As Simple as ABC?

Issues of transition for students of English Language A Level going on to study English Language/Linguistics in Higher Education

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By
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Foreword

English Language is one of the fastest growing subjects on the A Level Curriculum. Many students are applying to study in higher education institutions with this A Level, sometimes on its own, sometimes in conjunction with A Level English Literature and sometimes in an A Level that combines and integrates the study of English language and literature. Within universities and higher education institutions, English also means different things in different places and within different constituencies. English can mean English language; it can mean English literature, it can mean English language and literature, it can be embraced by the term English Studies it can even in some institutions mean English linguistics. There are particular dangers in the modern world of English Studies, if English Literature is the default meaning for English, for it can suggest a department out of touch with the most recent changes in the subject. For some time university schools and departments have needed to get a better picture of recent trends, changes and developments in the study of English Language in the A Level curriculum. This invaluable report does just that, establishing a comprehensive overview, providing helpful survey data and indicating significant conceptual distinctions in the ways in which English language is studied.

Above all this report underlines that English Language A Level is, contrary to many assumptions, not new. It has been available as an A Level for over twenty years, even though it is in the last five years that its exponential growth has been most sharply witnessed. It is an A Level that has been designed with considerable imagination.

It has also had a considerable influence, both conceptually and pedagogically, on the ways in which the English language curriculum has been developed in university departments.

Understanding more completely what it means to have an A Level in English Language enables higher education lecturers better to understand what starting points students have and where their strengths and weaknesses are likely to be in their approaches to the study of English, however conceptualised. It also enables them better to prepare how they describe the courses that they offer, their course titles and their entry requirements, making sense to incoming students (and not just to their own higher education peers).

One of the characteristics of A Level English Language students is that they have a broad set of expectations concerning how the subject is studied, their own involvement as producers and receivers of language, and the variety of pedagogies from within which the subject of language can be studied. It is important that the world of higher education English responds positively to these expectations. Thanks to Angela Goddard, Adrian Beard, the English Subject Centre and the Higher Education Academy this is now possible.

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March 2007

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1. Introduction: the scope of this study

This is a study of transition issues with reference to a specific subject area – that of English Language/Linguistics. The focus is on students who go to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in order to study English Language/ Linguistics, either as a single subject or in combination with other elements on a degree programme. At sixth form level, the specific focus is on students who take a particular A Level – English Language. In terms of academic subject area, then, this study looks at issues of 'fit' or otherwise between a subject studied at school or college level, and its notional equivalent in HEIs. To that extent, this study parallels that of Green (2005), who reported on the relationship between English Literature A Level and undergraduate degrees in the same subject.

Issues of transition between school and university are not, of course, simply about academic matters. However, the scope of this study does not allow for consideration of all the different aspects that might affect the success or otherwise of students crossing from one educational phase to another. There may well be issues that have been observed in generic studies of transition experiences that can be related to the findings of this study. Where that is the case, reference will be made. But readers who are looking for a general consideration of transition issues are directed towards Harvey (2006), which is a review and summary of over 600 pieces of literature on aspects of transition, and to Yorke and Longden (2006), which is a large scale contemporary survey of first year undergraduate experiences across a number of HEIs and different subject areas.

This study does contain some detail about the nature of English Language A Levels, both in their current form and in the new configurations proposed to start in 2008. However, this document is necessarily limited in the amount of detail that can be presented. Readers who are looking for a detailed account of English A Level specifications – *Literature*, and *Language and Literature*, as well as Language itself – are advised to read Bleiman and Webster (2006).

Although the focus of this report is on two phases of education – school or college and university – the report itself is comprised of three broad sections. The first section looks at the nature of A Level study in English Language, and the third section looks at the nature of beginning undergraduate study in English Language/Linguistics. The middle section acts as a bridge between those two points, eliciting information from those who are in the process of transition, still at the A Level stage but looking towards new horizons. It is hoped that what is captured there, at a particular point in time, helps to give this report something of the quality of a narrative - a story about and for the learners and teachers within a particular subject community.

2. Data and methodology

Green (2005) takes four perspectives in his study of transition issues for students of English Literature A Level moving to HEIs to do degrees in English Literature. The perspectives are: A Level students; A Level teachers; degree-level students; and HEI lecturers. Essentially, those four perspectives are also the basis of this study. However, there are additional sources of information and views; and the research methods used are slightly different. Below is a list of all data sources, with a description of each; and an explanation of research methods and ethics. In future sections, data sources will then be referred to simply by number. All templates for questionnaires and interviews can be found in the Appendix, as itemised below.

Source 1: Personal account

This is a personal account by Angela Goddard, one of the two authors of this report. It consists of a brief description of the beginning of the English Language A Level that has evolved into the largest specification. Angela Goddard was part of the original teacher consortium in Manchester who did preparatory work in the early 1980s, consulting with HEIs and the other stakeholders who are part of the validation process for the inception of any new A Level.

Source 2: AS Level students, April 2006

During April 2006, an HEI hosted a series of day conferences for AS Level students of English Language, and their teachers. These conferences are an established part of local educational provision, having been running with full attendance for the past three years. The aim of the days is to help AS students prepare for their summer examinations.

Student delegates were asked to complete a questionnaire, which can be seen in Appendix 1. A total of 271 questionnaires were completed. Although the questionnaires were completed anonymously for authorship, students were asked to fill in the name of their school or college, in order for us to get information about the range of establishments involved. These were as follows (all from north east England, the local area served by the HEI in question):

6th form colleges	FE	Comp schools	Grammar schools	Indep schools
1	3	12	1	4

AS-Level students (rather than A2 students) were targeted for a number of reasons. One reason was to capture the thoughts of students at the stage before some of them made the decision to go on to university. At this stage, it was thought that we would be able to access some of their starting points in the transition process, before they encounter the UCAS system and become 'schooled' in the formal language of course names and codings.

Another important motivation for choosing AS students was to allow us to gather as rich a picture as possible of the context for language study at the sixth form stage. Although the brief of this research was to make observations about transition issues for those going on to HE to study English Language/Linguistics, there is also the interesting question of why others may drop the subject at various stages before that. Having more information about the latter should help to contextualise the former.

Source 3: A Level, April 2006

During the midday break on the conference days, teachers accompanying the student delegates were invited to meet members of the research team over lunch to discuss aspects of the teaching of English Language A Level. The range of establishments represented was as follows:

6th form colleges	FE	Comp schools	Indep schools
1	2	5	3

Teachers were initially asked to jot down some notes in response to a set of questions: this questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 2. After completing their notes, they were invited to feedback to the whole group and elaborate on their responses in discussion with each other.

Their discussions were recorded, with their permission. That permission entailed the idea that researchers would have access to what was said, in order to ensure a faithful representation for this report. However it was never the intention to publish a full transcript of the discussions, and so no agreement was sought on that basis.

The idea of starting with a range of specific questions and addressing those in discussion was in order to focus on those issues which were considered a priority in the short time available. Also, in situations where participants are relative strangers, the questions formed the basis for a rapid establishment of common ground and shared focus. However, as discussions got going, there was no rigid enforcement of parameters, and participants did initiate new topics, as will be seen later in this report.

Source 4: A2 students, July 2006

A further set of study days held during July 2006 afforded a fresh opportunity to research delegates' views. As with the April days, these days are a regular part of provision each year by the HEI concerned. However, the purpose of the July days is different from that of the April series. By July, students at sixth form level have committed themselves to the choice of particular A Levels for their A2 year. The July days were therefore targeting those students who were going on to study for the full English Language A Level. (In contrast, the April days included those who were stopping their English Language studies at AS, either because they were intending to do other A Levels, or because they were leaving education altogether). The April days and July days, did, however, have some students and schools/colleges in common.

The July days aim to prepare students for a particular unit of A2 work, the 'Investigation', which is a piece of student-led research. After inputs from a range of staff covering different aspects of Linguistics, students work with their teachers to prepare a research question which is then put to a panel of experts (i.e. HE lecturers) later in the day. During that preparation time, the research team held focus group meetings on each of the days with student delegates who had volunteered to meet us. Teachers had been prepared beforehand via a letter from the research team, explaining that these group meetings were to take place, and asking for volunteers who said they were intending to apply to study English Language/ Linguistics at a university.

The focus group meetings with the research team were, in effect, an exchange of labour. The students wanted to know about studying English Language/Linguistics at university level; for the immediate purpose of the day, the students also had to refine a research question. In exchange for their input on their views and experiences, therefore, they received some insights into aspects of the culture of HE, and also some help with their research questions.

During the July days, three focus groups involving 32 students in total were organised, in order to obtain some more detailed qualitative material about their experiences and perceptions. The student delegates began their focus group sessions by filling in a questionnaire, which then formed the basis for oral discussion with researchers: essentially, this was the same method as was used with the teachers' groups, above. This questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 3.

It was felt that starting group discussion by feeding back their responses to the questions was the best way to break the ice and give group members some confidence to report their opinions: it must be remembered that students of this age are unused to working with their peers from other schools, let alone researchers who were relative strangers. These discussions were recorded, with students' permission, for the purpose of keeping an accurate record only. No teachers were present during the focus group sessions. This was so that the students could report their views honestly, without fear of upsetting their teachers if they said they hadn't enjoyed a particular aspect of study, or if they didn't value a particular teaching style or way of working.

In representing the discussions from both the teachers' and the students' focus group sessions, every attempt has been made to include the full range of views and comments offered by participants. We have also tried to indicate to what extent a particular view was supported, to what extent disagreed with, and whether certain positions were represented by lone voices. Sometimes we summarise participants' comments, and at other times quote them in full. Quotation is offered for a number of different reasons. It may be that, on occasions, a student voice (indeed, in writing as well as speech) could be ambiguous in its expression, in which case we offer the original phrasing for readers to ponder. Sometimes, too, participants in both types of group express their feelings in a way that can only be conveyed by the original formulation, and to summarise is to anaesthetise.

Because the discussion groups were not completely open-ended, freewheeling interactions, but grounded in needing to address the specific questions we thought appropriate to the subject of 'transition', it was possible to adopt the summarising method as described above. In conducting qualitative research of this kind, there are clearly many different methods for eliciting participant accounts (see, for example, Morgan 1996; Merriam 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Taylor and Bogdan 2003). While a less directed discussion may well have benefited from a more fine-grained discourse-analytic method (see Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton 2001 for a review of discourse methods), the focus group work was designed to capture, not nuances of participants' positioning, but broad themes and ideas in a group context where one member's contribution could jog the memory of another, in brainstorming fashion.

The 32 students taking part in the focus groups were from the following establishments overall: 10 comprehensive schools; 1 grammar school; 1 FE college (schools in the independent sector had mainly broken up for the holidays by the time of the conferences). There was at least 1 student from each of these, sometimes 2 or 3.

Source 5: 'Naive Applicant' UCAS search

In considering issues that may relate to the choice of a course at an HEI, it was thought useful to go beyond simply listing or counting different courses, and try to simulate something of the search process a potential applicant was likely to experience. To this end, a research assistant (a level 3 student of one of the research team) was asked to act as a 'naïve applicant', take the three most well known names for Linguistics courses (as evidenced in Source 2) and search the UCAS pages, looking for such basic information as whether English Language A Level was required or expected, and details of any entry requirements.

Source 6: A Level teachers, June and October 2006

Sixty-one teachers were surveyed in June and October 2006 while attending commercial in-service courses entitled *Teaching AS/A Level Language for the first time*. The courses took place in Manchester and London and drew delegates from all types of 16-18 provision across the country. This survey offered some information about the nature of the training of English teachers, and about the situation of those teachers preparing to teach English Language A Level. The issue of teacher training is a subject in its own right and goes beyond the scope of this study. However, the topic of training and preparedness to teach English Language arose from Source 3 of our data, and since access to the in-service delegates was available, it was considered a useful further source of data.

Source 7: HE Students

Two hundred and forty-six questionnaires were completed by Level 2 students in the first term of their second year of study. The questionnaires asked them to review various aspects of their Level 1 experience. The timing of the questionnaires meant that students' memories of Level 1 were relatively fresh, but at the same time they could have some objectivity about their previous experiences. The students attended eight different universities –

4 pre-'92, and 4 post-'92 establishments - and were doing a range of degree courses which involved study in the area of English Language and Linguistics. Nine courses were surveyed overall, 7 of which were entitled *English Language*, or *Linguistics*, or a combination of the two names; the remaining 2 courses were entitled *English Language Studies*, and *English Studies*. It was thought important to include some variation here, in order to represent the fact that the study of the subject goes beyond its 'pure' form and is often a constituent of courses in the English subject area more generally.

The questionnaires were administered in lectures by staff in each institution who were willing for their students to participate, and then sent on to the researchers by post.

The questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 4.

Source 8: HE Lecturers

Nine HE Lecturers from the establishments above were interviewed separately by the research team, and asked the questions listed in Appendix 5. In the case of one establishment, there were two distinctively different courses being offered by one university, and for this reason two members of staff were interviewed (on separate occasions) from the same university.

Note:

No individuals or institutions are named in this report.

The names of schools/colleges were recorded, in order to be able to give an account of the types of institutions represented; beyond that, individual institutions are not traceable here. The same anonymity is afforded to HEIs and individuals.

3. English Language A Level

3.1 A brief history of development (Data: Source 1)

English Language A Level was never an attempt simply to do HE Linguistics at school level. The current A Level English Language specifications grew from dialogues in the early 1980s between school English departments and HE departments, both of English and of Linguistics. The common goal of these dialogues was to generate a new course of study that would grow naturally from school-based English, but one that would have Language, rather than Literature, at its core; and one that would enhance the life – and work – skills of students going straight from A Level study into the job market as well as acting as a qualification for entry to higher education.

Pilot work done by exam boards (specifically, the then Joint Matriculation Board (JMB), in Manchester, and the London Board), involved extensive consultation with university partners in order to ensure that departments of Linguistics and departments of English viewed English Language A Level as a suitable basis for degree level study. In those early days, some problems were raised on both sides; and changes were made to the A Level curriculum in order to accommodate them. For example, in the JMB's theoretical paper, a section on stylistics was made to include a compulsory question on literary material, in order for HE English departments to feel that candidates had some knowledge of literary discourse. At the same time, the area of animal communication was cut, after objections from colleagues in Linguistics that this took the syllabus into areas of zoological knowledge that went beyond the remit of their subject.

By the mid 1980s, both the JMB and the London Board had up-and-running qualifications, their distinctiveness consisting, broadly, of more emphasis on sociological approaches (JMB) or more on structural aspects (London). While contemporary specifications are hosted by almost all the exam boards (see Section 3), the sociological orientations of the JMB-derived specifications (AQA A and B) have clearly been most successful and popular in terms of take-up by centres and numbers of candidates. ('Examination boards' are now more commonly referred to as 'Awarding Bodies' or ABs.) Having just 210 candidates in 1985, entries for summer 2006 totalled 19,608 for AS and 14,981 for A2 (see Section 3.3.1).

Finally, some mention of subject names is necessary. In the JMB's development of English Language A Level, various names were suggested and rejected. 'A Level Linguistics', for example, was thought to suggest (at the time) a rather abstract kind of language study, when what was needed was a name that connoted language in use. Another possibility was 'A Level Language'. While this foregrounded the fact that students could investigate other languages apart from English (in, for example, their investigation coursework unit), it was thought that such a title might sound too foreign-language oriented; and it was a concern that this new course of study should stay within departments of English, where it started. There were also attempts, which foundered for various reasons, to create a new course entitled 'English A Level', which would encompass new types of language study but also enable existing literature qualifications to continue.

The issue of names will come up again at various points throughout this study, as there are still unresolved issues that affect student transition, not just from A Level to degree level study, but also from GCSE to A Level. It seems that sometimes, and particularly within HE, 'English' means literature; while in the school system, it means anything but. Green (2005) points out that transition issues in literature are sometimes masked by the apparent transparency of having a common name for study at all levels. It may be that in language study, there are different names for what is essentially the same thing.

3.2 An account of the current A Level specifications, including their methods of assessment

3.2.1 Introduction

Section 3.2 will give an overview of the A Level specifications as they operate until 2009 (the last assessment for the full A Level, with a final resit opportunity in 2010). New specifications, with amended requirements and practices, are first examined at AS in 2009, with the full A Level being first examined in 2010. They are explained in section 3.4.

What follows will assume a broad understanding of the current structures at AS and A2 and will attempt to give an overview of the current system as it affects English Language. Readers requiring a more detailed understanding of how the whole A Level system works, and how it applies to all the subjects under the umbrella of 'English'

are recommended to read Barbara Bleiman's report for the English Subject Centre. (Bleiman and Webster (2006))

Four awarding bodies offer an A Level in English Language: these are AQA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC. AQA has two specifications, so in effect there are five different specifications to choose from. Increasingly schools and colleges offering A Levels shop around for the specification which they think will produce the best experience, and results, for their clientele. The Northern Irish examination board, CCEA, does not have an A level in English Language, but students in the province are able to take the subject via the other boards. There is no Higher qualification in English Language in Scotland, although the Higher in English contains some aspects of reading and writing which are traditionally called 'language'. There is a lobby group in Scotland, based in HE establishments in Edinburgh and Glasgow, pushing for a new Higher with much more of a Linguistics focus.

This section will not attempt to detail the subtle distinctions between the various specifications as they currently exist, but will instead focus on the requirements which are common to them all. These requirements are designed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), which has oversight over the curriculum in England from age 5-18.

3.2.2 What comes before AS Level?

It is assumed by A Level English Language specifications that 'no prior knowledge or attainment' is necessary. However AQA, for example, go on to say that 'candidates who have followed a course leading to GCSE English will have attained valuable skills which can be further developed'. As GCSE English is a core subject, there will be very few students going on to A Level English Language who have not done GCSE English first.

As will be seen elsewhere, though, the naming of subjects in this area is a tricky and, for some, quite confusing business. At GCSE within English there are two subjects

- GCSE English, which covers the national Curriculum for Reading (including some Literature), Writing and Speaking and Listening
- GCSE English Literature which covers Literature only.

