



GCSE
English Language

8700/C NEA: Spoken Language

Report on the Examination

8700
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Introduction

Centres are thanked for their continued support of all students' opportunities to succeed in the spoken language qualification and for providing such a wealth of inspiring evidence for the verifying panel to review.

The commitment to skill development, preparation, and management of the assessment experience itself, is well evidenced in the quality of work seen from a wide variety of centres and colleges. It is clear that the value and ethos of the spoken language endorsement is properly recognised and given status as intended, as the formal acknowledgement of what is an important milestone in students' personal development of communicative skill and confidence. Audiences are typically very supportive and respectful of the presenter and show proper interest in what is said through purposeful questioning.

The diversity of topics continues to inspire as does the passion of speakers when they have ownership of their topic, know what they want their audience to understand and craft their talk to influence. Significant maturity was noted in the handling of challenging social and global issues showing once again how aware and thoughtful young people are about the world they inhabit, and many students took the opportunity to address potentially sensitive issues in order to encourage others to have the confidence to speak out. As one verifier observed, sometimes the seed of a personal experience within these topics, allied to considered research and structured argument, resulted in performances of not only real maturity but also renditions which were genuinely emotionally engaging.

What was common across all of these impactful presentations was that students were empowered through the encouragement of their teachers to show ambition in both what they presented on and in the way they communicated. They had identified a purpose for their talks – they had considered 'why it matters,' planned, researched and organised their talks to ensure this was made clear to their audience.

Some presentations had a focus on how young people want their future world to be, which reinforces how students value the endorsement as an opportunity to show their awareness of, and readiness for, life beyond school as well as a forum to share their personal passions.

Topics and Tasks

As is always the case, certain topics are seen very frequently, and it is always interesting to note any shifts in focus over the years as technology and the state of the world influence student experience.

- Social media remains the most frequently seen topic area, but it is notable that most talks now focus on its negative impact on the lives of young people, particularly in relation to socialisation. Its impact on mental health was much discussed as was cyber-bullying, body dysmorphia, idealised beauty standards and conspiracy theories/fake news, and many were clear that some protection is required particularly for younger users in the face of the explosion of platforms and the peer pressure to 'participate.'

- AI was the preoccupation of many students and there are genuine concerns being expressed as to its impact on the future of society particularly in relation to employment. Whilst many students celebrated the potential of AI in medicine, technology and the advancement of science, there was clear consciousness of its as yet unknown and unregulated potential in relation, for example, to social media, the impact on creativity in the arts and music and the potential to cause ‘the death of diversity.’
- There were as always many talks about sport and in particular this year, much discussion of VAR in football. In the latter case, talks rarely showed complexity in that they tended to detail lists of decisions which, in the eyes of the speaker, were contentious.

The depth of knowledge 16-year-olds have regarding contemporary issues in society continues to impress. Frequent amongst these topics were:

- Education – the relevance of the centre curriculum to preparation for adult life, the value/constraints of GCSE and formal assessment and consideration of how the UK system contrasts with others across the globe. The impact of Covid and mandated online learning are clearly still being felt.
- Poverty, inequality and the cost of living crisis, with genuine political consciousness being shown of the wider issues of an unbalanced society. There was frequent discussion of the pay gap in sport although not always with appropriate understanding of the realities of the economics in play.
- Topics relating to equality of race, religion or gender: racism and black lives matter protests, the importance of representing black history in education. Islamophobia. Discrimination against refugees. Period poverty, women’s rights, misogyny. Men’s mental health, toxic masculinity. Gay and trans rights. Many students raised concerns that these issues are not sufficiently addressed within centres.
- The environment – fast fashion, the transition to green energy, single-use plastics, the urgency of tackling climate change as for example, in the exploitation of the environment in Brazil, river/sea pollution across the UK and some very interesting presentations considering the complex consequences of switching to electric cars.
- There have been many powerful talks about current wars and conflicts. Passion, reason and compassion were shown in abundance alongside real concern about the possible impacts on the future in relation to the economy, family life and the environment. In the most influential of these, students were moving beyond blame to consider resolutions.
- Topics where social, moral and political issues can be challenging: abortion especially given the change in the US situation; assisted dying and euthanasia; the problems facing the NHS; the UK prison and justice system; voting rights for 16 year olds; animal captivity, animal testing; legalisation of drugs, addiction, gun and knife crime.

