

2018 VCE English Language examination report

General comments

The 2018 English Language examination included three sections. Section A was made up of short-answer questions on a text provided as an insert in the examination, and was worth 15 marks. The text was an informal blog and students were required to answer five questions. The text for Section B included in the insert was a mainly formal speech delivered by Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove on the occasion of a citizenship ceremony held on Australian Citizenship Day. Students were required to construct an analysis through discussion of the context, social purpose, register, stylistic and discourse features of the text, and this section was worth a total of 30 marks. Section C provided students the opportunity to select from three essay topics, each supported by stimulus quotes. The topics included positive and negative face needs, freedom of speech and the underlying attitudes of dominant groups. Explicit reference to at least two subsystems of language and the contemporary Australian context were essential elements of success in this section, which was worth 30 marks.

Most students were able to respond to all sections of the examination with some confidence and success. A wide and interesting range of social and cultural examples was used by a significant number of students in their essays for Section C, together with ability to link these with relevant responses to specific topics. However, often there was a lack of application of metalinguistic features and concepts to the discussion.

Metalanguage

The instructions for Sections A, B and C require students to ‘demonstrate (their) ability to use relevant descriptive and metalinguistic tools’. In addition, clear reminders to do this are included in each section — in Section A, ‘using appropriate metalanguage’, and in Sections B and C, ‘refer to at least two subsystems in your analysis’. However, in many responses this year there was a considerable lack of use of the metalanguage. This was most evident in essay responses that drew on social and cultural examples very skilfully, but that could not be rewarded with an upper-range mark because of the absence of metalinguistic terminology.

Teachers and students must acknowledge the core value of the metalanguage list published in the *VCE English Language Study Design* on pages 17 and 18. Students must learn to identify the metalinguistic terms for language features, be able to exemplify them and apply their knowledge of this jargon to topics and text analysis.

Advice to students

- Completing Section A well shows understanding of how the metalanguage fits into analysis, which means potentially better responses in Sections B and C.
- Learn and understand the metalinguistic terms and concepts published in the *VCE English Language Study Design* (pages 17 and 18). Avoid use of language terms not on the list.
- Give particular attention to knowledge of word classes in developing a metalanguage repertoire – this year, for example, few students were able to show understanding of the verb

system of English. Verbs are not just ‘doing words’. They add nuance in many different ways to what is being communicated.

- Regularly trawl the media for good examples of the concepts in this study.
- Follow the instructions carefully – give line numbers, refer to specific line numbers when required (for example, ‘in lines 28 to 32...’), explain language features in metalanguage terms; in short, be as specific as possible.
- Select the prominent features of the text for analysis in Section B. Refine the structure by putting context, purpose, register in the introductory paragraph, thus establishing a framework for the analysis.
- Pay attention to key words in essay topics in Section C. In 2018, words like ‘always’ (Question 7), ‘sometimes’ (Question 8) and ‘underlying attitudes’ (Question 9) were critical in helping students to present relevant responses to the chosen topic.
- Refer to the stimulus material in Section C topics either directly or indirectly. Reference to the provided stimulus material is one of the expected qualities for the mark range in Section C. By doing so, students can further demonstrate the development of a relevant response to the topic in the context of the examination.

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

The text for Section A was a blog post written by Colin Bisset, a regular contributor to *Blueprint for Living*, an ABC Radio National program that covers topics related to architecture, food, travel and fashion.

Text 1

Question 1

Marks	0	1	Average
%	16	84	0.9

Students were required to nominate the register of the text, which was informal. Modifying comments such as ‘moderately informal’ and ‘quite informal’ were accepted. Comments that suggested the text was formal – for example, ‘mostly formal’ – were not accepted. A sentence fragment response was acceptable – for example, ‘*Informal*’, ‘*Mainly informal*’, ‘*Informal, with some formal features*’.

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	24	45	31	1.1

Students needed to identify more than one verb in the present tense and make a link to the informal register. Problems arose with verb identification as many students selected ‘banging’,

which was incorrect (its function in the sentence is as a mass noun), and ‘nailing’, which was accepted as a particle. Students also needed to ensure that they selected examples between lines 1 and 11 only.

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

The use of present tense verbs aids in creating an informal register as they create a personal, engaging feel as if you are experiencing them, such as with ‘I sit down...’(1) or with ‘so I respond.’ (8)

Question 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	13	24	42	22	1.7

Students either identified two language features for one identity, or two language features and more than one identity.

