VCE English Language 2016–2023
The accreditation period for English Language has been extended until 31 December 2023.

School-assessed Coursework report

This report is provided for the first year of implementation of this study and is based on the coursework audit and VCAA statistical data.

General Comments

Unit 3 and Unit 4

The online audit surveys for both Unit 3 and Unit 4 English Language (EL) demonstrated that the majority of Year 12 EL students are assessed according to the VCAA descriptors or criteria. A significant number of respondents utilise a modified version of the VCAA descriptors. Only a few schools use other assessment criteria, such as that developed by the school or by a commercial organisation.

Overall, the work provided by EL teachers in schools undergoing an audit showed that the majority of VCE Units 3– English Language programs being provided to Year 12 students are excellent – very comprehensive, challenging and interesting. They demonstrated a willingness and commitment on the part of EL teachers to continually update their materials, activities, and assessment tasks so that they are contemporary, up-to-date, accurate and varied. The nature of the subject means that teachers continually draw on material, especially new material, from a wide range of sources, including print and online media, both subject association and commercially published resources, as well as VCAA publications. The majority of schools surveyed made use of VCAA reports such as examination, statistical moderation, and School-assessed Coursework reports where available. In particular, many of the respondents mentioned the benefits of being a member of Victorian Association of Teachers of English (VATE) online English Language network and being able to share activities, texts, ideas and assessment tasks. This is of particular importance for teachers who are the sole teachers of English Language in their school. Being able to connect with the wider VCE English Language teaching community also helps these teachers with the important process of cross-marking and moderating their students’ work.

As 2016 is the first year of the new study design (2016–2023), teachers are reminded to check that they are using the current titles for Units, Areas of Study, Outcomes, etc. and that they are using the correct terminology for English Language. For example, the term ‘stimulus’ is used in EL to refer to support material provided for essays – as opposed to ‘prompts’, which has a specific use and meaning in the VCE English course.

Most respondents to the audit survey were satisfied with the experience and indicated that they had had no problems with accessing the survey and uploading their responses. The experience was also described by a few as invaluable, allowing for reflection and evaluation of teaching practices and suitability of their school’s coursework and assessment tasks. A few teachers reported some frustration with the online questionnaire – this included: problems with losing work saved or losing formatting of original work; the amount of time required to complete the online responses; and some difficulty navigating the text boxes on certain screens. Teachers participating in the audit were encouraged to provide as much detail as required to clearly and succinctly answer each question and demonstrate to the EL reviewer that their Unit 3 and 4 programs meet the VCAA requirements. Further evidence was sometimes requested only because not enough information was provided to clearly demonstrate this.

Specific information

Unit 3: Language variation and social purpose

Outcome 1

*Identify and analyse distinctive features of informal language in written and spoken texts.*

Analysis of one or more samples of informal language in any one or a combination of the following:

* a folio of annotated texts
* an essay
* an investigative report
* an analytical commentary
* short-answer questions

Assessment tasks may be written, oral or multi-modal. The total suggested length of the student responses should be approximately 600–800 words or equivalent.

Outcome 2

*Identify and analyse distinctive features of formal language in written and spoken texts.*

Analysis of one or more samples of formal language in any one or a combination of the following:

* a folio of annotated texts
* an essay
* an investigative report
* an analytical commentary
* short-answer questions

Assessment tasks may be written, oral or multimodal. The total suggested length of the student responses should be approximately 600–800 words or equivalent.

Responses to the Unit 3 audit survey clearly showed that for each Outcome (1 and 2) most schools provided students with two different assessment tasks in order to achieve the Outcome. These were overwhelmingly written, rather than oral or multimodal – this possibly reflects time constraints in a busy course, and the desire of teachers to utilise the assessment task to prepare students for the experience of sitting the end-of-year written EL exam. The preferred assessment tasks for each Outcome in Unit 3 were generally short-answer questions and an analytical commentary, one focusing on a spoken text (informal and formal) and the other on a written text (formal and informal). The analytical commentary was a new addition to the list of assessment tasks in Unit 3, recognising that most teachers were already introducing and using this type of task in classroom activities and for assessment in Unit 3. At this early stage of the year, short-answer questions provide a very structured way of interacting with a given text and analysing the language therein, supporting students as they are challenged to use the metalanguage they are concurrently learning in a more sophisticated and nuanced way. Short-answer questions also relate to Section A of the end-of-year external exam and clearly teachers are keen to introduce students to this type of task as early as possible to help them gain the necessary skills to tackle this section of the examination. Similarly, the analytical commentary is a very popular assessment task in Unit 3, and as it relates to Section B of the external end-of-year exam, teachers are obviously keen to introduce it to students early in the year. Short-answer questions often provide a scaffold to support students with the more-opened analytical commentary task. These two assessment styles work well together as a pair of tasks to assess each Outcome in Unit 3.

