2017 VCE English Language examination report

General comments

The 2017 English Language examination consisted of three sections. Section A included a spoken text with four questions and was worth 15 marks. The text presented in Section A was a televised acceptance speech for the 2016 Logie Awards, consisting of 32 intonation units. Section B included the written text of a real estate advertisement/infotainment article that appeared in *The Age* newspaper, consisting of 40 lines of text, with a set of guidelines to assist in completing a language analysis. Section B was worth 30 marks. Section C included three essay topics with stimulus quotes and was worth 30 marks. In Section C, students chose one of the three questions and were required to discuss at least two subsystems of language in their response.

Section A was generally well handled, with most students being able to provide a relevant response for all four questions. A wide range of acceptable responses were given to Question 1, indicating that students were confident in identifying social purposes. In general, responses to Question 2 adequately demonstrated students' ability to identify prosodic features and explain their function in the part of the text specifically identified. Question 3 assessed students' knowledge of metalanguage and some struggled to use specific terms for specific features. Question 4 was the least well-handled question. Common misreadings involved using prosodic features to discuss topic management, usually not successfully, and writing generally about the features/strategies of spoken discourse without making specific reference to the text.

Students addressed Section B with confidence. They followed the guidelines, often establishing context, register and social context effectively in the introduction. It was also evident that students were selective in what they analysed in the text and considered in their presentation of the text's salient features.

Of the three options for Section C, Questions 6 and 7 were the most popular. Most students adhered to essay-writing conventions with introductions, body paragraphs and conclusions.

Constructing relevant interpretations of the topics was demanding for some students, who tried unsuccessfully to bend a prepared essay to the topic. Carefully reading the stimulus quotes in considering the topic can be helpful in checking which ideas and examples learned through the coursework could be adapted to the examination topic. Higher-scoring essays consistently displayed repertoires of current examples from politics, the workplace, social media and social groups.

Advice to students

- Learn and practise the metalanguage – particularly lexical and morphological features such as word classes: nouns, verbs, auxiliary verbs, modal verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, determiners, interjections; affixation and word class conversion – these can be of great assistance in working out what is going on in a text.
- Apply the metalanguage to specific texts.
- Relate responses specifically to the texts in Sections A and B.

- Identify exactly what is needed for each question in Section A, for example, how many examples, which lines, the exact feature being discussed.
- Select and discuss the language features of Section B that are most closely connected to the text's register, context and social purpose(s).
- In Section B, give at least one example from the text for every feature discussed and remember to cite line numbers.
- Pay attention to the wording of the topics in Section C – do not just go for the main idea; drill down into what the topic is asking for.
- Use the stimulus material for topics in Section C directly or indirectly – doing so shows that you have thought about the topic and adapted your knowledge of it to the examination.
- Use the stimulus material to help you remember your own relevant examples.
- Incorporate the stimulus material and your own ideas into the development of your essay.
- Ensure that examples used are contemporaneous and relevant to the topic.

Specific information

Note: Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what the answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A – Short-answer questions

This section consisted of Text 1 – a transcript of a pre-recorded video of a speech given by actor and comedian Tim Minchin in accepting a Logie Award for his role in the television drama 'The Secret River'.

Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	5	34	61	**1.6**

To inform, to entertain, to assert identity, to persuade, to build a rapport with the audience, to acknowledge others

Students completed this question well by choosing two of the above social purposes and linking them specifically to the text.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

One social purpose of this speech would be for Minchin to build rapport with his audience members through employing a casual and playful register. Another social purpose would be to reinforce the need of Australians to respect the past and the 'painful' (line 13) story of British colonisation in relation to the dispossession of indigenous Australians.

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	4	12	33	27	24	**2.6**

Most students selected emphatic stress – 'true' (line 12), 'complicated' (line 13), 'painful' (line 13), 'do' (line 16), 'doesn't' (line 17), 'never' (line 18), 'any' (line 19), 'history' (line 20) – used to highlight a terrible reality of Australian history; and intonation, mainly falling pitch – 'Australia\' (line 12), 'painful\' (line 13), 'voices\' (line 15), 'it\' (line 17), 'has\' (line 18), 'culture\' (line 19) – used to reinforce the seriousness of what is being said. High-scoring responses used appropriate metalanguage and successfully linked the prosody to the purpose(s) of the speech.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

The use of emphatic stress in 'complicated' and 'painful' (13) helps Minchin accentuate with negative connotations how dreadful the history of Australia was – spreading awareness of this issue.

