

# Lang-Lit From A to BA: Student Backgrounds and First Year Content

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## 1. Introduction

This report, originally prepared in 2013, investigates the relationship between English 'lang-lit' provision at A level and at BA level (school qualifications outside the A level nations are beyond the direct scope of this report). We use the term 'lang-lit' here for work which combines work on language with work on literature in any way (the most obvious possibilities are to combine language modules with literature modules in particular study programmes, to combine these within modules, and to combine these within specific classroom sessions). It builds on an earlier HEA report (Clark and Macrae 2014) which considered general questions about the nature of lang-lit work in both contexts and some issues of transition between the two. This report presents a more detailed comparative analysis of the content and delivery methods of lang-lit work at A level and first year BA level, identifying popular teaching and learning resources, tasks, and assessment methods. This overview is mainly grounded in data gathered from course materials, plus questionnaire responses gathered via a small survey. 20 responses to the survey were received from teachers and lecturers: these responses are not treated as representative of national opinion, but are nonetheless, we feel, indicative of some widely held opinions in education at school and university. The report also presents limited anecdotal data, some of this gathered from interviews with colleagues delivering courses at both levels. The comparative analysis forms the basis of the main investigation of the report, which focuses on how directly BA level lang-lit teaching relates to and follows on from lang-lit work at A level. This research is designed to address the following questions in particular:

- Does the scope of lang-lit work at first year degree level develop or significantly differ from the scope of lang-lit work at A level?
- What is the nature of the disjunction (often reported by BA lecturers) between the experience and preparedness of new BA students and what lecturers expect?
- Are there distinct areas common to lang-lit study at first year degree level which are not currently introduced at A level? If so, a) would A level students benefit from such areas being considered for inclusion in A level syllabuses, and b) would HE students benefit

from adjustments to the ways in which such areas are introduced within first year studies?

- Do delivery methods in these areas at HE correspond with and follow on from those employed at A level, or are there significant differences in teaching methods, task types, levels of guidance and assessment methods?

Our main general conclusions are:

- that the student experience at school and at university could be greatly improved with a more thorough review and adjustment of syllabus content and organisation
- that there have been particular transition issues affecting students interested in lang-lit work
- that the development of new A level specifications provides an important opportunity to address some of these, and that changes in A level specifications are an important first step in improving student experience at school
- that significant improvements in student experience would follow from focused developments at BA level.

More specific conclusions are:

- Scope of lang-lit work: While there is greater diversity of content and practice at university, including variation about the levels at which it occurs, there has so far been more integrated work in BA programmes than at A level. The diversity has implications for how students choose universities and programmes. The contrast between combined and integrated work has implications for student experience and for our second question.
- Pre-BA experience and preparedness: Contrasts between school and university work raise specific issues for English programmes. Some students find that their new programmes diverge from their expectations and in some cases this is demotivating. At the same time, variation in pre-BA work means that lecturers need to devise content and activities which challenge students with more relevant experience while helping other students to 'catch up'. This can also lead to demotivation for the more experienced

students. Finally, some students wrongly assume that they have ‘already covered’ particular topics or overestimate their existing knowledge and abilities.

- Delivery methods: Teaching methods at BA level also vary considerably, with some programmes mainly delivering workshop-style sessions and some but not all including lectures of some type (again, there is variation in how the notion of a ‘lecture’ is understood). There are two findings relating to this topic which seem particularly significant. First, school lang-lit teachers do not use textbooks and research materials used at university. Second, university lecturers view coursework as a more useful preparation for university work than examinations.

## **2. Background**

We are academics involved in providing language and literature work at university. One of us (Marcello Giovanelli) also has considerable experience as a teacher at Key Stage 5 delivering AS and A level courses in English, and as a senior examiner and moderator for one of the awarding bodies. In addition, we all have experience providing extra-curricular English teaching to students at school. Our interest in this project is based on our interest in lang-lit work at both levels and three key assumptions: that there are particular issues affecting students making the transition from school to university who are interested in lang-lit work; that student experience could be greatly enhanced by addressing these; finally, we all share the view that work which focuses on language and literature in an integrated way plays a vital role in the English curriculum at school and at university.

