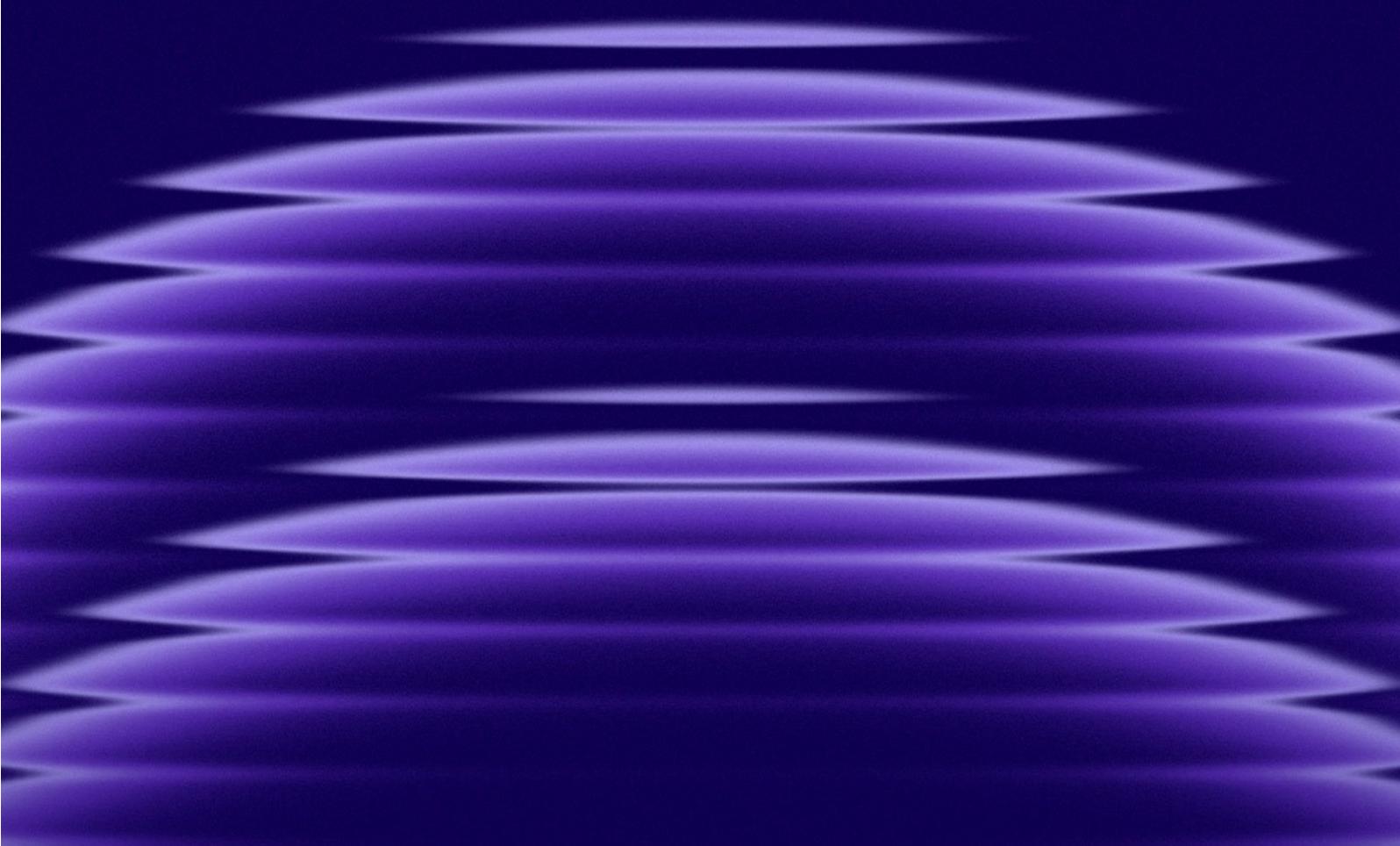


» Pearson

A Guide to Theories and Concepts 2026

A level English Language



Contents

Introduction	3
Concepts and issues across the specification	4
Component 1: Language variation	10
<hr/>	
Section A: Individual variation	10
Section B: Variation over time	11
Theories, concepts and issues	14
Answering the question	16
Component 2: Child Language Acquisition	17
<hr/>	
The development of written language	17
The development and acquisition of spoken language	22
Nativist approaches	22
Cognitive-Functional theories of child language development and acquisition: Michael Tomasello, Katherine Nelson, and Michael Halliday	23
Summary	26

Introduction

This guide has been created to provide general guidance to teachers on the theories and concepts that should be introduced to students during their study of A level English Language, providing an update to the guides published when the specification was first offered. These remain valid however:

[A guide to language frameworks and levels](#)

[Guide to issues, concepts and theories](#)

The guidance provided is not intended to be exhaustive, but to offer teachers and students a useful list of language features, theorists and concepts, with their definitions, to support teaching and learning and to encourage wider and independent reading based upon these.

