

Examiners' Report Summer 2008

IGCSE

IGCSE English Language (4355)

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Contents

1.	4355 1F	1
2.	4355 2H	3
3.	4355 03	5
4.	4355 04	9
5.	Statistics	11

4355 1F

This paper produced a wide range of responses, and proved an effective means of assessing the candidates

Section A - Reading

The passage, concerning migration by wagon, with the family leaving their ' little house in the Big Woods', seemed to appeal to the candidates; and there were few obvious examples of comprehension difficulties with the passage as a whole.

Q1-4 seemed to prove straightforward for most candidates, although in a handful of cases the references were taken from other parts of the passage than those suggested (Q2-4); and some candidates failed to give the required number of examples (also Q2-4). Close attention to the instructions is vital.

Question 5 required inferential skill, and proved a good discriminator; as did question 6, which focused on the writer's technique: it was pleasing to see that many candidates had been well prepared for this type of question.

Section B - Reading and Writing

This section was based on the 'Romanian babies ' passage from The Anthology, a passage which always seems to elicit lively responses. Q7 generally reflected a fair understanding of the writer 's techniques, as they are seen throughout the passage, though there was often more on content than on an analysis of style - the third bullet point was the one least effectively followed, in other words.

Q8 brought out some strong writing, as candidates aired their views on an emotive subject, and the views were often expressed with clarity. At the weaker end, candidates were not quite able to do justice to their opinions, as their ideas were often undeveloped.

Section C - Writing

As with Q8, the task set for Q9 seemed to present few difficulties in itself, and proved a an effective stimulus. In some cases there was an over-reliance on direct personal experience (perhaps leaning too heavily on the third bullet point) so that the content of the 'article' became wholly anecdotal, offering very little in the way of an objective response to the task: no over-view was offered in such cases, where the perspective was exclusively personal.

Stronger responses reflected a clear sense of the purpose and audience for the writing these were, of course, specified in the question, and perhaps it would benefit some candidates if this need to focus on the precise demands of the question could be reinforced. Weaker responses tended to be a little brief on this Section, and, although no word limit is suggested, there is advice to ' spend about 40 minutes on this Section, giving some indication that a moderately sustained piece of composition is expected.

4355 2H

Introduction

There was a wide spread of ability across this large number, with some very impressive work at the top end. Generally the candidates managed the tasks well, and there seemed to be relatively few problems with timing and incomplete responses.

Section A

Questions in this section were based on the Joel Deutsch passage, which deals with the gradual loss of eyesight, in dramatic circumstances. The content of the passage seemed to appeal to most candidates, and the writer's account of his emotional experiences was understood clearly.

Q1-2 caused very few candidates any problems - and, indeed, these questions should be within the range of any candidate properly entered for Paper 2H.

Q3 began to show the greater ability of some candidates, particularly as the 'own words' instruction was not always followed; and there was also a range of ability evident in the responses to Question 4. Some analysis of language and style was required for a complete response to Q4, and this was not always offered: many candidates dealt adequately with the content of the passage (bullet points 1 and 2) but gave less weight to the 'How' aspect of the question, as highlighted in bullet point 3. Also, candidates are strongly advised to look at the number of marks available for each question, as this suggests the length, and the degree of detail, which examiners are expecting. Thus, Q4 was worth 12 marks, more than half of the total for Section A, and yet some candidates gave only a very brief response, which was clearly insufficient for such a high-value question.

Section B

This Section was based on the passage about Karen Darke's heroic reaction to her accident, 'I Never Thought I could be this Lucky', from The Anthology. Like the passage in Section A, this passage reveals strong emotions in a controlled way, sometimes understated and candidates generally seemed to have responded with considerable sympathy to Karen Darke's story, and to have been well prepared for this Section of the paper.

Q5 elicited some good answers, although some of the 'brief' quotations were rather lengthy: examiners are looking for the candidate's own views, in this question, supported by brief and well chosen references to the passage, rather than for extended extracts.

Question 4, the real discriminator between the weaker answers and the more accomplished lay in whether the candidate focused on the 'How' aspect of the question successfully: simply identifying the dramatic and emotive nature of the content did not constitute a complete answer, as some developed analysis of style and technique is also looked for, for the highest grades.