In reality, there is no such thing as GCSE English Language. Many schools and colleges call GCSE English 'GCSE English Language', however, as a way of distinguishing it from GCSE English Literature, and as an echo of a previous qualification. Where this happens, it may contribute to the fact that students choosing to study English Language at A Level are doing so under the misapprehension that they are continuing with the same broad areas of study that they enjoyed at GCSE.

A wide range of students opt for A Level Language – wider in terms of ability, sex, ethnicity and interests than tends to be the case for Literature. This needs to be borne in mind when the content and methods of the subject are viewed as preparation for HE.

3.2.3 Aims and Objectives

When designing the current specifications, the examination boards had to work within the overall structures of AS/A Level common to all subjects, and then within the particular requirements of English Language. These particular requirements are set out by QCA under various headings, although similar ideas are often repeated. The full design brief is available via the QCA website at **www.qca.org.uk**

There is a common set of aims which govern all A level English Language specifications. These are set out below, in edited format. (AS Level forms the first 3 units of A Level).

(a) AS and A Level courses should encourage students to develop an interest and enjoyment in the use of English through learning more about its structures and functions, drawing on their experience and knowledge of language change and variation. Students should learn to express themselves in speech and writing with increasing competence and sophistication, undertake a varied programme of reading, and develop skills of listening critically and attentively to spoken English.

(b) AS courses should introduce candidates to an understanding of concepts and frameworks for the study of language and enable them to apply these to investigate their own and others' use of speech and writing. AS courses should develop candidates' skills in speaking and writing for different purposes and audiences, as well as their ability to respond perceptively to the different varieties of English they hear and read.

(c) A Level courses should develop further the ability to apply a range of linguistic frameworks to a wide variety of texts from past and present. A Level students should be able to select and use the frameworks most

appropriate for their investigation and research and express themselves fluently and competently when speaking and writing.

In summary the Aims show that:

- There is an emphasis on English in use
- There is reference to varieties of language in use both now and over time
- Speech and writing are given equal emphasis
- Students will be assessed on their production of language as well as on their understanding of how language is used
- There is reference to research and investigation
- References to 'structures' 'functions' 'concepts' 'frameworks' and 'linguistic frameworks' point to linguistic study in rather different ways
- There is reference to 'a varied programme of reading'.

It should be noted that although the aims refer to students' own use of speech, in effect this is not assessed within the current structures.

Alongside the aims of the specifications are the Assessment Objectives (AOs) which drive the design of the whole specifications as well as the shape of individual units. Assessment Objectives can be seen as the equivalent of Learning Outcomes in HE. Although there is some flexibility around the weightings of these Assessment Objectives, this flexibility is relatively limited, meaning that all the awarding bodies have to address the same broad areas. There are five objectives for English Language, two of which are stepped, the first step applying to AS, the second to A2.

The assessment objectives state that students should:

AO1: communicate clearly the knowledge, understanding and insight appropriate to the study of language, using appropriate terminology and accurate and coherent written expression

AO2: demonstrate expertise and accuracy in writing for a variety of specific purposes and audiences, drawing on knowledge of linguistic features to explain and comment on choices made

AO3i: know and use key features of frameworks for the systematic study of spoken and written English

AO3ii: apply and explore frameworks for the systematic study of language at different levels, commenting on the usefulness of the approaches taken

AO4: understand, discuss and explore concepts and issues relating to language in use

AO5i: distinguish, describe and interpret variation in the meanings and forms of spoken and written language according to context

AO5ii: analyse and evaluate variation in the meanings and forms of spoken and written language from different times according to context

In summary, the Assessment Objectives require:

- Accurate academic writing
- Use of appropriate linguistic terminology
- Production of student's own texts
- Commentary on the production of own texts
- Application of key features of frameworks for analysing spoken and written language
- Awareness of issues around language use
- Awareness of how contexts affect meanings.

3.2.4 Content Requirements

In a section headed 'Specification Content Knowledge, Understanding and Skills' QCA further set out what is required, stating that 'candidates will be required to show that their contextual study of spoken and written language is based on sound theoretical knowledge'. This 'theoretical knowledge' has already been hinted at previously with references to 'frameworks' in both the aims and the assessment objectives. Here, though, a greater level of detail is given. QCA state that 'key features of frameworks for the systematic study of the English Language at different levels of analysis', include at AS level:

- the characteristic speech sounds and intonation patterns (phonetics and phonology);
- the vocabulary of English, including the origins, meanings and usage of words (lexis);
- the forms and structures of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and texts in speech and writing (grammar);
- the ways meanings are constructed and interpreted in speech and writing (semantics and pragmatics).

Plus

- variations in language according to mode (speech or writing) and context, including the role of personal and social factors in influencing meanings and forms.

In addition, A level specifications should require candidates to show deeper knowledge and understanding of:

- frameworks for the systematic study of language, including phonology and phonetics, lexis, morphology, grammar and semantics;
- the application and usefulness of different linguistic frameworks for the description and analysis of speech and writing;
- how historical and geographical variation shape and change meanings and forms in language.

So what are candidates required to do at AS? According to QCA they should:

- apply linguistic concepts and frameworks appropriately and systematically in the study of language;
- describe, explain and interpret variation in both spoken and written language;
- demonstrate appropriate and accurate control of spoken and written English for a variety of audiences and purposes;
- comment on the production, interpretation, adaptation and representation of texts.

In addition, at A level they should:

- analyse and evaluate variation in written and spoken language, including language from the past;
- make connections between their knowledge and understanding of concepts and frameworks for the study of language and evaluate the suitability of these as tools for analysis of language in use.

Finally QCA specify that 'in all AS and A level specifications, the texts and language samples studied must be of sufficient substance and challenge to merit serious consideration'.

It is fair to say, though, that the idea of 'frameworks' has proved difficult for those concerned with English Language at AS/A Level. Although a multiplicity of frameworks is implied by the plural word, many teachers are unsure of what different 'frameworks' there can be. They are also worried by the reflexive nature of students not only having to analyse language, but also by having to say what 'framework' they are using. In addition, what used to be

described as language 'levels' for example lexis, phonology, grammar, etcetera are now apparently being described by QCA as frameworks in their own right. So, while looking at lexis in a text might be an appropriate part of textual analysis, many teachers cannot understand how reference to vocabulary alone can be seen as a 'framework'.

In reviewing criteria for new specifications in 2008 (see Section 3.4) there has been considerable discussion about the usefulness of the reference to frameworks in the statutory material. Eventually, though, it has been decided to retain some reference to frameworks as a necessary underpinning of the subject's theoretical possibilities.

3.2.5 What do the courses look like?
Once QCA has laid down the curriculum requirements, it is up to the awarding bodies to design specifications which then compete against each other for a market share. Because so much detail is already prescribed, there is in effect a great deal of common ground across the different specifications – there has to be. The choice which faces teachers when they select a specification is as much about nuance and brand loyalty as it is about fundamentally different choices.

It is fair to say that increasingly in the 11-18 curriculum, let alone the 16-18, the forms of assessment and the nature of the examinations drive what is taught in the classroom. So, an outline of AS/A Level examinations in English Language will be a good indicator of what is taught in the classroom. (For a discussion of how the material is taught, see Sections 3.5 and 3.6)

Coursework is currently limited to 30% of the total assessment for AS/A Level. In some specifications coursework is optional, in others it is compulsory.

The following forms of assessment are typical of AS/A Level:

Analysis of Text: this forms a staple part of the assessment diet. It includes analysis of spoken data, written texts including texts over time, media texts, multimodal texts. There is often a requirement to compare texts and/or to group them generically. Sometimes the students are asked to comment reflexively on the 'frameworks' they have used.

Language Topics: These are assessed sometimes by essay, sometimes by commentary on data. Typical topics include gender, occupation, region, technology, representation, power, change, child language acquisition.

Language Investigation: Usually done as coursework, this involves students carrying out their own investigation into an area of language study by collecting their own data and then analysing it. Examples might be the study of a child's spoken language, analysis of a piece of sports commentary, research into attitudes to regional talk, etcetera.

Text Transformation: This has various labels including desk study and editorial writing. It usually involves students reading a range of material on a certain topic and then producing their own text(s) in a new genre. They then add a commentary explaining the choices they have made in producing the text(s).

Original Writing: Usually done as coursework, this involves students producing their own texts. Although this offers opportunities for 'creative writing' within literary genres, more typically it involves students creating imitative models of texts and genres that they have analysed first. Again a commentary is required. Examples might be a guide to a local area for new students, a leaflet advocating 'green' policies, etc.

3.2.6 What standards are achieved?

The awarding of grades at AS/A Level is a complex process, whereby each unit is awarded separately and then student performance is aggregated into a final grade. To conclude this section, printed below is the QCA description of a grade A performance in English Language. It is fair to say that this is probably a rather idealised portrait of the A grade student, but it offers some insight into what good A level students are expected to have achieved.

QCA Description of a Grade A performance
In response to the tasks set, candidates demonstrate a comprehensive theoretical knowledge of the way language works as a multi-layered system, through their analysis and evaluation of a range of material from the past to the present. They select and apply analytical frameworks appropriately and systematically in their own investigation and research, evaluating the usefulness of the approaches taken to the description of spoken and written English.

Candidates explore perceptively and critically concepts and viewpoints relating to language in use, supporting coherent, well-argued discussion with relevant examples, using appropriate terminology. Their writing is fluent, well structured, accurate and precise, demonstrating awareness of a wide range of different audiences and purposes.
(taken from 'Subject criteria for English Language AS/A level' **www.qca.org.uk**)

3.3 Statistical data on English Language AS/A Level, Summer 2006

3.3.1 Entry figures for all exam boards

	Overall entries at AS Level:	**Overall entries at A Level:**
AQA A	5,235	3,758
AQA B	14,373	11,223
OCR	631	380
EDEXCEL	1,960	1,494
WJEC	2,188	1,515
Totals:	**24,387**	**18,370**

3.3.2 Grades awarded
(percentages are cumulative)

AS Level Grades:	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**
AQA A	13.0%	32.9%	61.1%	83.5%	95.3%
AQA B	13.9%	35.5%	64.7%	86.8%	96.6%
OCR	15.3%	34.7%	60.6%	84.1%	95.7%
EDEXCEL	11.8%	37.7%	66.7%	87.1%	95.8%
WJEC	13.5%	38.8%	71.6%	92.2%	98.0%

AS Level Grades:	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**
AQA A	13.5%	37.9%	70.0%	91.8%	98.6%
AQA B	12.9%	37.2%	70.4%	93.1%	99.1%
OCR	13.7%	39.4%	66.2%	88.2%	98.7%
EDEXCEL	13.6%	40.7%	72.1%	91.7%	98.7%
WJEC	17.8%	47.3%	81.2%	96.5%	99.7%

3.3.3 Types of educational establishment

AS Level:				
	Schools	**FE/6th Form Coll**	**Independent**	**External/others**
AQA A	1585	3444	187	19
AQA B	8693	5174	428	78
OCR	396	117	118	0
EDEXCEL	1571	361	0	28
WJEC	382	1783	2	21

A Level:				
	Schools	**FE/6th Form Coll**	**Independent**	**External/others**
AQA A	1338	2215	188	17
AQA B	7199	3497	468	59
OCR	209	63	108	0
EDEXCEL	1104	368	0	22
WJEC	294	1220	0	1

3.3.4 Sex of candidates

AS Level:	F	M
AQA A	3533	1702
AQA B	9299	5074
OCR	Data not analysed for this variable	
EDEXCEL	1274	686
WJEC	1406	782

A Level:	F	M
AQA A	2561	1197
AQA B	7137	4086
OCR	Data not analysed for this variable	
EDEXCEL	931	563
WJEC	977	538

3.4 Changes to come: 2008 and beyond

3.4.1 Introduction

In 2004 the Tomlinson report into the 14-19 curriculum and its assessment recommended wholesale changes to the education system in England and Wales. Most of Tomlinson's recommendations were eventually rejected by the Minister of State, Ruth Kelly, but one which survived was the recommendation that most A Level subjects should be reduced from six units to four from 2008. This reduction was to be achieved without any diminution in the overall content of the specifications or their levels of difficulty. The rationale for this was to reduce the assessment burden on students, and also on the system itself, which was seen to be struggling to manage in the aftermath of what became known as the 'A Level crisis' of 2002.

This means that all English A Levels are currently undergoing reviews in order to comply with the new ruling. In the case of English Literature, this will mean considerable change, as the opportunity has been taken to look again at the nature of the subject and its content at this level. In English Language, however, the changes may be less marked, although the reduction from six units to four will inevitably reduce some of the variety that is possible when assessing students. QCA has also taken the opportunity to attempt to clarify criteria in the subject.

Despite rumours in the press, coursework, which appeared at one stage to be under threat, has survived in all English subjects, with a slightly increased allocation of marks. So from 2008, 40% of all English specifications can be internally assessed. English has kept coursework provided that it allows the independent study which is seen as an important part of progression from A Level to HE and employment. English Language, which has traditionally had students' own writing and their own language investigation within coursework, has contributed significantly to the view that English needs coursework if it is to allow the independence and creativity which

the subject has traditionally fostered. There is also a suggestion in the new criteria that the increased weighting for coursework will allow greater emphasis on talk: both in terms of the study of spoken texts and possibly the assessment of spoken presentations.

One result of the change to come, which potentially will affect all subjects, involves when examinations are taken, and how often they are taken. Currently, many students take single units in January, with the possibility of resitting them in June. Fewer units, with more content, might mean that there is a move towards the majority of students taking AS (two units) in June of Year 12 and A2 Level (two units) in June of Year 13. A further step might be that some students take all four units at the end of Year 13, which would see a return to something like the situation before 2000.

3.4.2 Changes to English Language: Aims and Objectives

At the time of writing the examination boards are only just beginning to design their new specifications, based on a revised set of criteria produced by QCA in consultation with awarding bodies and their senior examiners. The new aims for English Language reflect clearly the increased emphasis to be placed on independent learning and creativity within English throughout the 14-19 phase. These aims are:

> 'AS and A level specifications should encourage students to deepen their interest and enjoyment in the use of English as they:
>
> - develop and apply their understanding of the concepts and methods appropriate for the analysis and study of language
> - undertake independent investigative work related to language in use
> - engage creatively and independently with a varied programme for the study of English from the past to the present day
> - develop their skills as producers and interpreters of language.'
>
> (See **www.qca.org.uk** for further details)

If these aims are compared to those in section 3.2.3 it can be seen that there is a general tidying up of the criteria taking place, with greater clarity as a result.

The tidying up process can be seen with the Assessment Objectives too, which have been reduced from five to four. The AOs will now have the requirements that students should:

> AO1: Select and apply a range of linguistic methods, to communicate relevant knowledge using appropriate terminology and coherent, accurate written expression
>
> AO2: Demonstrate critical understanding of a range of concepts and issues related to the construction and analysis of meanings in spoken and written language, using knowledge of linguistic approaches
>
> AO3: Analyse and evaluate the influence of contextual factors on the production and reception of spoken and written language, showing knowledge of the key constituents of language
>
> AO4: Demonstrate expertise and creativity in the use of English in a range of different contexts, informed by linguistic study

Of particular interest to readers of this report might be the ways in which more theoretical linguistics is now configured. The problematic term 'frameworks' (see 3.2.4) has now largely, but not quite completely disappeared from the criteria (see 3.4.4 below). Taking key phrases from the AOs above, it can be clearly seen that a substantial theoretical underpinning is required throughout the course:

- select and apply a range of linguistic methods
- communicate relevant knowledge
- demonstrate critical understanding of a range of concepts and issues related to the construction and analysis of meanings in spoken and written language
- use knowledge of linguistic approaches
- analyse and evaluate the influence of contextual factors on the production and reception of spoken and written language
- show knowledge of the key constituents of language.

Even AO4, which essentially deals with students' own writing, requires that this writing be subjected to reflexive analysis that is informed by linguistic study.

How these objectives get written into full specifications remains to be seen, but there is a clear sense that AS/A Level Language will require:

- understanding of language structures
- awareness of the significance of context when analysing language in use
- awareness of debates and issues about language in use
- creative practices and reflexive evaluation of such practices.

This list seems to reflect clearly some of the different types of language study which are available at HE – apart of course from the final bullet.

3.4.3 Changes to English Language : Content Requirements

Although the greater clarity evident in the new AOs is also evident when the new criteria look at required content, there remains an issue with the term 'frameworks'. At AS there seems to be a clear understanding that 'key constituents' form part of a whole study of language, rather than as separate entities in themselves. At A Level, though, the term 'frameworks' re-appears in its old guise.

> 'AS specifications should require candidates to show broad knowledge and understanding of some of the key constituents of language and how they contribute to meaning in spoken and written English, including:
>
> - the characteristic speech sounds and intonation patterns (phonetics and phonology)
> - the vocabulary of English, including the origins, meanings and usage of words (lexis)
> - the forms and structures of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and texts in speech and writing (morphology, grammar and discourse)
> - how meanings and forms in language are influenced by variations in mode (spoken and written, including multi-modal and electronic forms) and context, including personal, cultural and social factors.'
>
> In addition, A level specifications should require students to show deeper knowledge and understanding of:
>
> (a) how some of the following frameworks can be applied to the systematic study of meaning in language:
>   - phonology and phonetics, lexis, morphology, grammar, discourse

> and
> (b)
> - the influence of mode and context, including time and place, on the meanings and forms of English
> - connections between different areas of study in their course as a whole.
>
> (**www.qca.org.uk**)

Notice here that the terms listed in (a) above are all described as frameworks in themselves, rather than contributing to a single framework.

At the time of writing this report new specifications are in the process of being written, and in a competitive market, no examination board is prepared to declare their hand until QCA has given final approval to all specifications. It is a fair guess though that the following elements will form a significant part of most if not all specifications:

- analysis of varieties of spoken and written data, including texts over time
- study of some sociolinguistic topics
- an individual research investigation into an area of language study
- students producing their own texts through various kinds of writing (and perhaps speaking).

Further details are likely to be available via both QCA and the individual examination boards by June 2007.

3.5 Student perceptions and experiences of A Level study.

3.5.1 Sixth formers' initial ratings of their AS Level courses

Data in sections 3.5.1 – 3.5.4 is from Source 2 (AS Level students, April 2006). Of the 271 responses, 48 students said they were planning to study English Language/ Linguistics at university; 204 were planning to study other subjects at university; and 19 were planning to leave education altogether.