Our earlier report made a start in investigating these questions and making suggestions for future developments. That report and this one share the aim of building on previous work, including an earlier report on transition from A level to BA in English Language (Goddard and Beard 2007), a report arising from an event on ‘Teaching on the Language-Literature Border’ (Knights 2005) and another project which included a related workshop on ‘Learning on the Language-Literature Border’ (Higher Education Academy 2009). Our aim here is to develop the discussion and make fuller recommendations. We

think that this report is particularly timely given the arrival of new A level specifications (for teaching from September 2015) and we hope that it will continue to be useful to everyone involved in the roll out of these, such as teachers and course planners at both levels, and others involved in course recruitment and admissions or interested in the transition from FE to HE.

Some of the topics discussed below are relevant in considering subjects other than English. A key example is the sense reported by university lecturers in many subjects that students need not only to develop new practices but also to ‘unlearn’ existing ones during their first year (level four modules) at university, i.e. that the first year of many BA programmes focuses on developing skills and knowledge required for ‘degree level’ study in years two and three (levels five and six). An overall aim of this project is to develop thinking about how lang-lit work might appear at various stages of school and university curricula and how work at these stages can be understood by teachers and students as contributing to a coherent overall educational experience.

### **3. AS and A2 English Language and Literature**

This section of the report presents an overview of current provision of integrated language and literature work at A level.

#### **3.1 A level English Language and Literature awarding bodies and specifications**

Table 1 presents a breakdown of UK entry figures for AS and A2 level English Language and Literature across the exam boards in 2013. Table 2 presents a summary of A level entry figures for each of the three English A levels that year. Of the three English A level courses available, the English Literature A level dominates the market (with over 50% of the candidates at both AS and A2), though English Language has increased in popularity radically over the last five years (going from 14751 students completing the A level in 2003 to 24796 in 2013). The English Language and Literature A level is far less widely available in schools and FE colleges than the other two, though its popularity with students is also

increasing. There are four awarding bodies offering specifications and examinations in English Language and Literature: AQA, which offers two different specifications, EdExcel, OCR, and WJEC. There is no qualification in English Language and Literature offered by CCEA (the examining board for Northern Ireland). AQA holds the largest share of the market. In contrast, OCR typically has a relatively small number of candidates sitting examinations in this subject.

<b>Awarding Body</b>	<b>AS (number/percentage)</b>	<b>A2 (number/percentage)</b>
AQA	14259/63.8%	9962/61.6%
EDEXCEL	3442/15.6%	3060/18.9%
OCR	553/2.5%	421/1.9%
WJEC	3753/17.1%	2733/17.6%
<b>Total entry</b>	<b>22007</b>	<b>16158</b>

*Table 1. Entry figures for A level English Language and Literature June 2013*

<b>Awarding Body</b>	<b>LANG-LIT</b>		<b>LANGUAGE</b>		<b>LITERATURE</b>	
	<b>AS</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>AS</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>AS</b>	<b>A2</b>
AQA	14259	9962	25895	19755	34769	26152
EDEXCEL	3442	3060	1766	1271	4937	3624
OCR	553	421	488	457	12349	10418
WJEC	3753	2733	4712	3315	10241	6977
CCEA	0	0	0	0	2478	1894
<b>Total entry</b>	<b>22007</b>	<b>16158</b>	<b>32861</b>	<b>24796</b>	<b>64774</b>	<b>47139</b>

*Table 2. Entry figures for each English A level June 2013*

### 3.2 Subject criteria

Awarding bodies develop A level specifications following established subject criteria. Current specifications, first taught in 2008, were initially developed under the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), but are now monitored by OFQUAL, the regulator for school examinations and assessment in the United Kingdom.

The subject criteria for the current (up to June 2015) specifications in English Language and Literature specify key aims and objectives that awarding bodies use when devising specifications and suggesting programmes of learning. These are that students should be able to:

- use integrated linguistic and literary approaches in their reading and interpretation of texts;
- engage creatively and independently with a wide range of spoken, written and multimodal texts, exploring the relationships between texts;
- undertake independent and sustained studies to develop their skills as producers and interpreters of language.

OFQUAL (2011: 3)

In addition, there are key areas of 'knowledge and understanding' and 'skills' that are to be demonstrated by candidates at both AS and A level. For the purposes of this report, these are briefly summarised below.