Q6 required a different approach, and the skills of accurate and appropriate expression, and of good organisation, were those which were looked for here. Many

candidates produced polished writing for Q6, organising their material effectively. As emphasised earlier, it is important for candidates to keep in mind the allocation of marks for the various questions: there were some anecdotal answers to Q6, and these were over-long, at the expense of time which could have been more profitably spent on the 'harder', more analytical, Q5.

Section C - Writing

Q7 carries 20 marks, with a recommendation of 40 minutes: in this context, some responses were a little thin, although the majority of candidates produced balanced and sustained answers across the paper as a whole.

The instruction to 'Describe' calls for a certain degree of objectivity, as candidates needed to think clearly about the 'skill or talent' they were writing about: this was not always offered, however, and some responses lacked organisation and perspective, in handling the subject matter. Other candidates gained higher marks by finding and sustaining an appropriate tone and style.

Interpretations of 'skill or talent' were very varied, as candidates ranged from the more banal and obvious - if I could kick a football accurately I could become a millionaire - to those who saw their 'talent' in terms of personality, or character, perhaps gifted to them by their God. All interpretations were, of course, equally welcome, provided that the content was relevant to the demands of the question.

Some candidates did not do justice to the two elements of the question, writing more about the talent than about the consequences on their lives: while a precisely equal balance of these two was not necessary, it was something of a misjudgement to write almost exclusively about one part, at the expense of the other.

4355 03

Q1 Reading

Candidates had been well prepared for the reading question. The question's focus on the interest generated by the writer in Madame Loisel provided relatively straightforward subject matter but at the same time there was much to write about. As a consequence most answers were very lengthy and the most serious challenge faced by candidates was covering all the bullet points in the time available, a process which involved selecting key points and quotations as deftly as possible. Some candidates wrote several sides on the first two bullet points and then addressed the last two in a few short, clearly hurried lines. Some streamlined their approach by dealing with the use of language as they wrote about the other bullet points. This approach worked very well and pre-empted the need to add a section on the linguistic features at the end.

The key issue for examiners was discriminating between candidates who were answering the question and those who were reproducing partially relevant generic notes. There were a significant number of candidates who wrote about the appeal of the story as a whole rather than the character of Madame Loisel. Some wrote 'English Literature' style character studies; others relied heavily on narrating or paraphrasing the story with a few focusing comments. Most candidates, however, did try to focus on how the writer made the character interesting for the reader and provided viable interpretations of the story. Most candidates seemed to have little sympathy with her. The majority of answers conveyed the reader's interest in Madame Loisel in very moralistic terms - broadly, they argued, she illustrated how pride comes before a fall but also she redeemed herself at the end by her hard work; this approach produced many answers that matched the 9-10 mark band descriptor of "sound and sustained". Some rather more searching, perceptive answers saw the writer as presenting Madame Loisel as a nineteenth century Cinderella and picked up on the more cynically ironic aspects, for instance the humorous contrast between her fantastic social ambitions and the reality of her life as the wife of a junior clerk; relatively few candidates accessed the highest band which requires "cogent and original exploration" and "sophisticated and individualistic interpretation." It is possible to see Mathilde as an attractive, bright girl who is a victim of fate, of men, of Madame Forestiere, of a suffocating class system, of the writer himself. A few exceptional candidates explored such possibilities.

The strength and weakness of many candidates' answers was that they were conscientiously and for the most part relevantly reproducing taught notes, but were not thinking enough for themselves about those features of the presentation of her character which really appealed to them. This was particularly true of the comments on use of language.

The bullet points, as intended, provided points of focus and in many instances were used to structure the answers. This worked quite well except for the last bullet point relating to the use of language. In many answers comment on this was left to a final paragraph, in which a few generally relevant features were mentioned and illustrated in a way which was not always convincingly linked to the question. More successful candidates (as noted previously) tended to refer to language points as they were discussing other bullet points; for instance when writing about the initial