Students who were planning to take their English Language studies further responded as follows to the initial question 'Thinking about your English Language Studies so far, how would you rate the subject for the following?':

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Interest	16 (33%)	26 (54%)	4 (8%)	1 (2%)	0
Relevance	18 (37%)	21 (44%)	7 (15%)	2 (4%)	0
Variety	5 (10%)	24 (50%)	16 (33%)	3 (6%)	0

Students who were planning to go to university, but study another subject responded as follows:

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Interest	17 (8%)	99 (48%)	70 (34%)	15 (7%)	3 (1%)
Relevance	27 (13%)	106 (52%)	60 (29%)	9 (4%)	2 (1%)
Variety	13 (6%)	81 (40%)	91 (6%)	13 (6%)	6 (3%)

Students who were intending to leave education responded as follows:

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Interest	0	11 (58%)	3 (16%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)
Relevance	1 (5%)	9 (47%)	2 (10%)	3 (16%)	3 (16%)
Variety	2 (10%)	3 (16%)	11 (58%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)

It could be argued that educational establishments who are active enough to attend conferences have an unusually positive learning culture, compared with the norm. It must be remembered that this research presents the results of a sampling process taken at a specific time and place, and is not trying to present a national picture.

However, having said this, the results above do offer a more positive profile from those students intending to take the subject further, and a less positive one from those not doing so.

3.5.2 Students not intending to do any further study

This group identified their intentions as follows (from 17 responses altogether):

4: seek employment
4: don't know
3: apprenticeship
1: work with animals
1: Navy
1: Army
1: college
1: sports therapy
1: travel

When asked what skills they thought they had learned from their study of language, their responses were as follows (quoted verbatim):

analysing texts (x3)

evaluating how people speak

analyse transcripts

look for meanings of different texts

further understanding of language

original writing skills

learnt a lot more about language and the understanding of a lot more terminology

analysis skills and general language knowledge

deeper analysis of texts

understanding the language, what it is all about, there is much more to it than people think

not a lot

communication, realise situations, etc.

more about accents

For this group (apart from the student who said he/she had learnt 'not a lot'), AS study had enabled them to see that texts needn't be taken at face value; and that it was possible to stand back from language and evaluate it, rather than simply use it. The emphases on analysis, on looking for meaning beyond a surface level, on one's own writing and communication, all suggest that this level of study is equipping students with some useful workplace skills as well as providing a foundation for further academic achievement.

3.5.3 Students going on to study a different subject at university

For this group of students, their work in English Language is likely to constitute either a fourth or fifth AS Level qualification, or – if they continue on to the full A Level – a second or third A Level to sit alongside their area of first choice. Of particular interest to us here was the extent to which English Language could be seen as relevant to other subject areas, and as an appropriate choice for students wishing to create an enjoyable and flexible portfolio of A-Level study for themselves.

3. English Language A Level

On being asked which subjects they intended to take at university, this group offered 202 responses, 125 of which gave a single choice, 77 gave 2 or more choices, as follows:

Accountancy	3
Advertising	4
Animation	1
Architecture	3
Art	7
Art and Design	3
Biology	2
Building Surveying	1
Business Management	3
Business Studies	12
Chemistry	2
Childcare	1
Classics	1
Criminology	3
Dance	2
Design	5
Drama	1
Early Years Education	3
Ecology	1
Education Studies	1
English and Creative Writing	4
English Literature	6
English Literature with Philosophy	1
Estate Management	1
Fashion	3
Fashion Marketing	2
Film Studies	6
Film Photography	1
Film Production	3
Finance	1
French	3
Geography	14
Graphic Design	7
Health and Social Care	4
Heritage Studies	1
History	15
Interior Design	1
Irish Studies	1
I.T.	7
Journalism	7
Law	18
Law and Criminology	2
Management	3

Maths	4
Maths and Statistics	1
Media	16
Medicine	3
Modern Languages	5
Music	2
Music Production	1
Nursing	5
Occupational Therapy	2
P.E.	5
Philosophy	3
Photography	4
Physics	2
Physiotherapy	1
Politics	5
Probation Studies	1
Product Design	1
Psychology	21
Psychology and Law	2
Social Work	3
Sociology	5
Spanish with History	1
Speech/Language Therapy	2
Sport Science/ Sport Psychology	1
Teaching	24
Textiles	3
Theatre	2
Theology	2
Transport	1
Travel/Tourism Management	1
T.V. and Radio Production	1
Veterinary Science	1
Don't know	4

The picture above is a clear statement of the perceived relevance of language study to a wide range of other subject areas. It would be interesting to know whether the other A Level 'Englishes' operate in this way.

A number of points can be made from the results above. One clear outcome is that, for teachers of A Level English Language, their student groups are extremely rich and diverse in terms of the other subject areas their students bring with them into the classroom. In an AS English Language classroom, it is possible to be working with a group whose primary interests are anything from Physics, Maths and I.T. to Dance and English Literature. It seems that English Language is able to work both across

the arts/science boundaries, and across the commercial/ philosophical subjects, in ways that offer relevance to all.

A further point that is worth making here relates to the category labelled 'Teaching'. Clearly, English Language is a good basis for those students who want to go on to do degrees that offer Qualified Teacher Status with a national curriculum subject. In that sense, some of those 24 respondents who offered 'Teaching' as their chosen university pathway will possibly be encountering aspects of Linguistics at that higher level. More will be said about teaching and subject knowledge in Section 3.6.

3.5.4 Students going on to do English Language/Linguistics at university (Data Source 2: AS Level students, April 2006)

Interestingly, when the 48 students who expressed this intention were asked about the skills they had learnt so far in their AS-Level studies, the resulting list was similar to that of the intending school leavers:

Ways to argue and present an argument. Analysing text and speech

linguistics; archaic language, text analysis

Notice how people use language more in everyday life

helped me think more about people's use of language ...analysing language, both written and spoken

Ability to look at texts in depth

original writing

lots – how people communicate in writing and language – more understanding of the world around me – more confidence – more intellectualism

transcribing; analysing, writing for varied audiences, purposes

Slight differences here include the reference to the presentation of argument and to the idea of study as an intellectual pursuit which may increase one's self confidence (although one of the intending school leavers also mentions his/her acquisition of 'terminology'). Also, one person in this group is aware of the subject name 'Linguistics'. But common areas that are repeated include the following:

- ability to analyse both spoken and written texts
- ability to look beyond the surface of messages

- developing own writing skills
- ability to work with transcripts of real language use
- own observational skills in noticing and evaluating others' language use.

This group were also asked about the activities they engaged in as part of their AS work. At this early point, respondents were given a list of potential activities and asked to tick any relevant ones, and add to the list, rather than being asked to come up with a list on their own. This was because the April questionnaires were seen as a starting point, to be followed up in more detail in the July focus group sessions.

The results of the question on activities were as follows:

Making notes in class	46
Doing original writing	43
Writing argument-based essays	32
Doing group presentations	28
Working online	27
Writing data analyses	24
Reading textbooks on your own	23
Doing individual presentations	15
Finding books about language in libraries/bookshops	14

As can be seen here, 'making notes' and 'doing original writing' were ticked most frequently in the activities list. (It needs to be noted that 'Original Writing' is a named unit in AQA's AS Level specifications (see Section 3.2) rather than a qualitative description of the nature of what is produced).

How any list of this kind is responded to will of course be partly shaped by what is laid down in specifications to be covered at particular times. It is a mistake to think of all of these categories as describing any kind of permanently-present state of affairs pedagogically. For example, 'original writing' would be unlikely to feature as a recognised activity during the A2 year. Similarly, although 'working online' looks like a frequent activity, this could be because 'language and technology' is a prescribed topic on one of AQA B's AS examination papers. On the other hand, 'making notes' and 'writing data analyses' could potentially cover elements that run right through the two years of A Level study.

What can be generalised from the responses above is that group work is more foregrounded than individual work.

Finding books, working alone on textbooks, and doing solo presentations – significantly, the very kinds of things asked of university students – are less frequently represented in the list. Some activities in the list could conceivably be done alone or as a group: for example, 'making notes in class'. In reality, this would be unlikely as an individual activity (unless the teacher was absent and a supply teacher was taking the class), for the whole rationale for making notes in class as opposed to doing this at home is to get mediation of some of the difficult concepts covered in textbooks by one's own flesh-and-blood language expert – the teacher. These ideas will be further explored from the teacher's perspective in Section 3.6.

3.5.5 Students going on to do English Language/Linguistics at university (Data Source 4: A2 students, July 2006)

The questionnaires elicited written answers to a number of questions, but this time without offering any lists or suggestions as starting points. The first of these questions was about which aspects of AS-Level study had been most enjoyable, and would be good to take further. The list of areas is as follows (numbers represent student responses, from 32 in total):

Aspects of AS-Level study most enjoyed:	
Accent and dialect	9
Representation (defined variously as taboo, power, political correctness)	9
Original writing	8
Language and gender	8
Language of advertising/the media	7
Language and technology	6
Language acquisition	4
Sociolinguistics	4
Textual analysis	3
Language and occupation	2
Language change/etymology	2
Language in literary texts	1

When asked to elaborate on their responses in group discussion, there were some interesting variations in how participants characterised their English Language work and those aspects they found engaging. The first focus group (10th July) offered a very 'creative industries', media-oriented account of what had been enjoyable, mentioning their own writing and the language of the media,

particularly journalism, advertising, and public relations. In contrast, the second group (11th July) articulated their interests as more around language and representation, the social and political dimensions of language use. For this second group, coursework was popular as a vehicle for pursuit of individual interests and personal expression. Two participants in group three (12th July) also referred to ideas about representation and social justice; in addition, three further group members noted the contemporary and personal relevancies of Language and Technology. One participant explains how they learnt to value their own skills in using new forms of communication:

> half the stuff we learned about we didn't know we were doing it.

In summary, three subtly different accounts were offered of what English Language AS Level was, and what it did well. One account was of language as a creative media resource; one was of language as an enactment of social status and positioning; and the third was of language as personal communication, evolving and changing with new communication affordances and constraints.

A further aspect explored in the July focus groups was how they were taught the subject. The question 'What methods of teaching are used on your A Level English Language course? How much are you expected to contribute to lessons?' elicited the following responses:

Activities experienced by students at AS-Level (numbers represent student responses, from 32 in total):

Student participation/contribution is expected/ encouraged	19
Group presentations/analysis/activities	14
Group discussion	12
Lectures	7
Class / teacher discussion	6
Note-taking	6
TV/documentary programmes/videos/film *(My Fair Lady)*	5
Handouts	5
Teacher analysing and explaining	5
Teacher / class Q & A sessions	3
Dictation	3
Individual research	2
Language games	2
Computer use	1

The picture that emerges from these results is in accord with the initial data obtained from the April questionnaires, in that students perceive the culture of the English Language classroom to be participatory, with group activities forming the core of what they do, and the basis for their learning.

Two further questions about A Level study were asked in the July sessions, this time about students' own reading. When asked if they had been given a list of reading for their A Level course, 19 students said a straightforward no; 3 said yes. The remainder (10 students) said they had been set some reading, but that this was very much tied in with proposed activities: in other words, sections of textbooks or small amounts of reading were sometimes set for specific purposes that then formed the basis for doing something. Language books were seen less as reading matter for their own sake, and more as preparing the ground for particular tasks. One student articulated the difficulty of having a wide range of subjects to manage at the same time:

trying to factor in reading the whole book in your own time whilst they're still giving piles of homework to do on top …and then when you've got another three, four subjects to do at the same time – it's hard.

Having said this, there was some pride in recalling some specific reading matter, which included the following:

- Various awarding bodies' support materials
- Books and papers by the following authors: David Crystal: (specifically, *Language and the Internet; Rediscover Grammar; Cambridge Encyclopedia*); Peter Trudgill (*Sociolinguistics*); Jennifer Coates (*Men, Women & Language*); Norman Fairclough; Deborah Tannen (*You Just Don't Understand*); O'Barr & Atkins; Robyn Lakoff; Zimmerman & West; Pamela Fishman.
- Other reading matter referred to included 'photocopies of extracts', and 'website print-outs'.

3.6. Classroom Practice at A Level

3.6.1 Introduction
This part of the report will look at several aspects of the teaching of A Level English Language. It will begin by reviewing what some teachers themselves say about their knowledge of the subject. It will then look at some issues to do with the training of teachers in the subject. This will

then be followed by a look at transition issues for AS level, and then finally there will be a summary of some of the methodologies used by teachers and how this equates with student perceptions of their experiences seen in section 3.5.

3.6.2 Teachers and their subject knowledge
It would appear that many teachers of AS/A Level Language have not themselves studied the subject at degree level. A total of 61 teachers was surveyed in June and October 2006 while attending commercial in-service courses. (See Source 6.)

The following results were obtained:

Have you studied English Language/Linguistics as a whole or part of your own degree?

    Yes: 16   No: 45

When you were trained to be a teacher, did your training include aspects of teaching A Level Language?

    Yes: 12   No: 49

If you answered 'yes' above, how extensive was this training?

All 12 respondents said it was either one or two sessions of about 3-4 hours in total.

Do you feel you need help with subject knowledge as much as teaching methodology?

    Yes: 53   No: 8

It would appear from these figures that AS/A Level English Language is being taught by many teachers who, by their own admission, feel that their own subject knowledge is limited. While it might be expected that teachers new to a subject are modest about what they know, and that teachers who have bothered to attend courses are again likely to admit to needing assistance, it nonetheless seems clear from this and other anecdotal evidence that we have collected along the way that teachers of AS/A Level Language need and welcome further professional development.

3.6.3 Teachers and their training: PGCE courses and A level English Language
(Data in Sections 3.6.3 – 3.6.8 is from Source 3: A Level teachers, April 2006)

It was seen above that 80% of the 61 'new' teachers surveyed said that they had received no training at all in the teaching of AS/A2 Language. Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses, especially those which are one year post-graduate courses, tend to focus on the pedagogy of classroom practice, while at the same time expecting that trainee teachers will continue their own education in the subject, albeit in various different ways. Trainee teachers are not assessed on their subject knowledge as such.

Most PGCE are one year courses run from universities and colleges. The SCITT (School Centred Initial Teacher Training) programme, which involves wholly school-based training, also usually lasts for one year. The PGCE/SCITT courses have to equip teachers to teach Key Stages 3 (11-14) and Key Stages 4 (14-16) in what is a core curriculum subject with a very high profile, not least through the publication of league tables. Not surprisingly this takes up a good deal of the limited time available – for much of the year students are working in schools. Where, then, does this leave English post 16, including English Language A Level?

The national curriculum for the training of teachers is produced by the TDA (the Training and Development Agency for schools – see **www.tda.gov.uk**). In its curriculum it specifies three different age ranges which trainees can be prepared for: 11-16, which is not of direct relevance here, and 11-18 and 14-19 which are. It is only on 14-19 courses where you can be guaranteed to get some A Level training; on 11-18 courses it is optional whether it is provided or not. Yet actually finding 14-19 courses can prove difficult.

The GTTR (Graduate Teacher Training Registry) website (**www.gttr.ac.uk**) allows a search under 'English' at 'age 11+' and shows 59 courses in English or Welsh universities and colleges. There are a further 11 organisations which organise the SCITT route into teaching English. The fact that only 'age 11+' can be searched makes it very difficult to distinguish between 11-18 and 14-19. In addition, most of the 70 organisations go on to specify 11-18 courses as their norm.

The national curriculum for the training of teachers of English contains three sections: the first is on Pedagogical Knowledge as it relates to teaching English, the second to Effective Teaching and Assessment, and the third to Subject Knowledge in English.

In the first section the document says that 'Trainees on 11-18 and 14-19 courses must be taught how pupils' progression in English post-16 builds upon the progression identified above'. This follows a ten point detailed plan for 11-16.

In the second section of the TDA national curriculum for training teachers of English, Effective Teaching and Assessment, there is no specific reference to A Level – although sections on aspects such as teaching grammar, teaching language variety, teaching spelling will be relevant.

The third section of the curriculum, Subject Knowledge, however, has much more to say that is relevant to A Level. In the following quotation it clearly addresses the idea of gaps in knowledge, and seems to suggest, not unfairly, that it is up to the trainee to work at these gaps.

'Although all trainees will have a substantial amount of English in their previous education, and those on postgraduate routes as part of their degree, different trainees will have covered different areas to different extents. For example, some trainees may have pursued studies which emphasised English literature, while others may have followed courses with an emphasis on linguistics. For some, the narrowness of their background subject knowledge may mean that they do not feel confident about, or competent in, all the English which they are required to teach.

All trainees need to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses in their own subject knowledge, to analyse it against the pupils' National Curriculum and examination syllabuses, and to be aware of the gaps they will need to fill during their training. Trainees need to be alert to the differences between having a secure knowledge of the subject and knowing how to teach it effectively.' (Source: **www.tda.gov.uk**)

At the same time, though, the training institutions are expected to audit trainees' knowledge at the beginning of the course. For 11-18 courses this must be subject knowledge up to GCSE. For 14-19 courses it must include A Level. As has already been seen, though, 14-19 courses are rare, so effectively A level does not have to be covered.

Paragraph 29 of the TDA document, the final paragraph, sets out, via 14-19 courses only, what trainee teachers should know about English Language:

'In order to teach: A-level English language effectively trainees must demonstrate that that they:

  i. have the breadth and depth of knowledge, understanding and skills needed to apply a range of linguistic frameworks to a wide variety of texts from both the past and present;

  ii. are able to investigate their own and others' speech and writing and respond critically and perceptively to the different varieties of English they hear and read;

  iii. are able to select and use the linguistic framework most appropriate for investigation and research into language uses and issues.'

By the end of the course the following is required for all trainee teachers of secondary English:

'For 11-18 courses, the subject knowledge set out in paragraph 29 is advisory only. Providers should have regard to it, have provision available in relation to it, and audit trainees' knowledge, understanding and skills in English against it. By the end of the course, ITT providers should assess how far each trainee's subject knowledge matches the post-16 content, taking account of the opportunities the trainee has had to practise teaching English post-16. Capability in relation to the post-16 content should be recorded clearly on each NQT's Career Entry Profile.'