#### *Knowledge and understanding:*

Build on GCSE skills; develop a coherent approach to integrated linguistic-literary study; explore language variation, understand how readers interpret texts and the importance of context; study both spoken and written texts comprising of two substantial texts from the genres of prose, fiction, poetry and drama, and one other text at AS level; study a further two substantial texts from a genre not studied at AS and one other text at A2 level.

### *Skills:*

Develop skills associated with integrated linguistic-literary methodologies; compare and contrast texts; use English clearly and accurately; use sources and provide accurate references.

Finally, assessment objectives (AOs) provide the direction for individual units within the specification and are given certain weightings. Again, full descriptions of these and weightings for current units may be found on the OFQUAL website. In summary, the assessment objectives test the following skills:

*AO1:* use of methodologies and accurate terminology

*AO2:* analysis of form, language and structure

*AO3:* evaluation of contextual factors in shaping meaning

*AO4:* expertise and creativity in using language for a variety of audiences and purposes

### **3.3 Areas of study**

Given that AQA currently offers two specifications, there are effectively five alternatives from which schools/colleges and teachers can choose. All of the five specifications offer candidates the opportunity to engage in the following kind of work:

#### *Literary analysis:*

This involves responding to literary texts, either from a thematic anthology of material or a more conventional series of set texts from which centres (schools and colleges) and students choose. At A2 level, this can also include sustained comparison of texts either within or across literary genres. There is no stipulation that this should involve any focus on aspects of language.

#### *Analysis of mode:*

Exploration of the differences between speech and writing, often with some developed work on natural speech and its representation in literary texts. Some specifications (e.g. OCR) have an explicit focus on the idea of 'literary voice' and the construction of point of view in fiction.



*Critical reading:*

Based around a topic and including wider reading and critical-literary theory. At A2, this might also include some discussion of issues and topics such as language variation, context, and reader response theories.

*Creative writing:*

Mainly related to the candidates' own reading of primary texts and which they use as stimulus material to develop their own writing. Some specifications have additional stipulations such as the writing of a multimodal text (OCR) or the production of one written and one spoken text (EdExcel). Writing is accompanied by a critical commentary.

*Text transformation:*

Transformational or recasting work based on textual intervention activities (Pope 1995), and also accompanied by a critical commentary.

Across these specifications, there is a tendency for the content to be weighted in favour of the study of literary texts, with no requirement that this work should focus on aspects of language. Where there is more of a balance between non-literary and literary texts, it is most evident in those units that focus on the study of speech, and those that invite students to refer to wider reading. However, even in these cases, this is still based on a central literary theme or a number of set literary texts. To a great extent, the degree to which work is fully integrated depends on the examination board and specification. AQA A, EdExcel and OCR all have units that are more explicitly geared towards linking the non-literary and literary in speech through the study of mode, register, spontaneous and scripted speech, natural conversation and the construction of dialogue, narration, dialect and idiolect in literary fiction. It is noticeable, however, that this tends to be understood as 'linking' two separate things (language and literature) rather than seeing individual activities as 'one thing'.

### **3.4 Resources**

The resources available to support the delivery of A level Language and Literature tend to be examination board-specific. This means that textbooks will cater for one particular specification and will be geared towards preparing students for examination answers through advice on deconstructing questions, structuring ideas into writing, and addressing assessment objectives, in addition to questions and activities based on the specification content. The focus of these particular questions and activities varies according to the specification and publisher. However, generally, A level textbooks will offer focused questions asking students to comment on aspects of set texts or representative samples of texts from particular genres in line with the key focus (e.g. speech in fiction, transformational writing) and assessment objectives for that unit. They are also likely to offer guidance on key terms and how to use them in examination answers, and suggestions for some further reading based on the topic area.

For the specifications launched in 2008, examination boards entered into exclusive partnerships with major publishers to produce print and web-based materials. So, for example, the two AQA specifications each had AS and A2 student books, and a series of 'e-learning activities' published by Nelson Thornes, whilst OCR (Oxford University Press) and EdExcel (Pearson) had similar publishing relationships.