Alongside these popular topics were many fascinating explorations of highly individualised topics which secured powerful impact proving again how valuable the endorsement can be as a forum for self-expression and autonomy. It is testament to the centres' support of students that there is such a variety of imaginatively original presentations which really make us sit up and take notice.

A few examples;

- the importance of dreams
- who owns space?
- chess boxing
- why we must not forget Windrush
- students sensitively exploring the issues arising from the experience of being a carer/being in care
- what it means to be autistic or to live with an illness such as long-Covid or with a disability.

Where students identified specific aspects of any of these topics, they were successful in formulating an argument to give their presentations purpose. Evidence was used to add depth and substance to their reasoning. The necessary research was not simply shared as knowledge gained under a generic topic heading such as 'I'm going to talk about social media', but was instead used to shape a title, often and effectively, a question which they went on to address using what they had learned to influence not just inform their audience: 'Is Facebook really our friend? I'm here today to explain to you why you and I should be turning our phones off before we go to sleep.'

Talking **for** rather than just **about** is central to the ethos of the endorsement and helping students arrive at an answer to the question '**why does it matter?**' should be a key focus when approving students' topic choices. This then allows for purposeful shaping, selection of appropriate and effective examples/details and influential choices of vocabulary and rhetorical techniques allowing students to build to a conclusion which has impact.

This is more challenging for students when, as again seen this year, centres direct the choice of topic and all students in the centre present on studied Literature texts. Such tasks oblige students to revisit their classroom learning in terms of knowledge not skills, and typically result in 'essay' form responses such that these talks are rarely delivered with any external focus or intention to affect the audience and will typically be 'read' rather than 'presented'. Questions focus on the text and do not always recognise the actual contents of the student's talk.

It is of course possible to explore themes and ideas from literary texts in relation to contemporary society and some very able students do this well, recognising the importance of considering a wider frame of reference. This is, however, challenging for those less confident or secure in their understanding who might well genuinely struggle to identify 'why it matters' or feel genuine interest and motivation in the task.

Whilst the focus on Literature might be for pragmatic reasons related to course management, centres should consider whether all students' abilities, and the criteria requirements which prioritise communication of ideas, are best shown in such work. The linking of the endorsement to preparation for GCSE English Language Paper 2 does offer a more productive approach, as using language and structure to express viewpoints and perspectives is key to success here.

There are 3 aspects to consider when considering what is appropriate in terms of topics and tasks:

1. Is the topic/task appropriate to the formal requirements of the endorsement?

- The endorsement is part of the GCSE examination and so it is formal. Presentations should be serious in approach, grounded in proper evidence and of sufficient substance that the audience will respond thoughtfully and respectfully. Tasks such as ‘Room 101’ or ‘Don’t get me started on’ do not readily reflect such formality. The subjects chosen for these talks are often chosen to entertain without a secure information base and will often not truly reflect the students’ own ideas but instead constitute a contrived fictional creation in which rhetorical skills and vocabulary might well impress but the talks themselves lack substantive information, an evidence base and plausible reasoning. The necessary balance of content and craft is generally not therefore achieved.
- It is equally important that the topic chosen is appropriately substantive. For example, talks about whether jaffa cakes are cakes or biscuits or if there should ever be pineapple on pizza cannot yield appropriately serious investigation to match the endorsement expectations at GCSE level. Directed tasks seen such as ‘my favourite colour’, ‘my role model’ are similarly unhelpful in fostering appropriate ambition and depth of ideas.

2. Is the topic/task consistent with the rubric of the endorsement?

- Enshrined in the rubric is the principle that students have complete independence in the choice of topic for their presentations and should formulate their own task title. This underpins students’ success by enabling students to take ownership of what they say, being motivated and enthused to share their original and individual ideas which, in turn, influences the way they prepare and deliver their presentation.
- It therefore follows that any direction to respond to a common task across a centre or for specific sections of a cohort - work experience, war, whether Christmas should be banned, fast fashion, overly controlling parents and homelessness being examples seen this year - constitutes inappropriate practice and is to be discouraged.
- Common tasks often lead to common, predictable questions further limiting opportunities for students in that the question exchange becomes perfunctory rather than meaningful or challenging.
- Equally unhelpful is any use of a directed common structure/phrasing; students should be able to develop their presentations in the way they deem most appropriate applying the skills acquired through their subject learning.