This effectively seems to dodge the issue as far as A Level is concerned, or at least try to have it both ways. There seems to be a real grey area when it comes to training teachers for A Level, with lots of audits and self-reviews, but ultimately very little requirement. The response in 3.6.2, suggesting that only 20% of the teachers surveyed had any training at all in English Language, does suggest there is a real training issue here.

So, in brief, issues that arise from the training of teachers are:

- There is no requirement to train teachers in A Level on most PGCE courses
- Where provision does occur, it is, of necessity, limited
- Although the national curriculum for training English teachers includes a section on A Level Language, in most cases it is optional
- It is difficult for potential trainees to find courses that contain substantial A Level training

3.6.4 Trainee teachers with degrees in Language/Linguistics

Section 3.6.3 above explores the apparent gaps in the training of potential teachers of AS/A Level English Language. One group of trainees who might be more secure in their subject knowledge are graduates with degrees in this subject area. There is anecdotal evidence, however, that these graduates sometimes find themselves struggling to gain places on PGCE courses. Although no PGCE course says up front that it will only accept graduates with Literature in their degrees this seems to be the case – and seems to have been the case for some time.

In March 1994 Lynne Cameron and Katherine Perera researched 33 colleges/departments of education to enquire as to whether the study of linguistics can count as a curriculum subject and so allow entry to PGCE courses in English. None said an unqualified 'yes' and only one said 'no', with the rest saying that they needed to see a breakdown of course components before making a decision.

One view reported by Cameron and Perera was that 'good applicants with a degree in linguistics would certainly be interviewed even if they had no literature qualification, but would be quizzed hard in the interview about their personal reading of literature' (see Hudson 2003).

It is perhaps time that a further and more detailed investigation is made into the treatment of applications to PGCE courses from graduates with English Language/ Linguistics degrees. Meanwhile, it would be interesting to know how many Literature graduates are 'quizzed hard' in their PGCE interviews about their knowledge of language.

3.6.5 Transition to AS/A Level from GCSE

In two focus groups, 22 teachers of AS/A Level were asked to complete a short questionnaire before going on to discuss several issues relating to this report. Part of the questionnaire referred to aspects of their work at AS/A Level, and part to specific transition issues with HE. The teachers came from eleven separate institutions across the north of England: one 6th form college, two FE colleges, three independent schools and five state comprehensives of various types. The questionnaires in particular, because they allowed anonymity, showed a range of views even from colleagues within the same institution.

To introduce the idea of transition, the teachers were asked the extent to which they think GCSE English offers a foundation for English Language A Level. Interpreting longer answers as broadly 'a significant contribution', 'some contribution' or 'no contribution' the following figures appeared from 22 teachers surveyed:

To what extent does GCSE English offer a foundation for English Language A Level?

	Comp school	FE Coll	6th form Coll	Indep school	Total
Significant Contribution	4	0	0	I	5
Some Contribution	2	I	I	2	6
No Contribution	2	4	4	I	II

What these figures show is that teachers in institutions which take students post GCSE, and have not taught them before (i.e. FE, 6th form college), are more critical of the preparation of the previous phase than teachers who have continuity with students across phases (i.e. schools). There are various ways of accounting for this. One is that there is a natural inclination among teachers to be critical of the teaching that precedes their own. Another is that teachers who are teaching only up to GCSE have no incentive to prepare their students for the next phase. Meanwhile the more positive response from teachers in schools with sixth forms might be because they feel that their A Level teaching percolates down to younger students and/or because teaching across a wider age range carries a greater sense of responsibility for continuity.

When reasons were given by teachers as to why GCSE English does not offer a foundation for English Language A Level, they tended to focus on lack of prior knowledge of terms and concepts:

> Students have to learn an entirely new 'language' of the subject ie linguistic frameworks eg 'semantics', 'pragmatics'

> The students I teach have little awareness of basic parts of speech

> Students seem to have very limited knowledge of any level of linguistics

Teachers who were more positive about the contribution of GCSE to AS/A Level Language tended to look at broader principles:

> At GCSE we discuss purpose, audience, context. We look at aspects such as dialect, occupation, technology but they are not explored in any great detail. Skills in analysis of language are certainly covered but a great deal of this has to be done through literary texts.

> Most recently GCSE specifications are including elements which lead on to A level.

> I have allowed my experience in teaching A Level English Language to influence my delivery of GCSE. I find that I include 'extras' which would usually be kept until 6th form.

When teachers moved on to talk about their responses to this question in the focus groups, some of these ideas were reinforced. GCSE itself was often criticised as too narrow and restrictive:

> GCSE sees reading as formulaic

> There's no analytical framework at GCSE, it's just the use of English

> we have to teach to content

and students were seen to be choosing AS/A Level Language under misapprehensions:

> they are choosing A Level Language blind and don't know what it involves –and so need a lot of remedial help

> Students choose the subject at A Level under a misapprehension – there has to be re-education

Those teachers who had seen GCSE in a more positive way gave rather different views:

> If you've been teaching A Level Language it influences how you teach GCSE

> GCSE is taught differently if it's taught by A Level language teachers

> I don't think the linguistic element at A Level is very much, or as much as it is cracked up to be… students know much more than we often indicate, just by living…we make things far more complicated than they need to be. We make it seem like a science when it isn't

However one teacher looking beyond the immediate concern of English Language said:

> We have an educational system which doesn't encourage continuity

In summary then, when asked to discuss transition as it affects them at the start of their courses, AS/A Level teachers were divided. Those who do not teach across phases tended to feel that students were underprepared, especially when it comes to linguistic knowledge and terminology. Those who teach across phases had more mixed views, with some suggesting that their teaching of GCSE became better informed by their work at AS/A2. These teachers were also less bothered by the absence of specific knowledge or terminology at the start of the post 16 phase.

3.6.6 Teaching methods: everyday classroom activities

As one might expect, there was considerable variety of methodology, even within institutions. It almost went without saying that the teaching was very much geared to the examinations students were taking, and frequently teachers talked about the examination units as though they were the actual curriculum. So, for example, two teachers talked about teaching 'ENB2', rather the sociolinguistic topics.

It is worth reminding readers who may be unfamiliar with AS/A Level teaching that classes tend to be the same groups of student who are met nearly every day: even in FE, where classes are often taught in blocks of time, there is much more teaching time than tends to be the case in HE. This section will look at what teachers say are their teaching methods, which can then be cross-referenced with what students say they do in Section 3.5.5.

The single most common teaching method was described as follows:

> We tend to teach the first unit via a range of texts and teach the language terms/concepts as and when we need to describe what is going on in a text. We often let students explore texts in pairs/ groups first then give them the technical terms and information about the concepts once they have identified them for themselves in lay terms. Of course we also have a checklist of things they need to know and understand so make sure that

> is all covered. We rely a lot on a structure which goes something like: paired/group work first, followed by feedback and discussion, followed by teacher input and formal teaching at the end. It seems to work well for us all.

A number of teachers mentioned that, because data analysis is so important, they try to encourage students to be collectors of data themselves:

> We work a lot from what they bring to the lessons in terms of their own research, data and experiences - we try to relate language features and theories to that and really just tell them about published studies as a secondary layer. We also rely on students to provide relevant data, including transcripts, at times…but it is often not very successful and you need to have back up resources to support theirs.

A variant on this method of using students to collect data was described by a teacher who was introducing students to Language Change. To exemplify the use of 'new' words in language use, she put sheets of paper round the room headed A-Z and asked students (and staff) to add words as they came across them. After three months or so she had a huge amount of data to work with. A by-product, which she was especially pleased about, was that the growing data collection became of interest to all her classes, not just A Level Language.

Other methods identified by teachers included:

> For each topic we get them to do a mini piece of research - again often in pairs/small groups

> Original writing is taught via analysing models and then writing workshops

> To introduce investigations, this year we've told them all to get three sets of different interesting data over the summer (at least one spoken). We intend to do group work and brainstorming when we get back to see what (if anything) the data yields - i.e. start with the data, not an idea

> Students do presentations sometimes

> Concepts are taught sometimes abstract, sometimes via data

> We try to take students to conferences run by HE institutions – which often help us as teachers too

Use of the internet as part of everyday classroom work was mixed, depending very much on availability. Most teachers suggested that they could not assume online access would be available at any given time.

From the teachers we spoke to, it was clear that they try hard to have practical sessions which involve the students actively. They were also aware, though, that there is a need at times for more didactic methodology.

If we cross refer what teachers say with what students said in 3.5.5, we find broadly similar responses, but at least one different emphasis. It must be remembered that the students who responded about classroom activities were (a) saying they might go on to study English Language/ Linguistics at university and (b) were given a check list to use. It might also be the case that some students were commenting on their whole sixth form experience rather than English in particular. Nonetheless it is worth pointing out that the item most ticked by students was 'making notes in class', when teachers seemed to be claiming that such didactic methodology was rather less frequent.

3.6.7 Teaching methods: teaching grammar

All the teachers we spoke to admitted that a major challenge for them, regardless of the specification, is how to give students the theoretical knowledge they need to cope with the various examinations. Interestingly this was often phrased in terms of the need for a knowledge of 'grammar' or 'terminology' rather than knowledge about broader theory. Many teachers admitted to struggling with how to give students the required knowledge of grammar, when each component seemed to rely on another to be understood, and when student understanding and retention of understanding was so limited. One teacher asked

Where do you start…and indeed finish?

In one comprehensive school the course leader and her deputy agreed that they took completely different approaches to teaching the subject and to teaching grammar in particular. The course leader, who has a degree in Linguistics, said:

I teach grammar systematically via word class, sentence level etcetera. I am confident that I know it myself and students seem to like it…

Her colleague, however, whose degree is in Literature said that she could not do this. Her method was to introduce students to the mechanics of language via practical work

on a variety of data. Both agreed that when they shared a class together (groups are sometimes taught by pairs of teachers at 16+) their methods complemented each other well. When they taught different groups, though, they admitted that each group was getting a rather different type of experience.

The teachers interviewed ranged across the whole spectrum in their approach to introducing students to the structures of language. Some said, like the teacher quoted above, that they approached grammar head on. Others said they 'sometimes' did lessons on grammar. At least half of the teachers interviewed, though, took the line that with students of a wide ability spread in all of their classes, even if they wanted to teach grammar it would not really 'work'. They generally expressed the hope that students would acquire at least some ability to use terminology and knowledge about grammar through hearing these terms applied regularly to textual analysis. No teachers interviewed thought that their students could acquire structural knowledge through independent study alone.

A typically pragmatic approach to the teaching of grammar and structures was given by a comprehensive school teacher:

We have been painfully aware of a lack of formal grammar teaching - and that it is a weakness in our students in that they can identify something is interesting but can't explain what it is grammatically. Up until this year we've covered things as they've cropped up in looking at texts and data for other units. We've found ourselves drawing the students' attention to pronouns throughout the course and would hope they could identify the basic word categories - but even this is not always the case. When doing language change in particular I have found a need to do more detailed work on syntax but that often doesn't move much beyond identifying that long complex sentences often add to a greater degree of formality. The way a text addresses a reader comes up quite a lot and looking at grammatical issues via formality.

However - this year we used some of the time once Year 12 came back after the AS exams to do some more formal grammar exercises. My colleague did them as she tends to teach Acquisition and finds their - and her- lack of grammatical knowledge

a hindrance. She used David Crystal's book on grammar and felt it was a really useful thing to do and reckoned the students found it interesting. Not sure if it'll make any difference though. So far I have done Language change and do grammatical bits and pieces as and when needed to describe something that is going on in a text.

3.6.8 Teaching methods: Independent learning

All of the teachers interviewed were aware that 'independent learning' is encouraged in HE and that there is a growing lobby for there to be more independent learning at AS/A Level. There was not, though, agreement across the teachers about what actually constitutes independent learning, and for some it is seen as being 'a risk'. One teacher from an FE college said:

Students come to us from a very structured school environment. I want to encourage independent learning but there are such pressures on retention and results. It just seems safer to teach the class together and provide all the input myself…

This teacher went on to say that she prepares for her class a booklet which includes data, readings with questions, articles and extracts from textbooks. Students are often asked to do presentations based upon their use of this booklet: some teachers saw preparing for and then giving a presentation as independent study.

One teacher said of her department's approach to independent research:

A handful read on their own but they need guidance and teachers do not always feel expert, or have access to the books…. anyway how realistic is independent reading for grade E students, especially when even the most able say they struggle with academic books which are clearly not aimed at them.

Another said something similar:

Independent learning in terms of reading? Well we sometimes give them occasional chapters but even then we cannot rely on them all to do it, or of it being accessible. The very bright do tend to do some reading, but not many of the others.

A teacher in a comprehensive with the full ability range gave the following answer to the question 'to what extent do your students do independent reading in the subject and to what extent is it feasible to expect them to do so?'

They have a reading log/journal thing and are encouraged to come and borrow a book from us for at least one free period a week. Some are better at doing this than others. At times I have real push on this and make them come and sign a book out with me and return it and show me notes etcetera but it's quite time/labour intensive on my part and once I stop keeping such a close eye only the diligent ones do it.

Occasionally we give them a lesson to select a text book and read and make notes on an area they feel they need to reinforce or on a new topic to give them possible ideas for a project.

I think independent study is really important and too many students have the mentality that it is down to the teacher to get them a good grade and that if they don't it is not their fault. Next year I am going to try to do more of expecting them to have found out about something before the lesson – for example some theories about language and gender or finding out what jargon is and researching some of the claims of the Plain English Campaign – and then conducting the class looking at data assuming they all know something about the given topic and expecting them to apply that knowledge. I know I'll have to go back and tell them in the end but I want more responsibility on their part.

This mixture of good practice, good intention and realistic awareness of what most will/can do seems to be typical of many teachers we spoke to. It might also ring true for plenty of HE teachers, too.

Where independent study becomes a requirement for most students is the coursework Language Investigation they undertake for A Level. All teachers spoke highly of the benefits of this unit and how it seems to give many students the confidence to go on and do well in other parts of the course. Teachers, though, often have to oversee these investigations in difficult circumstances. They frequently said that senior management in their institutions would not countenance classes being collapsed to allow students to be tutored on a one-to-one basis. As one teacher in a school said:

Although we are told to encourage independent learning, the institution as a whole does not understand what this means. Classes are sacrosanct, without them results tumble and parents object.

Much the same picture emerged, though, from the college sector, both 6th form and FE; teachers are often having to supervise investigations in their very limited spare time - at lunchtimes and other breaks.

3.7. Summary of Findings: English Language A Level

Data collected from students indicated the following:

- There were high levels of satisfaction around the interest value, relevance and variety of English Language AS Level
- Students – whatever their next intentions – saw their studies as having equipped them with some valuable analytical and production skills
- English Language as a subject appears to fit well with a wide range of different academic and vocational areas
- Candidates for HE listed many different topics as those enjoyed within their language studies so far
- Characterisations of the subject area by those above ranged from media-orientations through aspects of representation and social justice to changes in social practices around new technologies
- The learning culture as described by the group above had group activities at its core, with individual reading set in order to accomplish particular tasks.

Data collected from teachers indicated the following:

- AS/A Level has its own transition issues with GCSE
- The range of ability found in AS/A Level English Language classes has an influence on what is taught and how it is taught
- Teaching approaches vary according to the training and confidence of teachers in the subject area
- There was consensus that good teaching at this level started with data and worked towards terminology as an endpoint
- Teachers are aware of the need for teaching formal aspects of language study, but are also aware of the problems that can ensue from over-didactic approaches

- Teachers are aware of the need for independent learning, but for various reasons find it difficult to implement
- ITT seems to pay little or at best very limited attention to preparing newly qualified teachers for teaching English Language at 16+
- There is some evidence that graduates with degrees in English Language/Linguistics may not have access to the full range of ITT possibilities
- There is a need for the continuing professional development of practising teachers.

4. Moving to Higher Education

4.1. A Level students' understanding of HE courses and cultures

4.1.1 Searching for courses

During the April conference days (Source 2), students who said they were intending to go on to higher education to study English Language (48 in total) were asked what course names they would be searching when they started making applications. The list of names is set out below:

English Language and Linguistics	8
English Language	6
English Language and Literature	2
English Language Studies	2
English Language and Communication	1
English	5
English and Media	1
English and Drama	2
English and Sociology	2
English and Psychology	1
Primary Teaching with English Studies	2
English Linguistic	1
Modern English	1
Linguistics	5
Language	1
Language Studies	1
Language and Linguistics	1
Communication	1
Journalism	1
Creative Writing	1
Not sure	4
I don't know	3

It is difficult to know from a paper questionnaire whether these examples reflect actual course titles that students had seen (and courses that they had scrutinised), or whether they were describing their idea of a 'best fit' between their A-Level study and subjects in higher education. For some of the examples, the answer seems clear: 'Primary Teaching with English Studies' seems to be the name of a specific course, while 'English Linguistic' seems like a good attempt to describe a kind of Linguistics that might focus on English as a language (or a kind of English studies course that is linguistically-oriented). Others are not so clear: for example, were the 5 students who put 'English' saying that they might apply to do English Literature courses

(forgetting that the question had asked them how they would search for English Language), or that they thought they would find linguistics courses within departments of English?

Whatever the students' understanding at the time, the fact that there is such a wide range of titles here is interesting in itself. The examples show, basically, four categories (excluding the 'don't knows'): names using 'English Language'; names using 'English'; names using 'Language' or 'Linguistics'; and names that reflect a particular application of language study, such as 'Journalism'.

The English/English Language/Linguistics trilogy echoes the tensions around the naming of English Language A Level back in the 1980s (see Section 3.1). The difference now, perhaps, is that the picture is more complex and subtle. Historically, departments of English Literature offered little or no language study; at the same time, departments of Linguistics rarely analysed literary and media texts. However, there have been significant changes in the scope of these academic domains: there are now linguistically-oriented courses run within some English departments; and in Linguistics departments, the term 'discourse' may well refer as much to 'discourses' in the Foucauldian sense (what Gee 1999 terms 'Discourse with a capital 'D'), as to the idea of exchange structure within dialogue.