There are also more general books aimed at A level students and their teachers. Examples include Susan Cockcroft's *Living Language* and *Living Literature* series (1999, 2000, 2001), Alan Gardiner's *Revision Express: AS and A2 English Language and Literature* (2008), resources published and shared by the teaching community such as those posted on the Times Educational Supplement (TES) forum and 'The English Language List', and those that are published and available through website subscriptions such as 'TeachIt' and 'EnglishEdu' (URLs provided in references below). The National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) and the English and Media Centre (EMC) also publish online materials and run workshops and conferences to support teachers' continued development of subject knowledge across the discipline. In addition, there are undergraduate introductions that are useful for A level study (e.g. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short's *Style in*

*Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* 2007, Paul Simpson's *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* 2004). Interviews with teachers (see section 3.5) show that the latter type of resource is used less frequently in the A level classroom. There may be value in further promoting texts such as Simpson's as a Key Stage 5 teaching tool, and in developing further resources which bridge the general revision guides and specification-specific student books to texts at the level of Simpson's.

### **3.5 Teaching and Learning at A level**

The section below details some of the teaching methods and practices revealed in questionnaires, interviews and a small number of classroom observations that were undertaken for this project.

A level teachers we spoke to were keen to plan and deliver lessons that were interactive and allowed students to build on existing knowledge in meaningful ways. In the lessons we observed there was a real emphasis on group work, discussion, and whole-class sharing of ideas in plenary sessions. Activities were predominantly student-led with the teacher introducing terminology as and when appropriate and playing the role of a 'facilitator' rather than a transmitter of information. Examples of activities seen during observations included:

Students were asked to think about the nature and conventions of poetry during an introduction to a unit on the language of poetry (AQA A). Students used their previous experience of reading poetry at school, and particularly at GCSE to develop a series of statements about the nature of poetic form and content. They were asked to create their own poems using cards that the teacher had prepared with different words on them. In creating poems and referring back to their initial ideas on the genre, students were able to explore in more detail ideas about metre, semantic cohesion and foregrounding.

A lesson on text transformation (AQA B) was observed where the students were considering a range of different literary and non-literary forms into which they could recast their base text

as part of a series of textual intervention activities. The group debated the relative merits of choosing different text types, discussing and noting down key linguistic decisions that they would need to make in each case. These were then presented to the class before students made their individual choices.

The A level teachers interviewed all stated that they were either 'language' or 'literature' teachers and viewed themselves as having more subject knowledge in one area than another. There was a sense among them that lang-lit was very much the 'third subject', with teachers typically being timetabled to teach either one of the discrete subjects in addition to the combined course. The relatively limited range and amount of reading that teachers had undertaken within the subject area suggested that 'the combined course' (as most teachers refer to it) was considered a 'poor relation'. This is consistent with findings in our earlier report and anecdotal evidence from teachers we have discussed this with in various contexts. None of those interviewed had completed any reading of recent work (articles, textbooks, monographs) in literary linguistics either to support their own knowledge or for pleasure. In contrast, they said that they made a point of keeping more up to date with work in either 'Literature' or 'Language', which they saw as useful in their teaching. The only resources these teachers made use of to inform their teaching were the examination board-endorsed textbooks.

A number of students were asked about their reasons for choosing A level Language and Literature and their experience of the course. All were very positive, with a large number stating that they took the subject because it offered them a chance to study a range of options within a broader notion of English as a subject. Many of them were attracted to the idea of reading literary texts but still having the opportunity to explore aspects of spoken language and communication. They were also drawn to the creative work that lang-lit specifications offered. All of those interviewed were planning to go to university, with a significant number thinking of carrying on with English, in some form, at undergraduate level.

### **3.6 Future changes to A level specifications**

This report was initially written in the summer of 2013, at a time when changes to A level specifications were being planned by awarding bodies following guidance from the UK government and from OFQUAL. Reforms include a change to the structure of courses to make them fully linear, a stand-alone but co-teachable AS level qualification, and the more explicit involvement of higher education institutions and academics in developing course content and ensuring progression to more advanced study.

#### **4. BA English Language and Literature**

This section provides an overview of current provision of lang-lit work within BA level English courses.

