

OXFORD

INTERNATIONAL
AQA EXAMINATIONS

INTERNATIONAL AS AND A-LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Teaching guidance

For teaching from September 2017 onwards

For AS exams in June 2018 onwards

For A-level exams in June 2019 onwards

Version 2.0 Specimen

Our specification is published on our website oxfordaqaexams.org.uk We will let centres know in writing about any changes to the specification. We will also publish changes on our website. The definitive version of our specification will always be the one on our website; this may differ from printed versions.

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Introduction

This teacher guide complements the specification and specimen materials for the International AS and A-level English Language and should be read alongside them. This guide will provide the following for teachers and prospective teachers of this course:

- An overview of this specification's philosophy and approach to the study and assessment of International AS and A-level English Language
- A rationale for key aspects of assessment, such as question frames and the role of data
- A unit-by-unit look at what is required in learning and assessment

For those teachers new to International A-level English Language or where teachers need to update their knowledge, AQA provides an extensive list of recommended reading as well as an endorsed OUP textbook devoted to this specification for use in the classroom.

Section 1 – Overview

This specification has been designed by an expert team to give international students an interesting and rigorous course in English Language. The course reflects the international contexts in which the students are studying, while at the same time preparing them for the further study of the subject (should they wish to do so) at leading universities across the world.

It is not the intention of this guide to make comparisons with reformed UK A-level, but the retention here of a unitary approach to International AS and A-level, plus the flexibility afforded by being able to choose an examined or coursework option for the exploration of contemporary language use, makes this specification an exciting proposition for international centres.

Assessment objectives (AOs)

The specification has been designed around three assessment objectives which reflect how language should be studied at this level. The numerical sequencing of the AOs deliberately reflects this. Here are the AOs in their official version:

- **AO1:** Demonstrate understanding of methods, terminology, concepts and issues in English language.
- **AO2:** Analyse how meanings are shaped in a range of texts and data.
- **AO3:** Demonstrate ability to use English in different ways.

AO1 requires students to show their understanding of the basic ‘building blocks’ of language study. The term ‘methods’ refers, not just to the different ways of finding out about language – for example, by interviewing informants, by consulting archives such as dictionaries, by recording speakers, and so on – but also to the methods used traditionally by Western academic linguists to divide up language for purposes of study. These divisions, devised initially by the Swiss linguist Saussure (1857–1913) have come to be known as ‘language levels’ and are the following:

- Phonetics and phonology – how speech sounds and effects are articulated and analysed
- Lexis and semantics – meaning at word and phrase level
- Grammar – the structural patterns and shapes of English at sentence, clause, phrase and word level
- Pragmatics – contextual aspects of language use such as inference and assumed meaning
- Discourse – extended stretches of communication occurring in different genres, modes and context
- Graphology – the visual aspects of textual design and appearance.

The OUP textbook provides detailed coverage of these levels.

The ‘levels’ above function as a toolkit to be applied to the various language topics throughout the specification; and also to the work of text analysis and research. At any one time, a number of these levels are likely to be relevant in analysing a text or understanding a topic; and although it is valuable for students to be able to break language down into different areas for purposes of study, they need to see the connections between the different areas in order to understand the complexities of real language in use.

As with other academic areas, language study has its own terminology and AO1 rewards students for being able to identify significant aspects of language. Using terminology can be an economic way to refer to the finer details of language use. However, relevance and understanding are key factors: labelling with no relevance or understanding is worth less than showing understanding of how language works without being able to use linguistic terminology.

AO1 also refers to concepts and issues. Concepts are simply the ideas that we have about language – for example, that it changes, that it varies, that people acquire it and use it in different ways, that people have attitudes to it. ‘Issues’ are the practical outcomes of the concepts that we have about language. For example, if language changes, how do we agree what is right at any one time? If people have attitudes to language, how does that impact upon us socially? The specification sees language as a social phenomenon, as a form of social behaviour enabling humans to organize the world around them.

As will be obvious from what has been said above, AO1 is a key objective. At International A-level, AO1 is heavily weighted as it represents the essence of academic language study. However, AO1 can be applied in different ways, in assessments. Where an exam answer requires a discursive essay about a specific topic, several aspects of AO1 may come into play and a substantial number of marks may be allocated to this as a result. But in a text analysis task, a smaller number of marks may represent the fact that AO1 rewards students for being able to identify the language features that form the basis for interpretive work of AO2 – see below.

