



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

21 January 2025

Dr Annelise Balsamo
Curriculum Manager, English
Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
Level 7, 200 Victoria Parade
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Annelise,

I am writing to you on behalf of the VATE Council to outline the concerns raised through the VATE English Language Network regarding the 2024 VCE English Language examination.

VATE and English Language teachers would like to acknowledge the work of the VCAA and of the English Language examiners and exam writers. The feedback vis-à-vis the 2024 English Language examination focused on several key areas that are listed below. Please also see attached a summary of the longer responses received by VATE. The English Language teachers who expressed concerns agreed on the following:

- That this was a challenging exam in the first year of a new Study Design with some significant changes which did not have a staggered two year implementation process (the students sitting this exam had only had 12 months of this Study Design).
- The length as well as the complexity of the exam – the texts, the questions and the stimulus material combined; it was difficult to finish reading and understanding all of it in the reading time, and then have to deal with it during writing time. Many teachers noted that both discourses were relatively long, and the second one had the increased complexity of being multi-modal.
- A dissimilarity between the final examination paper and the VCAA sample exam published prior.

Overall, I was left feeling like this wasn't an accessible paper. The last few years we have been pleased to see exams that offered complexity for our top end and an accessible entry point for our low end. I don't feel that this year's paper served either – it was too complex for the strugglers, and it left the top end questioning their own knowledge and feeling like they weren't able to show what they have learned this year.

This feedback is, of course, for the benefit of the hardworking students who take this challenging and deeply rewarding subject. We would like to imagine that every English Language student, with application, could approach the exam with confidence, and would meet an exam that enables them to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and analytical skills developed through the course.

Section A: Short-answer questions

- **Question 1:** The question asks for a vocal effect which, according to the Study Design, includes whispers and laughter. There were no whispers and laughter. It is presumed that the question was seeking the 'breathiness' indicated on the transcript, but according to the Study Design, this is a separate paralinguistic feature, not a 'vocal effect'. This forced students to go beyond the listed features to make up an answer, despite previous examination reports clearly stating that students should focus on using appropriate metalanguage as it is listed in the Study Design. Perhaps this could have been 'paralinguistic feature' to give it more breadth for responses.

Beginning with a question that all students could approach confidently would set a more encouraging tone for the exam as a whole. Unfortunately, the initial question seemed to cause some confusion and may have affected students' confidence from the start. Many of my students felt bewildered and failed to fully recover.



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- **Question 2:** The language used in this question – ‘establishes Alcott’s contributions to society’ – is very vague and not commonly used in the English Language Study Design.
- **Question 3:** The word ‘justify’ in this question is not a term commonly used in English Language exams before. While it is a term that students are taught explicitly in other subjects, students may have spent additional time trying to connect this term to their English Language studies and distinguishing it from ‘explain’, ‘comment on’, or ‘analyse’ which have been used in the past. For only two marks, this question requires a lot: an example, and discussion of politeness and tenor.
- **Question 5:** This was an unprecedented question asking about how turn-taking strategies help to ‘construct’ each speaker’s individual identities and group membership. This question asked too much of students to identify and analyse turn-taking strategies, two individual identities and two examples of group membership. Also, Alcott is the only speaker who has any additional information provided about who he is. Unless this question is only referring to Koslowski’s identity as a radio host/interviewer, not much else is known about Sam.

The link between turn-taking and ‘group membership in the wider community’ is unclear and abstract.

- Overall, concerns that the questions were poorly worded and required a high level of unpacking in order for students to understand and respond.

The complex wording of the SAQs is particularly concerning ... It wasn’t necessary to overcomplicate and confuse the wording of SAQs in order to discriminate between top and lower end responses; essentially it didn’t allow for students to fairly and equitably show their year’s learning ... many students reported they simply didn’t understand what was expected of them.

- Unlike the VCAA sample EL exam, and previous exams, none of the questions in Section A provided any line numbers from the transcript to help focus students and support their responses.

Section B: Analytical commentary

- The text included a row of images with a line number, and also blank lines with line numbers.
- Line 5 and 6 referred to 2 lines and 3-5 lines respectively, rather than being separately numbered.
- Given that this section of the exam had changed significantly with the four guiding dot points, some teachers questioned why a more unfamiliar (multi-modal) and lengthy text was used.

While dual modes are certainly allowed, the formatting, length of the text and the background information, compounded the distress many students experienced.

Section C: Essay

- There were concerns about the perceived difficulty of the wording of Questions 8 and 9, and about the use of stimulus material that often lacked relevance.
- The use of the term ‘social standing’ in Question 9 is not a term in the Study Design, and there was no footnote definition as there has been for similar terms in the past. To be asked to consider the ‘concept of social standing’ was confusing for students.
- Some of the language used in the stimulus material referred to concepts no longer taught, e.g. ‘politically correct language’ (Stimulus B in Question 9), or referred to a different concept from what is in the Study Design (‘function’ in Stimulus B in Question 7), albeit identified with an asterisk.



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VATE Council would welcome further clarification and consideration of the aforementioned concerns.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Dr Jo O'Mara
VATE President