The use of falling intonation in 'it\' (17) and 'has\' (18) helps Minchin project his exasperation and sadness about how indigenous Australians have been treated. His helplessness evokes the sympathy of the listener.

Question 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	8	12	29	27	24	**2.5**

Features reflecting Tim Minchin's identity included:

- use of self-deprecating humour (lines 27–29), showing the Australian tendency to 'cut down tall poppies' and expressing humility
- pejorative 'handsome bastards' (line 23), also reflecting the Australian habit of swearing in an affectionate way and showing informality, a laid-back attitude
- both of the above demonstrating Minchin's role as a comedian
- satirical use of a Broad Australian accent in 'let's get over it and move on' (line 16) reflects strong opinion and conviction as well as skill as an entertainer
- lexical references to acting and entertainment – 'Logies' (line 1), 'cast' (line 9), 'scene' (line 11), 'casting agent' (line 26), 'performances' (line 27) – identify Minchin as an actor
- use of shortenings – 'wanna' (line 4), 'you're' (line 3), 'I'm' (line 25), etc.; and the colloquial expressions 'give us a call' (line 29) and 'massive honour' (line 31) – show Minchin's laid-back, relaxed persona
- passionate commitment shown through intensifiers such as 'sickeningly violent' (line 11), 'incredibly important' (line 12), 'extremely complicated and painful' (line 13)
- Minchin is also polite, respectful and deferential – 'thank you so much' (line 2), 'if it was upsetting for me' (line 7), 'I can only imagine what it was like for…' (line 8), 'I particularly want to acknowledge…' (line 10), 'it's an honour' (line 22)

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Minchin is able to reflect his playful and Australian identity through his use of the vernacular lexeme 'cool' (11), as well as the playful vocative in which he calls his co-stars 'handsome bastards' (23). These terms would imbue a sense of laid-backness and reinforce the social norm of the ocker in Australian men. Furthermore, the coalescence of the lexemes 'want' and 'to' to create 'wanna' (4) again indicates his more casual and down-to-earth character. Minchin builds an actor identity through his employment of theatrical jargon including 'nominated' (22), 'casting agent' (26) and 'cast' (9) which indicates his familiarity with these terms as it is a part of his occupation.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	16	20	23	22	13	6	**2.2**

Text management features:

- formulaic opening and closing (lines 1, 2, 3 and lines 30, 31, 32)
- intake of breath/filled pause (lines 4 and 21) used to signal change of topic
- pauses (line 12 followed by repair and line 24 followed by conjunction signalling change of topic)
- discourse particle ('Ah', line 21) indicating change of topic
- lack of non-fluency features because the speech is pre-recorded and so is likely to have been prepared

This question was a discriminator for Section A. A number of students included prosodic features but were not able to explain how these might be part of topic management. Some discussed cohesion and coherence, but not very well in terms of topic management. These responses showed a misreading of the question since topic management was the specific focus. It was also imperative to identify specific features related to management – not all pauses, for example, were related to management. Some students showed no awareness of the context for the text, instead they wrote generally about topic management.

The following is an example of a mid- to high-scoring response.

The use of pauses found throughout the text help Minchin manage the text by allowing him time to think about or remember his next utterance. Discourse particles are also found in this text such as 'Ah' in line 21 which enables him to engage in topic management by shifting the subject of his speech from one topic to another. Tim Minchin also uses openings, 'Hello Logies' (1) and closings 'thank you' (32) which are conventions of speeches such as his and give direction to his utterance by signalling when and where his speech starts and ends, hence aiding him in the managing of his speech.

Section B – Analytical commentary

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Average
%	1	0	1	1	3	4	8	9	16	18	16	11	7	4	2	0	**8.8**

Text 2 was a newspaper article from the *Domain* section of *The Age* newspaper. Its purposes were to promote a property for sale and to demonstrate journalistic expertise in the writing by entertaining readers while providing information. Many students recognised these multiple functions and used them as ways of signposting language features. There was plenty of scope to discuss lexical and morphological features, lexical choices and semantic patterning. The layout of the article helped students to write well on cohesion and coherence. Most students adhered to the guidelines accompanying this question and produced well-structured responses.

There was ample evidence of students being selective in the features they chose to analyse, though some overlooked a key feature of this text – its entertaining and engaging use of figurative language, exaggeration and colloquial language – and so were unable to reflect on the overall impact of the article.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

This text is a written article in The Age newspaper which appeared in the real estate section. It was written by Lou Sweeney and gave details about a particular house in Toorak. The register

of this text was mixed as it shows aspects of both formality and informality. This text also contained a few purposes such as to inform, to advertise and to establish expertise.