AO2 requires students to demonstrate their analytical ability to trace patterns in texts and data. While AO1 credits students with identifying aspects of language, seeing how those identifications build into patterns of meaning is at the basis of AO2.

Language study includes different types of activity. In addition to discursive essays, students of International English Language need to show they can analyse all aspects of a continuous text, whether that be a transcript of speech, a piece of writing, or a multimodal text (ie one that uses more than one mode, such as a written text with images, or a webpage). ‘How meanings are shaped’ refers not just to writers (or speakers) but also to readers (or listeners), on the assumption that meaning is a negotiated aspect of communication. There are language features in any text, but what they ‘mean’ is a result of a writer’s or speaker’s language choices interpreted by a reader or listener and filtered through the experiences they bring to a text. Text analysis in International English Language ranges more widely than in International English Literature, in being applied to any type of text, literary or otherwise. But the analytical methods involved are similar to those of literary analysis in that they are interpretive rather than rigidly ‘scientific’ in any way. In all the English subjects, good analysis involves providing textual evidence for interpretive claims made.

AO3 requires students to demonstrate skill in using language themselves. The specification stresses the inter-relationship between analysing language, and using it, with the belief that criticality and creativity are two sides of the same coin. Developing skill in using language increases students’ appreciation of how texts work when they come to analytical tasks; and developing skills as text-analysts sharpens their awareness of their own language choices, when they come to write. The specification recognizes a public (and international) expectation that any qualification in International English Language should include communication skill. This element is particularly prominent in the AS units in order to support the generic writing skills that are needed for study and work in 21st century life. At International A-level, writing skills are more lightly weighted than at International AS, and focus more exclusively on academic styles of writing.

Different tasks and question frames

The International English Language specification combines different types of assessed task and each type of task has an associated question frame:

- Discursive essays require students to debate a concept or issue about language use.
- Text analysis tasks require students to write in detail about how a written, spoken, or multimodal text works.
- Writing tasks require students to produce a piece of writing for a specific audience and purpose, with a particular genre of communication in mind.
- The Unit 4 exam/non-exam assessment (NEA) options both require students to make their own methodological choices, choose material, analyse it and write a research report within a designated word count.
- Each of these different types of activity has its own question frame and some of those are supported by bullet-pointed recommendations.

Discursive essay question frames

These invite students to debate a topic by setting out their views, as in this example from Unit 3 of the specimen material:

‘To what extent is interaction with caregivers the most important influence on a child’s spoken language development?’

This type of question expects students to address the topic and choose a line of argument, but also show that they are aware of contrasting views (hence the ‘to what extent’ formulation in the question stem).

Text analysis question frames

Question frames for this type of activity will offer a structure for analysis in the form of bullet points. These need not be answered in the order in which they occur, neither do they all need equal or discrete coverage. They are simply there to remind students of the nature of text analysis work as an activity where the endpoint is the ‘big picture’ of language use – what people are using language for and how they make meanings with it. This can be seen in the following example (from Unit 1 of the specimen material):

‘Examine how the creators of **Text A** and the participants in **Text B** use language to create meanings’.

In your answer you should consider different:

- audiences
- purposes
- genres
- modes of communication.

Writing task frames

These frames will specify the parameters of the writing required – its genre (for example, magazine article, a script for a speech), its audience (for example, tourists, a business group), and its purpose (for example, to persuade, to inform). A word count will be given as guidance but no specific penalty will be imposed for pieces that do not match the total. It is important for students to realise that more is not necessarily better. The word count should act as a guide for what is appropriate for the task.

Research-based frames

The Unit 4 exam/coursework options both suggest a plan for writing up a research report on the language exploration task. This is as follows:

Suggested structure for writing up your investigation

1 Aim(s)

State the aim(s) of your investigation and identify which texts you are using.

2 Method

Explain the linguistic frameworks you are using to analyse your data.

3 Analysis

Present a detailed analysis of your data.

4 Conclusion

Draw your conclusions in response to your aim(s) and based on your analysis.

Again, this should be viewed as advisory and not compulsory. However, students need to be aware that they need a clear structure for their work and that specific marks are awarded for the cohesiveness and clarity of their report.