##### **4.1 Lang-Lit at BA level**

Lang-lit study occurs within modules wholly dedicated to the combination or integration of language and literature as well as in modules cast as literary in focus but which involve some analysis of the language of literature. Modules of the former type, often described as focusing on 'stylistics' or 'literary linguistics', occur within degree courses with titles 'English', 'English Literature' and 'English Language and Literature', each of which encompass a fairly broad understanding of 'English', and sometimes within programmes called 'English Language'. Modules of the latter type are more likely to occur in degree programmes with a greater focus on literature. A survey of English degree course descriptions available on university webpages in 2012 revealed that 39 out of the 107 higher education institutions in the UK offered modules in (or substantially comprised of) lang-lit as part of an English or related degree programme (e.g. Communication and Media) (see Clark and Macrae 2014).

Both publically available course information and lecturers' responses to questionnaires suggest that there is wide variation in precisely what is considered combined/integrated language and literature within BA English teaching. Attention to language most commonly occurs within close reading practices. It is within this kind of study that basic linguistic description, as part of detailed analysis of inferable impressions and

themes, is sometimes explicitly encouraged and rewarded within mark schemes. However, teaching of grammatical terminology within this context appears to be rare. Grammar and syntax are more often commonly taught as part of the study of poetry and poetic form, along with rhetorical figures and tropes.

Study of language in literature (or 'literary language') at all linguistic levels (from phonetics/phonology through morphology, syntax, lexicon, semantics and pragmatics) is slightly more common in modules wholly dedicated to lang-lit or to creative writing. These modules, if available, tend not to be offered to first year (level 4) students, but rather feature as second or third year options (levels 5 and 6). Combined use of literary and linguistic approaches to study non-literary texts, within the same module, is also more common in second and third year study (levels 5 and 6), where available. However, some narrowly focussed or more broad and basic lang-lit modules do occur at first year (level 4), such as modules dedicated to phonological analysis of accent and dialect in literary and non-literary texts, and introductory stylistics modules (see 4.2 and 4.3 below).

#### **4.2 Learning Objectives**

Typical specific learning objectives of broad introductory integrated lang-lit modules at level 4 or 5 include (paraphrased from the various specifications):

- Articulate the form and function of a range of stylistic features
- Discuss the relationship between interpretation and form
- Demonstrate evidence of research into current theory and application of relevant linguistic and stylistic methodologies

#### **4.3 Areas of study**

First and second year (level 4 and 5) lang-lit modules cover areas such as the following (again, paraphrased from the various specifications):

- Literary pragmatics (conversation analysis, Gricean pragmatics, Politeness theory, critical discourse analysis)

- Accent and dialect (morphology and phonology)
- Narrative point of view (person and tense)
- Poetic diction (metaphor, figures and tropes), poetic syntax (clause structuring)
- Basic linguistic description (e.g. of word classes) as part of close reading
- Modules wholly and more broadly dedicated to lang-lit study tend to bring the above areas together to consider what stylistic analysis as a whole can achieve and to include more detailed study of some further linguistic features of literary discourse, such as modes of speech and thought presentation, modality or deixis.

#### **4.4 Resources**

Popular resources for initial lang-lit study at university level include a range of primers such as Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short's *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (2007), Paul Simpson's *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* (2004), Mick Short's *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose* (1996), and Peter Verdonk and Jean-Jacques Weber's *From Text to Context* series of collected essays (1993, 1995). Second year (level 5) modules and modules wholly dedicated to lang-lit tend to require additional engagement with research monographs and journal articles specific to particular linguistic and stylistic forms and approaches. An increasing body of resources, developed by leading lang-lit academics, provides lecturers with practical teaching resources offers students a lot of foundational and innovative material to support their independent learning.

#### **4.5 Teaching and Learning at BA level**

This section details questionnaire responses from and related discussions with lang-lit lecturers regarding content and delivery methods of lang-lit, and regarding the level of study at which it most commonly occurs.

