions removing blame. For example, in management a boss may say that they're 'downsizing' or that the workers are part of an 'exit strategy,' which hides the truth from the fact they are getting fired. Doctors may say that a patient's cancer is 'terminal', while being sensitive to the patient's condition is obscuring the truth that they are going to die. Similarly, the Governments' TAC campaigns using direct and sometimes dysphemistic language (along with taboo colloquialisms) 'Only 5 over? You bloody idiot' have made an impact on road deaths. Sometimes straight, direct language can be just as, if not more effective, than euphemisms.

Although euphemisms appear at first to promote social togetherness and sensitivity, they can just as easily be used to obfuscate and harm. The use of euphemisms must be tempered with a situational awareness and moral judgement.

Question 12
Relevant topics included, but were not limited to:
- literary techniques, for example, puns and double meanings
- word games
- nicknames
- text messaging
- limericks
- advertising
- jokes and comedy

Reasons why language play is important included that it:
- is creative
- is fun and enjoyable
- can provoke a positive reaction from an audience
- allows for the development of a language
- creates rapport
- can be a marker of identity.

This topic was the least popular of the three.

The following extract showed an awareness of the topic and is a medium-scoring response. It is clearly organised, accurate and fluent. The student appreciates that language play can be fun, creative and an instigator of change. However, in the first two paragraphs there is a reliance on the stimulus material provided but as the response develops, student examples are discussed.

While providing us with something to do on a rainy day, language play is equally as important to the development and progression of our language as is keeping tradition alive – granted, where would we be without 'i before e except after c,' but our language being almost a living entity in itself, it needs tampering with. Though David Crystal in his book 'Loving Linguistic Lucidity' says that 'we are, in effect, bending and breaking the rules of the language and if someone were to ask why we do it, the answer is simply: for fun.' The fact remains that with words dying out or becoming innocuously obsolete, new words and variations are needed.

As seen by the neologisms submitted to a magazine, clever puns and blends are being born – ones about appearance seemingly rampant. 'Muffin top, trout pout, whale tail, cankles, oompa loompa'....the list goes on. And what better way to laugh at these collagen stuffed, underclad, orange hued people than to give them a witty epithet? By these neologisms, language grows: and people enjoy themselves.

Similarly, the pet names (or 'pillowese' as stated) predominant in relationships, are breaching the boundaries of 'too soppy, too cheesy' and limited only by the imagination of those involved; 'cuddlechops,' 'stud muffin' and even 'hunkaspunk'…are all used. A journalist for The Age recently reminisced on her wild summer with an Italian boy named Antonio; the looks of Casanova yet the monotonous tongue of a sheep shearer in Wangaratta. Despite the readers assumptions that pillow speak would play second fiddle to what was actually taking place a little south of the pillows, this journalist claims Antonio's inability to enunciate anything but 'Si!' led to the abrupt end to that summer.

By this prioritising, we see the importance of word play: choosing vocabulary over Antonio's other attributes is a clear window into how our society sees, and uses, language.

Finally, that infinite land of cyberspace. The influx of MSN speak, text speak, bad grammar and needless acronyms – as Lucy Carter, founder of a professional speech training company puts it, 'we are now living in a world of 140 characters or less on Twitter.' The magnitude of the impact cyberspeak has had on language use is not to be argued with. Though, there is a fine line between language play and language slay: abbreviating 'laugh out loud' to 'lol' acceptable, but not actually saying it in face to face utterances instead of laughing; not condensing a text message so much that there are no vowels in it and your desperate pleas to pick up the milk on the way home go unheeded by a very confused receiver. Language play has probably affected language the most with regard to technology – and, despite the cringe many prescriptivists exhibit, is an important catalyst for the further development of language.

So why do we play with our language? Is it as David Crystal says, to have fun? Because we're not allowed to play with our food? Or maybe, just for something different? Whatever the case, there is no doubt that this dimension of our language is crucial to its future; as words as 'kum in' and old standards have 'gzg'.

Question 13

For this question to be answered well, students needed to have a clear understanding of Standard English. By appreciating that this variety has prestige, no geographical base and is codified in dictionaries and style guides, students were able to construct relevant responses. Most students understood that by using non-Standard English it was still possible, depending on the appropriateness, to communicate effectively. A range of examples and usages was provided by students in supporting their contention, with many coming from the following varieties:

- slang
- ethnolects
- the language of teenagers and youths
- Aboriginal English
- 'netspeak'.

Most students recognised that by using a non-Standard variety of English a close rapport and distinct identity can be created. Conversely, some students recognised the importance of Standard English as a world language used for international communication.

Some students erroneously wrote of the cultivated accent being a feature of Standard English and 'the correct way to speak,' without recognising that Standard English can be spoken in any accent. A number of students also tried to make the contention that Standard English was not necessary, without appreciating the irony they were discussing the topic using Standard English. Standardisation and codification were often not well understood. Few students explored the importance of orthography and grammar in maintaining a Standard English and why these combine to create a variety of English that is understood by most of the population.

The following extract provided a broad range of relevant and contemporary examples that enabled the student to provide strong evidence in support of why other varieties of English have a value and place in Australian society. There is good use of metalanguage and the paragraphing is structured and cohesive.

There are many people in society, especially those with a prescriptivist attitude, who strongly believe that the Standard is 'intrinsically superior to other varieties', as stated by K Burridge. It is clear however that this is not true, when one considers the ability of ethnolects and Aboriginal English to express identity and finer nuance. Ethnolects occur when features of someone's first language or 'mother tongue' are adopted into their second language, in this case English. Features can include the phonological addition of vowel sounds to the ends of nouns e.g. bread / / (common to Greek and Italian); the incorporation of foreign lexemes e.g. 'habib' to mean 'mate' (Lebanese ethnolect) and syntactic ellipsis of prepositions e.g. 'a box matches' (common to many ethnolects). These non-standard features reflect the foreign heritage of their users, which could not be achieved as well by the Standard. Similarly, Aboriginal English can be used to express someone's indigenous roots and ultimately reflect the joining of Aboriginal and English cultures in our history. Whilst many of the features here are non-Standard, they are often rule governed. For example, many Aborigines use 'bin' to mark a completed action but 'was' to show an ongoing action. Hence these dialects are not inferior to the Standard, they are simply different. Ethnolects and Aboriginal English are powerful tools for creating identity and so have a right to be used in place of the Standard.

The following extract showed an awareness of how register can be changed depending on the context and audience. By providing examples and quotations from the same speaker, the student was able to show clearly why it is not always appropriate to use Standard English all the time.

Standard English certainly is effective when used in formal situations. It has long been associated with power and prestige, being taught in schools and used in court. When Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave his speech on bushfire mourning day, he avoided deviating from the Standard, as his Prime Ministerial roll and the context dictated that only Standard English was appropriate. However, when meeting with bushfire survivors, Rudd was aware that the context meant Standard English was not the best suited variety for his purpose of communication, and as such used the fairly informal greeting, 'Hi, I'm Kevin!' and slang such as 'I don't give a bugger.' These lowered the social distance which was obviously appropriate in this context... Clearly, Standard English is not always the most appropriate variety.