Possible identities reflected in the blog included: someone who is easily distracted, absent-minded, arty, knowledgeable in cultural matters, someone who has expertise with technology.

Language features reflecting identity included: discourse particles (‘And oh look’, line 6), sentence fragments (‘A small regret’, line 10), use of conjunctions to create stream of consciousness (lines 6–10), lexis from domains of architecture, music, art and social media/technology.

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

Colin Bisset’s identity is reflected by the use of frequent topic and subject changes away from his work, making him appear as someone who is casual and is easily distracted – being ‘playful’ in a way e.g line 12 “Now, back to work...” Additionally, active voice is frequently used to also help create his casual, easy going identity, e.g “There’s some banging going on...” (line 3). This makes his writing seem more spontaneous and not planned out/rehearsed, building this casual identity.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	10	16	29	23	21	2.3

Features typical of spoken language included: discourse particle (‘Rightio’, line 17), sentence fragment (‘Back to work’, line 23), ellipsis of pronouns, copula or auxiliary verbs ([I’ve] ‘Never been to Mexico...’, line 24, [he] ‘worked with Henry Moore...’, line 26), coordinating conjunctions (‘and’, ‘but’, ‘so’), explicit attempts at topic management at the beginning of paragraphs (lines 17, 23).

This question limited responses to lines 17–26. Examples given outside these lines were not accepted, even if they were correct. Students needed to analyse two different examples of types of spoken discourse, supported by two different examples from the nominated section of text. Some students attempted to discuss prosody through reference to punctuation and tone, with limited success.

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

The use of ellipsis creates a conversational tone and is seen in ‘worked with...get on’ (26) where the third – person subject pronoun ‘He’ is omitted, as it can be inferred from the context. It also reduces lexical density and avoids repetition. Additionally, the use of sentence – initiating conjunctions such as ‘And’ (19) is non-standard and contributes to the informal register by creating a conversational tone. The use of these conjunctions is typical of spoken language, where sentences are loosely connected.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	15	19	26	24	12	4	2.1

Examples of coherence in the text, well discussed with metalanguage, were required. Discourse features contributing to coherence included lexical choices in the domain of ‘culture’ (see notes for Question 3), formatting (paragraphs each with a specific topic, sentence fragments, e.g. ‘Back to work’ [line 23]) and a discourse particle ‘Rightio’ (line 17) all demonstrating logical sequencing, inference, opening and closing, cohesion (repetition, use of conjunctions, ellipsis, anaphoric reference).

This text had many examples of inference. Students needed to explain what could be concluded by the reference, rather than simply stating that it was coherent. For example, mention of a famous architect ‘Michelucci’ (line 8) as well as buildings in Australia, China and Mexico suggests that Bisset is knowledgeable about architecture. Some students focused on cohesion in their response. Unless they explicitly discussed cohesion in relation to the ways it contributed to coherence, a high score could not be awarded.

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

Inference is required for the text to be coherent. For example, prior knowledge is needed by readers to understand reference to the music genre ‘Baroque’ (13) and songs such as ‘Mad Men’ (15).

Logical ordering is another factor that aids coherence. Each paragraph begins with a sentence about what Bisset is currently doing, then proceeds to describe some of his thoughts as he is working, so that the reader can follow his thoughts easily. Furthermore, consistency in subject matter is seen through the use of lexemes from the semantic field of the ocean such as ‘pelicans’ (17), ‘current’ (19) and ‘fishermen’ (20) in the third paragraph. This clearly indicates the topic of the paragraph which aids coherence. Additionally, conformity to the conventions of the text type through the use of well-structured paragraphs aids coherence.

Section B – Analytical commentary**Question 6**

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Average
%	1	0	0	1	3	4	10	12	18	18	14	9	5	3	2	0	8.5

Text 2 was a formal speech delivered at Government House, Canberra, by the Governor-General of Australia, Sir Peter Cosgrove. The functions of the speech were to celebrate Australian Citizenship Day and conduct a formal citizenship ceremony. Sir Peter’s social purposes include extending a welcome to Australia’s newest citizens as well as informing them of their responsibilities and promoting Australian values. In performing his ceremonial role, Sir Peter delivers a planned and edited speech, from which he diverges slightly in his references to his own experiences and to Lewis Kang, a small child in the audience. His intention in making these ‘asides’ is to soften the formal and serious tone of the ceremony by establishing rapport with the audience.