This guide focuses more on Components 1 and 2 than on Components 3 and 4. Component 3 is synoptic, changes its focus each year, and gives guidance in the pre-release support for the theories, concepts and issues on which the students may choose to focus. Component 4 is very dependent on the choices the students make in their selection of tasks and their use of style models. However, the theories and concepts throughout this guide could also be of use in the synoptic Components 3 and 4.

Concepts and issues across the specification

This section of the guide will look at the language knowledge students need to bring to all components. Students analysing language data need:

- a basic toolkit to allow them to do this;
- to know the names and functions of the components of language;
- to be able to identify these correctly in order to discuss them in relation to the data they are analysing or the texts they have created.

It's hard for students to achieve well at AO1, AO2 and AO4 if they don't have the ability to identify these key features of language.

In order to achieve well at AO3, students also need to be aware of the way culture, social and regional identity and personal identity affect and influence the language we use.

An awareness of how language works by analysing style models and crafting their own writing to follow these is necessary to achieve well at AO5.

All of these aspects of language are relevant to all the examined components of A level English Language. Students need to bring their awareness of language to the analysis of data, apply this in the light of the question, or to the choices they have made in coursework.

This list is not prescriptive, especially at the levels of discourse and pragmatics.

Phonology

Spoken data given to the students in the exam will contain phonemic transcription if this is relevant to the analysis. Some phonetic symbols are used as these can give students relevant information; for example, the allophones /ʔ/, syllabic /n/: /ŋ/ and syllabic /l/: /l̩/.

To retain readability, we will only transcribe a feature once. If this is not transcribed again, it means the pronunciation remains the same as the original transcription. If a pronunciation is not **transcribed** at any point, then it cannot be inferred. For example, if /t/ is pronounced as /ʔ/ consistently in spoken data, it will not be transcribed again. If /t/ is not transcribed at all, then students should not make any assumptions about the way it is pronounced.

Often, changing pronunciation is relevant to the question, so students should look out for changing pronunciations, for example, variability in the use of the glottal stop, variability in TH-stopping, variability in /h/ dropping.

Accent can represent regional, social and cultural identity. If an aspect of pronunciation has been transcribed, this is because it is relevant to the question. /h/ dropping, glottal stops, /ɪn/ rather than /ɪŋ/ in -ing endings, TH and DH stopping are all features that occur in a range

of regional, social and global varieties. They are features that are found in British Black English, USA Black English Vernacular, Irish English, Indian English, regional accents and the language of some social groups.

Understanding of this is important for AOs 1 and 2, but also for AO3. Why is this form being used in this context?

It is important students remember that these forms are not 'errors' or 'lazy.' They are examples of pronunciation that occur in a particular variety. They may convey group identity, covert or overt prestige, regional or cultural identity, or may simply represent casual speech. Most speakers have a phonological range that moves towards or away from standard pronunciation.

Morphology

This looks at the internal structure of words, how they are formed and what the smallest meaningful units are.

Morphology isn't simply the identification of parts of a word. It is useful in the discussion of changing verb paradigms, word coining, creative uses of existing word structures, morphemes in regional and cultural forms and the ways in which children develop and acquire the morphological structure of the language.

Lexis

It's vital that students are able to identify word classes correctly when they are analysing the language. They can't talk accurately about adjectival or adverbial uses if they can't recognise adverbs and adjectives. They can't talk accurately about noun and verb phrases if they can't identify nouns and verbs.

The traditional definitions, for example: a noun is a naming word, a verb is a doing word, tend to confuse. In the sentence 'I went for a run', is 'run' a naming word or a doing word? You can make a case for both. However, 'run' in this sentence is marked as a noun as first of all, it follows a determiner, the indefinite article 'a'. It can be replaced by a pronoun. 'I went for a run. I enjoyed it.'

Some stative verbs do not comfortably fit in with the definition of 'doing.' 'I think therefore I am,' is problematic here. It's possible to describe the action of thinking, but how someone goes about *amming* is a bit trickier. Useful checks are tense or aspect change. If you put the sentence into the past: 'I thought, therefore I was,' or change from the perfect to the progressive form: 'I was going for a run' the verbs become clear.

Similar checks can be devised for all open word classes.

Word classes are also important in identifying a range of language functions. Semantic field is often found at the level of lexis. The descriptive nature of a text can often be found in the selection of a specific word, and in the use of adjectival or adverbial description. The verb phrase carries tense and aspect. It also carries modality in the use of modal auxiliaries.

Denotation and connotation often exist at the lexical level. These are useful for identifying, analysing and discussing topic, emotional impact, manipulation of meaning, and pragmatic aspects of language. The connotations of a word can be important to meaning and context. For example, 'dog' used literally; 'dog' applied to a man; 'dog' applied to a woman.