While any shifting of rigid boundaries is to be welcomed, the task of understanding and selecting a higher education course may just have got harder as choices have been elaborated. Would there have been 7 'don't know/ not sure' responses to this question from an equivalent group of A Level English Literature students?

There is clearly a potential for confusion in having to think about the semantics of naming in one's own chosen subject area. However, the fact that English Language can be taken in different directions and occur in many academic partnerships is also a source of its strength. This is evident in the list of examples, where it occurs with Communication, with Social Sciences, with Arts, Education, and, finally, with Linguistics itself, which presumably for these students means a more detailed and analytical focus on the structural aspects of language. The next section offers a more qualitative account of students' expectations of course content at university level.

4.1.2 Expectations of course content

The questionnaires conducted during the April conferences (Source 2) asked students who said they were intending to study English Language/Linguistics at university what sorts of language activities and topics they expected to encounter there. This general question was explored in more detail during the July days (Source 4), when focus group members were asked in separate questions what they hoped to study and how they expected to study it. This section and 4.1.3 attempt to summarise both these sources of data on the crucial questions of 'what' and 'how'.

The following topics were listed on the April questionnaires by those 48 students who said they were going further with their English Language studies. The items listed represent areas that they expected to encounter (italics indicate verbatim quotation from students' writing, where the comments were thought to offer interesting perspectives):

Data/textual analysis	11
including the following description:	
Further analysis into talk and writing in	
social situations e.g. posters etc	
Speech, particularly regional varieties	9
Original/creative/journalistic writing	8
including the following description:	
Creative writing: stories, poetry, music, scripts	
Language acquisition	5
Language change	3
Language use in literature/media	2
Language & power	2
Semantics	2
Discourse	2
Pragmatics	1
I.T.	1
Psychology	1
Gender	1
Occupation	1
British sign language	1
Creoles	1

The July focus groups also listed the following:

Language acquisition; language use in educational contexts	10
Language & gender	9
Language use in the media	8
Accents & dialects	7
Language & power, representation	7
Sociolinguistics	6
Language change/history	3
Grammar	2
Language & occupation	2
Original writing	2
Language use in literature	2
Language & technology	2
Phonetics	2
Text/data analysis	2
Discourse	1
Lexis	1
Language & age	1
Linguistic structure (= *hierarchy of language*),	1
Language & context (= *how and why language is used in a wide range of areas; use of language in various situations/settings*)	1

The observation was made earlier when discussing students' accounts of their own study activities (see Section 3.5) that they are likely to be referring at least in part to what has been prescribed for them at a particular stage, rather than giving examples of activities that would obtain across time (or even across centres using different awarding bodies). The example given was that of original writing, which exists as a specific AS coursework unit in some specifications.

A similar rider needs to be put upon the lists above. The results cannot simply be read as a wish-list drawn up by sixth formers for their higher education diet, as it is difficult for people to write about what they don't know. Both lists in fact reflect the kinds of areas that feature on current AS specifications: for example, regional and social variation, gender and representation, technology and power. So the list is likely to be as much about what has been encountered as it is about what is to come.

One difference in the question wording of the April and July questionnaires needs to be pointed out. While participants in April were asked what they expected to see on a HE course, the July focus group members were asked what they *hoped* to see. This was not accidental: it was thought that because the July groups involved face-to-face discussion, it was legitimate to ask a more 'blue sky' kind of question, because it was going to be mediated by the researchers' presence.

This difference in question orientation may explain the way some particular topics are more strongly represented in the July list. A question which focuses students on their own futures in a more active way may trigger thoughts of how to use a university education for future employment. This may be why language acquisition features strongly, as careers working with children may be at the back of some participants' minds. The idea of employment was certainly evident in the discussion which led from the completion of the July questionnaires, one participant rejecting the idea of doing work on accents and dialects at university level because, in her own words, *I don't see it as a career prospect.*

Another factor which emerged during discussion was the idea of how far some subjects could realistically be taken. For example, one student explains that he was attracted away from English Literature to English Language because of the chance to do original writing, but that he couldn't imagine doing that kind of work past the A Level stage because *there wouldn't be any ways you could become more advanced at it.* Another participant disagrees, saying *I wouldn't go to uni unless I could do creative writing.*

In a similar vein, structural aspects of language – grammar, phonetics – were seen as potential topics for university degrees (after explicit questioning by researchers), but there was some uncertainty about how much more there was to grasp in these areas, and reservations in the minds of some about the purpose of further study. Following a 'grammar' prompt by researchers (*no-one has mentioned grammar yet, anyone have any strong feelings about that area?*) one participant champions the idea of focussing on the language system:

> *I want to look more at the actual language itself, how it's constructed, 'cos I've never really looked at it … punctuation, real basic stuff, how it's all put together.*

But another student sees more value in attitudes to grammar:

> *it'd be more interesting why people don't care about grammar.*

An idea of the finite nature of a structural focus alone is articulated in the following terms by one participant:

> *Having studied it at A Level, how much further could it be taken?*

Another says:

> *What would be the point? It's just being too scientific.*

It would be true to say, though, that in the main, our focus group members didn't see grammar as anything either to object to as a focus for study, but neither did they see it as particularly exciting. The general feeling can perhaps be summed up by the comments of this individual:

> *We've been taught grammar as a framework. It's all right I liked learning about how it all gets put together then you can work on that with everything else.*

The July focus group discussions underlined the earlier impression (see Section 3.5) that there were a number of different stories or 'takes' in the A Level student population about what language study is, about what is good about it, and about what it is good for. Some students really enjoyed taking what they saw as a 'scientific' approach to language study, while others enjoyed its more creative potential as an 'arts' subject whose study could enrich individual performance skills. Crossing between these domains was not always seen as a comfortable ride. One participant comically related his experience of one minute being happily immersed in his own creative writing, only to be started on lessons about phonetics where his short story was whipped away and replaced by a cross-section of someone's vocal organs.

A different account again was given by those who were more interested in the semiotics of language; this group wanted to see issues of representation and social organisation covered on a university degree, seeing the structural aspects of language as indices of power and social values. One participant described his interest in going beyond texts in order to look at *what people aren't saying and why that's significant.* This group can be seen as espousing a more social science orientation in their view of language study.

Regardless of any particular characterisation of language study, focus group participants were happy with the idea of 'touching on' areas they might already have done, but not with repeating everything they had learned at A Level; in general, they expected to be studying their subject in much greater depth and detail.

4.1.3 Expectations of learning and teaching methods

The sixth-form conference delegates who said they were intending to study English Language at university (48 during the April days; 32 focus group members) offered some ideas about what learning and teaching may be like in HE. The two groups were offered slightly different questions, with the April questionnaire asking respondents to list some of the activities they thought they'd be involved in; while the July focus groups were asked a slightly more sophisticated question about 'the teaching and learning situation' at university. As was the case in 4.1.2, this more challenging question was posed because of the support available from researchers, who were able to re-word the question and/or elaborate on it in the face-to-face context.

The April questionnaire generated the following list of activities:

Essay writing	6
Independent study/research	4
Presentations	3
Reading	3
Group work – e.g. discussions, workshops	3
Working online	2
Learning writing skills	2
Learning speaking skills	1
Lectures	1
Individual studies	1
Interviewing people	1

The July focus groups also listed the following ways of working:

Lectures	21
Seminars	14
Independent study/research	12
Tutorials	5
Note taking	3
Group work	1
Presentations	1
Library use	1

Some of the differences in the lists above may be to do with how the April questionnaire was understood, without the interpretive support available to the July groups. For example, it is noticeable that 'lectures' feature only once in the first list, but 21 times in the second. This may be because in the first list, lectures were not seen as 'activities', as such.

It also needs to be noted that in 4.1.2, certain items were classified from the April data as 'content'; but it could be argued that some of those could equally be seen in this section as 'activities'. For example, 'text/data analysis' was listed several times by respondents and classified earlier as expectations of content. This is because we have taken it as the basis for modules in, for example, discourse analysis; but 'text/data analysis' can also be seen as a general activity that could attach to any topic.

However the categories of 'content' and 'activities' are determined, the lists do give a general sense of what sixth formers expect to experience in their higher education studies. In the more probing focus group discussions, there were also some interesting ideas about what might be seen as general working conditions.

One participant expected the same number of teachers as she currently had, supplemented by, in her own words, outside sources, but others expected more generous provision:

> *more teachers; a larger amount of teachers.*

This expectation was coupled with the idea that classes might be more intimate:

> *classes very small and much more interactive; more variety of teaching ...small classes; classroom based conversation on topics of groups of 5 – 8.*

The subject of contact time produced divided opinion. Two participants expected fewer, but longer, lessons; one group member, however, thought there would be *lectures mostly every day, taught by a few teachers*; while another expected *four or five hours of lecturing per week with perhaps half an hour one-to-one time*. Another participant expected much less individual attention:

> *I expect the teaching at university to be totally different, maybe difficult to have a one to one conversation about the course as they will be busy and maybe hard to find when they are needed.*

Common themes in all groups included the idea of being supported but not being as managed or monitored as when at school:

> *Treated as adults (hence respected for views and opinions) but still guided with aid wherever required; much less formal...[attendance at] lectures ... non-compulsory; having choices about when you go to lectures.*

Coupled with the idea of greater freedom was that of being expected to be independent. This was seen generally as a welcome challenge, although one student was anxious about the idea of working alone: she expected to have to be *much more independent though I would still want to continue group work: lectures do not suit my learning style.*

A more positive view of independence was around the idea of being able to choose one's own pathways, and follow topics of personal, individual interest. One participant articulated an association between achievement and personal motivation:

> [at university] I expect to be given more independent studies – more responsibility …when I have more responsibility I look into things more.

There was also a sense that a different kind of relationship might obtain in universities between teachers and learners. One participant expects *that teaching will be support towards independent learning rather than independent learning supporting what's been taught.* Another maintains that learners in schools expect their teachers in the end to supply answers, so that there is a limitation to how much independent learning can take place:

> you kind of just expect the teacher to give you the answer – to just teach you – they're gonna tell you

One group member describes a phase of development towards HE-style work which is recognised by other students as happening at their school:

> the AS course was very much we'd be given something to discuss, but now we've started to do something we want to do like a mini investigation.

This recognises a type of transition towards greater independence occurring between AS and A2, as well as between A2 and HE.

When quizzed about potentially different ways of reading at university level, there was some awareness that there might be much higher expectations of students (it will be recalled that, in 3.5.5, participants said that their A Level teachers tended to set chunks of reading in order to accomplish various tasks and activities). Researchers asked the groups whether they thought they would be able to undertake reading even if there was no assessed outcome or activity at the end of it. The group members recognised (with some laudable honesty) the difficulty of this proposition.

Having said that, as AS-Level students, they found any reading they already did as challenging:

> It's difficult to find books aimed at our level – most are aimed higher.

Particular worries and concerns about reading at HE level included the idea of lack of feedback:

> It's hard because you're delegated the responsibility to do a study I wanna know that I've achieved something by a mark saying 'that was good'

the idea of reading not being 'visible' and therefore not creditable:

> there's no way of proving it

and, finally, the idea that reading without an assessment or other associated activity is rather open-ended in terms of time:

> I want a deadline.

4.2 AS/A Level Teachers' Knowledge of the HE Sector

4.2.1 Introduction

This section of the report looks at transition issues as seen from the perspective of teachers of AS/A Level English Language.

Two focus groups were used, as described in Source 3. Twenty-two teachers of AS/A Level were first asked to complete a short questionnaire before going on to discuss several issues relating to transition. The teachers came from 11 separate institutions across the north of England: one sixth-form college, two FE colleges, three independent schools and five state comprehensives of various types.

Three questions (see Appendix 2 questions 3-5) were used to gain some understanding of teachers' perspectives on this area.

4.2.2 Preparing students for degree work

Teachers were asked to write a response to the question:

> **To what extent do you feel responsible for preparing your A Level English Language students for degree work in the subject?**

and responses were then followed up in discussion. In asking this question we wanted to discover the extent

to which teachers felt an obligation for the transition of students from sixth-form to HE. Although respondents were not asked for a simple yes/no answer, it is possible to broadly categorise their answers as follows:

	Number	Percentage
Do feel responsible	8	36%
Feel some responsibility	5	23%
Feel no responsibility	9	41%

Although there were no discernible patterns within the state sector schools and colleges, with respondents in all three categories, all of the teachers in the independent sector tended to see themselves as having at least some responsibility for preparing their students for HE. Although they would probably deny the inference, this may be because they are operating with consistently more able students than the others.

Some typical replies among those who answered in the first category, that they do feel responsible for transition in the subject, were as follows:

I feel very responsible – I wish to show them the exciting possibilities of language study, especially from a linguistic point of view

Ideas are often discussed in terms of how they can be developed at higher levels

This is a major responsibility. We make a point of encouraging individual research and small group learning, as preparation for university teaching

I feel fully responsible within the confines of the curriculum. Our students are expected to be independent learners and researchers

I think the A Level Language course is an ideal preparation for undergraduate work

It can be seen here that some teachers have responded to the question in terms of subject content, and some in terms of teaching methodology.

From teachers in the middle category, those saying they feel some responsibility, typical remarks were:

To some extent – I've noticed that there is an overlap between A Level and the first year of many degree courses. My priority though is simply to prepare students to do well at A Level

I'm always presenting my subject in a positive light, but I do not explicitly recruit English Language degree students

Partially. Most will not take the subject further, but some will and I am interested in the broader picture and new research

From those who said they did not feel responsible came the following comments:

Not at all – but I do want to enthuse them about the subject

At my school the A Levels chosen are often wide and varied and most students do not wish to pursue English Language beyond A Level. I am teaching them what they need to know at this level, although this should prepare them for degree work if they wish to do it.

There is too much to do in getting them through AS/A. If I know a student is going on to study English Language, I would certainly encourage them to extend their reading

Only a minority will choose this subject for HE, and the range of content at HE makes it difficult to be specific

There is so much emphasis on exams I don't feel that it is something I worry about

Bearing in mind many don't take up the subject, it is more appropriate to focus on the A Level rather than beyond

Two main reasons for not feeling responsible for degree preparation emerge from this group: that A Level (and its results) have to take priority, and that with only a minority of students going on to further study, the needs of the majority need to be prioritised.

Two final points that emerged from one of the focus groups are worth raising here. This group in particular seemed to feel that they had detected an element of criticism being directed at sixth-form teachers by HE. In response to this they said the following:

it is perhaps inevitable for a higher stage (in this case HE institutions) to blame the lower stage for failing to prepare. Many students report that the first year of university is spent repeating A Level material

4.2.3 Advising students about degree courses

There are many ways for students to find out about potential degree courses, but asking their subject teacher, the person with whom they have frequent contact, has traditionally been a way of finding out about possible courses of study – even if that advice can be rather subjective and based on the teachers' own degree experience.

We asked the 22 teachers the following question:

How confident do you feel in advising your potential university candidates for this subject about relevant higher education courses and institutions?

Again, broadly categorising responses, we see the following:

	Number	Percentage
Not confident	16	73%
Confident/ Reasonably confident	6	27%

There were clear patterns for teachers saying they are not confident: they lacked up-to-date knowledge and were confused by the plethora of subject titles. Some typical replies were:

I don't know enough about what's on offer and what variations and combinations are available. At best I know a bit about a few specific institutions

I am not at all confident. I feel that language courses are changing constantly

I could speak from my own experience, but knowledge of what goes on in courses? I would not have a clue and would struggle to guess because of the vague names of some of the courses

I need more information on the landscape of HE Language

It's difficult to advise when the content of a course called 'English Language' is so variable

I'm confused – too many variations in courses/titles etc. 'Linguistics' can put students off as they see it as MFL

Those who were more confident about advising students still had some caveats:

I feel that I can advise them broadly, from my own point of view and from my own study

I'm fairly aware of options but would like a clear set of information about all courses

A little – it grows year on year with feedback from students who go on to HE and keep in touch

Reasonably confident but the huge variation in course content and titles makes the task almost impossible

Moderately confident but course titles can be misleading (For example my degree certificate says 'Language Studies' even though the only language I studied was English.)

A clear finding from this part of our research is that by and large teachers in this subject area do not feel well equipped to give advice to their students about further study. While teachers are by no means the only sources of such information, they have a potential value for HE which is not being fully utilised. One practical suggestion raised in a focus group was as follows:

a dedicated website would fulfil the purpose of offering current information, and could be designed to overcome the confusing array of course titles, and content biases. The website could also promote the subject itself as a useful springboard to many other areas.

4.2.4 Links between HE and sixth-form

Following our previous question as to whether sixth-form teachers are confident in giving advice to students on entering HE, we asked the question:

What links (if any) have been offered to you by higher education institutions in your area? What kinds of link would you ideally like to see?

Our thinking behind asking this question was that if there were such links, then they might serve three purposes:

- They might help sixth-form teachers understand the sorts of courses that are available to their students – although this would presumably only apply to the HE institutions in the near locality
- They might offer sixth-form teachers further professional development
- They might offer sixth-form students further help with their AS/A Level studies.

It must be remembered here that the focus groups were taken from teachers who were attending sixth-form student conferences at a particular HEI at the time. References to this event are not included in the data below.

Of the 22 teachers surveyed, eight said that there were no links at all. Typical comments from those who were aware of some links were:

We get occasional invitations to day courses

We get some information leaflets from various departments about their courses

We have higher education experts coming into college regularly, but not yet on a subject specific basis

Our students go to a day course every year

Our local university used to do conferences for sixth-form students but not any more it would seem

All of those surveyed, however, said they would like more links, and a number offered suggestions of what form these links could take:

I would welcome links at staff level

I would like more staff/staff opportunities to extend skills, sample courses, just meet!

Subject specific visits to our college

Revision days for students are really useful

It would be excellent for our students to spend a day in a local university doing some English Language work.

I would like courses for sixth-form teachers

It would be good to have some time together without students

One teacher, from an inner city comprehensive, voiced some concern over the fact that local links can narrow student perceptions:

I would encourage involvement from higher ed people, but if it is done locally I would worry that it might limit my students' aspirations about where they might apply

One suggestion, which came from four different teachers, was that links could be established online. It was pointed out by one teacher that this would get over the problem of having only local input from HE, and that it could be part of the website suggested in 4.2.3 above to help with applications.