3. Will the topic/task facilitate access to the criteria relating to quality of ideas/argument at the level appropriate to the student’s skill potential?

- The first criterion at each level defines the quality of ideas being explored progressing from straightforward through challenging to sophisticated. Students targeting higher levels need to have a topic which facilitates exploration of different perspectives where evidence needs to be weighed and solutions/alternatives can be independently considered. Depth over breadth is valued in the progression between levels.

- There remain a number of topics which are seen every year which tend to not readily allow students to maximise this opportunity to show original thinking. School uniform is one such topic. The death penalty and capital punishment have also proven ineffective since students typically focus on historical information and the US situation and rarely explore beyond what a Google search has revealed. It is interesting that in both these cases, there is very little scope for nuanced opinions or arguments – students are ‘for’ or ‘against’. Choosing topics which allow for more independent thinking and original consideration of evidence and ideas is of benefit to the student and encouragement to follow their own interests and passions can support this.

The rubric specifies that the choice of topic is subject to the approval to the teachers and discussion of topic choice is to be encouraged such that teachers can be assured that appropriate choices have been made and students have thought clearly about the purpose of their presentation. An approach that can be taken to achieve this in a supportive manner is detailed in the [Notes and Guidance](#) document available on the main AQA website.

As part of the official examination, the principles of respecting ethical and moral sensitivities also apply such that consideration is given at the approval stage to ensuring that content will not offend and is wholly appropriate for a centre setting. Some very graphic details were shared in talks about serial killers, explicit detailing of drug-taking in talks on drug legalisation, and there were also instances where views shared on war and gender were potentially inflammatory requiring careful management on the part of the teacher present.

Assessment and Standards

It is always pleasing to report that, in the vast majority of centres, the assessment criteria were being accurately applied and established standards for this GCSE level award were matched allowing the centres to be verified.

Verifiers do however report that there remains some inconsistency in the application of the assessment criteria in relation to the core ‘descriptor’ of each level: **straightforward, challenging, sophisticated**. The progression between these levels of award is detailed in the [Notes and Guidance](#) document available on the main AQA website.

The primary element to be considered is the quality of information and ideas being communicated. Students do need to choose a topic which requires some research, but they also need to be prepared to weigh this and offer their own opinions and ideas. It is noted that many centres complete the assessment in year 10 and verifiers report that there is a discernible difference in both maturity of thinking and confidence in delivery when the endorsement is completed later in the course.

This is particularly noticeable in relation to the ‘wider frame’ principle whereby students begin to consider the social, moral, ethical and political importance of the issues they are addressing. They begin to show recognition of ‘why it matters’ to others rather than just themselves.

So, what do the key descriptors actually require in terms of information and quality of ideas?

Straightforward (PASS): information will be relayed, stated. Facts will be asserted/listed but often with little explanation of their connection and importance. The information shared will typically be derivative and generic. Personal stories and accounts of hobbies or travel will often fall into this category and be mainly descriptive and self-focused thus meaning that achievement beyond Pass level is unlikely as centres typically recognise.

Challenging (MERIT): as in other aspects of the subject, facts/information/data/opinions will be engaged in more depth with an increasing level of evaluation and analysis. There will be evidence specificity in the information and examples used to support the argument/idea being presented or the question being posed. Originality of approach is to be valued. Interestingly, as we move up in the merit level band, there is likely to be some challenge offered to the evidence/theory/opinions being expressed thus indicating increasing independence and critical judgement allowing students to begin to assert authority on their chosen topic. The purpose for their talk will be increasingly specific and clearly communicated.

Sophisticated (DISTINCTION): the skill levels are cumulative so all of the above will have been demonstrated as a foundation from which to aspire to fully independent, authoritative and influential detailing of ideas. There will be significant selectivity which recognises reliability of statistics and assertions and there will be synthesis and analysis of the evidence used, in order to categorically ‘prove’ the truth of the opinion or argument being presented such that the audience can be convinced. Alternative viewpoints will be weighed and as appropriate, disproved as further proof of argument. The sense of purpose will be assured, underpinning the content and craft of the presentation.

