Taking Back the Reins: the new English Language GCSE

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What with all the controversy that surrounded the emergence of the new GCSE in English Literature, the requirements for English Language attracted relatively little comment. To some extent, this is because English Language has been unable to muster any particularly newsworthy changes, at least when compared with the outlawing of those set-text stalwarts Of Mice and Men and To Kill a Mockingbird. I suspect it’s also partly because English teachers are so punch-drunk with change that they haven’t had the time or energy to do more than register the basics. There are the major changes: the switch to linear assessment, and the introduction of grades that run from 9 to 1 instead of A* to G. There’s the disappearance of controlled assessment and its associated admin, and the increased emphasis given to spelling, punctuation and grammar, now worth 20% of students’ overall grade instead of 12%. But beyond this, most people’s reaction to the new GCSE is probably characterised by the reflex elicited by many of Michael Gove’s reforms during his time in office: a sense of despair at yet another example of change for the sake of change, driven by agendas that pay little attention to the needs of today’s young people.

This is a pity, because I’d argue that the new GCSE in English Language actually has a lot to offer. The end of controlled assessment offers scope for departments to create courses that are genuinely challenging and engaging, making use of time that was previously taken up with preparing for prescribed tasks, filling in planning sheets and supervising work that had to be done under exam conditions. By now, departments will probably have decided which specification they’re going to follow, and will
be looking ahead to how to use this summer’s gained time to plan for September. So what do the new specifications actually involve? And—crucially—how can departments make the new GCSE work for their students?

The scope of the subject

The DfE subject criteria for GCSE English Language, which provide the framework for the awarding bodies to create their individual specifications, divide English Language into three components: critical reading and comprehension, writing, and speaking and listening (DfE 2013a).

Critical reading and comprehension involves a familiar range of skills: ‘identifying and interpreting themes, ideas and information’ in a range of literary and non-literary texts, drawing inferences, identifying bias, reflecting critically on texts, summarising and synthesising, and analysing and evaluating the effects of writers’ choices of language, structure and form. Students will be asked to respond to texts from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries and will need to be prepared to analyse literary fiction, ‘extended literary non-fiction’, and other non-fiction texts such as journalism, reviews, diaries, letters and speeches. The DfE specifies that ‘texts that are essentially transient, such as instant news feeds’ are excluded (DfE 2013a: 4). All texts set in the examination will be unseen, and students will also be asked to compare texts.

Writing is divided into ‘producing clear and coherent text’ and ‘writing for impact’. Students need to be taught to write for different audiences and purposes, to use language creatively, imaginatively and persuasively, and to organise their writing appropriately. They must also be prepared for the increased weighting given to their ability to ‘use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation’ (DfE 2013a: 6).

Speaking and listening is reported on but does not form part of the overall grade. It has narrowed considerably in scope, consisting of preparing and delivering presentations and listening and responding to questions and feedback, using Standard English where appropriate.
The new specifications

The tightness of the DfE’s prescriptions means that there is relatively little variation between specifications. All set two papers, both of which assess both reading and writing. All assess Speaking and Listening through one single piece, which has to be a formal presentation.

NATE has placed a very helpful summary of all four specifications on its website (NATE 2015); the English and Media Centre blog contains an overview of the changes (English and Media Centre 2014). English departments will, however, need to spend time looking at the details of their chosen specification, exploring the sample assessment materials and looking at the additional resources and teacher support materials that the different awarding bodies offer.

AQA (see AQA 2014a and 2014b)

Paper 1: Explorations in Creative Reading and Writing (1 hour 45 minutes; 50% of overall grade)

Section A focuses on literary prose fiction from the 20th or 21st centuries (in the sample assessment materials, this is a 43-line extract from the beginning of Jamaica Inn). The questions on this extract follow a clear pattern, with one short form question requiring four brief responses that test students’ basic comprehension, two longer form questions focusing on the writer’s choice of language and how the opening of the novel interests the reader, and one extended question that asks students to evaluate the writer’s presentation of character. These structured questions, which contain bullet-point prompts, give students support—important with such high-stakes assessment—and allow them to ease themselves into the exam.

Section B offers a choice of two descriptive or narrative writing tasks. There will be some stimulus material in the form of an image or written prompt (in the sample materials, this is a photo of the storm-damaged Dawlish railway). 40% of the marks for this task are awarded for technical accuracy.
Paper 2: Writers’ Viewpoints and Perspectives (1 hour 45 minutes; 50% of overall grade)

Section A focuses on two texts: one non-fiction, the other ‘literary non-fiction’. One will be from the 19th century, one from either the 20th or 21st centuries. In the sample assessment materials, there is an article from *The Observer* by Jay Rayner and two letters from the early 19th century; all focus on experiences of school. The questions follow a similar format to Paper 1, with one short form, two longer form questions and one extended response. Unlike Paper 1, however, the longer form questions do not have bullet-point prompts.

Section B offers no choice of task. It assesses students’ ability to present a point of view in writing for a specified audience and purpose: in the sample materials, an article for a broadsheet newspaper on the value of homework. Again, 40% of the marks are awarded for technical accuracy.