In developing their analysis, students clearly followed the dot points in the rubric for Section B and in doing so were able to select and effectively discuss salient features of the text. Some students listed features rather than linking them back to purpose, audience and context and/or became repetitive. This text provided ample opportunities to include all of the subsystems, so there were plenty to choose from. Many favoured lexis, syntax and discourse. Discussions of prosody tended to be too general and lacked awareness of the deliberate efforts made by Sir Peter to pace and

signpost his complex comments. A number of students missed the features of informality in an otherwise formal speech or, if recognising the divergence, struggled to explain it well.

The following example does well at identifying and analysing the register and purposes of the speech. The variation in register is recognised and given some explanation. The discussion of a key statement in line 57 is clumsy, but correct. The student recognises and explains the prosodic effects used in the speech accurately. This analysis received an upper-middle score.

The relatively formal speech by Australia's Governor General Sir Peter Cosgrove was presented in the Government House in Canberra. The ceremonial occasion was an official welcoming of new Australian citizens. The audience included individuals from all different backgrounds, ages and occupations. The social purpose of the speech was to build rapport with the new citizens and make them feel welcome in their new "home" (38).

As this is a speech which targets a specific audience Sir Peter Cosgrove employs discourse and lexical features specific to the text type. The formulaic opening "ladies and gentlemen", (1) is an attempt to establish a professional as well as a caring identity. As this is a formal occasion, it is necessary that Sir Peter Cosgrove comply to the features of speeches. Furthermore, the utilisation of the second person pronoun "you" (7) (13) indicates that the focus of the speech is directed towards the public thus, meeting their face needs. This makes the citizens feel accepted and cherished to be a part of Australia as Peter Cosgrove is speaking on behalf of Australia and its current citizens. Additionally, the employment of positively connotated adjectives such as "harmonious" (17) "diverse" (17) and "significant" (6) is an attempt to bolster Australia's image and instil a sense of pride within the new citizens for being able to call this nation their home. This is a typical feature of ceremonious speeches as it aims to highlight the importance and prestige associated with becoming an Australian.

Sir Peter Cosgrove aims to achieve the social purpose by meeting the face needs of his audience. The utilisation of asyndetic listing of countries "South Korea, Brazil, China..." (41-43) is indicative of his attempts to show that Australia is a welcoming nation and accepts individuals from different regions of the world. Thus, emphasising that everyone is equally valued hence, closing the social distance between Sir Peter Cosgrove and the new citizens. Additionally, the particular mention of one of the child citizens "Lewis Kang" (48) further emphasises the notion that Australia respects everyone as Sir Peter Cosgrove took the effort to memorise a citizen's name and include him in his speech. Hence, increasing the social proximity between him and that child's family. Furthermore, the inclusion of the paralinguistic feature of laughter in line 51 lightens the mood of the ceremony and creates a comfortable and convivial atmosphere which will help build rapport and make the citizens feel more welcome in their new home. To continue, the employment of the possessive second person pronoun "your" (57) in conjunction with the first person possessive pronoun "our" (57) indicates that the new citizens have now been officially recognised as Australians and their unique characteristics which define time are also accepted and acknowledged.

As this is a spoken conversation Peter Cosgrove indicates aspects of non-fluency and prosody. For instance, the employment of the short pauses in line 20 to 22 is used to create a dramatic effect and emphasise his use of parallelism to describe the qualities Australia and its residents have. Furthermore, the slow-paced speech in lines 13 to 15, "you...beliefs" is employed to emphasise the commitments associated with becoming an Australian. It is an attempt to ensure that the citizens have clearly understood the expectations that Australia has of them. The emphatic stress on the positively connotated noun "home" (38) and "diversity" (57) signifies that Australia is an accepting nation that encourages the growing emergence of new citizens from different backgrounds.

Section C – Essay

Question chosen	none	7	8	9
%	1	25	25	49

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Average
%	1	1	1	2	3	7	10	13	16	14	11	8	7	4	2	0	8.3

A notable feature of the essays was the impressive repertoire of contemporary examples to which students were able to refer. Students also made an effort to incorporate stimulus material in their essays. Both features – examples or evidence drawn from contemporary sociolinguistic discussion and debate and reference to the provided stimulus material – were expected qualities that were required for high scores. However, a significant number of students wrote about social aspects of a topic but not enough about its linguistic aspects. Students are again reminded that analysis using metalinguistic terms as a tool is an expected quality in the examination.