This text has a mixed register as it contains both formal and informal features. A formal feature found within this text is the use of elevated lexis such as 'excavating' (8), 'precedes' (26) and 'akin' (15). It also contains jargonistic terms in the semantic field of real estate/houses such as '1980s art deco' (16), 'entry foyer' (18), 'ensuite' (21) and 'skylights' (31). All of these features aid the author establish expertise by making him seem highly educated and knowledgeable in his field.

On the other hand, informal lexis is also common in the text through use of terms such as 'tradie utes' (8), 'gorgeous' (13) and 'cracking' (36). Register is also lowered through syntactic constructions that are unconventional for the text type such as use of sentence fragments. 'Not one thing' (7) and the parallelism of short clauses 'It's different' and 'it's unusual' in line 36. This reduces lexical density thus making it slightly more informal. Although these informal features contradict with the purpose of establishing expertise, it aids the author's other two purposes. The informal features engage the readers and are used to create a positive persona around the house being sold. The former would aid the informing purpose as the audience is more likely to absorb and retain information while engaged. The latter aids the advertising purpose by giving the house a more relaxed vibe and thus attracting potential customers.

A variety of features of written discourse are also evident in this text to aid cohesion and coherence. The most prominent example of this is the use of headings and subheadings such as 'House of the week' (1), 'Auction' (4), 'Inspect' (5) and 'Room for improvement' (37). This sections information based on the topic to which it relates, establishing a logical ordering within the text. It thus makes the text more easy to understand aiding coherence. Coherence is also built in this text through cohesion. A factor contributing to cohesion in this text is the use of anaphoric references such as 'it' (19), 'it (10) and 'there' (20). The use of these anaphoric references link together different elements within the text aiding cohesion and finally coherence as it also makes the text easier to understand.

Through use of features in the subsystems of syntax, semantics, lexicology and discourse, Lou Sweeney is fulfils his purposes of informing, advertising and establishing expertise.

Section C – Essay

Question chosen	none	6	7	8
%	0	51	32	16

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Average
%	1	0	1	2	4	6	9	11	15	14	13	10	7	4	2	1	**8.5**

Students are reminded to read the topic very carefully and think about ways in which they can create relevance to the specific focus of the examination topic. In general, most students used contemporaneous examples in their essays. By doing so, students were able to demonstrate understanding of language features and concepts such as diversity, since they had to make a decision about why a particular example was relevant. While the stimulus quotes for each topic were not always widely referred to, incorporating reference to one or two of them demonstrated the ability to shape a discussion/an analysis.

For each of the samples below, the essay was long, the student did more than describe and real processing was evident. A key element is planning. These students were able to plan and synthesise what they knew.

Question 6

Responses to this topic were sometimes more descriptive than analytical. Diversity was reflected in ethnolects, Aboriginal English, the LGBTIQ community and teenspeak, but students tended to identify these groups only and not link language to how such groups see themselves and/or how others perceive them.

The excerpt provided below is from a much longer essay. The introduction sets up the discussion, which groups will be discussed and why such variations exist. The paragraph about Aboriginal Australians and the LGBTIQ community mentioned in the introduction is also included as it specifically links language to identity and diversity. The writer is also clear about social diversity being an element of national identity.

The level of processing and sophistication present in this response put it in the upper range for assessment.

Language is a constantly evolving medium that can be manipulated in order to reflect, construct and reinforce a sense of identity. The language employed by interlocutors in contemporary Australian society largely reflects our nation's social diversity as exemplified through the phenomenon of teenspeak as well as the linguistic variances between the speech acts of male and female gendered individuals. Furthermore, the growing acceptance of minorities within Australia, namely the LGBTQI community as well as Aboriginal English ethnolect speakers has lead to a change in language that therefore allows us to signify our natural identity.