Most disagreement resulted from over-awarding where merit and distinction level awards could not be supported against the quality of ideas descriptor. Verifiers report a number of reasons for this:

- Topic choice had not been sufficiently carefully considered to allow exploration of complex and challenging material. This had consequences for the quality and range of vocabulary employed.
- Students were seen to be relaying information rather than communicating their own ideas or using the information found to shape their arguments. They were not presenting with purpose.
- Presentations were too short to allow proper depth and development of ideas or to show high level management of structure for impact. It is challenging to support awards of merit and distinction when talks last only 1 or 2 minutes since the full range of criteria for that level, however potentially complex the subject, are unlikely to be properly demonstrated.

However, the need to match all criteria within a level is also important to recognise and there are two factors in particular which verifiers report as having a significant impact on whether the levels awarded by a centre were supported. These key elements are explored in more detail in the following sections of this report.

- Students did not show sufficient awareness of the need to engage their audience; they were seen to be reading a script, not presenting a talk. A head down, monotone reading of a full speech cannot even achieve ‘meet the needs of the audience’ and so at best can only be a Pass. The [JCQ instructions](#) state that: ‘Teachers should advise students that reading entirely from pre-prepared notes is unlikely to enable them to access the criteria for the higher grades which require engagement with the audience’.

- The required question and answer element of the endorsement was not seen to be sufficiently extended to evidence the management of challenge such that the key descriptors relating to responses cannot be matched. On occasion, barely 30 seconds was seen to be allowed for this essential element thus restricting students' opportunities to achieve at the appropriate level.

There were some centres where all students are awarded PASS such that the skill levels demonstrated are under-appreciated in the awards made. On occasion, this appears to be a consequence of lapses in grammar or pronunciation, particularly in the assessment of English as an Additional Language (EAL) speakers and it is worth noting that the requirement for Spoken Standard English is related to being clear in meaning not necessarily grammatically flawless in oral expression.

There are a small number of centres where teachers are still allowing students to prepare and present in pairs or groups. This is not permitted under the rubric so any such submissions will inevitably receive a 'not classified' award. Equally inappropriate are survival type tasks – life raft/balloon debates, job interviews or teacher-led discussions where the student has not actually prepared a talk. It is of course accepted that certain students will need support to sustain their talk and the standardising examples of Holly and Josh demonstrate how teachers can do this in a way that permits full access to pass level criteria; the expectation being that students in these circumstances will demonstrate that they have identified a topic and can present some information about it which can then be developed through teacher questions.

Centres are reminded that internal standardisation is a requirement of NEA submissions and that this should be informed through regular review of the published standardising materials available through Centre Services. Consistency of assessment but also of approach to the key requirements should be considered across teaching groups. Building a centre reference library of agreed exemplars can also be of benefit to both students and teachers when embarking on preparation for the endorsement allowing students to properly appreciate and be inspired by the variety and ambition the task can foster.

Centres where standards cannot be verified are referred for secondary review and consequently receive feedback either via letter or via a monitoring meeting/visit to offer support which is intended to support verification of future samples. It is notable that many of the centres engaged with last year have made significant improvement, showing a more secure understanding of the established standards as a consequence of reviewing their approach to the core principles of the endorsement as detailed in the [Notes and Guidance](#) document.

Promoting presenting not reading

Students should be encouraged to be conscious at all stages that they are preparing a presentation which will be given orally. This is a key aspect of preparation for the assessment which is not being properly addressed in many centres. They need to be considering how an audience might respond and how they can affect this through their content and delivery. This requires them to 'know' their talk such that the notes/texts they have available are 'used' as a support rather than being relied on. It is advised that a discussion of how to devise appropriate 'notes' and practising of presentations should form part of the preparation for the assessment. There should not be an expectation that a PowerPoint will be prepared, and, on many occasions, these proved to be a distraction rather than an aid to effective communication. A reminder is pertinent that there is also an audience behind the camera ready and willing to be influenced.