Question 7

Students responding to this topic discussed politeness strategies, the use of euphemism, dysphemism, and political correctness. Most wrote about threats to positive face and about how to preserve it. How people may use or threaten their negative face was not often discussed successfully. Few students responded to the key word in the topic – ‘always’. This was a pointer to consider how ignoring face needs may sometimes be a more effective way of communicating – for example, in cases of emergency, such as shouting ‘Stop!’.

The following paragraph is from a high-scoring essay in which the student discussed politeness strategies, euphemism and use of politically correct language as positives for face needs, dysphemism and profanity as threats to face needs, how euphemism and profanity can sometimes have the opposite effect. Contemporary examples were used, there was a reference to the stimulus material and the essay was well structured. The essay was a high-scoring response.

Politeness strategies are an important way of addressing others' face needs and communicating successfully. According to Brown and Levinson (Stimulus D), politeness involves preserving face. For example, the use of informal vocatives such as 'Dave', terms of endearment such as 'sweetheart', back-channelling such as 'Yeah' and supportive comments such as 'That's wonderful' are all positive politeness strategies. These strategies build rapport and reinforce close social distance, which addresses positive face needs. On the other hand, the use of honorifics such as 'Sir', politeness markers such as 'please' and 'thank you', hedges such as 'probably' and 'kind of' and the high rising terminal (HRT) to soften the force of statements, are all negative politeness strategies. These strategies demonstrate respect and reinforce social distance and authority, which addresses negative face needs. By addressing others' positive and negative face needs through the use of politeness strategies, individuals are able to promote social harmony and communicate successfully.

Question 8

Students responding to this topic discussed discriminatory language, the rights of minority groups, racism, the consequences of saying what you want, political correctness and Australian values. The modifying term ‘sometimes’ was explored in the negative sense that while freedom of speech is a ‘right’, sometimes we have to think twice about its negative effects if used indiscriminately.

The following paragraph is taken from a passionately argued essay about the value of political correctness and how free speech carries with it the responsibility to be fair. It reflects the wide knowledge and conceptual command this student has around the topic. Overall, the essay makes

some reference to lexis, morphology and semantics. This paragraph serves as an example of social knowledge overshadowing linguistic knowledge. The essay was scored in the upper-middle range.

The beautiful and freeing notion of political correctness is that it is a 'self-examination', a 'chance to confront some of our own ingrained prejudices' (RMIT University) – "They' is still a barrier.' It is the opportunity to use your freedom of speech to be kind and accommodating to the people who deserve it, because they are simply people. Freedom of speech is supposed to ensure that we have dignity and power through our language, not to strip both of those things from others. Take the wonderfully cringe-inducing Australian Ernie Awards of 2018. A comment made during a celebration of the 'International Day of Women and Girls in Science' won the Silver Ernie for 'astounding sexism' because someone used their free speech to quip, 'wasn't it better when they used rabbits? This is not freedom of speech, as it takes away the freedom of another. It invalidates the forgotten work of Hedy Lamarr, a computer scientist. It invalidates the work of Rosalind Franklin, whose research on the structure of DNA was stolen and the DNA model she pioneered named after those who took it from her, Watson and Crick. However, it is better to have such sexist and dysphemistic language such as that showcased in the Ernie Awards – another of the most outstanding examples being the State of Origin ad ... as it is a brilliant example of what not to say and how not to act to be a good and kind member of this society. Surely people cannot view being politically correct as oppression if it promotes social harmony and nurtures positive face.

Question 9

Students often wrote well about how minorities establish their identities and cultures, often focussing on ethnic minorities, Aboriginal English speakers, teens and teenspeak, the LGBTIQ+ community, politicians and political correctness. However, many were unable to identify a dominant group whose attitudes have to be negotiated by minorities. Some argued, sometimes successfully, that teenspeak is a dominant influence with teenagers and therefore defining of identity and culture. This missed the point of the topic, which was to encourage a discussion of the influences and influencers on language at a macro level. The students who discussed Standard Australian English as a major arbiter of identity and culture were able to go on and compare how minority groups manage to negotiate their own identities and culture within this matrix.

The following high-scoring response is reproduced in its entirety. It is a good example of a student consistently using contemporaneous evidence along with reference to stimulus material. There is enough metalanguage to be acceptable. It maintains structure across paragraphs and makes valid comments about dominant groups and how their attitudes affect others. For example, the paragraph on ethnolects reflects an understanding that, while we celebrate multiculturalism, in practice there is sometimes a backlash if Australian English is not seen to be the major language. The student explores the topic in considerable depth, both in the discussion of underlying attitudes and in alluding to societal changes through the growth of politically correct language to support minority groups.