presentation of Madame Loisel, some referred to the negatives (“no dowry, no prospects, no opportunities”) and the use of key words such as the verb “drift” to show how depressing her life was, and then contrasted the humdrum reality of this with the world of her imagination, which was conveyed in colourful, superlative language: “antique silks...priceless knickknacks...exquisite porcelain.” The effect of the contrast between her image of the perfect meal (“the pink flesh of a trout”) and the reality of the actual “vegetable soup” was frequently commented on. The relationship with her husband (the second bullet point) also produced some engaged comment, again mostly to illustrate the selfishness of Mathilde. Most candidates saw her husband as a saint who emphasised in stark contrast the selfish hedonism of his wife - his kindness emphasised by the way in which he slept in the salon while his wife cavorted in the waltz. (Few commented on his naivety and even fewer that his wife was only doing what at least three other wives were doing.) Where candidates had not been carried away with the detail of their consideration of other bullet points, many commented precisely on the third bullet point relating to “the changes after the loss of the necklace”; useful points were made about Mathilde’s pride and determination not to lose face, and her willingness to work to the extent that she aged prematurely. Comment on the impact of the shock of discovering the necklace was paste was disappointingly limited - and yet this raises all sorts of questions in the reader’s mind, not least of which is what happens next.

The weakest candidates still tend to paraphrase or transcribe the story, occasionally making a focusing comment. Some candidates address “the use of language” bullet point by reproducing a list of learnt linguistic features with illustrative quotations, but no specific reference to the question. Some candidates use terminology effectively, some do not; one candidate noted enigmatically that “the use of paralysis...during Mme Loisel’s remarks adds suspense.”

Q2

The writing questions provided a genuine choice and each was answered by significant, if not equal, numbers of candidates.

Q2(a)

This produced a range of varied responses, including letters and speeches. Most gave clear, detailed and focused advice. A clear structure was also a feature of many answers. The context of giving the advice to a friend worked well; most candidates seemed comfortable with this and wrote confidently in an appropriately engaging and semi-formal style. Often an anecdote was included to illustrate exactly what constituted success. Some were clearly echoing advice they had themselves received and used phrases whose patterning suggested well worn aphorisms (“I would advise my friend not to fear failure, for those who truly fail are those who fail to try and not those who try and fail.”) and there were a surprisingly high number of references to - and quotations from - Kipling’s “If” poem. There were interesting and insightful comments about what exactly success means, most seeing it in moral rather than materialistic terms; the importance of hard work, honesty and love were all stressed, perhaps summed up best by one candidate who wrote “you have to look for spiritual contentment as this will open your eyes - and make you clearly see the “real” and the “fake” the world can offer.” Some offered “alternative” advice, sometimes witty and, very occasionally, offensive.

Q2(b)

This question produced the most engaged writing of all the responses, from all candidates whatever their cultural or religious backgrounds. Candidates felt very

strongly about gender discrimination and expressed their views in a forthright, but usually logical way. There were powerful, fluently written essays arguing from both points of view, but the most impassioned responses were unquestionably from those who argued the case for female emancipation. Candidates read the quotations carefully and discussed them with discrimination. Most accepted one fully, but rejected the other; some accepted the first half of the second quotation - "Boys and girls should be given the same opportunities" - but rejected the second part about having "an equal amount of freedom", arguing that this was just not feasible, as girls were at far more physical risk than boys.

Most answers were reasoned and evidence and examples were adduced to support the point of view adopted; the best used persuasive language, including rhetoric to present their ideas. Some became pleas; one concluded "We are living in a democratic country. All men and women should be given equal respect and dignity. Today I, as a female, stand by my point and urge you all to support women. Will you support me?" Occasionally logic was lost in a welter of emotion, but most answers were fully developed and soundly structured.

Q2 (c)

This question produced the least successful answers and perhaps attracted the least able candidates. Responses tended to be neither as controlled nor grammatically correct as responses to the previous two questions. The more successful and effective stories integrated the quotation and its significance into the narrative from the beginning; the least successful had the quotation tagged on at the end in a way which suggested the basis of prepared story, hastily and not always relevantly adapted. One examiner reported that he had read "six answers where candidates had simply written a story on a random theme which made no attempt at all to address the question." It is difficult to award marks in circumstances like that.

Approaches to, and settings for the story divided by gender; boys wrote about war, girls wrote about romantic relationships (stories of betrayal about boys who were not what they first appeared to be), though there were some exceptions. A few candidates used folk stories as a basis - with some success - and the Bassanio casket episode from 'The Merchant of Venice' also figured.

4355 04

This component is becoming well established and centres are increasingly confident in all aspects of its delivery. Despite the growing and widening range of entries, standards of attainment were comparable with previous years. There were more candidates at the lower end of the ability range, but the vast majority of the folders still fell within the C to A* range.