Edexcel (see Edexcel 2014a and 2014b)

Paper 1: Fiction and Imaginative Writing (1 hour 45 minutes; 40% of overall grade)

Section A focuses on an extract of 19th-century fiction of about 650 words. In the sample assessment materials, the extract set is from ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’. As with AQA, students are assessed through questions that require a mixture of short and extended answers testing skills of comprehension, analysis and evaluation, some focusing on specific lines from the extract and others on the extract as a whole. There are no bullet-point prompts.

Section B consists of one creative writing task from a choice of two. One of these will offer two images as stimulus. The tasks in the sample materials ask students to write about a time when they or someone they know tried to hide something, or to write about a frightening experience.

Paper 2: Non-Fiction and Transactional Writing (2 hours; 60% of overall grade)

Section A centres on 20th and 21st-century non-fiction, including journalism, autobiography, speeches, obituaries, letters and travel writing. In addition to the DfE’s ban on ‘transient’ texts, the specification
also states that advertisements will not be set (Edexcel 2014a: 8). One of
the texts set will be literary non-fiction, and the two texts will be about
1000 words altogether. In the sample paper, one of the texts is an article
from the Daily Telegraph about recruitment to MI6: the other is an extract
from a memoir about codebreaking during the Second World War. There
will be three questions on each text (a mixture of short and long answers)
and then a two-part question requiring students to compare the texts.

Section B is a transactional writing task: again, students are given a choice
of two, both linked to the theme of the non-fiction extracts. In the
sample assessment materials, these are a letter to MI6 applying for a
position as an intelligence officer, and an article for a newspaper about
the use of technology to track people’s movements. Both contain
prompts to give students some ideas.

It is worth noting that the different weighting given to Edexcel’s papers
has most impact on the Reading sections. The Reading section of Paper 1
is worth only 15% of students’ overall grade; its counterpart on Paper 2 is
worth 35% altogether.

OCR (see OCR 2014a and 2014b)

Paper 1: Communicating Information and Ideas (2 hours; 50% of
overall grade)

Section A focuses on two thematically-linked non-fiction texts, one from
the 19th century and one from the 20th or 21st centuries. In the sample
assessment materials, these are an extract from Narrative of the Life of
Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, and President Obama’s statement
on the death of Nelson Mandela. These are assessed through four
questions: two lower tariff and two higher tariff. In the sample materials,
the last of these is a challenging evaluative question that demands a
personal response to the ideas being discussed as well as to the texts
themselves: students have to discuss what they learn about the
importance of having freedom and strong personal beliefs.

Section B asks students to write one piece of original non-fiction from a
choice of two tasks, both of which will be linked to the theme addressed
in Section A. The tasks in the sample assessment materials are a speech
and a magazine article. Students are given bullet-point prompts.
Paper 2: Exploring Effects and Impact (2 hours; 50% of overall grade)

Section A centres on prose from the 20th and/or 21st centuries. There will be two texts, at least one of which will be fiction: the second text might be literary non-fiction such as biography or travel writing (in the sample paper the texts are extracts from Clive James’ *Unreliable Memoirs* and Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, totalling just under a hundred lines). As for Paper 1, there are two lower-tariff and two higher-tariff questions, assessing skills of comprehension, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Section B offers a choice of two imaginative and creative tasks, linked to the theme explored in Section A. In the sample paper, students are invited to write an autobiographical piece about starting a new school, or a story or piece of personal writing with the title ‘The Outsider’. Again, students are given bullet-point prompts.

WJEC/Eduqas (see WJEC/Eduqas 2014a and 2014b)

Paper 1: 20th Century Literature Reading and Creative Prose Writing (1 hour 45 minutes; 40% of overall grade)

Section A focuses on an extract of 60-100 lines from a work of twentieth-century prose fiction: in the sample materials, this is from a novel by Alexander McCall Smith. As with the other specifications, the paper consists of short and extended-answer questions. However, the WJEC/Eduqas assessment materials differ in that they consist simply of a question paper, with students writing their answers in a generic answer booklet. The question papers produced for all of the other specifications have space for students’ answers, thus giving students an idea of how much they should write: some specifications also reproduce short sections of the text if they want students to refer to these in particular questions.

Section B, which focuses on creative prose writing, involves responding to one task from a choice of four. In the sample materials, there are no prompts: students are simply given four titles (‘Making a Difference’, ‘The Choice’, ‘Write about a time when you were at a children’s party’ and ‘Write a story which begins “I didn’t know if I had the courage to do this”’). Students will need to be prepared for the absence of the kind of
scaffolding provided by the other specifications: many will find it extremely demanding to produce a piece of creative writing with only the briefest of stimuli.