An understanding of lexis is an excellent way into a text. To achieve the higher levels of mark schemes, students need to access other levels of language as well, but lexis makes an excellent starting point.

Syntax

Syntax is the way morphemes and words combine into meaningful units such as phrases, clauses and sentences.

Students need to feel confident in identifying a range of structures and commenting on them when they are relevant to the question. It is useful for them to understand clause structure; the mood system; voice; modality; and to comment on the relevance of these to the question. Students often struggle to find meaningful things to say about syntax. They will comment that a text uses 'mostly declaratives,' and not take this any further because they can't find much more to say. Declaratives are the expected form in most texts. They express ideas, provide information and state facts. Voice, modality and transitivity in declaratives often provide more to analyse and discuss.

Often, it is easier to comment on the uses of interrogatives, imperatives, exclamations, or minor sentences. However, students should be able to look at a text and say more about the syntax than 'This is mostly declarative.' Declaratives can be deceptive. They can carry pragmatic meaning. They can be used to ask a question. Politeness in English means an instruction can be worded in the declarative form rather than the imperative. For example the declarative 'I would like you to read the next chapter,' means, 'Read the next chapter.' They can be in the active or passive voice.

Active and passive voice (the relationship between the action and the recipients of the action) is identified at the level of syntax. Voice is usually a feature of declarative and interrogative clauses. For example, 'The man was bitten by the dog' (declarative); 'Was the man bitten by the dog?' (interrogative). They can occur in imperatives using 'let,' though this is rare. For example, 'Let the door be opened.'

Discourse

Discourse analysis is very relevant to achievement at AO3, as discourse looks at language above the sentence level, and language in context. It looks at how meaning is constructed in units of text, written, spoken or electronic.

An interesting recent example that can be looked at via discourse analysis is a redesign of litter bins in Sheffield. After some serious incidents where local parks were trashed by rubbish, the council responded by supplying brightly coloured bins which carried imperatives written in the local dialect: 'Purrit int bin'; 'Chuck it in'; and 'Tek it 'ome'.

Generally, imperatives in public discourse can be seen as impolite in English. We tend to be indirect with our instructions: 'Would you...?' 'I'd like you to...' However, these visually attractive bins with their imperative clauses gave instruction, were humourous and created a community by using local forms of the language.

Students need to develop an awareness of the discourse aspect of texts in order to access the higher marks levels.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is often defined as what the producer of a text means, beyond the meaning that comes from purely linguistic knowledge. Shared knowledge of context and society allows language to be cryptic, indirect and sometimes apparently contradictory; but in most cases, native speakers will understand. Learners of a language may struggle with pragmatic meaning even when they have reached a high level of proficiency. Neurodiverse people can also struggle with pragmatic aspects.

A simple example is the negative imperative 'Don't ask.' It appears to be a clear instruction not to query something (like the instruction on USA street signs 'Don't Walk' is a clear instruction not to cross the road). However, in most cases where 'Don't ask,' is used, it carries a much wider meaning:

Did you have a good Christmas?

Don't ask.

How are you?

Don't ask.

The TV programme 'The Big Bang Theory' gives good examples of pragmatics in discourse. Sheldon's tendency to take utterances literally, his inability to identify implicature and presupposition are a core part of the character.

Aspects of pragmatics that students might find useful are presupposition and implicature.

Presupposition

Presuppositions are implicit assumptions about the world whose truth is taken for granted. They can often be used in persuasive language to steer the audience towards the assumption the producer of the text wants the receiver to make. For example, the question, 'Were you speeding when you jumped the red light,' presupposes the receiver of the question jumped the light. This can be an important aspect of personal identity, language and power, and journalism.

Implicature

Implicature refers to the implied meaning of an utterance that is not explicitly stated. A useful approach to implicature is the Co-operative Principle proposed by H P Grice.

A lot of students misunderstand this useful analytical tool. Grice proposes four maxims, and suggests that we assume that the participants of a conversation will cooperate with each other to allow conversation to take place.

He broke this down into four maxims: **relevance, quality, quantity, clarity**.

People do not always observe these maxims. Failure to observe the maxims – talking too much, making irrelevant comments etc, may hamper communication, but do not create implicature. Grice's co-operative principle looks at the way openly **flouting the maxims** can create implicature.

The exchanges above flout Grice's maxim of relevance. 'Don't ask' is not an informative response and therefore flouts the maxims of quantity and relevance. However, they create implicature and the listener will interpret the response as meaning 'I didn't have a good time,' or 'something went wrong.'

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Mark Anthony flouts the maxim of quantity and quality with his repetition of a statement he clearly does not believe is true: 'Brutus is an honourable man' creating the implicature that Brutus is not honourable at all.