The choice of texts is paramount here and also the length. Texts chosen for either short-answer questions or analytical commentary must allow students a fair opportunity to be able to achieve each outcome in Unit 3 – using previous years’ exams can assist in the layout of texts. An introductory blurb should always be provided, and sometimes a glossary of difficult terms – students are not permitted to use a dictionary in the end-of-year EL exam so allowing students to use one in all assessment tasks (as some schools reported in the audit survey) may not be providing students with the best assistance. The material provided for the audit survey showed that most EL teachers spend time preparing texts for classroom activities and assessment, for example, numbering each line so that students can provide line numbers and reference examples much more easily.

The length, as well as the content, of texts is important – some texts were quite long and it is too much to expect students in the first half of the year to be able to both read and analyse the language in quite a lengthy text while they are still learning and acquiring both the metalanguage and the skills of analysis and commentary. Consideration must also be given to preparing a ‘sequence’ of short-answer questions – again, previous years’ exams can provide some insight into the expected wording and scaffolding of short-answer questions. Some short-answer questions provided in audit survey material were far too open-ended, or expected far too much detail for only a few marks, or wanted students to able to answer a question across two texts. Students are better supported by: two-part questions; narrowing some questions to focus on a set of lines, rather than all covering the whole text; providing clear instructions about how many examples they need to provide, or what type of linguistic features (e.g. ‘lexical’ features). There should be some easier, introductory questions building up to more challenging and complex questions that allow for discrimination between students’ responses. It is very important, when preparing short-answer questions on a text, to have a clear understanding of the difference between prescriptive and holistic marking. Short-answer questions in the end-of-year exam are marked holistically, that is, they are ranked, rather than being marked prescriptively, and marks are awarded rather than responses penalised.

For each Outcome in Unit 3, students are required to analyse language in both spoken and written texts – this was not always evident in the material provided in the audit survey and teachers were occasionally asked to provide further evidence to show that their students are provided with opportunities to analyse informal and formal language in both modes, and therefore achieve each Outcome. While spoken texts can be monologues, students need the opportunity to listen to, read, and analyse dialogues in both informal and formal language as spoken discourse features are a crucial part of Unit 3. Careful consideration must also be given to the transcription of speech – particularly in recognising that the lines in a transcription of a speech or conversation should refer to intonation units, and not sentences (as in written texts). Some of the spoken texts provided in the audit material were not transcribed according to intonation units and in some cases this created quite lengthy and dense texts for students to read and analyse. Again, using transcripts from previous years’ exams can provide a good basis to assist in learning how to better transcribe and format spoken texts (e.g. adding in prosodic features, transcriptions symbols).

The range of assessment tasks provides EL teachers with choice and flexibility in creating a ‘package’ of assessment opportunities for their students. The folio of annotated texts, for example, was often combined with short-answer questions, or the essay as an introductory/preparatory activity, allowing students to do some independent research in their own time, collecting, collating and annotating text samples and media discussion of language. While not as popular as the short-answer questions and analytical commentary, some schools introduce the essay as an assessment task in Unit 3 – more so in Outcome 2, than in Outcome 1, presumably when students have developed an appropriate level of metalanguage and general linguistic knowledge and awareness. Again, it is recommended that essay questions try to follow the structure and layout of essays in the end-of-year exam, particularly in providing 3-5 samples of contemporary stimulus material, and in the wording, e.g. requiring at least one reference to the stimulus material and referring to at least two different subsystems. An essay question for Outcome 1 (informal language) or Outcome 2 (formal language) must clearly allow students to achieve the relevant Outcome in Unit 3. This may require some modification of pre-existing essay questions. Occasionally, some of the essay questions provided for the Unit 3 Outcomes were more relevant to the Areas of Study in Unit 4 and further evidence was required by schools to demonstrate how the chosen essay task provided an opportunity for students to achieve the desired Unit 3 Outcome.