The role of data and research in essay questions

Texts and data feature as the primary site for analysis in text analysis questions. But small extracts of data can also feature as starting points for discursive essays. For example, the discursive essay about child language exemplified earlier used the following question frame:

- To what extent is interaction with caregivers the most important influence on a child's spoken language development?

This was then followed by a further frame:

- In your answer, you should refer to Data Set 1 and to relevant ideas from language study.

[Refer to the specimen material for Unit 3 to see the data]

The data set here offers students a practical exemplification of the essay question. This shows students what the examiners mean and therefore helps to clarify what might otherwise be an overly abstract concept. The example also acts as an anchoring device, helping students to see that they need to use exemplification and not simply talk at a theoretical level. It also ensures that students don't simply import a pre-determined essay, as such a prefabricated plan will not be able to accommodate the specific nature of this unseen data.

The phrase 'ideas from language study' reminds students that this is not simply a data analysis task, however. They are expected to show knowledge of different academic ideas, and they will be able to draw on some examples of their own that they have remembered from class activities. This breadth of different possible sources is why the phrase 'ideas from language study' is preferred to 'research', which could be taken in a restricted sense to refer only to published articles and books and therefore to seem rather forbiddingly dry. Finally, relevance is a key factor and, again, this should discourage students from writing pre-scripted set answers.

Transcription conventions

Where spoken data is included, there will always be a key alongside it which explains the various markings used for aspects such as pauses, simultaneous speech, emphasis, non-verbal communication, and so on. The markings chosen will be determined by the role of the data in the question set. There are different traditions for marking up transcriptions but the following will act as a set of core features that, where present, will always be marked up in this way:

(.) normal pause

(2) numbers in brackets indicate length of pause in seconds

| vertical lines indicate simultaneous speech

bold type indicates emphasis

[italics] in square brackets indicate non-verbal aspects such as movement or background noise; or vocal effects such as whispering or laughter.

Students are expected to be familiar with phonemic symbols but are not expected to memorise them. Wherever symbols are used on exam papers (for example, to represent a child's pronunciation), a key will be given to explain the symbol.

The OUP textbook covers both phonology and language acquisition in some detail.

Section 2 – The four units

How the units fit together

The units that comprise the course are inter-related and therefore offer a cohesive learning experience. At the same time, each unit has a particular focus and develops a slightly different area of skill. As a result, there is flexibility around the order in which they can be studied.

The AS units emphasise writing skills while offering an introduction to accessible areas of language study that are universally relevant. Unit 1, Language and context, as its title suggests, focuses on the importance of context in understanding and interpreting language. Context is an absolutely fundamental concept within linguistics (as it is within other arts and humanities subjects generally), referring to all the shaping factors that surround any piece of language use. Unit 2, Language and society, draws broadly on the area of sociolinguistics to consider how individuals and groups establish their identities and how language is shaped by social factors. Each of these units is assessed via an exam paper that requires a text analysis in Section A, and a writing task in Section B.

If students choose to finish their study of International AS English language, they will have gained knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- understanding of how language use varies according to context
- awareness of how language users employ language as a resource, to signal their relationships with others
- skills of writing in a number of different ways – directed writing, text analysis, and discursive writing
- the AS qualification therefore offers valuable skills for contemporary work and life.

It also represents a solid foundation for the two further units that make up the International A-level suite: Unit 3, Language variation; and Unit 4, Language exploration. These units offer fresh language topics and an opportunity to develop the research skills that are key to success at undergraduate level. The writing elements of these units are focused more on discursive skills and on report writing, while the language topics – language learning and international English – introduce mainstream, contemporary areas of applied academic study that generate lively debate and where international students in particular can bring their experiences to bear.

Supporting the learning required for the units

Unit 1 Language and context

The texts in Section A of the exam paper will always share a common theme, and this is a deliberate strategy to help students become aware of how the same topic can be treated in many different ways, varying according to mode (whether it is spoken, written or multimodal); audience (specialist or not, people of different ages); purpose (to entertain, persuade, inform, instruct, or a mixture of these functions); and genre (the type of text it is).