Synthetic personalisation

Synthetic personalisation is a term developed by **Norman Fairclough** and identifies the process of addressing a mass audience as though they were individuals. It can assume the existence of a group with shared goals and beliefs. This is done through inclusive language usage. It is a device of power and persuasion, often found in political speeches, journalism, and advertising. It is created through direct address, inclusive pronouns, assumptions of membership of a group ('We, the people'; 'animal lovers'; 'people who care') and sometimes the assumption of an external opposition – an ethnic, social, cultural or religious group that are presented as a threat. The Sheffield bins mentioned above could be seen as an example of synthetic personalisation. The mass audience of park users felt addressed individually through the inclusive use of the local dialect. Students sometimes make the mistake of assuming any inclusive use of pronouns creates synthetic personalisation, but in practice synthetic personalisation will usually also involve the use of possessive pronouns giving the effect of sharing personal information or beliefs; and treating the texts as a two-way discourse through the use of questions, tag questions, and imperatives.

Politeness

There is no one definition of linguistic politeness. It has been defined as an awareness of the face needs of participants in an interaction, the presentation of positive or negative face.

Linguistic politeness had nothing to do with 'manners'. Politeness looks at the way language users explore the social needs of themselves and others in interaction: the presentation of a persona; the need to be accepted or liked; the attitude presented to others; and negotiating wants and needs.

Positive politeness emphasises solidarity and moves towards others in an interaction: shared dialect, shared levels of formality, and direct requests.

Negative politeness preserves the right not to be imposed upon. This tends to use more formal language, indirect requests and maintains any social distance between speakers.

How are these relevant to the exam questions?

All of these theories, concepts and issues can be relevant to all components. Students need the ability to analyse language, identifying the different aspects correctly, and analysing how these operate in relation to the question.

Component 1: Language variation

Section A: Individual variation

Approaching the exam

Students must read the question and analyse the texts given with the question in mind. They also need to make use of the contextual information given about the texts in the Source Booklet.

Students should identify the concepts and issues, and the appropriate level of language analysis from all the aspects listed in the first section of this guide to look at the way individuals use language to present themselves.

Analysis of language levels should take students into relevant areas of discourse and pragmatics.

For example, Text A of the 2025 paper explores mental health issues. The introductory information identified this as a promotional text for a book about men's mental health.

A lot of students identified important aspects of lexis; the use of abstract nouns relating to the field of mental health: *breakdown, depression*; and stative verbs also related to the lexical field: *cope, struggling, confront*. Students achieved more highly when they linked this to the promotional aspects of the text and looked at the way the text moved concepts of breakdown into concepts of recovery: *the recovery process; other people; dealing, trying*; so the text ends on a positive note.

A lot of students identified the use of pronouns and direct address. Those who achieved more highly identified synthetic personalisation and linked this to the promotional aspects.

More information about this can be found in the mark scheme and in the examiner's report, available on the website.

Section B: Variation over time

As with all the components, language analysis using appropriate aspects listed in the first section of this guide are important. Earlier forms of English use the same aspects of language, but sometimes in different ways. This section of the guide looks at useful theories and concepts for language change. It is not intended to be exclusive or to include all possible theories and theorists.

Language change

The English Language is over a thousand years old. The earlier forms, Old English and Middle English will not be used for exam purposes, and they are very different from Modern English. However, an awareness of these earlier forms can help students to understand more about the nature of language change, and why some aspects of later English are as they are.

Approaching the exam

Students need to read the question and analyse the texts given with the question in mind. They also need to read the contextual information given about the texts in the Source Booklet, as this will give them useful guidance.

Concepts and issues can be applied to the language data given and be used to discuss and analyse the aspects of language over time on which the question is focusing.

Responding to language change data

When changes first occur, they are often seen as 'wrong,' 'errors', 'lazy.' However, language changes all the time for a range of reasons and it is important that students see language change as an inevitable feature of any living language.

The specification looks at the English Language from around 1550, the start of Early Modern English to the present day. However, it is useful for students to be aware of earlier forms, to understand how the structure of English has changed, how some aspects are still with us and how some of the most common words we use – some conjunctions, prepositions, words for clothes, for family members, food and drink, or body parts all come from the earliest form, Old English.

Phonology and orthography

Spoken forms of early texts are not available. Sound recording did not start until towards the end of the 19th century. Phonological information can only be gained from spelling, rhyme, metre, and later from dictionaries that give this information.

Some of our more eccentric spelling comes from the phonology of Old English. Old English writing seems to have been phonetic. For example, the word *cneo*, meaning *knee*, was pronounced as it was spelled with an initial /k/. This remains in the modern spelling even though the pronunciation has changed.

In some of the earlier texts that appear in the exam, earlier orthography, spelling or evidence of pronunciation can be seen. For example, the word 'the' was never pronounced /ji:/. Early forms used the symbol thorn from the runic alphabet, <þ>. Printers began to use <y> instead, because it was available, hence 'ye' as a spelling of 'the'.