Early modules dedicated to lang-lit study at BA level tend to facilitate learning via a series of workshops or seminars, with less of an emphasis on lectures than in more conventional literary or linguistic study. Where lectures do occur (which is more common at

level 5), they often present a detailed overview of a linguistic/stylistic topic, such as transitivity, modality, deixis, etc., or of an approach, such as feminist stylistics. Seminars often involve exploratory analysis of unseen (usually literary) texts and extracts with attention to particular stylistic features. In such contexts, the primary learning objective tends to be to enhance understanding of the form and functioning of the stylistic feature in question in relation to specific literary contexts. Interpretative insight into the text or extract in question is sometimes a correlative but secondary aim within the learning experience at this stage, given that the main focus is on developing a basic understanding of stylistics. As mentioned above, understanding of features of language is occasionally developed as part of creative writing exercises, sometimes through the practice of textual intervention.

Assessment methods usually involve essays focussed on a chosen particular stylistic feature (or range of related aspects of language/discourse) in a chosen literary text/extract. Exams are not common, but are sometimes used, and can involve a combination of close stylistic analysis of an unseen literary or non-literary text, textual intervention practices to re-write and respond to a (usually non-literary) text, with an accompanying comparative stylistic analysis, and short questions requiring definitions and demonstration of understanding of particular linguistic and stylistic features and related terminology.

#### **4.6 Student aptitude related to prior study**

There is very little data analysing student aptitude for particular areas of BA level English study in relation to their specific AS/A2 level backgrounds or equivalent education. Some questionnaire responses suggest that experience of the English Language and/or combined English Language and Literature AS/A2 gives students more confidence in engaging with lang-lit at BA level and better prepares them for both the kinds of analysis employed and oral and written communication of detailed linguistic and stylistic analysis. Questionnaire responses and discussions with lang-lit lecturers also suggest that a relative lack of experience of lang-lit study has a more detrimental effect on students' confidence if their first engagement with this at BA level is delayed to year 2 (level 5) or later. Questionnaire



responses and discussions with lang-lit lecturers also suggests that students for whom English is an additional language, particularly from other European countries, have a better understanding of basic grammar and syntax, and sometimes achieve higher marks in such study, than students for whom English is a first language and who have been educated in the UK.

## **5. Apparent transition issues**

This section draws upon the information presented above to extricate and illustrate some of the current issues impacting upon students' transition from A level to BA level English study.

### **5.1 Content**

Most lecturers involved in this study reported a sense of too little awareness, across their departments, of current A level content, and a lack of attention to this with regard to BA course design. Some lecturers reported recent efforts to correct this within the HE context. Some of the examining bodies are also in consultation with HE lecturers and course designers to ensure a smoother transition for A level students to BA work. Furthermore, NATE, the EMC and the HEA publish material to disseminate relevant course-content related information to educators at each level (for example, Bleiman 2009).

Some overlap is apparent between some initial BA level lang-lit topics and A level topics (e.g. pragmatics), and some resources (e.g., Simpson2004). This is a natural consequence of there being three different A level English courses, as students with diverse backgrounds need to be able to 'catch up' with their peers with respect to areas of study and understanding not previously elected (or available) but necessary for their BA course requirements. This can function as a 'refresher' for some students with the requisite experience, and can be a useful juncture for expansion of their critical horizons, but it also risks frustrating and under-challenging some students for brief periods, which can have a negative impact on overall student satisfaction.

What is cast as 'lang-lit' at A level is not currently in line with lang-lit at BA level, which is most commonly based on stylistics. The separate English Language and English Literature A level courses are much closer to their BA counterparts. The main discrepancy exists between the predominantly *combined* nature of lang-lit at A level and the availability of genuinely *integrated* nature of lang-lit, e.g., stylistics and literary linguistics, at BA level.

## **5.2 Learning activities**

Delivery of content is similarly interactive and text based at A level and at BA level. Classes at A level sometimes focus on particular stylistic features (e.g. common linguistic markers of narrative perspective), but appear to be much less likely to focus on the detail and practice of a particular stylistic model/approach than seminars within integrated lang-lit modules at BA level. For example, the popular AQA lang-lit 2008 specification A avoids prescribing the level of detail to which 'linguistic features' of texts should be analysed, or specifying particular kinds of linguistics features (though linguistic differences between particular discourse types are suggested). Furthermore, though in the final part reference is made to 'frameworks learnt throughout the course' (p.8), no particular literary, linguistic or literary-linguistic models or frameworks are mentioned within the specification itself. The assessment learning objectives (summarised above) include: 'A01 Select and apply relevant concepts and approaches from integrated linguistic and literary study, using appropriate terminology and accurate, coherent written expression', and 'AO2 Demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which structure, form and language shape meanings in a range of spoken and written texts' (p.12). Though the text books, revision guides and online exercises co-developed by the exam boards and publishers offer much more detail, it may be that more explicit direction within the specifications themselves would be beneficial in guiding centres, enabling teachers to better target their continued development of subject expertise, and promoting a coherent, systematic and consistent learning experience among students of the same specification.