Language encapsulates the values and beliefs of a society, making it so interconnected and influential on each other. Dominant groups may often shape language with their overarching values, which is occasionally seen through language used towards different cultures and ethnicities. Language can also reflect the gender biases of society especially directed at women. However, political correctness suggests that minority groups can also influence rigid social values of the majority.

The attitudes towards various ethnicities and cultures in Australia suggests gradual progression in embracing multiculturalism. As a nation priding itself on cultural diversity and also proudly embracing this, Australia sees many ethnolectal varieties being used on a daily basis such as 'Chinglish' which is a mixture of Chinese and English. However, these values are not always upheld as seen when a Sydney suburb mandated English signage on shop signs earlier in May, 2018. In necessitating this, it reflects 'multicultural tolerance, not active multiculturalism' (The

Conversation), which suggests that dominant groups speaking English in Australia prefer its widespread use in society in contrast to other ethnic languages. Similarly in August this year, ABC radio presenter Sami Shah stated that he had to attend vocal classes prior to starting his radio host job to 'flatten out [his] Pakistani accent' and take out some of the 'brown'. Despite speaking standard Australian English, the controversy behind Shah's accent which is different from the traditional general Australian accent, suggests that there is generally more support for the accent spoken by majority of Australians and perhaps less so for migrants. This is mirrored in Stimulus B which states that studies show 'English speakers who are identified with an ethnic minority group are subjected to a higher degree of negative evaluation', which postulates that there are still varying attitudes towards the language used by individuals of minor ethnic groups as Australian English remains more prevalent and accepted.

In addition to the varying attitudes towards ethnic groups, gender bias is also reflected through discriminatory language against women, which is indicative of gender inequality. As stated in Stimulus A, a dominant group is a group that controls the value system and rewards in a particular society', this is mirrored through the derogatory language used particularly by men against women in society that perpetrates prejudiced values towards women. At present there are slurs ...which negatively connote the sexual activity of women however as mentioned by Nick Enfeld (Professor at University of Melbourne), 'there is no male equivalent ...' which makes it particularly gender biased. ...Such language being used in public context could be indicative of current disparities between respect for men and women which was mirrored when former ABC chairman Justin Milne reportedly called managing director Michelle Guthrie the vocative 'missus' in front of staff. (September 2018) This inappropriate lexeme 'diminishes the agency of women and makes them akin to a possession' (The Guardian) thus presents women as less worthy and lacking importance in society. As stated by author Henry Gray, 'What we say must be gender nuanced to respect women' however the current discriminatory language used towards women places them as minorities and reinforces gender imbalance.

However, whilst the values of dominant groups are often reflected in the language used by the majority, politically correct language (PC) aims to uphold the respect and acceptance minority groups are entitled too. As linguist Kate Burridge once stated, 'PC language challenges us to evaluate our values' and similarly in Stimulus D 'changing the language is a consciousness-raising exercise which may assist....[in]changing the status of oppressed groups.' This suggests that whilst language of dominant groups may perpetuate the rigidity of social norms, PC aims to overturn this and protect the rights of minority groups such as the LGBTQI community. In July 2018, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services campaigned for the first Wednesday of every month to be 'They Day' which encourages gender-neutral language such as third-person plural, 'they' as opposed to gender-specific pronouns such as 'he' or 'she'. The pronoun 'they' which encompasses all genders allows for language to reflect the identity of individuals who identify as other than male or female, thus promoting social inclusion and challenging society's fixated values towards gender. Similarly, earlier in 2018, Perth University and Curtin University in Western Australia banned the use of gender-specific language to promote unity and belonging for all members of the LGBTQI community. Curtin University even stated that gender-specific language would risk marks being penalised by students who used it. Whilst there was some controversy surrounding this, such encouragement for PC language which has resulted from the increasing awareness towards LGBTQI rights, suggest that language can also reveal the underlying attitudes of minority groups who wish to obtain the rights they are entitled to.

Language will always act as a mirror, reflecting the values and attitudes of society. This is evident through the views of dominant groups towards ethnic groups, as well as through gender biases against women. However, the attitudes of minority groups are becoming increasingly evident through PC language especially amongst LGBTQI communities. As stated by linguist Kate Burridge, 'language and its culture are so tightly bound that it's very difficult to separate them,' which accentuates the interconnectedness of language and societal values.