Morphology

The structure of words has changed over the centuries. For example, verb paradigms have changed. Older forms of English use the verb endings -est and -eth in the second- and third-person singular. Old English used inflections rather than word order. These have largely vanished, though we still have the genitive form in the possessive 's.

Words have also been coined by combining separate morphemes, or even by creating new morphemes. For example, the word *alcoholic* (originally an adjective but now often used as a noun) is made up of the word or free morpheme 'alcohol' and the bound morpheme '-ic', used to create adjectives such as *Byronic*, *atomic* etc. However, this has led to the coining of words such as 'chocoholic,' and 'workaholic,' in which the newly created bound morpheme 'oholic' or 'aholic' is used to mean 'addicted to,' and can be added to many nouns.

Recently, in British English, the bound morpheme -ology has gained status as a word in some contexts, probably derived from a TV advert in which 'an ology' defines an academic subject.

Lexis

Students need to be aware of the origins of words, the ways they enter the language and that meanings change over time. Words can come from a wide range of sources including borrowing, semantic change and class shift. For example, the verb 'to medal' has recently developed from the noun 'medal.'

Syntax

Modern English is an SVO language, where the preferred form is Subject, Verb, Object. Old English used morphology in the form of inflections to signal the function of a word or phrase in a clause. For example, the first line of the poem 'The Dream of the Rood', translates into modern English as 'Behold! I will tell the best of dreams.' The Old English version is, 'Hwæt! Ic swefne cyst secgan wylle;' literally, 'Behold! I of dreams the best tell will.'

By the Early Modern English period, word order is much the same as modern English, with a few differences. This extract from the Lisle letters, in 1533, in which Lady Lisle intercedes with Cromwell on behalf of an offender shows the SVO structure of modern English: 'I am so bold once again to be a suitor unto you; tenderly desiring you to be a good master unto this bearer, who is like to have much wrong by the Abbot of Bruton, if you be not his singular good master.'

The main differences are that Early Modern English is more elaborate in its address and politeness than modern English. Examples include: the use of 'wrong' to mean physical hurt or harm; the use of 'tenderly' in a formal letter which would be seen as more intimate in modern English; or the use of subjunctive 'be,' which is falling out of use in modern English.

Theories, concepts and issues

Language change occurs under a range of different influences, and changes occur at all levels. Some useful theorists include:

Jean Aitchison

PIDC model

- **Potential:** There is a gap or a need for change in the language, e.g. the current need for non-binary singular third person pronouns
- **Implementation:** Change occurs, usually through usage, e.g. the move towards shorter sentences in much of current written communication
- **Diffusion:** The spread of changes through different social groups and contexts, e.g. the spread of informalisation
- **Codification:** The process by which changes become the accepted norm, e.g. the inclusion of new words in dictionaries.

Suzanne Romaine

Internal and external influences

Language changes as a result of **internal influences**, an ongoing process under the influences of changing social concepts and the development of technology, such as the printing press, the dictionary and new word formation; and **external influences** including social contexts such as social or cultural group, class and gender.

Charles Hockett

Random fluctuation

Language is unstable and changes unpredictably because of random errors and events within the language system as a response to the ever-changing context of language use and its users. For example, the 21st century verb 'pwn' meaning 'totally defeat,' or (in reference to hacking) 'to gain illegal access to.' A noun has been formed from this, 'pwnage.' It originated from leetspeak in online gaming, probably from a common typo caused by the close proximity of the graphemes <o> and <p> on keyboards. The words 'hacking' 'leetspeak' and 'typo' are other examples of recent additions to the language.

Michael Halliday

Functional theory. Language changes to meet changing needs.

This is not an exhaustive list. Students need to be aware of some of the theories that attempt to account for language change and where appropriate, reference them in the analysis. An awareness of the mechanisms of change and the possible reasons for these is more important than applying a theorist's name.

Answering the question

It is important that students answer the question: *Analyse and compare the ways that both texts demonstrate how this type of language has changed over time.*

Students are not expected to be social historians. They need to explore the social and cultural issues they can infer from the texts. These comments can and often should be speculative, couched in tentative language. For example, the more elaborate politeness in the extract from the Lisle letters above suggests a much more formal attitude towards written communication, especially where a power imbalance exists, than occurs in modern English.

Another example of social and cultural change can be found in the 2018 paper which used texts giving accounts of sea journeys, one from 1578, the other from 2016 which showed the changing nature of this form of travel and attitudes to it. The earlier text focuses on the hardships, discomforts and dangers of sea voyages, which were undertaken at the time for purposes of exploration and discovery. The modern text sees the sea voyage as vacation, a concept not available to most people in the 16th century, and focuses on ease and luxury. The earlier text suggests the existence of a team of people working together to overcome hazard; the later text focuses very much on the enjoyment of the individual being served by others. Students do not need to be aware of the history of the period to identify these different attitudes towards this form of travel.

