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A LEVEL
Teacher Guide

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

H470
For first teaching in 2015

Independent Investigation of Language in Use

Version 2

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INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION OF LANGUAGE IN USE

GENERAL GUIDANCE

INTRODUCTION

Centres will find it important that candidates are given detailed guidance in preparation for their independent investigation. It is recommended that an introduction to research and organisation is provided at some time during the first year of study, since it is quite likely that this will be their first attempt at a significant piece of academic research. This should help, also, obviate problems which do occur if candidates begin work on the study only in the second year of the course. In general terms the initial guidance should stress the following:

- Choosing a topic which is of personal interest.
- Not undertaking an over-ambitious task.
- That research is a time-demanding undertaking – so a clear focus and time-management are critical.
- That the inclusion of data collection and analysis is a feature of the investigation.
- That it is essential that the investigation does meet all the assessment objectives.

One way of achieving this could be by students completing a mini-investigation towards the end of their first year of study, where they choose a small language topic and devise an appropriate way in which to research it, collecting data and then analysing their findings. Presenting mini-investigations orally in class is a great way to share what has been learnt about the pitfalls of practical research in this area, as well as the outcomes of their investigation.

AIMS

In completing the first section of the Independent Investigation component of the A Level English Language course, each student must write an investigation of 2,000-2,500 words. The primary aim of such is a detailed analytical investigation of the linguistic constituents in the chosen data source(s). This analysis will demonstrate a systematic application of appropriate terminology. The candidate needs to identify a research focus, and to select and apply an appropriate methodology for data collection. In the process of analysing their results, candidates may choose to quantify their data by the use of graphs, charts and any other form of suitable tabulation. The investigation will be written in an appropriate academic register and will be supported by a bibliography, which should conform to an accepted model.

TOPIC SELECTION

Topics can be chosen from the areas of spoken language or written language, or may explore both spoken and written language together. Multimodal texts are appropriate for study in this unit. Whilst originality can be commendable, there is no strong evidence that quite familiar topics will not yield very good outcomes. Teachers will need to exercise some discretion in guiding students away from ideas which will prove too daunting; or ideas which would appear to include the potential for too much discursive narration.

Centres could find it helpful to suggest topics which are drawn from components of the specification. This is a useful method for ensuring anchorage in varieties of language with which candidates will have gained, or will gain, some familiarity. Child Language could appeal to those interested in theories of language acquisition. Media discourse offers potential for exploration of social media, or multi-modal production. Language Change could appeal to interests in dialectology and lexicology.

However, it is important to note that candidates should be given the opportunity to explore beyond the topics explicitly covered in the specification, should they so desire. For example, a candidate who has shown an interest in the topic of child Language Acquisition could choose to explore a language acquisition disorder in their investigation. Candidates who want to focus on concepts and issues related to language and power could choose to investigate power in language in relation to particular professions - the law; health; politics; forensic linguistics. A candidate who wants to look at language variations may investigate their own sociolect or idiolect; language change could be explored in the context of technology or social media; data could be collected to investigate accent and dialect in their extended family.

The key to a successful topic choice rests primarily on two factors:

- Firstly, the students' interest in the topic.
- Secondly, the ability for the topic to be researched in a meaningful, practical and manageable way.

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Once a topic is chosen it is very helpful to suggest that candidates organise the process of their investigation by focussing on the following:

1. Having chosen a field of interest, identify a clear and specific research focus – what is it you want to explore, or find out?
2. Explore methodologies for data collection.
3. Identify an appropriate methodology that will help you explore your topic, or find out the answer to the question(s) you have.
4. Identify your data sources, and implement your methodology.
5. Collate and analyse your data.
6. Produce a detailed analytical and critical response to the data.
7. Produce a succinct conclusion, identifying the outcomes. This must not be just a summary of the content of the investigation.
8. Write an evaluation of steps 1-7.

This kind of elementary planning is useful in ensuring that students do not waste time in research which lacks attention to the specific demands of the specification, in terms of assessment criteria. As far as possible, teachers should monitor the development of the topic through the various stages. This can help in negating potential weaknesses and problems in the student's approach.

COLLECTING DATA

Data collection can be quite challenging, especially in terms of the availability and style of sources which can be taken from websites. It is good policy to suggest that several core written texts and/or periodicals should be used in parallel with digitally extracted materials. Concepts and practical examples drawn from sources need to be refined as the investigation takes shape, in terms of meeting A02 and A03. Ensure candidates do keep an accurate record of all such research, reminding them of its importance in the bibliography. With investigations which are concerned with speech, aspects of spoken language or language development, it will be very important to consider the recording of such data. There will be, also, the need to represent prosodic and phonemic features. A sensible policy for handling such data is to encourage candidates by suggesting a recording of about 5-8 minutes.

The application of specific technical analysis to be applied to just one section of transcribed data does encourage systematic and detailed analytical evaluation. In investigations which are to be based upon digital media and language there is a strong possibility that visual language will be included. This could cover, also, data drawn from television broadcasts. If there seems a need to link the linguistic constituents of the text with images, then it is important to ensure that a suitable methodology for analysing visuals is adopted. As with topic selection, it is important that, as far as possible, teachers do check and query the kinds of data candidates are proposing to use.

CONCLUSION

The best investigations should display evidence of having followed a clear plan. The presentation of the completed work is much easier to read if it is written using headings and sub-headings. With work which is likely to include quotation, detailed technical illustration and analytical and contextual information, such a layout can be very helpful to the external moderator. It could also be of value in helping to prepare the creative presentation of the work appropriate to the academic poster form, as required by the second part of the coursework component.

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