4.3 A survey of courses available at HEIs via UCAS data

This section reports on a simulation. (See Source 5: Naive applicants UCAS search.)

Readers who are interested in official statistics from UCAS of number of students on degree courses in English Language/Linguistics, please see section 5.1.

4.3.1 Subject search categories

Our starting point was the categories proposed by AS Level students in section 3.1.1 as those they would search when looking for HE courses. Of their suggestions, we chose the three most popular: these were 'English Language' (6), 'English Language and Linguistics' (8), and 'Linguistics' (5).

The researcher found **http://www.ucas.ac.uk** easily by typing 'applying to university' into Google: in fact, the UCAS website was top of the Google results list. The *Course Search* option was clearly shown on UCAS's first page. Clicking on *Search, 2007* then *Subject Search* yielded an alphabetical list.

To find *English Language* on the list, the researcher first had to go to 'e' for *English*. Clicking on this brought up a sub list which included *English Language* and *English Linguistics Studies*. *English Language* then listed both *English Language* and *English Language & Linguistics* courses (as single subjects): oddly, *English Linguistics Studies* listed neither.

Clicking on 'l' for *Linguistics* seemed more straightforward. The researcher was then offered *all Linguistics courses*, or *Linguistics on its own as a single subject*.

A total of 16 institutions were seen to offer degrees in English Language as a single subject (compared with 68 institutions offering English Language in combination with other subjects). This perhaps bears out the picture that emerged in Section 3.5, where English Language AS/A Level was seen as a popular choice in combination with many other subjects. Our researcher found that English Language could be studied at degree level with a huge range of different subjects, from Maths and Physics to Creative Writing. In total, it was available for combined study on 692 different courses.

Some combinations involving 'English' were, however, difficult to understand for our 'naïve applicant'. For example, the titles *English and English Language*, *English Language and English*, and *English with English Language and Communication* were all predicated on an understanding of 'English' as 'English Literature' (when, at the first point of subject searching, 'English' had seemed to be an overarching category name that encompassed English Language). Understanding both the search categories and the degree titles seemed to require that potential applicants should be able to carry both meanings in their heads, as they could never be sure whether 'English' was going to function as a hypernym or hyponym.

The variation seen for 'English Language' in terms of numbers of single subject courses compared with combined courses was also found for 'Linguistics'. Searching on that name in the category *Linguistics on its own as a single subject* yielded just nine institutions, whereas in combination, 612 courses were found at 56 institutions (however, some of those 'combinations' were actually 'English Language and Linguistics'). The category *Linguistics on its own as a single subject* also yielded the following, variant, course titles: *Linguistic studies; Applied Linguistics; Language and Linguistics; English Studies and English Language/Linguistics* (the latter perhaps working on the basis of 'if in doubt, include it').

'English Language and Linguistics' repeated the pattern seen above, featuring on its own at just 11 institutions, but, in combination, forming part of the earlier global figures given. Here, too, some very complex titles occurred, including *English and Language and Linguistics*. A particularly subtle variation is offered at one institution, in the form of *Linguistics and the English Language*.

4.3.2 Entry requirements

The following pages show the tariff scores, and the grade and subject requirements for entry to HEI courses in *Linguistics*, in *English Language*, and in *English Language and Linguistics*. Readers need to remember that there are three distinct A Levels within the English subject area: *English Language; English Literature;* and *English Language & Literature*.

Entry Requirements for Linguistics (9 HEIs)

Type of HEI	Tariff	Grades	Reference to English Language A Level
Pre 92	240-260 (at least 180 from A Levels)		
Pre 92	260 (all from A Levels)		
Pre 92	280		'Encouraged' to have English Language, English Literature, or English Language & Literature
Pre 92		ABB	English Language or English Language & Literature required
Pre 92		ABB-BBB	English Language, or English Language & Literature, or a language, required
Pre 92		ABB-BBB	
Pre 92		ABB-BBB	
Pre 92		ABC-BBB	
Pre 92		BBB	

Entry Requirements for English Language (16 HEIs)

Type of HEI	Tariff	Grades	Reference to English Language A Level
HE college	(no results found – this is a college teaching English Language in a TESOL context)		
Post 92	160		
Post 92	180-200		Grade C in English Language A Level
Post 92	200		Grade C in English Language, English Literature, or English Language & Literature
Post 92	220		'Must be studying' English Language, English Literature, or English Language & Literature
Pre 92	240-260 (at least 180 from A Levels)		
Post 92	260		Grade B in English Language or English Literature
Pre 92	280		'Encouraged' to have English Language, English Literature, or English Language & Literature
Pre 92		AAB	Grade A in English required
Pre 92		ABB	
Pre 92		ABB	Grade B in English Language or English Language & Literature required
Pre 92		ABB	
Pre 92		ABB	
Pre 92		ABB or BBB	English Literature or English – Language & Literature (sic) required
Pre 92		BBB	
Pre 92		BBB	

Entry Requirements for English Language and Linguistics (11 HEIs)

Type of HEI	Tariff	Grades	Reference to English Language A Level
Post 92	180		
Post 92	240-260		Grade C in English Literature or English – Language & Literature (sic)
Post 92	240-300		
Pre 92	no results found – 'please refer to institution' afforded no outcome		
Pre 92		AAB-ABB	
Pre 92		ABB	Grade A in English or related subject
Pre 92		ABB	Grade B in English Language or English Language & Literature
Pre 92		ABB-BBB	English Language required
Pre 92		BBB	
Pre 92		BBB	Grade B in English Language, English Literature, or English Language & Literature 'desirable'
Post 92		BCC	

4.3.3. How do the entry requirements compare?

It is noticeable that *Linguistics* (on its own as a single subject) was only on offer at pre-92 universities and that the entry tariffs/grades required were demanding. Within that group, only one institution insisted that applicants had studied English Language A Level.

In contrast to that picture, *English Language* (again on its own as a single subject) was spread across both pre-92 and post-92 institutions, and even found in a private college offering a TESOL course. The tariffs/grades for *English Language* were much more wide ranging, from 160 points all the way up to AAB (which would be 340 points). There were more instances of grades being specified for the subject; however, how the subject was referred to varied, and at times was very puzzling. For example, the following seemed to rule out English Language altogether, which cannot have been the intention since the other 'Englishes' were deemed acceptable: 'English Literature or English – Language and Literature'. On the other hand, another formulation ('English Language or English Literature') appeared to discount English Language & Literature, which seemed odd when its component parts, as it were, featured as a requirement.

Another problem, which has been referred to more than once in this report, was the vagueness of the term 'English': one institution said they required 'Grade A in English'. Did this mean any of the 'Englishes', or just English Literature? It seemed unlikely that it would be the latter, given that the course being applied for was English Language. At the same time, the lack of specificity was unhelpful, especially when other institutions were spelling out their requirements in some detail.

English Language and Linguistics saw a similarly wide range of tariffs/grades, and of types of establishment. The problem of apparently ruling out English Language in the requirement 'English Literature or English – Language & Literature' was repeated, at a different institution from where it occurred before.

Some institutions featured in more than one of the lists, seven universities offering two out of *Linguistics, English Language, English Language and Linguistics*; and four offering all three. Entry requirements differed in some cases across these courses within the same institution. For example, in one pre-92 university offering both *English Language* and *Linguistics* as single subjects, entry requirements were tougher for the former (ABB) than for the latter (ABC-BBB).

In two other pre-92 establishments offering all three courses, *English Language and Linguistics* presented the most challenging requirements, with *Linguistics* on its own featuring as a less demanding option. To illustrate the nature of the difference, one example within one university was as follows:

English Language & Linguistics: AAB-ABB
English Language: ABB
Linguistics: ABB-BBB

Presumably, these differences were more to do with the availability of places and less to do with the (notional) cognitive challenges presented by the different orientations.

4.4 Summary of Findings: Moving to Higher Education

Data from the student perspective suggested the following:

- that among the sixth-form population, different students might have different names for the study of English Language/Linguistics in HEIs
- that HEI course titles (as listed on UCAS) display a bewildering variety of naming practices
- that there are confusions and internal inconsistencies in UCAS headings, particularly around what counts as 'English' at any one stage

- that information from HEIs is not always clear, particularly around the names of the various 'Englishes' studied at A Level as they appear in HEIs' own entry requirements
- that a wide range of topics and perspectives need to be on offer in HEIs if they are to match the different student characterisations of the subject area
- that students expect more freedom to make their own choices but also more teachers and smaller groups
- that students find academic texts challenging and working without regular feedback difficult.

Data from the perspective of A Level teachers suggested the following:

- most teachers in this subject area do not feel well equipped to give advice to their students about further study
- they would welcome a website which gave them clear and objective information about HE courses, which they could then mediate for their students
- they would welcome stronger links with HE staff for a range of reasons, including enhancing their own and their students' subject knowledge, as well as raising staff and student awareness of the range of HE provision available.

5. Within Higher Education

5.1 Numbers of students taking Linguistics at UK HEIs, 2004-5

The following are the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures of students enrolled at HEIs on Linguistics courses, 2004-5:

FT UGs: full time undergraduates   FT PGs: full time postgraduates
PT UGs: part time undergraduates   PT PGs: part time postgraduates

	Total	FT UGs	FT PGs	PT UGs	PT PGs	F	M
UK Students	3465	2520	1290	560	920	2510	950
EU students	545	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	415	130
Non-EU students	1280	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	845	435
Grand total at UK HEIs	5285						

(Source: **www.hesa.ac.uk**)

The numbers above represent students taking courses listed as Linguistics, but do not represent those courses where *Linguistics* constitutes part of the overall study, but not all. So, for example, it is unclear how many of the 58,410 students listed under *English Studies* might be doing significant amounts of language study. There is no separate listing for *English Language*.

5.2. Student experiences of Level 1 work

Two hundred and forty-six questionnaires were completed by Level 2 students in the first term of their second year of study of Language/Linguistics at eight different HEIs. (See Source 7.)

Each of the questions is dealt with separately, below.

5.2.1 Question 1: Did you take A Level English Language?

Yes = 151   (61%)   No = 95   (39%)

The first question in the questionnaire gives an indication of how many students studying in this area have studied English Language at A Level. When considering the 'no' figure here, it needs to be borne in mind that: (a) one of the institutions is Scottish, so a significant number of students would have no access to A Level English Language; (b) that in several institutions a number of students were doing joint degrees and so not specialising in English Language/Linguistics; and (c) that in one institution there was a high number of access students who had not done A Levels at all.

Bearing in mind the considerations noted above, it seems that a reasonably high percentage of students in this area have studied A Level English Language, perhaps rather more than the HE staff realised when interviewed (see 5.3). This level of continuity through the transition process argues the need for HE staff to have more awareness of what A Level English Language actually entails.

5.2.2 Question 2: Do you think A Level English Language was a good preparation for your degree course? Please explain why/why not.

Yes = 112   (78%)   No = 32   (22%)

Clearly the students answering this question were largely positive about A Level as preparation for their degree – another reason, perhaps, why HE staff could usefully know more about A Level.

Looking at the various responses to the second part of the question, a number of key themes emerged:

- That pre-knowledge gives students confidence when starting a degree
- That they were already familiar with some key concepts and topics
- That they were already familiar with some key terminology

It was also clear that how students answered this question was in part influenced by what they had been taught at A Level.

Some typical responses from students to the second part of the question included the following:

Because I learnt key basic terms that helped me to understand degree level more easily. It also made me feel more confident that I wasn't going to get left behind in my studies.

A Level Language was a basic stepping stone to degree level. We did modules similar to the same topics now…but carrying on the topics to degree Level has opened up a whole new world of language.

I have found the transition from A Level to degree to be quite a natural progression. I think I would have struggled with this (degree) course if I had not taken English Language at A Level.

Where students are less sure about the usefulness of previous study, they tend to focus on a lack of grammar in their A Level study. One student answered the question with a tentative 'yes', before going on to say:

I have often wished that somewhere in my education a basis of grammar had been taught.

Another was more definite in her criticism of A Level:

I don't really think A Level English Language was a good preparation, particularly with regards to grammar. I can't remember being taught anything relevant about grammar except in child language acquisition. I felt I was being taught grammar from scratch at uni which is really bad.

Interestingly, although critical of her own A Level course, this student sees the need for previous study of Language and preparation for the challenges of degree Level work.

5.2.3 Question 3: Did you repeat any material from A Level in Level 1 of your degree? If so, what? And if so, did it matter to you?

Yes = 96   (71%)   No = 40   (29%)

This question was answered by those who had taken A Level English Language. It was designed to see whether there is any repetition of work between A Level and degree Level, and whether such repetition, where it occurs, makes students feel that they are marking time in their first year.

Answers here tended to be less clear-cut. A large percentage of students said there was repetition, but this ranged from 'some areas' to 'repetition of a lot of material we covered at A Level'. The content that students said was being repeated was wide-ranging, including:

- Historical aspects of English
- Grammar
- Child language acquisition
- Phonetics
- Semantics
- Pragmatics
- Discourse analysis

This list reflects what is studied across A Level, rather than what is studied by every student. Grammar, for example, was quite frequently mentioned as an area of repetition, yet as we have already seen in Question 2 above, some students bemoaned the absence of grammar in their A Level courses.

When students were asked whether repetition of work 'mattered' to them we were interested in whether students were finding repetition tedious and de-motivating. In their responses, though, students understood the question to have a positive application, saying that it mattered because it helped. Seventy-one students who indicated that work was repeated went on to answer the question 'Did it matter to you?' as follows:

Welcomed repetition	67
Were negative in their responses	3
Saw positive and negative aspects to repetition of work	1

Typically those who found benefit in some overlap said :

- That it was not so much repetition as reinforcement
- That knowing something already was comforting and helped them settle
- That degree study took the topics/concepts further and so their previous study acted as a springboard for degree level work.

Some typical responses were as follows:

Some of the material that was covered at A Level has been repeated during the degree course, but it doesn't matter too much to me. The degree course covers things in far more detail, whereas A Level gave an overview.

We repeated some of the A Level course in Level 1 and then built on that knowledge.

This was interesting and it was helpful when entering university to cover some familiar territory. Sociolinguistics and basic grammar/syntax were some areas that were repeated.

I found it beneficial that some work was repeated. The lectures were more in-depth than A Level and it also helped me to recap some information that wasn't fresh in my mind. It was my A Level course that inspired my passion for linguistics, so I like the fact that my degree doesn't stray too far from the topics I liked.

From the three students who responded negatively to repetition across the phases, the following was the most critical:

Pretty much all of first year was a repetition of A Level, but first year was at a lower/easier Level than A Level. It mattered greatly to me as it rendered first year somewhat repetitive and irrelevant.

On all Level 1 courses we surveyed there were some students who had taken A Level Language and some who had not. This presents a challenge to teachers at HE level. However, where students have taken the subject before, they by and large did not mind repeating work, especially when their knowledge and skills are extended.

5.2.4 Question 4: Has your course so far matched your expectations of what it would be when you applied?

Yes = 180   (82%)   No = 39   (8%)

The idea behind asking this question was to ascertain whether students felt that the course they had chosen when applying to university had the content and methodology that they expected from having read the prospectus and other pre-course information. Harvey (2006:3) says 'Research shows that students find conceptual development difficult and staff need to assess whether their teaching styles enable students' conceptual development'.

Where students responding to the question gave any more than a yes/no answer, though, they seemed to take the question in a much broader way, thinking that it was asking for a judgement on how good their current course actually was. If the figures above are taken, therefore, as a customer satisfaction rating, albeit an inadvertent one, then a very positive picture emerges of student experience.

Student comments covered a range of issues. These were:

* Level of interest
* Quality of teaching
* Range of content
* Amount of choice in what is studied
* Depth and challenge
* Methods of assessment
* Overall student experience

Positive comments referred most to range and variety of content:

Actually the course is even more varied than I expected

It's covering a lot of material I am interested in

There are lots of diverse areas of study

We have covered more that I expected

Negative comments, on the other hand, tended to refer to what was perceived as an overly scientific curriculum:

Compulsory modules in syntax are not stimulating. I find sociolinguistics more interesting …

The course is not as good as I had hoped. There is not enough sociolinguistics and it can be too technical.

It involves more science based thinking, as opposed to creative.

What students actually want, of course, varies from student to student. One respondent, commenting on the depth and challenge on the course said:

It was not as challenging as I expected…

But then went on to add

…which has been good.

5.2.5 Question 5: What areas of Language study did you cover last year and what aspects did you most enjoy?

This question was designed to see what aspects of Language are frequently studied at Level 1, and which in particular are popular with students. Each of the institutions provided very different results, depending in part on what is offered at Level 1, how much choice there is, and how the areas of study are named and labelled. Some students opted for one favourite, others gave longer lists.

The table below, therefore, offers cumulative totals which need to be treated with some caution and so have been listed alphabetically rather than numerically. The high numbers 'voting' for historical linguistics, for example, is because it is taught in most institutions and numbers are boosted by one institution with a large cohort where the module clearly had a popular teacher. On the other hand, Sign Language is only taught in one of the institutions.

Names of courses have been homogenised into generally recognised areas of Language study.

British Sign Language	14
Child Language Acquisition	21
Culture and Communication	8
Grammar	16
History of English	41
Phonology/Phonetics	34
Pragmatics	24
Psycholinguistics	12
Semantics	5
Sociolinguistics	62
Syntax	18
Tesol	7
Text Analysis	8

Although students were not asked to give reasons for their choices, some did. Most frequently mentioned was the type of learning involved:

> *I loved phonetics – it was very fun and interactive*

> *I preferred the areas of the course which involved a more practical way of learning*

> *I enjoyed the historical aspects. There were facts to learn and put in place. It made a lot of sense to me*

5.2.6 Question 6: What would you say were the major differences between how you were taught at A Level and how you are taught now?

This question was designed to compare teaching methods at A Level and degree Level. Although many students commented on this, many also commented on the relative levels of complexity in the subject matter being covered.

Answers to this question fell broadly into the following categories. Numbers indicate the number of times the issue was mentioned by students.