The aim will always be to offer familiar starting points, using everyday texts. This is not a test of esoteric knowledge of obscure texts. In fact, every effort will be made to explain to students where the texts have been sourced from. Texts will be drawn from a range of English language sources, including advertising and promotional material, informative booklets and flyers, news and magazine articles, digital texts such as blogs, discussion forums and other website material, spontaneous speech, planned and formal spoken language, different kinds of non-fiction writing and reference material.

The question wording for this section (including the bullet points) will remain constant; the texts and data will vary. Students are being tested on their ability to analyse material they have not seen before, rather than being tested on their knowledge of a particular topic.

The task then is to focus in detail on how each text represents the topic in hand, drawing out any similarities and differences that are useful to discuss. This is not an exercise in difference and similarity in any crude or simplistic way, however, and it is perfectly acceptable to treat each text separately. But obviously, an answer that achieves an overview by looking across the texts is likely to be offering a 'big picture' view of discourses and representation and that would be rewarded accordingly.

In learning about textual variations, students should have opportunities to study a range of texts:

- about various subjects
- from various writers and speakers
- for various audiences
- for various purposes
- in a variety of genres
- using a variety of modes (written, spoken, electronic).
- When analysing texts, students should explore how language is:
 - shaped according to audience, purpose, genre and mode
 - used to construct meanings and representations
 - used to enact relationships between writers, speakers and audiences or between participants within a text. This exploration will include:
 - methods of language analysis (language 'levels' – see p2 in this document)
 - how identity is constructed
 - how audiences are addressed and positioned
 - the functions of the texts
 - the structure and organisation of the texts
 - how representations are produced

Where possible, texts should be explored on a common theme and sourcing this material can be an opportunity for students to collect their own texts and data for classroom sharing and use.

Website material and other types of new communication will necessarily feature at times, simply because they are an important part of global contemporary communication. In a situation where students are examined via paper-based texts only, digital data will be presented as a screenshot or equivalent. This is obviously not offering an authentic experience of the data in its original form; the same is true of speech transcripts and other material that was originally in a different medium. In analysing such material, students are likely to need to refer to how the text would have been experienced originally: for example, in the case of a website, by using links to click through to further pages. Texts will be produced in colour wherever possible, to maximize authenticity.

There is no optionality in Section A of Unit 1, simply because it would present students with too much material to process in order to make a choice in the time allowed. However, in Section B, there will be optionality in the writing task. The questions will offer variations of some of the dimensions that students will have studied: for example, one question may require writing for readers while the other requires writing for spoken delivery (as in the specimen material). The task may require different audiences to be targeted, or for the writing to have different functions. This optionality is considered appropriate because students will have been given a starting point for the topic by analysing the material in Section A. The level of integration between the two sections of the paper is a particular strength and it should be possible for students to tackle Section B with no further knowledge than that provided by Section A. At the same time, while they may use any of the material in Section A in order to write their piece, they are not required to do so.

Unit 2 Language and society

As with Unit 1, the exam paper for this unit also offers a good level of connectivity between Sections A and B: the writing task in Section B is supported by the text analysis work in Section A.

Section A focuses on the social aspects of language use, which includes the ways in which people use language to:

- express identities
- construct and maintain relationships
- mark group membership
- claim power and status
- play and entertain themselves and others.

The text(s) for analysis could be spoken, written or multimodal material, and will illustrate the social dimensions listed. Texts will be drawn from contexts where the factors above are strongly in evidence – for example, power-laden contexts such as interviews; spoken or written texts that exhort and persuade by asserting power and status; interactions between people or written texts focussing on shared interests or group affiliations; written texts or dialogues or performances where language is used for shared play and pleasure. These are the types of text that students need to study in their work on this unit.

Students will be credited for their ability to identify how language choices contribute to:

- group rapport and shared perspectives
- assertions of power and status
- expressions of identity and relationship
- creative play and performance.

The question wording will remain constant, for the same reasons as for Paper 1 – that the task tests students' ability to address material they have not seen before, rather than their ability to respond to unfamiliar questions. However, how the bullet points appear will change slightly according to the orientation of the data. The bullet points are to act as a scaffold for students to use as they analyse the data.

Section B focuses on the skills of academic argument in written language. The essay question will require students to discuss an aspect of language and social group behaviour that connects with the data analysed in Section A. There is no optionality in Section B.