Whatever the data, students need to analyse it in a way that answers the question. Too many students fall into the trap of writing an essay about the processes of language change rather than doing this. If their response is not clearly linked to the data, and does not attempt to answer the question, they will not achieve highly. Their comments may be accurate, but if it isn't linked clearly to the question and the data, it will not achieve the higher levels.

Component 2: Child Language Acquisition

This section of the guide looks at useful theories and concepts for Child Language Acquisition. It is not intended to be exhaustive. It does not look at Piaget or Vygotsky, both of whom are often usefully quoted by students. Skinner's behaviourist theories have probably been superseded by later theorists. Some of the concepts and issues looked at in Section 1 can also be relevant to this topic.

The component focuses on actual examples of child language and includes both spoken and written language. In each series, either written or spoken language acquisition is assessed.

Spoken language may include monologues, conversations between adults and children and conversations between children. This list is not exhaustive.

Written language may include stories, work done in school, independent writing, fiction and non-fiction.

Approaching the exam

Students need to read the question to see which aspects of child language they are being asked to explore. They also need to read the contextual information given about the texts in the Source Booklet, as this will give them useful guidance.

Concepts and issues can be applied to the language data given and used to discuss and analyse the aspects of child language acquisition on which the question is focusing.

The development of written language

Current theories about child language development and acquisition can be broadly divided into two areas: nativist approaches and cognitive-functional approaches.

Students are not expected to choose between these approaches, but to be aware of the important aspects of these and consider them in relation of child language data.

Children's development of reading and writing skills is often seen as a process that happens outside the home, in a school or nursery environment. However, in an age of literacy, where written language is part of the environment, children are exposed to written language from birth.

Early spoken language includes sounds like cooing, repetitive sounds and babbling. It also includes gesture, like pointing. Written language, like spoken language, involves the understanding of an important concept: 'this' (a sound or a mark on paper) stands for 'that' (some concept in the world).

The nativist vs cognitive-functionalist divide, explained below, is not so marked in relation to written language. Written language develops in an environment of spoken language. It also starts to develop before formal education begins.

The 21st century child grows up in a rich textual landscape in which they will experience a vast range of texts in a multimodal environment. Experimental evidence suggests they can identify signs and logos before they can clearly articulate their first word.

They experience written language through:

- Environmental print: shop signs and logos, traffic signals, posters, hoardings etc.
- Being read to by adults
- Observing adults reading
- Involving themselves in writing tasks
- Drawing
- Using reading and writing in imaginative play

Emergent literacy

Literacy begins at birth. Children grow up in an environment rich in written language. They live in a world of signs they recognise and understand long before they enter the classroom. They are also exposed to written language from a very early age through being read to, observing adults reading or looking at screen, involving themselves in writing tasks, drawing, using reading and writing in imaginative play.

The linguist and semiotician **Gunther Kress** believed that the way children create meaning is fundamental to understanding the way their literacy develops.

Lev Vygotsky suggested that 'make-believe play, drawing and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language.' He saw this as part of a socially-mediated interaction in which learning is guided by more experienced peers or adults, the zone of proximal development.

Emergent reading

Any activity in which an individual comprehends (or attempts or pretends in play to comprehend) a message encoded in graphic signs.

Emergent writing

Any occasion in which an individual manipulates appropriate tools to produce (or attempt to produce) graphic signs representing oral speech.

Literacy in the home

Evidence suggests that access to literacy: books, access to libraries, shared reading, encouragement of early writing can have a profound effect on a child's later development.

Functional perspective

Writing for a purpose. Children understand quite soon that writing is done for a purpose and that different writing has different functions. Even in the pre-literate stage, before they have the formal skills of reading and writing, they recognise that writing has a distinctive shape and form, and that this shape and form is important to the meaning of the text.

What are children doing when they start to write?

There comes a point when a child starts to identify letters with meaning and distinguish between drawing and writing. The basic concepts a child brings to their earliest experiences of literacy are that:

- Print carries meaning
- Print is different from drawings
- Speech can be encoded in print
- Print can be read out loud
- Print has direction (in English, left to right)

These appear at a very early stage and are soon superseded by forms that represent, or attempt to represent, conventional writing.

Writing and reading are not translating and deciphering. When children begin to write, they are not simply copying from adult models. It is a process of learning and exploration that can be observed by looking at children's writing.

It is a recognised phenomenon of spoken language that children will develop forms that are not part of the adult system in the process of language acquisition, and will be resistant to correction.

In early literacy, a child is also experimenting with signs, in this case, visual symbols that create meaning. This experimentation leads to an understanding of how the system works. Written language is similar to spoken in that it has rules that can be inconsistent. The English

spelling system is a case in point. As discussed in the Language Change section of this guide, English spelling was codified before it was standardised which leads to illogical forms that have to be learned. For example, '/k/ is for /kɑʊ/' has an internal logic that '/k/ is for /ni:/' does not.