Distinctive Features of University Teaching as against A Level

Expectation of independence	67
Expectation of wide reading	21
Lecture system	3
Use of new technology	2

Distinctive Features of A Level teaching as against University

More contact with teachers and personal guidance	25
More contact hours in class	16
More ongoing assessment	14
More talk and interaction in class	11
Smaller class sizes	6

The most frequently observed difference in methodology involved the amounts of information given to students by teachers. Some students reported this neutrally:

> *At A Level we were given information and had to learn it. Now we are given basics and have to go away and find out more and do more independent study.*

> *At university you are given an overview of a subject and some critical insight to guide you – the pace being quicker because of the lecture method. You are expected to take this and expand on it in your free time and discover other/your own ideas. A Level was more formulaic.*

Other students stated a preference:

> *At degree level the teaching style is extremely different as students are mostly left to their own devices. In my opinion I found it easier to take in information at A Level as it seemed more structured and formal.*

> *I enjoy the fact that at degree level you are able to think more for yourself.*

> *A Level doesn't go into enough depth. I felt my A Level teachers didn't put in enough Linguistics.*

> *A Level was more in-depth and required better essay writing. It was more structured and covered a greater breadth of subjects in greater detail.*

The contradiction between the last two statements shows the danger of assuming that all A Level experiences are the same and that all degree experiences are the same. Students on any degree course differ for a variety of reasons: they have had a range of experiences at A Level and look back on those experiences in different ways. As Harvey (2006: 6) says: 'The first-year experience is not a homogenous experience but a multiplicity of experiences contingent on type of institution and student characteristics.' The following student evaluated some of the key issues:

> At university you are given more freedom to do your own research and work – you are not given as much instruction and as many boundaries. You can go off the rails a lot more easily because there is not as much supervision. There is also less assessment in the 1st year compared to A Level.

The issue of ongoing assessment featured quite prominently in student responses. An important context here needs to be taken into consideration: A Level is an external examination with neither teachers nor students knowing what the tasks are, and even coursework is externally moderated. This means that in A Level classrooms, students have regular experiences of being presented with topic-related tasks to do, by way of 'mock' exam exercises on which feedback is given. At university, however, the assessments are set and marked internally, which tends to mean that there are fewer formative assessments along the way.

One major difference between A Level teaching and degree Level is the amount of contact between students and staff. A Level terms are longer and typically teachers and students meet most days of the week. In addition teachers are more frequently on-site and probably more accessible on both a formal and informal basis. Students frequently referred to this difference, but again with somewhat different perspectives:

> At A Level we had more opportunities to sort out our difficulties, having more teaching hours a week and the teacher would have a look at assignment drafts saying if we were on the right track.

> At A Level there was constant monitoring and everyday contact with tutors. Now students only have contact 3 or 4 times a week and the rest is up to the student. If a student works well by him/her

> self and knows which direction to look for, there will be success, otherwise not much success will be accomplished.

> More is expected of you at university. You are treated more like a grown-up. You are given a free rein with your style of learning and working but there is still help and support if you need it. You don't feel as separated from the tutors – they are more like real people, not teachers!

Some students commented on the difference in class sizes between A Level and university and the personal contact they could have with staff:

> At A Level I was guided through the course. I had contact with my tutor at least three times a week on a one to one basis and my class size was never above 10. University teaching is quite daunting, particularly the size of lectures and the lack of personal tutoring.

> My A Level class was quite small so the number of people in lectures/seminars is one major difference compared to lessons.

> I got to talk more at A Level, rather than being in lectures.

5.2.7 Question 7: What do you understand by the term 'independent learning' and do you do it?

All students who responded to this question were happy to suggest that they have an understanding of what is meant by the term independent learning. Typically they answered along these lines:

> Independent learning is going beyond themes and concepts raised in lectures via private study to further knowledge and develop original arguments.

Some connected the notion of independent learning to question six above, suggesting that the need for independent learning is the biggest difference between A Level and degree level study.

> This I think is how we as university students are expected to learn – to read set/recommended texts ourselves, make notes and use our initiative to teach ourselves. I find this difficult having had so much contact with my tutors at school but I do try.

Although there might be a sense with this question that students know the answer that is expected of them, the following answers were received for the second part of the question – **do you do it?**

Yes = 137   (75%)   No = 45   (25%)

Not all students, though, gave a straight 'yes' or 'no' answer, many adding the rider that although they did *some* they did not do *as much as I should*. One reason given for this was the fact that students were short of time because of paid employment:

Independent learning is the continuation of study by the student on subjects raised/taught in lectures to further strengthen their knowledge of their degree course/module. I try to maintain a reasonably high level of independent learning, but find it hard to motivate myself and find time as I work part-time as well as studying.

Clearly, though, a large majority of students (75%) say that they do some form of independent study, which does not appear to tally with staff perception on this issue. Harvey (2006: 4) says '…students need help in adapting to university life and becoming autonomous learners.' He then goes on to say that 'Research suggests that students may accept the principle of autonomous learning but need help in becoming autonomous learners'.

Overwhelmingly, students gave an understanding of independent learning which involved reading from text books as a solo activity. In one HEI, where the staff had reported enthusiastically about students and staff participating in on-line discussion forums, only one out of 50 respondents mentioned this in the survey, and even this was a vague reference to 'Blackboard'. Comments such as this one were typical:

I understand it as studying from home or library, but doing it on your own.

The following two comments represent the very few who took a much broader view:

The term to me means organising their own study and using the teaching at university to help them. I do it using WebCT, online tests, reading and going through class notes.

This means …discussing lectures with peers over coffee or on WebCT. Keeping eyes and ears open

for things in the press and advert etcetera that are appropriate.

Between them these students identify aspects of independent learning that most others seem to have failed to recognise, or for which they are not given the opportunity. These include:

- Discussion with peers
- Using online resources for discussion with peers
- Online tests devised by staff but electronically marked
- Collecting your own data
- Revising notes
- Further reading.

Several students in the survey referred to their levels of interest being a key factor in how much they do independently.

Learning independently and adding to depth of study on topics covered course-wise. I do it, but more so if the topic is of personal interest.

and

By the term independent learning I take the idea of pursuing the area of study as an interest as well as a subject.

Not all students, however, were prepared to accept independent learning as a necessary part of university life.

Learning at home, library, groups. I do not like it. We need more time at university with tutors.

I find it hard to find the motivation to study independently and if I'm honest I do as little as possible, as I am not excited by the subject areas.

Independent learning is a way for lecturers to avoid answering questions. Independent learning is personal applications and interest in a subject…I do it…but motivation can be affected when there seems to be too little guidance. Also resources are not always easy to find, understand, use or benefit from.

Despite the rather cynical opening comment here, this student identifies an additional question that needs to be addressed. If private reading is indeed to be at the core of independent learning, are the texts accessible to all Level 1 students, both in terms of availability and level of difficulty?

5.3 Higher education lecturers' views of transition issues

See Source 8: HE Lecturers. Each of the questions is dealt with separately, below.

5.3.1 Question 1: Do you have any knowledge of English Language A Level courses?

There was considerable variation in the extent of HE lecturer knowledge of English Language A Level. Of the nine lecturers interviewed, six described themselves as knowing nothing or very little, while three clearly knew a considerable amount. One of the latter group had been involved in the mid-1980s at the inception of the very first A Level course, offering advice and support to colleagues in the school sector, and getting involved in teacher Inset and the production of language materials for this new audience. The other two tutors in the latter group kept their own knowledge updated by running student conferences and workshops for schools and colleges.

The extent to which HE lecturers considered it important or even possible to know about English Language A Level courses also varied. One lecturer in the 'little or no knowledge' category commented that specifications are so extremely varied that only a detailed understanding of each Awarding Body's specification would suffice. However, as has been seen in Section 3.2, QCA does specify subject criteria which form the basis for any Awarding Body's offering, so in reality there is some variation but not at any extreme level (and probably a lot less than the variation between different HE English Language/Linguistics courses). Another lecturer in the same category thought that English Language A Level was 'new' and therefore was likely to be very different from what was done in HEIs (which were presumably being characterised as 'traditional'). Actually, as has been shown in this report, the first English Language A Level is over 20 years old; and QCA subject criteria share much common ground with QAA's Linguistics Benchmarking.

By far the most common rationale advanced by lecturers for their lack of concern about their own level of knowledge was the fact that they were dealing with students who came with a whole range of different subjects; and that tutors started, as it were, from 'scratch' at Level 1. One lecturer exemplified this range by referring to a student who came with A Levels in English Language, Physics and Dance. It may be the case that students who

apply for HE English Language/Linguistics courses do present with a wider range of subjects at A Level than, say, their counterparts applying to English Literature courses. If this were the case, it would be consistent with the picture suggested in Section 3.5, where English Language, at least at AS, was seen to be being studied alongside everything from IT to PE, with much in between.

In fact, as has been seen in section 5.2, a high proportion of students at the HEIs where staff were interviewed had taken English Language A Level. Two lecturers commented that they already knew this to be the case; and, as can be seen below, three HEIs expect students to have 'one of the Englishes' as a basic entry requirement. So, if it is possible to know about a course of study that has formed the pre-university experience of the majority of one's undergraduates, to what extent is it necessary or beneficial?

One potential reason for HE lecturers to know about their students' pre-university experience of English Language study would be to ensure that there was no duplication, so that students wouldn't feel they were 'treading water'. In fact, as can be seen in 5.2, students who have done English Language A Level do tend to feel that areas are being repeated, but view this as a positive experience, enabling them to feel more confident because they recognise some of what they are being taught.

If duplication is not a 'transition' issue, then are there any other transition-related reasons for HE lecturers to learn about the A Level 'take' on their subject specialism? One such reason may be that an increased awareness on the part of HE lecturers gives them a better context for understanding the strengths and weaknesses their beginning undergraduates arrive with. It was noticeable that those lecturers who did have some knowledge of English Language A Level tended to have more positive views of the qualities of their incoming students than those lecturers who had no such knowledge (see 5.3.5, below).

In addition, lecturers who have some knowledge of English Language A Level are in a better position to understand why applicants might have certain expectations of HEI English Language/Linguistics courses (see 3.5). For example, one lecturer voiced concerns that sometimes applicants seemed to aspire to areas that were not traditional domains of Linguistic study – for example, writing or journalistic skills. Acquaintance by HE lecturers with A Level specifications would enable a better

understanding of the particular blends of language analysis and production that mark English Language qualifications at this level; enable them to see that English Language A Level is not simply Linguistics, but an interface between Linguistics and school-based English; and realise that English Language for very clear reasons has a home as one of the 'Englishes' in schools, rather than with Science, Social Sciences or Foreign Languages. A clearer picture of this kind would then enable initial applicants to HE to be dealt with more transparently. It would also enable English Language/Linguistics departments in HEIs to decide whether they are really best placed to provide continuity and progression for particular applicants, or whether those applicants would be better directed towards more Arts or Media-based courses.

5.3.2 Question 2: Do you ask for English Language A Level as part of your entry requirements?

None of the various programmes represented by the HE lecturers interviewed required applicants to have this qualification. However, as mentioned above and in 5.2, many of their students had in practice taken one of the English Language A Level specifications, and would have achieved high grades: out of the eight HEIs represented, six specify in their UCAS information that grades A or B are expected, either in all the subjects taken at A Level, or in one of the 'Englishes'.

In 4.3.2, it was noted that some individual HEIs offering a range of Linguistics-based courses – for example, *English Language*, or *Linguistics*, or *English Language and Linguistics* – specified different entry requirements for each. That information was confirmed by our interviews with lecturers from two different HEIs where that situation obtained. In both cases, *Linguistics* offered the lowest tariff, and *English Language* the highest. In one case, the rationale for those differences was unclear. But in the other, internal issues of comparability drove the requirements: *English Language* tariffs were expected to be the same as those for *English Literature*, since both those courses were taught in the same department, while *Linguistics* inhabited a different part of the university and shared no modules or staffing with *English Language*. In this HEI, effectively there was an internal 'clearing' system in operation, where applicants who failed to meet the requirements for *English Language* were directed towards *Linguistics*.

While interviewing HE lecturers was very revealing of the some of the complexities of the institutional structures

they had to work within, the situation described above, where similar-sounding courses set out different entry requirements, is clearly baffling to outsiders. In particular, it would seem odd that *Linguistics*, with connotations of a more technical orientation and a wider canvas of different languages, would have a lower tariff than *English Language*.

Our own interpretation of the names above are clearly associated with our own histories as lecturers and, indeed, as students, so an attempt was made to ascertain whether the connotations articulated above hold true for younger groups. The current Chief Examiner for the largest of the English Language A Level specifications asked her own AS groups (60 students in total) who were beginning the process of applying to university what connotations they had for the course names *English Language, Linguistics*, and *English Language and Linguistics*. There was universal agreement that anything with Linguistics in its title suggested comparative difficulty, and a technical and scientific approach, while names such as *English Language*, suggested something less traditional, less technically-oriented, and easier.

Obviously, what has been presented here is a snapshot, but if this is a more generally held view across a wide range of applicants, then while applicants' expectations of difficulty may or may not be true of the actual courses that are being run, there is something of a mismatch between their characterisations of HE study and the tariffs applicants are presented with.

5.3.3 Question 3: What teaching methods do you use for your Level 1 modules?

Responses to this question represented a fairly traditional HE range of contexts – lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials. However, there were clearly some ways in which, for these staff at least, the names of the learning and teaching configurations might have remained the same, but the nature of the activities had changed somewhat. For example, there was a recognition that lectures needed to be 'interactive' in order to sustain the interest of large groups. Also, the nature of tutorial provision appeared to vary considerably, from 'rarely occurring' through 'one-to-one sessions to give feedback on assignments', to 'groups of up to 12'.

The approach of one lecturer at a new university was particularly workshop-based, with sessions scheduled in two-hour blocks. This lecturer focussed particularly on skills, which included study skills in general as well as specific subject skills.

The students at this HEI in particular had rarely come in via the A level route, but were more often the result of successful widening participation initiatives in the local area.

At three further HEIs, there was recognition that new strategies had to be devised to match the changing nature of students coming into HE, and their particular needs at the beginning stage. One lecturer was in the process of changing Semester 1 after student feedback, in order to make it more applied and less theoretical, with more skills-based workshops being introduced. Another lecturer had recently been involved in completely overhauling the Level 1 diet of modules, and had introduced a strong element of 'enquiry based learning', where students learnt about the history of English via the use of annotated bibliographies, online discussion groups, and peer mentorship involving students from Levels 2 and 3.

Online working featured in three responses, in one case involving a kind of 'type a tutor' service where students could ask lecturers questions in online discussion forums. This feature had proved very popular!

Although there were no specific questions asked about types of assessment, this topic arose naturally in some cases. One lecturer provided 'bite-sized' tasks in phonetics which were then marked as an ongoing process; another tutor commented on what she saw as a general move away from essays towards data analysis exercises, regarding data collection and analysis as a way for staff to sidestep the problem of plagiarism.

5.3.4 Question 4: What is the content of Level 1 of your programme?

This question elicited remarkably similar responses. All tutors offered some elements of descriptive Linguistics – phonetics, grammar, semantics – mixed with some applied work in the Sociolinguistics area. Clearly, each programme has its own profile which is reflected in its overall degree name and particular emphases within the programme: so, for example, a degree called *Language, Culture and Communication*, or *Applied Linguistics*, is likely to have a more socio-cultural orientation than one called simply *Linguistics*; and *Linguistics and Phonetics* might reasonably be expected to offer more work on phonetics and phonology than something called *English Language*.

Other elements in the mix at Level 1 included modules on the history of English; on world languages; and on aspects of enquiry. Only one lecturer made any particular mention of study skills or key skills.

5.3.5 Question 5: What are your perceptions of students' strengths and weaknesses on arrival?

This question stimulated the most discussion, for fairly obvious reasons. One point on which all lecturers were agreed was that students arrive with enthusiasm for their chosen subject. Lecturers appreciated the willingness of students to engage with the subject and express their views. This enthusiasm cannot be ascribed solely to the study of English Language A Level, as lecturers were not in the main able to single out those who had taken A Level from the general cohort. However, there is clearly much valuable work going on by teachers in schools and colleges to make the study of language exciting and relevant to their students' lives.

One lecturer who could clearly distinguish those who had taken English Language A Level from those who had not was the lecturer working in a Scottish HEI, as his students who had been to school in Scotland would not have done any language study (this not being currently part of the Scottish Highers qualification). This lecturer's experience was that students who came from south of the border with experience of English Language A Level seemed more lively, interested and confident than others.

Two lecturers (in separate interviews) expressed strong feelings that since Curriculum 2000, students had arrived with expectations of a highly structured learning environment, and had seemed less able generally to work independently than students who had come through before that time. Examples of 'structure' included being given very precise instructions for assignments; expecting tutors to mark drafts of work; and expecting assessment to take place around very rigid criteria. When asked what 'working independently' might mean at this level, one lecturer's response was the ability to think through problems, to pursue lines of enquiry, and to refine questions without constant help. Both lecturers believed that over-assessment in the school system had brought about a culture of learner caution and over-dependency.

While the lecturers above expressed a sense that students were unwilling to take risks, they also referred to a particular aspect of the English Language A Level specifications that supported student-led enquiry and encouraged risk-taking – that of the A Level Investigation (see 3.2). A third lecturer interviewed also specifically pointed to this aspect of A Level study as extremely worthwhile. Consisting of a unit of study based on the

idea of students as researchers, the Investigation requires students to set their own research question, collect their own data, and analyse it using a method appropriate to the question and the data. One tutor saw this work as allowing students to make unique reference to their own histories.

Other strengths which lecturers observed were good IT skills – although it was thought they were less good at discriminating between different sources than in using IT tools; the ability to say things about the way whole texts work; an understanding of representation; ability to analyse the language choices made by writers; and the idea of being reflective in diaries and journals. Again, connections were made by one lecturer between the latter and the emphasis in many English Language A Level specifications on students' own writing, accompanied by their analytical commentaries (see 3.2).