Unit 4: Language variation and identity

Outcome 1

*Investigate and analyse varieties of Australian English and attitudes towards them.*

For each outcome, any one or a combination of the following:

* a folio of annotated texts
* an essay
* an investigative report
* an analytical commentary
* short-answer questions

Assessment tasks may be written, oral or multi-modal. The total suggested length of the student responses should be approximately 600–800 words or equivalent.

Outcome 2

*Analyse how people’s choice of language reflects and constructs their identities.*

For each outcome, any one or a combination of the following:

* a folio of annotated texts
* an essay
* an investigative report
* an analytical commentary
* short-answer questions

Assessment tasks may be written, oral or multi-modal. The total suggested length of the student responses should be approximately 600–800 words or equivalent.

Responses to the audit survey questions clearly demonstrate that the essay is the preferred assessment task in each Outcome for Unit 4, and that the majority of assessment is written, rather than oral or multimodal. By Unit 4, students have been introduced to a lot of the metalanguage required in Year 12 EL and have also had the opportunity to develop their socio-linguistic knowledge through classroom discussions, activities and wider reading. The essay task lends itself well to the content studied in each Area of Study in Unit 4, focusing on broader issues to do with language variety, identity, attitudes, etc. within the context of contemporary Australian society. As in Unit 3, students are often also presented with more than one opportunity to achieve each Outcome in Unit 4. In many cases, these assessment tasks are linked, for example, students may complete short-answer questions on a text and this text may be used as stimulus for an essay question. The analytical commentary was also often set as one of the assessment tasks for either Outcome 1 or Outcome 2 in Unit 4. The texts chosen, for example, demonstrated a particular variety or varieties of Australian English and attitudes towards these, or were able to be analysed as characteristic of an individual or group variety of Australian English.

Consideration must always be given, when using pre-existing essay questions from exams or textbooks, to ensuring that they are relevant and will allow students the opportunity to achieve the particular Outcome. This was not always clear in the material provided in the audit questionnaire. This may require some modification of both the essay question and, in particular, of the original stimulus material provided so that they relate specifically to the key knowledge relevant to the particular Outcome. Most essay assessment tasks mirrored the wording and structure of the Section C essay task in the end-of-year exam, providing students with the opportunity to prepare for the experience of writing an essay of this type under exam conditions. Most of the essay tasks referred to in the audit survey included several samples of stimulus material. However, the stimulus material could be improved by: trying to make it as contemporary as possible; shortening it to a few lines or a brief paragraph; considering where it ‘leads’ students in responding to the essay question; and including a range of varied voices and opinions on the issue in focus. If EL students are expected to introduce and discuss contemporary examples and evidence in their essays, then it is good practice to keep the stimulus material as up-to-date as possible as well. Presenting a whole text (a whole article, for example) as one of the stimulus is not very beneficial to students trying to write an essay as it adds dramatically to the amount of reading and interpretation on the part of students. Students could read, discuss and annotate a text like this and respond to short-answer questions as an initial assessment task. But for the essay, it would be better to select a relevant quote from the text that could then be included as part of the stimulus material for the essay assessment task. This type of scaffolding supports students as they develop both their content knowledge and their essay writing and analytical skills.

An important element of Area of Study 1 in Unit 4 is investigating and analysing the range of attitudes within society to different varieties of Australian English. Students need to be able to demonstrate their understanding of these attitudes in order to achieve Outcome 1 – it was not always clear, in the audit material provided, that students were given the opportunity to demonstrate this in the assessment tasks set. This element of Outcome 1 could be incorporated into the assessment by: reviewing and modifying essay questions; choosing texts that explore both varieties of Australian English and attitudes towards them; including essay stimulus that highlights a particular attitude. An understanding of differing social attitudes to language choices is also crucial in Area of Study 2, Unit 4.