Beware the 'deficit model'

Students who adopt a deficit model and dismiss these early forms as 'errors' or 'mistakes,' cut their analysis short and remove the opportunity for discriminating, controlled analysis or even critical and evaluative analysis.

Phonology and early writing

When children enter the education system (and frequently before this) they start to learn about the link between sound and symbol, between phoneme and grapheme.

Current educational policy focuses on the teaching of phonics, using multi-sensory tasks including songs, stories and rhymes. The aims of these programmes are to ensure that children understand the link between grapheme and phoneme in a carefully planned sequence. Written language is seen as a form of code. Children learn how to decode and encode it.

They are taught to blend phonemes (merge individual phonemes into words) and to segment phonemes (split words into individual phonemes) and are taught that words can be put together and taken apart.

Writing in early education

Children under five start formal learning of the writing system as soon as they start school. They have to acquire a very complex system, but many if not most children come into the education system already aware of a complex system of signs, and understand that marks on a page can carry meaning.

Children learn what writing looks like and to understand that marks on a page relate to spoken words and carry meaning. They also come to understand that letter forms can vary up to a point, but not to the point of inverting them. and and are all the same letter, but and <d> are different.

They acquire the knowledge that there are lots of symbols and they can be combined in different ways.

Children come to understand that they can communicate in this way too, but there are conventions that have to be followed in order to make this new code work. These

conventions include letter forms, use of capitals and lower case, directionality (left to right in English), spacing between words and punctuation.

They need to understand that the function of a text may influence its form and content. For example, lists run down a page, crosswords contain one letter in each box, headings run across a page and are different from the main text.

Very early writing consists of marks on a page that may contain letter-like forms and shows some awareness of general form.

Writing involves understanding, but also the development of motor skills and the practical task of pen control. In the very early stages of writing, children will ignore direction and fit their writing anywhere on the page.

As children develop writing skills, the differences between spoken and written language become more marked as they understand the different requirements of the two forms.

Recommended books and resources

The Routledge Handbook of Literacy Studies, ed. Jennifer Rowsell, Routledge, February 2020

Web sources

The National Literacy Trust [research report on literacy in the home](#).

[Sheffield REAL project](#) The Sheffield REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) project was carried out by Professors Cathy Nutbrown and Peter Hannan, looking at children's early development of literacy.

The development and acquisition of spoken language

Nativist approaches

Important theorists: Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker

Nativist theories of child language acquisition and development claim that children possess an inborn capacity for acquiring language, relying more on internal cognitive processes than on external reinforcement. Central to this view are several key ideas:

Universal grammar

This suggests that all languages share fundamental structural features. Children are born equipped to recognise and apply these as they experience their native language.

Critical period: Eric Lenneberg

There may be a limited developmental window - typically before adolescence - during which children learn language most easily and effectively. **Lenneberg** has been proven wrong in the detail (language acquisition starts before birth; the period at which the sensitivity to language starts to decline is almost certainly earlier than the early teens), but there is still interest in the concept of a critical period.

Poverty of the stimulus

The claim that the language children hear does not provide enough content, correction or negative feedback to account for their rapid mastery of complex grammar. Children acquire their native language very quickly, which suggests an innate linguistic framework.

Biological predisposition

The belief that the human brain is hardwired for language, enabling children to grasp underlying grammatical principles from an early age.

However, there are challenges to nativist theory, which is not based on empirical evidence. The poverty of stimulus claim is not well supported by observation of children. Adult use of child directed speech provides simplification, exemplification, input, and error correction required for children's learning needs.

Cognitive-Functional theories of child language development and acquisition: Michael Tomasello, Katherine Nelson, and Michael Halliday

Cognitive-functional approaches to child language acquisition stress the role of language in helping children understand and engage with the world around them. Rather than viewing language as an abstract system, these approaches focus on how children create meaning through use and how language develops within genuine social and cognitive contexts. Key ideas include:

Cognitive and communicative principles

Children build grammar by drawing on their developing cognitive abilities. They start to put together language in a way that combines meaning, context and use.

Constructive interaction

Language development is seen as emerging from children's active engagement with their linguistic environment, grounded in the everyday ways they hear and use language.

Meaning and purpose

Language becomes the means by which children can express meaning, influence the world around them, fulfil purposes in the context of day-to-day interactions.

Cognitive and pragmatic perspectives

Functional approaches show how language reflects human ways of thinking. Language development and acquisition occur within social and cultural settings, including developing cognition and pragmatic insights.

Functionality in language

Language forms part of children's conceptual and social lives. Language is acquired because it serves meaningful purposes.

Theorists

Michael Halliday

The theorist Michael Halliday takes a functional approach to language development and acquisition. Students often misunderstand Halliday's approach and try to analyse the language of older children (2+) using Halliday's seven functions, that are only appropriate for a very young child.