The essay question stem of 'how far does x affect language use?' will remain constant because it is intended to test students' ability to recognise that aspects of language and social group behaviour do not operate in isolation. There are many sociolinguistic factors that students can bring to bear in answering questions, ranging from the macro aspects of identity such as age, occupation, ethnicity, region and gender, to the micro, situational, factors such as time and place, topic, purpose, audience and mode of the interaction (the latter being aspects of context studied for Unit 1).

The essay question will focus on a particular aspect but, as with other question frames that use a 'how far' formulation, consideration of other factors that are in play alongside the named aspect will characterise a high-level answer. For example, in the Unit 2 specimen material, the data in Section A is drawn from a classroom context. The question in Section B focuses on age, but students will already have been given an example in Section A of a text where age is one of a complex of factors that also include occupation and gender. As with Unit 1, students are free to pull out any aspects of the data they have already analysed in Section A, but they are not obliged to do so.

It is recognised that each of the sociolinguistic areas above represents a large field of study in its own right at undergraduate level and beyond. But at this level, there is much that students can say simply from their own experience – and particularly international students, who more than most will have had some experience of different regions and ethnicities. In this unit, as in the others, it is useful for students to be aware of some academic studies but this essay is not intended to be an exercise in abstract theorising – rather an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they know from their experience, including their discussions with others, as well as from their reading and classroom tuition.

Unit 3 Language variation

This unit covers two major areas of academic study in linguistics: language learning (Section A of the exam paper); and international English (Section B).

There is optionality in both sections: students answer one question, from a choice of two, in each case.

Language learning includes both early language acquisition in young children, and also later language development in teenagers. A different set of data will be provided as a starting point for each question, and could include speech, writing, or multimodal texts produced by native speakers or English as an Additional Language (EAL) speakers.

Work for this unit should involve students in exploring how children develop their spoken and written skills. To achieve this, students should study:

- the functions of children’s language
- phonological, pragmatic, lexical, semantic and grammatical development
- different genres of speech and writing
- different modes of communication (spoken, written, multimodal)
- theories and research about language development.

Section B focuses on International English, which is understood as including both the idea of established World Englishes and that of the more recent expansion of English globally as a lingua franca. The work of this area builds on that of Unit 2 Section B, where aspects of sociolinguistics were introduced and explored.

While Section A of this paper will regularly present data from language users as a starting point, this will not necessarily be the case in Section B.

Work on this unit needs to include consideration of:

- the different terms that are used to describe English across the world, such as ‘World Englishes’, ‘global English’, ‘international English’, ‘English as a lingua franca’ and so on
- some examples of English as used in international contexts (note that students are not expected to know...)
- factors that have helped to shape the development of English use across the world
- some of the models proposed by academic researchers for understanding aspects of International English.

The OUP textbook covers both areas of Unit 3 in some detail.

Unit 4 Language exploration

Both the examined unit (4a) and the coursework equivalent (4b) provide a naturally synoptic endpoint to the A-level course in that, having gained knowledge of different language topics and skills in using language, students are required to direct their own research. In the examined context, they are given two batches of data or texts where there is a common theme in each case, but also where there are several possible types of investigation that could be devised on the respective material. Their task is to establish an aim and, using at least two of the texts or data sets from one of the batches of material, conduct an analysis and write up the results in the format of a research report.

In the coursework equivalent, students identify a research area, establish an aim, collect their own data, analyse it, and draw some conclusions. They then produce a research report. Any type of investigation is permissible, providing that there is a sufficient focus on language and providing there are no ethical issues in carrying out the research. International students have a particularly rich source of opportunities around them for investigating language use, for example exploring the use of English or attitudes to English in the local area or in the media; researching the language practices of bilingual speakers; or analysing representations of the country they are in, in news articles or travel literature. Marking criteria are provided in the specification. AQA will provide support for using the marking criteria and developing appropriate tasks through teacher standardisation.

Conclusion

The International AS and A-level English Language represent an exciting new opportunity for schools and colleges outside the UK to study an AS/A-level course which contains many similar features to the UK qualification, while at the same time having distinctive features of its own. This short teachers' guide is an introduction to the course at the point of its inception. Further reports, advice and guidance will be offered in due course, including an OUP textbook endorsed by AQA providing exclusive support for this specification.

GET HELP AND SUPPORT

Visit our website for information, guidance, support and resources at oxfordaqaexams.org.uk

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