### **5.3 Skills**

Some lecturers reported a lack of basic understanding of grammatical word classes and syntax among most students of English literature or lang-lit BA courses, posing problems for introductory work in the study of language and leaving students under-prepared for lang-lit study at BA level. This is not surprising given the content of work at school. Students who have taken A level English Language are likely to have done some work in these areas, but this is not currently part of work at GCSE/Key Stage 3. Even if students develop some knowledge about language before beginning secondary education, it is possible that this will largely have been forgotten before they begin work at Key Stage 5. Some evidence from questionnaire responses suggests this is sometimes reflected in lower average marks achieved by students taking lang-lit modules (in comparison to their marks in literature modules).

Some lecturers reported an over-confidence in some students with prior lang-lit experience regarding their (relatively rudimentary) understanding of some areas of linguistic and stylistic study, and related student resistance to thinking more critically about concepts and frameworks introduced to them at A level. This occurs in other subjects, of course, but there are specific issues with work in English where students have varying experience at school.

Some lecturers reported an apparent disjunction between expectations of students' essay writing abilities at A level and BA level, with most first year students demonstrating poor skills in this area. This often extends to such basic aspects of written communication as sentence structuring.

### **5.4 Context**

Some BA students have their first encounters with the study of language within modules on poetry or creative writing. As most UK students have experienced a divorce between the

study of language and the study of literature at G.C.S.E. and A level, this context can be confusing and challenging.

Lang-lit at BA level sometimes begins at level 5 (i.e. usually second year).

Questionnaire responses and discussion with lecturers suggest that students who have experience of language or lang-lit study at A level can forget much of their prior knowledge over this time. Students who have not experienced language or lang-lit study previously can find the proposed relationship between language and literature unfamiliar and an unnatural approach at this stage of study, particularly within the broader context of a degree course predominantly focused on either language or literature.

## **6. Proposals**

This section presents some proposals for the sectors overall, based on our research. We have formulated these bearing in mind the context of ongoing reforms to GCSEs and A levels. Our proposals are:

1. The current and future development of A level content should closely respond to and reflect developments in English scholarship to ensure smoother transition to work at BA level, with particular attention to the growth of stylistic scholarship in academia – that is, of genuinely integrated lang-lit work.
2. Issues raised by the limited knowledge about language which many students bring with them to university study of English need to be addressed by a coherent and cross-sector plan of action.
3. Better links need to be developed between schools, colleges, exam boards, universities, and relevant associations to facilitate more communication and collaboration with regards to curriculum development at both A and BA levels. This could be usefully targeted by the HEA, the English Association, and University English, particularly.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this project, we gathered only a limited set of data and it is clear that more research is needed in this area. Furthermore, our work focused only on A level and did not consider

other awards such as the International Baccalaureate or Scottish Highers. While individual conclusions might be debated, we think it is clear that more work should be done to develop a coherent approach to the content, delivery and assessment of language, literature and lang-lit work at all stages of school and university study. There is currently more integrated lang-lit work at university than at school and we believe that changes to school curricula which introduce more integrated lang-lit work will be beneficial to students and help to prepare them for work at BA level.

## 8. References

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### **Websites/discussion lists with teaching resources:**

English Language List. [englang@list.englishlanguagelist.com](mailto:englang@list.englishlanguagelist.com)

EnglishEdu. [English.edusites.co.uk](http://English.edusites.co.uk)

English and Media Centre. [www.englishandmedia.co.uk](http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk)

National Association for the Teaching of English. [www.nate.org.uk](http://www.nate.org.uk)

Teachit. [www.teachit.co.uk](http://www.teachit.co.uk)