…

Australia has recently become more socially diversified through the growing acceptance of minority groups hence creating a more egalitarian and cohesive society. As Michelle Guthrie states, television shows and programs "should look and sound like us" (Stimulus A), which is much the similar mindset that has been taken by many Australians. This was seen in July 2017 on the television program The Project, whereby Jessica Mauboy, an indigenous singer and actress, called her partner a "bush fella". 'Fella' is a distinctly Aboriginal lexeme which is generally preceded by a pre-modifying adjective such as 'black' or 'white' or 'bush' in this case. Mauboy was able to use this term in mainstream Australian society without garnering the negative connotations once associated with non-standard varieties hence evincing how language use in Australia most definitely reflects our social diversity. Moreover, in our currently politically correct climate, language choices employed by interlocutors are much governed by taboo topics and changing societal values because "as some taboo topics relax, others come to replace them" (Kate Burridge). The taboo nowadays is non-inclusive and discriminatory language that does not reflect our social diversity hence in April 2017, a large banking company HSBC introduced ten new gender neutral titles to allow individuals to "accurately reflect their identities online" as stated by a HSBC spokeswoman. This includes "Mre" for 'mystery' and 'Mx' for mix-gendered individuals which epitomises new language change and language use in contemporary Australia reflects our nation's growing bubble of acceptance and egalitarianism. Social diversity can be exhibited through Australia's changing language use particularly in relation to the LGBTQI community and the growing acceptance of Aboriginal English ethnolect speakers in contemporary Australian society…

Question 7

Students were required to demonstrate how language reinforces, challenges and sometimes changes social attitudes. A corollary to this is how social change and changing attitudes influence language. A number of students attempted to explore the complex interplay involved and used examples such as media personalities being called out by the public for using terms now rejected by society.

The following excerpt is the first body paragraph from a much longer essay. The introduction demonstrates awareness of the complexity of the topic. This paragraph, while long, elaborates

successfully on the complex interplay between language and social attitudes. This essay was marked in the upper range for assessment.

Euphemistic and politically correct language sways social attitudes by diminishing the negative effects of a phenomenon and representing users of this language in a positive light. This was done by Defence Minister Marise Payne who issued a statement reading, "It is with great sadness I acknowledge the passing of a Royal Australian Navy member" and continued to say "The member was deployed on Operation Resolute." By supressing the emotional magnitude of his death by using euphemisms like 'passing' and through use of agentless passives, Marise Payne deflects blame from the Royal Australian Navy thus avoiding a negative public opinion on it. On issues of larger scale, corporations such as Kmart use politically correct, euphemistic terms to change social attitudes towards a community. This was seen in September 2017 where they renamed 'plus sized clothing' with 'fabulously sized.' This not only prevents discrimination against larger sized people, but also changes the society's attitudes on brands such as Kmart, making them appear more tolerant and accepting. As well as navigating taboo and addressing social issues, this type of language can also have obfuscatory purposes. This is evidenced in the vernacular of politicians such as education minister Simon Birmingham who referred to taxes as "efficiency dividends" during a debate on university funding. As this euphemistic term again takes away from the intense reaction the public has to increased taxes, the obfuscatory devices used by Birmingham again serve to maintain a good public opinion on himself and the current Turnbull administration. Interestingly however, members of the public have responded negatively to this language use with articles such as "Pollies give plain English a try, we're smarter than you think"(Gary Nunn) being published. Thus this language use has unintentionally deteriorated public attitudes towards politicians such as Simon Birmingham. Therefore, it can be seen that use of euphemistic and politically correct language affects social attitudes.

Question 8

This topic invited discussion about register, context, purpose and audience. Fewer students chose this question than Questions 6 and 7. Students who chose this question were able to discuss context well and also show how Standard Australian English is not always appropriate. Students' understanding of Standard Australian English requires improvement.

The excerpt below is from a longer essay. This paragraph on teenspeak does a very good job of explaining how deviations from Standard Australian English are appropriate in specific contexts and for specific audiences and purposes, but this does not mean a lack of understanding that Standard Australian English is required in other settings. This essay was marked in the high range.

Deviation from SAE, however, is widely accepted as part of the values we hold dearly. This is particularly reflected in Teenspeak – when deviation from SAE is widely embraced so that teenagers are able to construct an inimitable identity with a distinctive hue. This was noted in stimulus b, when it is observed that 'some may think this generation of millennials is destroying the English Language.' However, teenagers still are able to adhere to SAE where required, such as in a school essay for VCE English Language. The fact is that in confined teenager circles, teenagers are not required to strictly adhere to SAE as creativity is key to building in-group solidarity amongst individuals. For instance, the slang 'razz' to imply flirtatious intent has undergone semantic patterning when any interaction with a person of the opposite gender may fall within the ambit of this lexeme. This is because by simply using non - standard features which the wider community does not understand, individuals are provided with a means of establishing camaraderie amongst their peers…