Centre assessment was very sound, if inclined to the generous, with few exceptions. Teacher annotation was typically detailed and precise, both in its relation to the marking grid and the individualising features of the presented work, making external moderation relatively easy. In some instances, centres could have indicated more clearly the reasoning behind the mark awarded, including the degree of assistance the candidate had been given and the extent of the use of secondary sources. A few centres marked very generously (typically where work was based on expectation rather than outcome) and a few erratically. Overall, however, there was little disparity between the external moderator's marks and the centre marks. There was little need to alter marks.

The range of work and the level of response were often impressive. Task setting was also exceptionally good and precisely directed at the specification requirements. Centres are increasingly tailoring topics to the interests and capabilities of individual candidates; in particular able candidates were both challenged and stimulated by many of the tasks set. The "one task fits all" does not serve candidates at either end of the ability range.

Many portfolios showed a degree of flair and individuality which emphasised the unique opportunities offered by coursework. There were, inevitably perhaps, some exceptions. Provenance was sometimes an issue; occasionally imaginative writing units were set in cultural and national contexts which seemed very remote from the candidate, and sometimes reading units had a fluency of expression which was not compatible with that demonstrated in the writing unit, suggesting an unacknowledged secondary source. Clearer teacher annotation might have helped clarify some of these points; in one or two instances the work had to be referred to the appropriate department because of lingering doubts about its integrity and authenticity.

Administration was also good and most samples were complete and dispatched on time. The most common weakness was the failure to include the mandatory student authentication statements. Some centres also did not include, with the sample folders, the folders of the candidates with the lowest and highest coursework scores in their entry. There was also some confusion about which copies of the mark sheets (optems) to send; centres should send the top pink copy to the given address, the yellow copy to the moderator and retain the third copy for reference.

Overall, however, the folders reflected the professionalism of the teachers who prepared the candidates for this specification and the conscientious hard work and skill of the candidates themselves.

Unit 1 Response to Section B of the Anthology

In the reading unit there was less focus on single texts and less reliance on generic titles. Hence there were fewer formulaic essays, which reproduced the same points. Centres with able candidates used ever more resourceful ways of linking disparate texts - for instance, 'The Road Not Taken', 'Refugee Blues' and 'Country at My shoulder' under the topic of "a sense of time and place" and "Electricity come to Cocoa Bottom" and 'The Last Night' through studies of the significance of light and darkness. There are risks of artificial links, but in most cases the risk proved worth taking. A key advantage of this approach was that abler candidates were challenged and stimulated to explore the texts in individualised ways. Many essays were also detailed and sustained. The main weakness in less successful responses was a tendency to narrate or give extraneous information about the context or the writer, at the expense of failing to address the assessment objective which requires candidates to interpret texts and evaluate "how writers use linguistic and structural devices to achieve their effects."

Unit 2 Personal and Imaginative Writing

An extraordinary range of writing was presented for this unit: it included description, narrative, autobiography, extension work, film scripts, mother/daughter letters, accounts of events from two perspectives and inner monologues, but no list could do justice to the ambition and inventiveness of much of the task setting. The outcomes were, indeed, personal or imaginative, and sometimes both. Candidates were provided with ample opportunities to access the higher band descriptors ("extensive vocabulary...sophisticated control") in their writing. The risk was over written pieces ("their smooth lips collided passionately") but some candidates still achieved very powerful effects ("With feet pounding like African drums, and arms flailing as if boneless, I wound the bed-sheet round my cold body. Round and round. Spinning into insanity, I danced.") Ultimately, however, it was the most personal writing which was often the most engaging and successful; one teacher noted "It is difficult to write about things we haven't experienced." However it was pleasing to see experimentation with structure, vocabulary and sentences. At the other end of the attainment spectrum were tired, derivative narratives set (usually) in high schools in small town America.

Statistics for IGCSE English Language 4355

Option 1: 1F, 03

Grade	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Boundary Mark				55	43	31	19	7

Option 2: 1F, 04, 05

Grade	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Boundary Mark				58	45	32	20	8

Option 3: 2H, 03

Grade	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Boundary Mark	74	66	58	51	40	34		

Option 4: 2H, 04, 05

Grade	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Boundary Mark	78	69	60	52	41	35		

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