Fundamental to students' success against the criteria of 'using strategies to engage' is the provision of a real and genuine audience with whom they can engage. One to one presentations were again seen to be prevalent despite the rubric's emphasis that they should be the exception. They are consistently reported as being unhelpful to students who, knowing their teachers will listen to them regardless, appear to pay too little attention to considering the delivery of their presentations.

The following issues, often in combination, were reported by verifiers as negatively impacting achievement against the engagement criterion and thus the support of the levels awarded:

- over-reliance on scripts whether on paper, on power-point slides or on phones
- monotone reading
- zero eye contact
- overly fast pace
- overly long and complex sentences making reception of meaning challenging for the audience.

Many centres' aims enshrine the importance of preparing students to participate effectively in the world beyond school. The endorsement requirements support this goal. Consideration of the audience, what they know, think and believe, fosters vital qualities of empathy, whilst listening and appreciating the views of other students serves to develop tolerance and understanding of different viewpoints and experiences.

One verifier commented on the tremendous mutual support (seen) in some groups. Another shared experiences of nervous students being sensitively encouraged by their teacher and classmates.

What is to be worked for, and what has impressed the verifying panel, is the achievement of a communicative rapport allowing for a positive experience whatever the ability level or topic chosen and we commend and compliment those students who spoke with little reference to notes and with a clear rapport with their peers, on a topic which meant something to them, and were then able to listen carefully to their peers' questions before giving thoughtful replies.

If students have been seen to be insufficiently engaging with their audience, it is imperative that the questioning element is extended and probing to afford them the opportunity to demonstrate this important communicative skill.

Making questioning meaningful

Verifiers report that there is evidence of more robust and extended questioning in many centre samples reviewed which is a very positive development. However, this practice is not consistent and there have again been too many instances where attention to this required element has either been ignored or was perfunctory with only one or two brief questions asked, rather than it being used, as intended, to add value and demonstrate to the student that what they communicated has been heard and considered and that their views matter.

Questioning needs to be substantive both in terms of the number of questions asked and the time allowed for answers. Where sweeping generalisations, unsupported assumptions, unreferenced statistics or vague non-specific examples have been used - it is imperative that students are challenged; the key point being that individuals are accountable for anything they say or write; an important life lesson.

The questions students receive need to show an understanding of the progression embedded in the criteria. The key terms to describe the quality of student responses are ‘appropriate/straightforward, formally and in detail,’ rising to ‘elaborated and perceptive’ at Distinction level. Questions should always target ‘thinking’ rather than just knowledge. This is explored in more detail in the [Notes and Guidance](#) document. It is expected that some questions, particularly at the higher levels, will be asked by teachers in order that the appropriate challenge to skill levels is provided.

At all levels, it is recommended that students are taught to consider the question asked from all angles and to answer in depth, rather than with a short superficial response.

There have been instances where, although a student audience is present, they are not invited to ask questions or, when invited, do not volunteer. Assessment Objective 9 encompasses the teaching of skills to promote the confidence to participate as an audience and the understanding of how to ask and respond to purposeful questions. Asking questions which are sequential, acknowledging and building on the responses given, is also an approach too often not used, and this again reduces how meaningful the experience is for the student presenting.

The question ‘Why did you choose this topic?’ still asked far too frequently at all levels, is not likely to be productive against the expectations at any level. It is not specific and shows no recognition of the actual content of the presentation given in which, in almost all cases, the answer has already been made clear.

Questions should permit the demonstration of expertise and ownership of the viewpoint expressed within the presentation by going beyond what has been said. Simply prefacing a question with ‘you said... but don’t you think that...’ can serve to initiate the type of meaningful exchanges intended since it both evidences listening and embodies challenge.

Questions should arise out of the talk and not be pre-prepared. There is too frequently evidence of questions being ‘planted’ across an audience. It bears reiterating that where students know what questions they are likely to be asked, the opportunity to demonstrate their processing and response skills is diminished and this required element becomes perfunctory rather than meaningful as students are not being offered opportunities to respond spontaneously.