**Paper 2: 19th and 21st Century Non-Fiction Reading and Transactional/Persuasive Writing (2 hours; 60% of overall grade)**

Section A consists of questions on two non-fiction extracts, totalling about 900-1200 words. The specification states that the texts selected ‘may include, but will not be limited to: letters, extracts from autobiographies or biographies, diaries, reports, articles and digital and multi-modal texts of various kinds from newspapers and magazines, and the internet’ (WJEC/Eduqas 2014a: 8). The texts included in the sample assessment materials are an article about leftovers and food waste by John Humphrys, first published in the *Sunday Times*, and an extract from a book called *The American Frugal Housewife* by Lydia M. Child, published in 1832. There are two questions on each text (one multi-part short-answer question testing basic comprehension and one long-answer question that asks candidates to analyse the way ideas are presented) and then two questions that require comparison.

Section B, unlike the equivalent section in all other papers, requires students to do two pieces of writing. Two tasks are set: in the sample materials, one is transactional (a report for a headteacher or principal on reducing waste) and the other persuasive (a magazine article on a motorcycle race on local roads). The fact that students have to produce two very different pieces under timed conditions, with minimal prompts, makes this paper seem particularly demanding, especially if the second task (as in the sample materials) is not linked to the theme of the extracts in Section A.

**Implications for English departments**

In the Spring 2015 edition of the English Association Newsletter, Barbara Bleiman and Andrew McCallum of the English and Media Centre state that ‘it is perfectly possible to construct an academically rigorous and engaging curriculum from current NC and GCSE requirements’ (Bleiman and McCallum 2015: 7). They are absolutely right; but many departments will be daunted by the new linear courses and the disappearance of the
formative staging-posts offered by coursework and controlled assessment. What do schools need to bear in mind, then, as they prepare to teach the new courses this September?

One important point to bear in mind is that English departments are already doing a huge amount of valuable work developing students’ imaginative, creative, persuasive and transactional writing, and introducing them to high-quality, challenging texts. The assessment regime might have changed, but the skills students need to cope with the new GCSEs are, in many ways, very similar. My current Year 10s began their GCSE course with a unit on personal writing that focused on Sylvia Plath’s short story ‘Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit’ and Simon Armitage’s poem ‘Kid’. It’s likely that next year’s Year 10 will begin in the same way, building up to a piece of original writing in which students explore a turning point in their lives. Students will still develop their ability to write coherently, thinking carefully about their choices of vocabulary, grammar and structural features and using language to create impact: they just won’t have three hours of controlled assessment at the end. (And, of course, the fact that students only need to do one formally-assessed Speaking and Listening task does not mean that departments should abandon the valuable work they do to develop students’ oracy: group work, discussion, hotseating and drama-based work should still form part of students’ experience of English).

Nevertheless, departments will need to pay attention to the fact that reading might well be assessed in ways that differ significantly from current specifications. The current AQA English Language exam, for instance, has no equivalent of the short-answer questions set in Section A of both of the new AQA English Language papers: these short-answer questions seem straightforward but they will need to be answered with real precision if students are to avoid losing marks. I suspect that students who are able but overconfident might well experience problems. My department will certainly be building in some of these questions to our work on both fiction and non-fiction, and emphasising the need to avoid cutting corners.

The subject criteria emphasise the need for students to read a range of high-quality, challenging texts: students will also need to be able to read and process extracts from these texts under timed conditions in a stressful situation. It’s vital, therefore, that departments think about how
they will teach the reading strategies students will need to cope in these conditions, which will be very different from the more supportive atmosphere in which texts are encountered and explored in the classroom. I’d advise departments to build a bank of stimulating, engaging non-fiction texts, including literary non-fiction and high-quality digital texts (the online magazine Rookie, accessible at www.rookiemag.com, is a brilliant example of a digital text that is extremely challenging, relevant and thought-provoking—plus, as a text written largely by teenage girls, offering a model of the kind of writing that your own students might aspire to). Given that all specifications apart from Edexcel will set a piece of 19th-century non-fiction, departments would be wise to include some of this in their planning. The British Library English Timeline, accessible at www.bl.uk/englishtimeline, offers a wealth of examples, including letters and diaries by familiar authors and newspaper articles on important public events. A lesson or two giving students the chance to explore the Timeline and find their own resources would be a fantastic way of giving them ownership of the learning process and developing their study skills.

Departments will need to prepare students for the greater emphasis given to technical accuracy, and will probably think about how to build this into teaching, learning and assessment at Key Stage 3 as well as Key Stage 4. This might well involve an increased focus on the explicit teaching of grammar, punctuation and spelling rules, flagging strategies for students to learn particular patterns and check their own work. There is, of course, no short-term fix for this, and it is a good time for schools to think about a long-term approach to technical skills, embedded in their whole-school literacy strategy.

Finally, schools should also remember that any course is much, much more than the way in which it’s assessed. The new GCSEs actually offer departments a huge amount of freedom. The two years that stretch ahead of us might seem scary at first, but they give us the chance to build an experience that includes everything we’d want for our Key Stage 4 students.

References

Bleiman, B and McCallum, A (2015): ‘Key Stage 3 and GCSE: what’s happening to English teaching?’ in English Association Newsletter, no.208, pp. 5-7