Phase 1: 6 – 18 months

Halliday identifies seven functions in early language around the ages of 6 – 18 months: instrumental, personal, regulatory, interactional, imaginative, representational, and heuristic. These seven functions are part of the very early stages of language development and are often identified before the child is using recognisable words or phrases. At this early stage, language also creates meaning by the use of sounds, intonation and gesture.

Phase 2: 18 – 24 months

This is when the child is making the transition from child to adult language. Children use language to perform the Phase 1 functions well before they are at the stage of using recognisable words or phrases. In Phase 2, there is a rapid increase in vocabulary, the use of structures, and the child's ability to interact through dialogue. They are aware they can do things with language and can express more than one function at a time. They use language to find out about things, and they use language to interact with others.

Halliday calls these Phase 2 functions **macrofunctions**.

Language used to find out about things, to explore the environment, Halliday calls the **Mathetic macrofunction**. This is language as learning.

Language used to interact with people, to influence them, to get what the child wants, he calls the **Pragmatic macrofunction**. This is language as action.

Phase 3: From 24 months

In this phase, children are moving into adult language. In phase 2, they could use language to find out about things and to do things. In phase 3, they can use language to do both at the same time. Halliday identifies these functions as **metafunctions**: ideational, interpersonal and textual.

The **ideational** metafunction is concerned with the use of language to represent the world around us, to describe, to share; and to make the grammatical choices that allow language to do this.

The **interpersonal** metafunction concerns establishing and maintaining the relationship between speaker and listener.

The **textual** metafunction organises the language itself, the language choices that ‘create coherent text – text that coheres within itself and with the context of situation.’

(Halliday, M.A.K. 2003. *On the "architecture" of human language. In On Language and Linguistics. Volume 3 in The Collected Works of M.A.K. Halliday. London and New York: Equinox. p. 17*)

It is important that students don't apply the functions from an earlier stage to data where the child is in, or moving into, Phase 2 or Phase 3 where the functions combine to produce adult forms.

Michael Tomasello

Tomasello's usage-based theory of child language acquisition and development suggests that language structure emerges from language use. He emphasises the role of social interaction, and the question *What is language for?*

Tomasello suggests that language acquisition is rooted in the communicative context in which it is used. Grammar is not innate. The structures of language are acquired through experience and interaction with others. Tomasello's theory is based on two main principles: meaning is use, and structure emerges from use.

Key aspects of this theory are

- Intention reading
- Pattern finding
- Joint attention

Intention reading

This refers to the ways children discern the goals or intentions of mature speakers and reconstruct the intended meaning of the utterances. It links with early, non-verbal communication and interaction (for example, gestures like pointing), followed by the combination of gesture and word and the different intentions that can be understood from these.

Pattern finding

Children identify patterns in language via their cognitive skills. Combining words allows them to create patterns that create abstract schemas. Tomasello looks in particular at the **pivot-open schema** proposed by **Braine**, where one word is dominant, for example *more* or

no and leaves an open slot that can be filled by a range of words, e.g.: *milk, story, play*. This moves on to the item-based construction that allows children to combine multiple words.

Summary

Both Tomasello and Halliday's theories challenge the nativist position and see language as a product of cognitive development and social interaction.

Both theorists place importance on the functions of language and the role these functions play in the process of language acquisition and development.

Both theorists place importance on the transitivity system in the development of longer structures. This involves the understanding of the relationships between actions and the objects they refer to.

Nativist or functionalist?

Students do not need to take sides in this debate. They need to be aware of the nature of the theories and the challenges to them. They need an awareness of the different theories about child language acquisition and development, and apply them to the data they see in a way that answers the question. They can question the theories where the data suggests this, and consider the way in which the theories explain what they are seeing. This allows them to develop their discussion and analysis in a critical and evaluative way. It's important that they understand that one example will not 'prove' or 'disprove' a theory.

Child directed speech

Observations show that adults and older children use a special register when talking to young children, known as **child directed speech**. This simplifies, reformulates and clarifies at all levels. Child directed speech challenges Chomsky's 'poverty of the stimulus' claims.

Synoptic aspects

As with all components, the aspects of language studied in relation to child language acquisition and development can be relevant to other components. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) model of language can be applied to all texts. The metafunctions are not confined to child language and Halliday's work on discourse analysis is both accessible and useful.

The functionalist theories clearly have uses beyond the understanding and discussion of child language and students should be encouraged to look at these theories and concepts about language in relation to the data they analyse in other components and in their coursework.

Recommended book: *Child Language: Acquisition and development*, 2nd edition, Matthew Saxton, Sage, November 2017.

This covers a range of theories and includes student activities and website addresses. It does not include Halliday's very important insights. Halliday's book about child language, *Learning How to Mean*, is unfortunately out of print, but his approaches are still very relevant.