There are, however, many examples of centres where, in tandem with the benefit of addressing a full audience, the question-and-answer exchange is given proper time and value resulting in a genuine communicative experience. In such cases students ask thoughtful questions and seek to support the speaker and show acknowledgement of the scope of the talk presented. Knowledge and understanding are extended for all those present and there is clear recognition that they had been involved in something valuable. These sessions typically conclude with genuine and generous applause and just praise from the teacher.

How long should presentations be?

Students need to be given adequate time to deliver their presentations and receive questions as the 10-minute guideline in the specification envisages. Many talks at all levels this year were too brief. Attention is drawn to the following observations from verifiers.

- Some talks seen of less than 30 seconds followed by brief questions cannot be viewed as sufficient for this GCSE level assessment; the full range of criteria cannot be appropriately demonstrated and Pass level awards were not therefore supported.
- Talks need substance - time is needed to develop detail around the ideas **but** length of talk is not a guarantee of higher-level achievement. More of the same rarely progresses; management of structure is a key higher-level skill valued in the criteria.
- Many Further Education students were seen to be speaking for well over 15 minutes which goes beyond expectations and was typically a result of not being wholly clear as to the main purpose of their talk.

Administration of the verification process

- It is a requirement of the endorsement that the presentations will be video recorded. Audio only recordings are not acceptable without an official exemption which must be applied for in advance of assessments being completed for each series by contacting the moderation team at AQA (moderation@aqa.org.uk).
- Such exemptions are intended to ensure that students with EHCPs and in specialist settings are not disenfranchised.
- There is no mechanism for students to ‘opt-out’ of being filmed and this expectation should be made clear.
- Centres select their own samples for this endorsement and so have the responsibility to manage the recording process in order to ensure that a valid sample can be submitted.
- Where technical problems affect the provision of the appropriate sample of evidence, the procedures for [Lost or Damaged work](#) should be followed.

The introduction of the AQA portal has been welcomed by centres and verifiers and we offer our thanks to those centres who have managed this transition successfully.

The issues listed here are both familiar and specific to the new portal system and support from centres in facilitating successful verification is much appreciated.

- Video samples need to be correctly labelled. This is to ensure that the evidence matches the component, the student and the award listed on the centre mark sheet. Just as with written NEA, the mark on the work itself is the mark which is deemed correct since it has been awarded by the assessor who has signed the Centre Declaration Sheet to attest to their adherence to the specification rubric. The format of the labelling is still the same:

8700_12345_0001_Joe Bloggs _ Pass

- Videos should be uploaded singly to match individual students. It is not helpful for the verifier if all students are uploaded against a single student. As always, continuous recordings are not acceptable even where a timed index is supplied.

- There have been many instances where audibility has not been sufficiently clear especially where the camera is a long distance away or, where it is close to the presenter but does not capture the questions asked from the audience. Centres are kindly asked to monitor their recording methods and, where necessary, it can be helpful if the teacher present can repeat questions to ensure clarity. A brief check on the audibility of the sample before uploading would also be appreciated.
- More recordings than usual were also very dark, and this can impede our ability to properly appreciate a student's performance, or any visual aids being employed.

Although there is the facility to upload pdf record sheets, these are **not** required for the usual process of verification.

Conclusion

It is widely accepted that communicative confidence is an issue for many young people today potentially exacerbated by the impact of Covid on educational experience. This is something which can be effectively addressed in the centre context by actively supporting the development of oracy skills across the curriculum. Providing regular opportunities to develop the skills and confidence necessary to complete this end-of-course assessment and, equally, to participate as part of an engaged audience merit dedicated attention given how important these abilities are in further education and working life beyond school.

It is a tribute to the staff and leadership of so many centres that students feel confident to address sensitive issues in class forums. Many powerful talks were seen on topics relating to the real and serious pressures students experience and the consequences which may result. What made these so influential was the consciousness of the need to offer ideas to support all young people – to demystify and open the conversation such that no one needs to feel isolated, embarrassed or helpless when faced with such challenges.

Students often talked about how the world is affecting young people today and verifiers felt privileged to be a part of this 'conversation.' When managed well, the benefits offered by the Spoken Language endorsement are clear to see and should be fully embraced by all centres.

Centres are once again thanked for their efforts in completing and submitting evidence for the series.

Feedback to centres where required in accordance with issues discussed in this report, will be sent in September 2024.

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

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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