It needs to be noted that the comments above about writers' language choices and on the idea of reflection came from a lecturer who works on a degree combining Linguistics with elements of Literature and Professional Writing. This lecturer was the most positive out of the whole group of HE staff about the range of skills students with English Language A Level arrived with. On the other hand, two lecturers who between them covered two degrees with much more 'pure' Linguistics content also noted the ability of their students to 'say things about texts'. Differences in perceptions of strengths and weaknesses in this respect may therefore be less about the orientation of the whole degree programme, and more about the kinds of illustrative material used in classroom contexts – perhaps about the use of whole, real texts as opposed to small fragments of language and constructed examples.

A problem area identified by almost all of the lecturers was that of students' ability to use a metalanguage in their analytical work, particularly their grammatical work. This did not seem to be an issue that related to a particular kind of degree programme, or a particular kind of student, or a particular level of tariff. Some lecturers represented this problem as one of confidence and the need for right or wrong answers. Lecturers' comments included the following:

> *some students worry about structural aspects and are scared of difficulty*

> *they lack the confidence to analyse because they are uncertain of the metalanguage.*

Two lecturers in particular expressed frustration that, because of this perceived lack, they could not get beyond the work of teaching basic grammar, when what they wanted was to be able to critique the idea of 'grammars' and hold up the whole idea of grammatical analysis to scrutiny. These lecturers were both working on *English Language* programmes, where the idea of the socio-cultural implications of certain approaches to language are perhaps given more emphasis than on traditional *Linguistics* programmes.

Taking all the lecturers' views together, there is no unified view about how this metalanguage should be developed and whose job it might be to teach it. One tutor lamented the demise of *old fashioned grammatical parsing* work in schools and clearly thought it should be part of the English curriculum there. On the other hand, as was outlined in HE lecturers' answers to Question 1, above, a commonly expressed view was that Level 1 work 'started from scratch' and gave beginning undergraduates a basic toolkit for Linguistics. However, five of the nine lecturers also said that their students were still poor in this respect even after two years of undergraduate teaching. One lecturer suggested that her students' struggle with metalinguistic terms and concepts led to some of them dropping out of the course altogether at Level 1.

The views expressed above find echoes in some of the comments from A Level teachers talking about how students arrive from GCSE *with little awareness of basic parts of speech* (3.6.5). The school/college teachers interviewed were all too aware that Linguistics came with its own kind of discourse, which had to be taught: *students have to learn an entirely new 'language' of the subject i.e. linguistic frameworks eg 'semantics', 'pragmatics'…* In 3.6.7, where approaches to the teaching of grammar were discussed, it was apparent that there was significant variety among teachers, dependent on their own training and confidence, in how much of a focus there was on structural aspects of language, and, when in focus, how these aspects were taught.

Interestingly, while their teachers and their prospective teachers were expressing anxiety about weaknesses in their students' knowledge of grammar, the students in our focus groups saw grammar as a part of what they did, but nothing to get too worked up about. One student said:

> *we've been taught grammar as a framework. It's all right – I liked learning about how it all gets put together then you can work on that with everything else (see 4.1.2).*

However, it will be recalled that another student couldn't imagine what more could possibly be done:

> having studied it at A Level, how much further could it be taken? (see 4.1.2).

It is perhaps useful at this point to move away from specific considerations of the study of Linguistics and towards the larger picture of transition 'behaviours' as articulated by Harvey (2006). In his summary of over 600 pieces of literature on transition issues, Harvey concludes that beginning undergraduates 'tend to overrate their knowledge and abilities' (Harvey 2006: 2) while the institutional focus 'tends to be on the deficiencies of first-year students and how to provide for them' (Harvey 2006: 4). Harvey recommends an approach that explores learners' needs by building on their strengths. One of the HE lecturers interviewed for this research articulates that idea in the following comment:

> we need to help students to tap into what they know already about grammar.

5.3.6 Question 6: Do you have any links with schools or FE?

All lecturers were involved with open days and visit days. Some were also involved specifically with aspects of widening participation work, such as 'Compact' arrangements, and participating in 'taster' sessions for visiting school groups. In addition, three lecturers spoke regularly at student conferences, and one of those three went out to schools and colleges who had generated their own local events.

5.3.7 Question 7: How do you attempt to give prospective students a sense of what kind of language study you offer?

All lecturers referred to course literature in the form of information booklets and other paper resources; all also referred to website information. At two HEIs where more than one 'variant' was on offer (for example, *English Language* as well as *Linguistics*) staff were at pains to clarify the differences for students by, for example, having very separate and distinctively different pieces of literature for each, and by scheduling separate sessions on open days.

One lecturer made regular use of the Linguistics and Area Studies Subject Centre's powerpoint slideshow, *What is Linguistics*? This same lecturer talked openly to prospective students about the scientific nature of the programme for which she is admissions tutor, likening it more to Science subjects that sixth-formers would be familiar with, than to Arts or Humanities. By this method, she hoped to make sure that the students who came onto the programme did so with a full understanding of the nature of Linguistic study as it is practised by her own staff team.

5.4 Summary of Findings: Within Higher Education

Data from the HE students suggested the following:

- 61% had taken A Level English Language
- Of the above, 78% thought it was a good preparation for their degree course
- 71% said they had repeated material from their A Level studies
- Of the above, 94% welcomed the repetition
- 82% said that their Level 1 experience had matched their expectations
- Although students recognised the need for independent learning, most tended to have a narrow definition of what such learning is

Data from HE lecturers suggested the following:

- Where lecturers were aware of students having taken English Language A Level, those students were seen as more confident and lively
- Where lecturers knew about the nature of A Level work, they were more positive about their incoming students' strengths
- All lecturers recognised that students arrived with enthusiasm for their subject
- There was a perception that Curriculum 2000 had resulted in a culture of student dependency and insecurity
- Most lecturers were concerned about their students' lack of metalinguistic knowledge
- All lecturers participated in Open and Visit Days; some also contributed to A Level student conferences and workshops.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 HE Programmes

Findings from Section 3 of this study (see 3.7) indicate that sixth-formers have a range of different views about the nature of English Language/Linguistics, have clearly enjoyed different aspects of their AS/A Level studies, and expect to see different areas represented on degree programmes. Rather than seeing such variety as a problem, we suggest that a broad interpretation of English Language/Linguistics is a strength, and can only help to make the subject area richer, more interesting, and more relevant to contemporary life.

However, the diversity of options across HEIs need to be matched to students' interests and aspirations. If students of A Level English Language want to take their own writing skills further, then it may behove a very traditional department of Linguistics to point those students in another direction altogether. HEIs therefore need to be clear about the nature of their own programmes, and upfront about what they cannot offer as well as what they can. We would point to the HE lecturer we interviewed (see 5.3) who was at pains to describe to applicants the scientific nature of the programme she ran, for example.

6.2 Lecturers' Knowledge of A Level

We have already pointed to the desirability of HE lecturers understanding more about the nature of English Language A Level. While it is perfectly reasonable for HEI Level 1 programmes in English Language/Linguistics to 'start from scratch', particularly as they appear to draw students with a wide range of AS/A subjects, knowing more about the previous experiences of a large part of the incoming year group is advantageous in a number of ways. For a start, it allows students such as those described above who want to study writing, to be seen as rationally following what they have been taught, rather than misunderstanding the nature of their chosen course. In this case, even if particular A Level specifications are not known, a brief reading of the subject criteria for English Language A Level would reveal the requirement that students should produce, as well as analyse, texts.

Knowledge of A Level can also reveal incoming students' strengths, which can all too often be overlooked in anxieties about their weaknesses. It was notable that those tutors who were familiar with A Level work picked out the Investigation coursework as a positive counterpoint to what they saw as the exam-driven conformity of the school system. Knowledge also has explanatory power in the pedagogic sense: those HE lecturers who said students were *good at saying things about texts* were describing what is almost an article of faith among A Level English Language teachers, which is commitment to the use of real texts and their contexts, rather than decontextualised and contrived examples.

6.3 Meta Language

Both the A Level teachers and the HE lecturers expressed concern about their students' ability to use metalanguage. It is interesting that this concern was associated with grammar, rather than, say, aspects of social theory where, perhaps, it is easier to hide one's lack of specific knowledge.

In 3.6.7, A Level teachers described some of their approaches to the teaching of grammar, one of which was showing students why grammatical terms were needed. This, of course, is what we would all hope to do – show our students that using grammatical terms can make our analyses more precise and sophisticated. However, it may be that colleagues who are teaching on *English Language* courses are expecting students to do more than they would do on more traditional *Linguistics* courses, in going beyond 'knowing about grammar' to a point where they can critique that knowing. This is an ambitious aim, entailing a kind of metalinguistic reflexivity. It is certainly not the intention to question this kind of work, quite the opposite; however, it is important to recognise the complexity of the task being set.

6.4 Teacher Training

In a further part of 3.6.7, two teachers described the very different approaches they took to the teaching of grammar, and connected their approaches with the nature of their respective training. One teacher, as a Linguistics graduate, felt at ease with teaching grammar, and said the students enjoyed learning about this aspect of language use; another teacher, trained in Literature, felt insecure in this area and relied on her colleague's knowledge in shared sessions. These teachers had evolved a pragmatic solution to their own strengths and weaknesses, which is

to be applauded. However, there is a clear role for HE English Language/ Linguistics departments to provide Inset courses for practising teachers – on grammar, as well as on a range of other aspects of Linguistics. Only when teachers themselves feel confident in areas of language, can they decide how best to approach these areas with their students.

Aside from the needs of teachers currently in post, there is a question of the training received by prospective teachers of English and, indeed, the entry requirements for applicants to PGCE courses. The evidence provided here on the lack of training in aspects of Language is alarming, as is the idea that Linguistics graduates might find it harder to gain places on PGCE Secondary English courses than Literature graduates. However, our evidence amounts to a series of snapshots and needs much further investigation. Only then will we be able to say whether the teaching of English Language in the school sector is being adequately prepared for and supported.

6.5 Naming

The nature of naming has been a constant theme in this report. At GCSE we see 'English' being misnamed 'English Language', we see a range of 'Englishes' at A Level, then those same subjects called different things and sometimes not even being in the same departments in HEIs. On the UCAS site, 'English' encompasses both English Language and English Literature on front pages, but later on is more likely to mean just 'Literature'. Some of the course titles at HEIs need considerable amounts of metalinguistic and cultural awareness to understand.

One important factor in the HEI naming of courses is the question of academic integrity: how do one's academic peers view the name given to a course? Is it an accurate description of where that course sits, in terms of 'academy' membership? However, those names are also expected to be transparent to people with little or no knowledge of such concerns. It may be that in some cases the needs of this group have been neglected in order to meet the expectations of academic peers.

6.6 Independent Learning

There is a consensus across all phases covered in this report that independent learning is a beneficial and necessary part of a student's intellectual growth. At A Level, teachers are aware of the need for independent learning, and some at least make tentative steps towards it (see 3.6). Teachers at A Level, though, work under different circumstances to colleagues in HE. They see their students much more frequently, and for much of the time they conduct 'lessons', which are essentially practical working sessions. In this sector, therefore, independent learning often means students leading the sessions, doing presentations, rather than working on their own, without supervision on their progress. It must also be remembered that at A Level there is much more formative assessment than at HE, and that external examinations lead to league tables for institutions, and performance management reviews for staff. Understandably, therefore, if not necessarily correctly, too much independent learning can be seen as a dangerous risk.

In Section 5.3, some HE lecturers said that students tend to arrive with expectations of a highly structured learning environment. Examples of 'structure' included being given very precise instructions for assignments; expecting tutors to mark drafts of work; and expecting assessment to take place around very rigid criteria. This is, though, exactly the sort of experience they have had at A Level - in all their subjects, not just English.

One of the lecturers in Section 5.3 defined independent learning as the ability to think through problems, to pursue lines of enquiry, and to refine questions without constant help. Many Level 1 students, though, saw independent learning rather differently. Although they almost universally understood that independent learning was a necessary part of their degree study, and claimed to some extent to do it, for many this meant reading recommended texts and making notes on them. This mismatch between tutors' and students' understanding needs to be addressed.

If students arrive at university with little experience of independent learning, they need to be given clear guidelines on what it is, on how to develop their skills in this area, and on why it will help them in their progress. A corollary here is that HE staff themselves also need to agree on what they mean by independent learning and ensure that recommended reading, for example, is accessible to Level 1 students. A key point that emerged in our focus group meetings with A Level students was that the reading they are given at their level is almost always very teacher-controlled, and set up in order to do an activity. Recommended reading at HE Level is typically much more open ended, often with no assessment or activity attached. A Level students in the focus groups could understand that this might be of value, but were honest enough to say they did not know whether they would do it if there were no obvious and immediate outcomes.

6.7 Structure

Our final recommendation follows from 6.6 above. Giving more structure and focus to all aspects of teaching and learning, including independent learning, and especially at Level 1, is worth further consideration and development. This may well mean 'front-loading' provision and resources, either into Semester 1 or Level 1 as a whole. The opportunity cost of providing clear ways of learning alongside clear introductions to core subject content should make this an effective use of valuable staff time. It is clear from what we say above, and from our research in general, that Level 1 students, who in the main are A Level students after a short break or students returning to education, are not going to be the finished article as soon as they walk through the door. Extensive structured provision early on should enable more successful independent learning to follow later.

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http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/4516.htm)

7.2 Other sources of information

Awarding bodies:
www.aqa.org.uk
www.edexcel.org.uk
www.ocr.org.uk
www.wjec.co.uk

Graduate Teacher Training Agency:
www.gttr.ac.uk

Higher Education Statistics Agency:
www.hesa.ac.uk

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority:
www.qca.org.uk

Training and Development Agency:
www.tda.gov.uk

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service:
www.ucas.ac.uk

8. Appendices

Appendix 1 (Relates to Source 2: AS-level students, April 2006)

AS LEVEL STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for answering this questionnaire which will contribute towards a report on the links between A Level Language and Higher Education.

Name of your school or college:

Please circle appropriate answers

Are you planning to go to university within the next few years?   Yes   No

If you answered Yes, please go on to Section A.
If you answered No, please go on to Section B.

SECTION A

1. Are you planning to continue the study of English Language at university?

Yes   No

If your answer is No, please state which other subject(s) you might apply for:

2. Thinking about your English Language Studies so far, how would you rate the subject for the following? Circle a point on the scale of 5-1, where 5 means excellent and 1 means very poor:

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Interest value:	5	4	3	2	1
Relevance to everyday life:	5	4	3	2	1
Variety of work:	5	4	3	2	1

The following questions are aimed at those of you who are planning to study English Language at University.
If you answered No to question 1 above, thank you for completing this questionnaire.

3. Which of the following form part of your work in English Language? Tick where appropriate:

- Making notes in class   ………………..
- Reading textbooks on your own   ………………..
- Finding books about language in libraries/bookshops   ………………..
- Doing individual presentations   ………………..
- Doing group presentations   ………………..
- Working online   ………………..
- Writing data analyses   ………………..
- Writing argument-based essays   ………………..
- Doing original writing   ………………..

4. English Language as a subject can be called different names at university. What course names will you be searching when you apply for university?

5. What sorts of language activities and topics do you expect to be doing on your university course? List as many examples as you can think of.

SECTION B

1. What are you planning to do when you finish your A Levels?

2. Thinking about your English Language Studies so far, how would you rate the subject for the following? Circle a point on the scale of 5-1, where 5 means excellent and 1 means very poor:

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Interest value:	5	4	3	2	1
Relevance to everyday life:	5	4	3	2	1
Variety of work:	5	4	3	2	1

3. What skills do you think you have gained from AS level English Language?

Thank you.

Appendix 2 (Relates to Source 3: A Level teachers, April 2006)

1. To what extent does GCSE English offer a foundation for English Language A level?

2. What are typical classroom activities in A Level English Language?

3. To what extent do you feel responsible for preparing your A Level English Language students for degree work in the subject?

In discussion it was seen that there was certain ambiguity around the word 'preparing', so it was made clear that in this question we were asking teachers about preparing students academically, both in terms of subject content and teaching methodology.

4. How confident do you feel in advising your potential university candidates for this subject about relevant higher education courses and institutions?

5. What links (if any) have been offered to you by higher education institutions in your area? What kinds of link would you ideally like to see?

Appendix 3 (Relates to Source 4: A2 students, July 2006)

AS Study Days: July

1. What parts of your English Language course have you most enjoyed, and would like to study in greater depth?

2. What kinds of topics do you hope to study at university level?

3. What methods of teaching are used on your A Level English Language course? How much are you expected to contribute to lessons?

4. In A Level, you attend classes most days of the week taught by one or two teachers. What do you expect to be the teaching and learning situation at university?

5. Have you been given a reading list for your A Level English Language course?

6. How many books on English Language have you read so far? (Names of books would be useful if possible)

Appendix 4 (Relates to Source 7: HE students)

RESEARCH ON TRANSITION ISSUES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE/LINGUISTICS

We are researching connections between A Level English Language and study of the subject at degree level. Answers to the questions below will help future students understand more about studying Language at university.

All answers are confidential and no individuals or universities will be identified in our report.

Name of your university:

Title of degree you are taking:

1. Did you take A Level English Language?   (Please circle)   Yes   No

If you answered yes to question 1, please go on to answer all the following questions. If you answered no, please go on to answer questions from 4 onwards.

2. Do you think A Level English Language was a good preparation for your degree course? Please explain why/why not.

3. Did you repeat any material from A Level in Level 1 of your degree? If so, what? And if so, did it matter to you?

4. Has your course so far matched your expectations of what it would be when you applied?

5. What areas of Language study did you cover last year and what aspects did you most enjoy?

6. What would you say were the major differences between how you were taught at A Level and how you are taught now?

7. What do you understand by the term 'independent learning' and do you do it?

Appendix 5 (Relates to Source 8: HE lecturers)

QUESTIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION COLLEAGUES

1. Do you have any knowledge of English Language A Level courses?

2. Do you ask for English Language as part of your entry requirements?

3. What teaching methods do you use for Level 1 modules?

4. What is the content of your Level 1 programme?

5. What is your perception of your students' strengths and weaknesses on arrival?

6. Do you have any links with schools or FE?

7. How do you attempt to give prospective students a sense of what kind of language study you offer?

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